

Early American Perceptions of Native American Captors

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In literature, comparing plots and characters is relatively easy. However, to conceptualize an aspect from a genre based upon three distinct works is more thought-provoking. Though the three captivity narratives discussed herein occur during different time frames and are acted out by different tribal groups, there are blatant similarities among them. By comparing the captivity narratives of Mary Rowlandson, Elizabeth Hanson, and Jemima Howe, one can begin to understand the Early American perception of Native Americans. The aforementioned perception stems from the observed resourcefulness and cultural practices of the Native Americans; as well as the impressions they made on their captives.

During each of the captivity narratives, the narrators witness bouts of extreme resourcefulness on the part of their captors. The Native Americans appear to be continuously on the run while facing destitute circumstances. Mary Rowlandson, a “well-educated and affluent political prisoner during King Philip’s War” recounts such resourcefulness in her narrative by saying, “On the Saturday they boyled an old Horse leg (which they had got) and so we drank of the broth; as soon as they thought it was ready, and when it was almost all gone, they filled it up again” (3, 21). The boiling and consumption of a working animal are depicted as outside of the English’s comfort zone, but the Native Americans do not act as if it is taboo to them. On the contrary, the Native Americans present as well-versed in adaptation due to their experience with the notion of using every portion of an animal. This idea is furthered during an encounter between Elizabeth Hanson, a Quaker farmer’s wife who was taken captive in 1724, and a squaw in the camp where she was held. In one encounter the, squaw tells Hanson “to take the Kernels of Walnuts, and clean them, and beat them with a little Water, which I did, and when I had so done, the Water look’d like Milk; then she advised me to add to this Water, a little of the finest *Indian* Corn Meal, and boyl it a little together” (74). By utilizing this previously never-imagined

process, Hanson was able to produce life-altering sustenance for her child. If the Native American woman had not intervened and taught her to use the items that were available to her, then her child would have starved. The ability to create what is essentially modern-day Almond Milk was something unheard of in those times. This fact proves how innovative the Native Americans were in their resourcefulness and fortitude. The “Walnut-Milk” example represents how the squaws adapted to their environment by creating an alternate source of sustenance when they themselves could no longer produce food for their children. Likewise, Jemima Howe, who was taken captive in 1755 “during an Abenaki raid in New Hampshire”, made a similar observation of resourcefulness (93). During her captivity, she witnessed “Indians manufacture sugar which they extracted from maple trees” (100). Although Elizabeth Hanson was taken captive in 1724, Jemima Howe in 1755, and Mary Rowlandson in 1682, by different tribal groups, all three groups give the impression that they have adapted to the circumstances of their situation.

The cultural practices portrayed by the narrators of these captivity stories vary only slightly from one to the next. In Mary Rowlandson’s narrative, the Native Americans appear to rejoice in their victory once they have returned to camp with their captives. She states, “Oh the roaring, and singing, and dancing, and yelling of those black creatures in the night, which made the place a lively resemblance of hell...” (14). Though it can be understood that she was prejudiced against the Native Americans, one could presume that they were celebrating the victuals attained during the battle, raid, and capture. Mary Rowlandson’s portrayal of her captors’ exuberant cooking of the animals they had taken from the town illuminates the indigent living conditions of the Native Americans before that victory. Rowlandson also describes what she observed during a ritual Powaw, known today as a Powwow, in preparation for a battle.

Rowlandson's account provides a crucial look inside Native American traditions, which are still extremely secretive today. Even though Mary Rowlandson loathes this group of people, she takes particular note of their "Pagan" ritual, perhaps leading one to conclude that she was curious as to how their religion functioned in comparison to her own.

Additionally, Elizabeth Hanson goes to painstaking lengths to describe a customary practice used by her captors: scalping. She states, "Now having killed two of my Children, they scalp'd'em (a Practice common with these People, they cut the skin off from the Crown of their Heads, and carry it with them for a Testimony and Evidence that they have kill'd so many, receiving sometimes a Reward of a Sum of Money for every Scalp)..." (67). This portrays the Native Americans as accustomed to taking human body parts as a trophy of their accomplishments in war. The same practice is briefly mentioned in Rowlandson's narrative regarding a Native American man who wore "...a string about his neck, strung with Christian Fingers..." (38). From this practice, one can surmise that the Native American captors were a proud group, proud of their victories and the resistance they were showing toward the English. These examples reiterate the fact that even though the tribes were different in name and location, New Hampshire for Hanson and Lancaster for Rowlandson, the captives observed similar cultural rituals.

Furthermore, each narrator makes use of similar language when referring to their Native captors. Jemima Howe, Mary Rowlandson, and Elizabeth Hanson use dehumanizing monikers throughout their narratives. Respectively, "savage masters," "murtherous Wretches," and "barbarous Salvages" are among the epithets chosen by the women. (97, 12, 66). Mary Rowlandson continues to refer to her captors as nearly every horrible name she can imagine

throughout her captivity narrative. Rowlandson used names such as “hell hounds” to represent the Native Americans because those names were synonymous with evil/ungodly. Rowlandson employs these derogatory terms because she viewed the Native Americans as depraved, indecent, and less than herself. Rowlandson’s opinion of Native Americans never falters because of their unwillingness to submit to the English ways and Christendom. On the other hand, Elizabeth Hanson changes the way she refers to her captor which can be seen as she transitions into the more understanding terms “Master” and “Indian”. Hanson states, “In all which, he shewed some Humanity and Civility more than I could have expected” (68). Yet, she still referred to other Native Americans as “these kind of People” (73). Thus, one can only assume that the differentiation is based on Hanson’s personal interactions with her “Master” rather than a fundamental alteration in the way she perceived Native Americans as a whole.

Furthermore, all three narrators describe what type of weaponry the Native Americans use during the initial act of violence. Mary Rowlandson states, “But out we must go, the Fire increasing, and coming along behind us roaring, and the *Indians* gaping before us with their Guns, Spears, and Hatchets, to devour us” (13). Elizabeth Hanson denotes a similar experience, “...all naked, with their Guns and Tomahauks came into the House...” (66). The commonality of weapons between tribes appears to give the narrators an idea of their perceived power. The Native Americans are described as being “virile” and “daunting” in physicality by both Rowlandson and Hanson, which insinuates that the “Indians” bodies also represented weapons. If these “cruel invaders” had wielded less evolved, nonlethal weaponry, or appeared meek in their disposition, then the women and children would have been more likely to resist; however, that was not the case. Instead, the perceived show of force produced by the weaponry and physicality

of the Native Americans resulted in loss of life and human captives, both of which would serve to influence the way the Native Americans were perceived by Early Americans.

Moreover, the narrators seem incapable of attributing any act of kindness to the agency of the Native Americans themselves. Anytime that the captives are treated with decency or offered a reprieve from their suffering, they justify those actions as an act of God or Divine Providence. Jemima Howe states, “The next day, however, under the wing of that ever present and all-powerful Providence, which had preserved us through the darkness, and imminent dangers of the preceding night, we all arrived in safety at St. Johns” (98). Her survival of the trip is not attributed to the knowledge of the Native Americans leading the captives on their journey. Instead, she attributes her survival to divine intervention. Similarly, Elizabeth Hanson rationalizes the decency of her “Master” using the same logic. “I was forc’d to creep up on my Hands and Knees, under which Difficulty the Indian my Master, would mostly carry my Babe for me, which I took as a great Favour of God that his Heart was so tenderly inclined to assist me...” (68). In Hanson’s mind, she cannot fathom any other justification for such an act of compassion, other than the intervention of God. These narrators come across as unwilling to admit any modicum of humanity within their captors due to their preconceived prejudices regarding Native Americans. This ratiocination originates from the captives’ quest for justification of the seemingly perplexing personality traits that they witness from the Native Americans.

There is a puzzling dichotomy between what the narrators perceive, at face value, about the Native Americans, and how they describe the Native Americans. If one were to look beyond the derogatory names used and the subjective thoughts of the writers, one just might believe that

the captives were in awe. For instance, descriptions of the original people's resourcefulness are noted on several occasions; a resourcefulness that the English seem to altogether lack. The intricate details pertaining to the cultural rituals of the "Indians" are more curious and explanatory than condemning. Despite their best intentions, the female captives insist that God's will is the driving force behind the acts of compassion performed by the Native Americans. Therefore, elucidating the narrators' lack of compassion for the aforementioned group. These narratives elaborately depict Native Americans as inferior to the average Englishman of Early America. Yet, these narrators describe the Native Americans as powerful and virile during acts of violence in comparison to the Englishmen present. Still, as a twenty-first-century reader, imagining Native Americans as anything other than the victims of intolerance and misfortune throughout history is hard to fathom. After reading these captivity narratives, one can only surmise that Native Americans were perceived in a negative light by Early Americans. Nonetheless, as a modern era reader, the authors' writings strongly delineate the resilience of a minority that the majority sought to suppress.

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