Anglo-Indigenous Female Captivity Narratives and the Construction of the Ideal Briton

By Taylor Chalker

The tradition of American captivity narratives[1] contributed heavily to the development of English identity during the colonial period, allowing for a sense of English nationalism to develop in the United Kingdom and the British Atlantic world. The captivity narrative, as a genre, has roots "that stretch back to the European middle ages,"[2] with British captivity narratives, like those of Barbary captives, already having an established genre by the time that American narratives began to thrive in public circles. American narratives did not surpass the British standard in complexity and length until the nineteenth century.[3] While British narratives often saw European counterparts and rebels acting as the captors, American narratives were concerned with Ango-Indigenous relations, focusing on the captive White woman and her Indigenous captors. The protagonists of the most popular narratives were almost exclusively White women of a respectable background who were devout in their religious beliefs. This ensured more publishing success as English publishers knew that a woman exemplifying the qualities of the ideal Briton would become a more relatable and commodifiable character. As explained by Samantha Pitchforth, "captivity narratives are transformed as they take on more lurid elements and become debased by commercialism."[4] This can be seen in the success of Mary Rowlandson's narrative, which is undoubtedly the most successful American captivity narrative to ever exist. This narrative contributed to the prevailing idea that all captive narratives involve one civilized individual who is being held by a beastly counterpart, but that is not always the

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[1] Samantha Pitchforth, "*Vulnerable Britons: National Identity in Captivity Narratives, 1770-1830,"* PhD Thesis for Sheffield Hallam University (2006), 22.
[2] Joe Snader, "*Caught Between Worlds: British Captivity Narratives in Fact and Fiction"* University Press (Kentucky), 1.
[3] Snader, 24.
[4] Snader, 24.

case as can be seen in the tale of Mary Jemison, whose story shows that not all captives regretted their time spent in captivity.

British nationalism, and the creation of the ideal Briton, is an inherently saxonist tradition that lent itself to Britain as she emerged as a world power. This tradition permeates into modern day as the image of the ideal Briton mirrors the saxonist paragon of masculinity, nationalism, and strength, exemplified through the actions and legacies of those like Alfred the Great. As Britain expanded through colonialism, these ideals lasted and became the expectations of those who were extending into the British Atlantic world. As explained by Colley, "contact with and dominion over manifestly alien peoples nourished Britons' sense of superior difference. They could contrast their law, their treatment of women, their wealth, power, political stability, and religion with societies they only imperfectly understood."[5] Thus, when faced with individuals who challenged their way of life, such as the Indigenous people of North America, the British reaffirmed their nationalistic beliefs through imperialism, believing "strongly in the superiority of British humanity and compassion, as opposed to the uncivilised barbarity of [their] opponents."[6] This was extremely evident in the captivity narratives that came from American experiences and were published due to their ability to elicit strong nationalist feelings in Britain. As explained by Joe Snader:

> The experience of captivity among an allegedly savage or barbarous people posed a fundamental challenge to British concepts of their own national liberty, character, and civility. Captivity was a colonial experience that demanded imaginative revision from Britons at home. One response to this demand was to intensify the captivity narrative's potential as an allegory of freedom, to make the captive into a figure of natural liberty and social oppression[7].

[5] Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation*, Yale University Press (2005) 369.
[6] Pitchforth, 137.
[7] Snader, 6.

Here, Snader is treading into the territory of Edward Said, and the importance of the 'Other' as an actor in captivity tales. Said concentrated on the subjections of the Indigenous people, which proves to be a complication in the context of captivity narratives. These narratives contradict the typical Indigenous character, who is usually the one being subjected to heinous acts, and turns those atrocities onto the colonial subject, demonstrating the vulnerability of "representatives of colonial power."[8] For any who viewed the colonists as intruders, these types of narratives elicited a certain amount of sympathy, showing them as different from their savage captors.

However, not all narratives were able to portray English captives as vastly different from their Indigenous captors, due to the violent nature of captivity. While the British represent themselves as being more civilized than their European or Indigenous counterparts, there is "...a central difficulty within captivity narratives; that captives are often violent despite the fact that this is supposedly a marker of the barbarity of the alien culture."[9] This violence, which was enacted by the Indigenous and English alike, minimized the distance between the two groups by uniting them through the common thread of action and reactionary violence, which complicated the assumed superiority of the Britons. Thus captivity narratives did not always elicit the expected nationalistic response, which is likely why many of them were heavily edited to minimize the judgement that the author may receive, as well as any anti-British rhetoric.

This is evident within *Two Months in the Camp of Big Bear: The Life and Adventures of Theresa Gowanlock and Theresa Delaney*, which "claimed to be a truthful and accurate rendition, but [was] carefully constructed to serve certain interests and purposes while condemning others."[10] This book used the stories of Gowanlock and Delaney to perpetuate the

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[8] Pitchforth, 141.
[9] Pitchforth, 132.
[10] Jeremy Mouat and Catherine Cavanaugh, *Making Western Canada: Essays on European Colonization and Settlement*, Garamond Press, 1996, 32.

dominating narrative that Indigenous people were barbarous savages, by highlighting the instances of violence that were experienced during their captivity. Gowanlock and Delaney, as well as other women who wrote of their experiences in captivity, were being characterized as 'survivors'. Survivors were women of the colonial period who were "capable of surviving on their own without the assistance of men"[11] and, while their stories were in high demand, they were not always factual. Indeed, captivity narratives often served as teaching texts that reflected suitable actions and ideals for women of the period, and were intended to serve "educational purposes much larger than imparting knowledge of actual events."[12]

The gendered stereotypes exhibited in *Two Months* were not isolated, many narratives written by women became popular due to their female subjects. However, the feminization of the captivity tale went hand in hand with the way they were perceived by publishers and public alike. As explained by Julie Wohlforth, "what an early modern English person would have thought about captivity and slavery, about women and gender, about literature and publishing, each defined where the gendered captivity narrative slotted into the culture and how these things influenced cultural development."[13] Female writers had to consider the way that their stories would be perceived in relation to the way they would be treated following its publication, a fact that influenced the way that they portrayed their captors, their experience, and themselves. On women, Wohlforth further explained:

> Often captives experience arrival in a strange land among people who were inhospitable and antagonistic not once, but twice. Captives were received home with enormous suspicion that they had lost their identities and their religion. For women, this suspicion was multiplied, for their sexual purity was always

[11] Carter, 35.
[12] Carter, 34.
[13] Julia Wohlforth, "Captive Bodies and Captive Minds: Women in English Captivity Narratives from the Early Modern Mediterranean to Colonial America" PhD diss., Tufts University (2021), 5.

> suspect. Suspicious reception was a frequent motivation for publishing, and it changed the way that published captivity narratives were written. With suspicion in mind, these narratives were crafted as defenses against criticism. These defenses could emphasize the cruelty, insatiable sexuality and violence of the captor's culture in avoidance of personal culpability for any identity changes.[14]

Female narratives pay specific attention to the inner thoughts of the woman in question, their passivity and their allegiances, which were all used as evidence to prove their nationalism. This can be seen in the account of Mary Rowlandson, who was the most notable political prisoner of Metacom's war, and the first prisoner to be released. Rowlandson was a Puritan woman of acceptable social stature who found herself imprisoned in 1675 by a group of Indigenous peoples. Rowlandson's narrative revealed her to be a woman of good faith who demonstrated strength of mind and character, both of which would be looked upon kindly by British readership. When faced with the option of death or captivity, she exhibited bravery as she wrote that "[she] chose to go alone with those (as I may say) ravenous Bears, than that moment to end my daies"[15] and maintained that strength through her faith during the trials that she faced. Rowlandson's narrative, successful as it may be, contributed to the stereotyping of Indigenous people as savages, as it maintains a firm divide between beastly captor and civilized captive.[16] The element of religion was also popular in American captivity narratives, but held much less importance in British tales of captivity. This was likely due to the Puritan's who inhabited the colonies, and perpetuated the secular tradition that had been ingrained into them[17] as the

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[14] Wohlforth, 20.
[15] Mary Rowlandson, "A True History of The Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson (1682)." In *Women's Indian Captivity Narratives*, Penguin Publishing Group, 14.
[16] Pitchforth, 25.
[17] Pitchforth, 25-26.

Protestant worldview "allowed so many Britons to see themselves as a distinct and chosen people."[18]

Interestingly, the presence of religion occurred much more in female captivity narratives than male captivity narratives, as captivity threatened a woman's sexual and religious purity. In order to protect these values, a woman may have exhibited masculine traits, which interested readers. While other female writers were reduced to travel writing and autobiographies, genres that ensured that they maintained their femininity, writers of captivity tales treaded the line between femininity and masculinity to ensure that they weren't overstepping gender roles while accounting their survival. They were permitted an increase of agency by the public, who were compelled to look at them as the 'survivor', pushing the "contemporary standards of female behavior."[19] For the early eighteenth-century reader, this female protagonist emerged as a new type of heroine.[20] These narratives were used, not only to contribute to British nationalism, but also allowed for women to emerge as agents of their own destiny. While the main goal of nationalism was to form a more defined "masculine British identity,"[21] women's captivity narrative created a type of nationalism that women could identify with. Unlike men, female writers were "informed by different discursive frameworks and pressures"[22] that changed the way that they perceived and reacted to their captors.

Contrary to the experience of Rowlandson, who remained adamant in her Puritan beliefs and values, is the narrative of Mary Jemison. Jemison was captured in Pennsylvania in 1742 or

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[18] Colley, 368.
[19] Pitchforth, 158.
[20] Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse, "The American Origins of the English Novel" *American Literary History* (1992), 393.
[21] Sara Mills. *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism*. Routledge (1991) 3.
[22] Mills, 3.

1743 by a French and Shawnee raiding party that killed her entire family. Despite this, Jemison assimilated to the Indigenous way of life, considering her experience to be an 'adoption', and receiving the Seneca name of Dehgewanus, meaning "Two Falling Voices"[23]. She mingled Indigenous practices and values with her existing set of beliefs, naming her children in a matrilinear fashion and finding solace in her 'adopted' sisters, who stopped her from being returned to the English in 1763. Of her sisters, Jemison wrote that they were "peaceable and mild in their dispositions; temperate and decent in their habits, and very tender and gentle towards me,"[24] which directly contradicts the stereotypical savage. Ultimately, her link to Indigenous culture was undeniable, and she existed in a dualist realm, presenting herself outwardly as a white woman, but exhibiting Indigenous ways of being. While she was "transculturated [*sic*] to Indian life and considered herself a Seneca, she could not completely evade her culture of origin."[25] Her narrative, which was published in 1824, proved to be contentious in political circles, as respectable men worried how the public would receive it.[26] It challenged the norm of other successful narratives, and presented a woman who found joy and safety away from the English way of life.

In addition to the gender prejudice accompanying female captivity narratives, they were also being marketed as non-fiction books. Non-fiction implies the truth but, as seen in this piece, truth was not always a guarantee. As Pitchforth says, it is "unsafe to assume that captivity narratives should be taken as 'true' and uncomplicated accounts of historical events."[27] Seeing as narratives are essentially an inherently biographical work, they rely on the experience of the

[23] Katherine Derounian-Stodola, *Women's Indian Captivity Narratives*, Penguin Publishing Group (1998), 119.
[24] Mary Jemison, "A Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Mary Jemison," Penguin Publishing Group (1824), 144.
[25] Derounian-Stodola, 119.
[26] Derounian-Stodola, 126.
[27] Pitchforth, 69.

writer, which is often marred by time, trauma, and outside influences. A narrative is written with the ending in sight and the audience knowing that the author survived and was able to produce the work, but this denies the "rearrangement of events after the fact to create a coherent plot,"[28] or the altering of events to mitigate backlash of the public. The extreme situations that captives found themselves in did not always excuse their actions or thoughts, desperate as they may be, and this fact was recognized by both the authors and publishers. In the eighteenth-century, with the advances in the printing press and distribution methods, writing became a much larger agent for ideologies. Thus, it was more common than not that narratives were altered to reflect societal ideals and expectations.

As a genre, the American captivity narrative placed captivity in "a uniquely strange and hostile place"[29] wherein the author searched incessantly for anything that resembled Englishness. Through their desperation to find something that felt like home, the narrator was able to inspire passion for the English way of life, reigniting that desire for an English identity in their readership. Captivity narratives have a unique lasting power, with some English women experiencing romanticism and fictionalization that enabled them to transcend the boundaries of time and emerge as a lasting author of a nationalist text. Because of the popularity of texts written by English women, as opposed to women of other backgrounds, a representative imbalance "led to an imbalance in English perception of the early modern world and the ways the forces in it interacted."[30]

Ultimately, colonial writing like that of American captivity narratives had an unexpectedly powerful impact on the instigation of British nationalism and the formation of the

[28] Pitchforth, 71.
[29] Armstrong and Tennenhouse, 395.
[30] Wohlforth, 3.

ideal Briton. The written narrative of a colonial captive "would carefully document the abject yet intimate experiences of an isolated [captive] and organize these experiences as evidence for the full ethnographic truth about the alien culture of the captors, and about the nature of any cultural interaction."[31]These captivity narratives contributed to the formation of English identity, and allowed for women to emerge as writers in their own rights, as well as agents of political change. Throughout the examination of the accounts of Theresa Gowanlock and Theresa Delancy, Mary Rowlandson, and Mary Jemison, it is clear that gendered narratives from female writers were threatened by societal criticism, forcing the captive to defend herself even during her freedom as she was encouraged and persuaded to alter her account to serve the pursuits of others. While narratives were changed and altered to suit publisher desires and expected public reception, captivity narratives emerged as a genre in which women could thrive, while encouraging the British public to move from being a passive inhabitant of their nation to a prideful agent of change.[32] While there is a surplus of scholarship that investigates how Englishness changed due to colonialism, there is less that examines the direct link between colonial writing from the Americas and their impact on English way of life and, as Colley implores, "coming to terms with the complexity and depth of patriotism is vital if we are to understand the British past - and indeed the British present[33]."

[31] Snader, 5.
[32] Colley, 371.
[33] Colley, 371.

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