

A Gauntlet in the Wilderness, or Multifaceted Trans-cultural Crossings in Mary Rowlandson's *Narrative* (1682)

Andr s Tarn c

By the end of the seventeenth century the New England wilderness achieved a special historical significance as a site of intercultural exchange, during which the encounter between Anglo settlers and Indians contributed to the mutual shaping of both civilizations. As King Philip's War (1675-1676) set most of New England aflame more and more settler communities were victimized by Indian attacks and being forced into captivity became a characteristic experience of several English families dwelling on the intercultural borderline. Following the attack on Lancaster on February 10, 1676 Mary White Rowlandson was forcibly carried away by Narragansett Indians. As a result of the assault and the following capture she lost several members of her family, was torn from her husband and children and she was compelled to undergo a forced march in the wilderness.

The text in which she perpetuated her tribulations titled *The Sovereignty and Goodness of GOD, together with the Faithfulness of his Promises displayed: being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (1678, 1682) [henceforth: *Narrative*] bears special cultural and literary significance and provides an optimal vehicle for the realization of the objective of the present essay, the examination of the dynamics of the captivity experience. In order to achieve this goal I will construct a model incorporating Joseph Campbell's concept of archetypal initiation and Richard Vanderbeets' three-partite interpretation of the quest motif. Captivity narratives have been examined from numerous vantage points, including Tara Fitzpatrick's analysis of the "cultural work" (1) resulting from the mostly female authorship, Roy Harvey Pearce's focus on the narratives' literary value, and Ralph Bauer's probe into the documents' identity building capability. The present essay will treat the captive as a questing heroine completing the archetypal initiation process.

Inspired by Joseph Campbell and Northrop Frye, Richard Vanderbeets considers captivity narratives as primary reflections of the archetypal initiation procedure in which the motif of the quest can clearly be established. According to Vanderbeets, captivity narratives are built around a common three-partite structure comprised of separation, transformation, and return. The separation phase entails the details of abduction; the transformation stage can be divided into three sub-phases: ordeal, accommodation, and adoption; and the return component can take three forms: escape, release, and redemption (562). Naturally, here a similarity can be discerned with Campbell's hero, as being carried away Mrs. Rowlandson, or any captive is forced to cross "the threshold of adventure, thereby dying a symbolic death, eventually, undergoing a supreme ordeal, and gaining a reward among others in such forms as apotheo-

sis, illumination, or return” (Campbell 246).

Mrs Rowlandson’s captivity relocates her into the American wilderness, described by Mary Louise Pratt as the “contact zone” (qtd. in Faery 13), or by Richard Goodbeer as a “middle ground” (91) in which the encounter between the Anglo and Indian mutually affected both respective cultures. It is on this very site where a figurative dividing line is drawn separating a civilization based on Christianity, private property, literacy, and Caucasian racial consciousness from a culture built on non-hierarchical spirituality, communal ownership, oral communication, and Native-American essentialism. Faery, building on Richard Slotkin’s concept of the Indian as the “darkened and inverted mirror image” of the Puritan, reaffirms the existence of this metaphysical barrier (26). Whereas she views the Anglo-Indian relationship in such versus patterns as “civilized-savage,” “human-beastlike,” and “pious-diabolical,” this borderline is far from solid as according to Calloway “the boundaries that divided Indians and Europeans in early America were porous: the frontier operated as a sponge as often as a palisade, soaking up rather than separating people and influences” (152).

Mrs. Rowlandson’s *Narrative* divided into twenty chapters titled “Removes” commemorates an archetypal journey. The protagonist’s crossing of political, racial, cultural, textual, and ecological boundaries is a bi-directional process containing two quests. The first quest includes the captivity experience itself, encompassing the Separation, Transformation, and Intended Point of Return stages, and with the eventual release the second quest aiming at reintegration into the settler community is launched compelling the protagonist to repeat his or her passage through the Separation, Transformation, and Return phases. In fact the very structure of the *Narrative* reflects this division, as Quest One is described from the first until the sixteenth Remove, and the remaining four units are dedicated to the portrayal of the second metaphysical journey.

The Separation stage of Quest One begins with the actual attack on the city of Lancaster. While the heroine is captured, and as Susan Howe asserts she is “abducted from the structure of experience” (qtd. in Faery 28) the ensuing captivity is presented as a result of her own will as “she chose rather to go along with those [. . .] ravenous Beasts” (437). In my reading this stage concludes with the death of Mrs. Rowlandson’s daughter, Sarah as at this point she is not only physically detached from white society, but her self-image as a mother is temporarily disrupted. The protagonist’s lament of being removed from God’s proximity: “that it was easie for me to see how righteous it was with God to cut off the thread of my life, and cast me out of his presence for ever” (440) suggests a spiritual exile as well. Mrs. Rowlandson’s temporary loss of faith and deprecation from motherhood along with the ever-increasing physical distance from her former culture and life signify her symbolic death.

During the Separation stage numerous components of the intercultural borderline were traversed. The protagonist was torn from a hierarchically structured Puritan society and thrown into a communal, tribal system. The captivity changed the victim’s political perspective too, as a woman forced into the private sphere of Anglo society

was injected into the public sphere of the Indian tribe. This phase also includes an interracial encounter reinforcing Frankenberg's thesis concerning "the notion of the colonized subject as irreducibly Other from the standpoint of the white self" (16-17). The crossing of the ecological boundary is also evident as a move is made from the settled urban community into nature, moreover, a textual boundary is breached as the capture indicates a departure from a written culture towards a culture based on oral information exchange. Nevertheless, the Separation entails only physical disengagement as throughout her experience Mrs. Rowlandson demonstrates that the cultural, emotional, and spiritual ties binding her to Euro-America are permanent and cannot be severed. Whereas the abduction results in her actual presence among the Native Americans, mentally and psychologically she was never removed from Anglo-America.

The approximately 150-mile route completed by the heroine represents the physical aspects of the archetypal cycle. Mrs. Rowlandson's tour de force across the wilderness comes almost full circle as she is released 20 miles from her original point of departure. In addition to crossing figurative demarcation points Mrs. Rowlandson passes through actual legal boundaries as her route takes her to Vermont, and even New Hampshire. Ironically, while the stopover near Chesterfield, New Hampshire takes her farthest from her home, according to her woes registered in the thirteenth Remove: "I began to think that all my hopes of Restoration would come to nothing [. . .]. Then also I took my Bible to read, but I found no comfort here neither, which many times I was wont to find" (451); she seems to lose her spirits only on the return leg of her journey near Hinsdale, in New Hampshire.

While the *prima facie* application of Vanderbeets' model might lead the researcher to the conclusion that the three stages of Transformation can clearly be discerned in the text, one must bear in mind that the respective periods can overlap, representing the tenuousness of the demarcation of the cultural spaces and experiences the heroine travels through both in a literal and figurative sense. Moreover, the "fractured or hybrid nature" of captivity narratives further underscores "the fluidity of identity in colonial setting" (Faery 58-59).

Consequently, the protagonist's laments are juxtaposed to expressed and implied references to the hope of potential return. This is also demonstrated by the alleviation of her sense of loss: "And now I must part with that little Company I had. Here I parted from my Daughter Mary, (whom I never saw again till I saw her in Dorchester, returned from Captivity), and from four little Cousins and Neighbours, some of which I never saw afterward: the Lord only knows the end of them" (443), by the eventual reception of a Bible. Thus armed with Scripture her separation cannot be complete, as the Bible will always offer comfort and emotional support even during the harshest physical and psychological conditions: "The Indians were as thick as trees . . . and no Christian soul near me, and yet how hath the Lord preserved me in Safety?" (445).

The language of the text also reflects the protagonist's actual position within the archetypal initiation cycle. Mrs. Rowlandson goes into painstaking detail in describing

the losses incurred, the casualty rate, the methods of the attackers, and her mental anguish during the assault. One cannot but wonder at the incongruity of the impassionate description of the scenes of horrible suffering. One returning expression, "knockt on the head" gives an almost grotesque air to the account. The following terms as "carried away alive," "but out we must go, the fire increasing, and coming along behind us," (436) "wofull sights," "pulling me one way, and the Children another," "none escaped either present death or a bitter captivity," (437) "now away we must go" (438), all indicate that the heroine is slowly coming to terms with her losses.

The text also offers an opportunity to retrace the heroine's passage through the respective stations of the Transformation process including the "initatory ordeal, followed by a gradual accommodation of Indian modes and customs, [. . .] and finally a highly ritualized adoption into a new culture" (Vanderbeets 554). The ordeal of the captive entailed such cultural and ritual elements as the aforementioned gauntlet, starvation, and being threatened with scalping or with being eaten by the tribe. Whereas Mrs. Rowlandson does not suffer physical abuse, she is subjected to a figurative or virtual gauntlet composed of psychological terror and starvation. The Indians constantly threaten her with cannibalism, she is traumatized by the constant rumors of her son being roasted, and intimidated by the reports of the brutal killing of a companion captive woman and her child. Mrs. Rowlandson's initial starvation due to a self-imposed deprivation of Indian food is another exacerbating factor of her ordeal.

The accommodation phase indicates the experiencing of the scale of Indian food and culinary habits along with "a gradual accommodation to Indian practices and modes" (555). According to Vanderbeets "in narrative after narrative, captives describe an initial loathing of Indian fare, then a partial compromise of that disgust under extreme hunger, and ultimately a complete accommodation and in many cases, even relish of the Indian diet" (555). Mrs. Rowlandson's *Narrative* provides ample justification to Vanderbeets' theory as her increased attraction to Native American food signifies the attainment of the accommodation stage. In the fifth Remove she reports that "The first week of my being among them, I hardly ate anything: the second week, I found my stomach grow very faint for want of something: and yet it was very hard to get down their filthy trash: but the third week, though I could think how formerly my stomach would turn against this or that, and I could starve and dy before I could eat such things, yet they were sweet and savoury to my taste" (444). This "relish of Indian diet" is also indicated by the increased and newly found appreciation of such Native American fare as baked bear meat (448) and half-roasted horse liver (445).

The captivity experience results in a clash of cultures and value systems as well. When she is ordered to work on a Sabbath day Mrs. Rowlandson at first refuses, then compelled by threats resumes her work (444). Moreover, during her meeting with King Philip she declines to partake in a pipe-smoking ceremony, yet she promises to knit a shirt for his son. Having received remuneration for her services she not only finds a new self-respect, but by providing clothing for the Indians she indirectly or figuratively becomes part of the tribe. The fact that she invites her master and mistress

for dinner indicates a partial acceptance of her new way of life and signifies that she constructed her own living space as well. On the other hand, the text also contains references to a partial acceptance or the development of emotional ties towards the captors as near the end of her captivity Mrs. Rowlandson recalls the humane treatment she sometimes received: "Yet the Lord suffered not this wretch to do me any hurt [...] he many times refresht me: five or six times did he and his Squaw refresh my feeble carcass" (459). Furthermore, upon learning the news of her prospective release she bursts out in tears and grabs the Praying Indians' hands.

Thus, during the Transformation stage the protagonist passes through political, cultural, ecological, and racial barriers. In Mrs. Rowlandson's case, however, the term "partial transformation" appears more applicable as on the Native American side of the contact zone she attempts to preserve her WASP identity. The crossing of a political boundary is indicated by her opportunity to meet King Philip, and during the negotiations she remains a partner of equal rank, even risking her "host's" anger upon refusing the offered pipe. While Mrs. Rowlandson's cultural crossing appears to be most effective, the extent of this passage is ambiguous at best as there are definite factors that pull her back toward her previous life. Although she is forced to work on the Sabbath, she continues to preserve a pious mindset during those days, the psychological terror brought on by the threat of cannibalism is abated by a recognition of the Indians' "horrible addictedness to lying" (451), and her newly found appreciation of Indian fare is a result of physical starvation justified by the Biblical maxim: "For the hungry Soul every bitter thing is sweet" (445).

Quest One comes to an end with events reported in the sixteenth Remove as news of a potential liberation gives her physical and spiritual strength: "My heart was so heavy before that I could scarce speak or go in the path: and yet now so light, that I could run" (455). The farewell scene launching the second separation phase is rather paradoxical, since as a result of "a remarkable change of Providence" (463) the tribe bids an emotional goodbye and compared to the ambush, the release is anticlimactic: "Let the Redeemed of the Lord say so, whom he hath redeemed from the hand of the Enemy, especially that I should come away in the midst of so many hundreds of Enemies quietly and peaceably, and not a Dog moving his tongue" (463). Mrs. Rowlandson embarks upon her second quest with mixed emotions and with an ambiguous state of mind: "So I took my leave of them, and in coming along my heart melted into tears, more then all the while I was with them, and I was almost swallowed up with the thoughts that ever I should go home again" (463).

The Second Transformation stage places Mrs. Rowlandson on to the Anglo side of the contact zone as upon release she both figuratively and literally becomes stranded on "middle ground." She does not directly enter Puritan society and the much-awaited family reunion is delayed. Upon returning to the destroyed Lancaster she can only encounter the smoldering remains of her home, and she is forced to find refuge outside the city boundaries in a farmhouse.

First she meets her brother and brother-in-law and her reunion with her husband

will take place in Boston. While dire circumstances force them to live in the house of a sympathetic Bostonian, the fear of the loss of their children results in a mental state resembling the psychological ordeal suffered in Indian captivity: “Being recruited with food and raiment we went to Boston that day, where I met with my dear Husband, but the thoughts of our dear Children, one being dead, and the other we could not tell where, abated our comfort each to other” (464). The submissive status of the returnee is indicated by the assignment of a parental role to her host: “Then Mr. Thomas Shepard of Charlestown received us into his House, where we continued eleven weeks, and a Father and Mother they were to us” (464). One definite sign of her and her husband’s reintegration into the settler community is the public Thanksgiving celebration welcoming the returnees, which also corresponds with Vanderbeets’ notion of the “highly ritualized adoption” completing the Transformation cycle (554).

The gradual reunion of the family informs the accommodation and adoption stage of the second Transformation phase as first she is reunited with her elder son Joseph, than with her sister’s son, followed by the return of her daughter. Mrs. Rowlandson’s reintegration or redemption is only partially achieved through the rebuilding of her previously destroyed family life. The extent of this reintegration is limited as not only the captivity experience, but her interpretation of the respective events create a gulf between her and the rest of Boston: “Oh! the wonderfull power of God that my eyes have seen, affording matter enough for my thoughts to run in, that when others are sleeping mine eyes are weeping” (466). Mrs. Rowlandson’s metaphysical distance from the Puritan community is further underscored by Faery, who, inspired by Mitchell Robert Breitwieser, argues that the *Narrative* can be considered as an attempt of the protagonist to rewrite herself into the WASP community after experiencing a radical separation from the latter (51).

Mrs. Rowlandson’s completion of the two archetypal initiation cycles can be interpreted as an intercultural sojourn. While at first glance one could discern the traversing of several dividing lines, her experiences simply take her to the Indian side of the contact zone. Her reference to the preservation of her physical integrity: “yet not one of them offered the least abuse of unchastity to me, in word or action” (463) suggests that the literal crossing of racial boundaries or miscegenation is not applicable. While Mrs. Rowlandson develops an appreciation of Native-American fare, this results from hunger, as it is safe to assume that her starvation would have driven her to appreciate any food. Moreover, her references to Indians as “infidels” (437) and “inhumane creatures” (439) further reinforce her intention of maintaining a distance from her captors. Her refusal to smoke a pipe with King Philip and her attitude toward tobacco and smoking as a “Bait, the Devil layes to make men loose their precious time” (446) is a stereotypical Puritan response to an important Native American ritual or, as Bauer asserts, “a semiotic exorcism of New World exoticism” (678).

As Joseph Campbell suggests, an archetypal hero’s quest can have numerous objectives including atonement, apotheosis, and illumination (246). Certainly, for Mrs. Rowlandson the recognition that spiritual deficiencies in her previous life resulted in

the captivity experience, as well as the realization of the importance of Divine advice suggest the presence of atonement. Moreover, the interpretation of the Biblical texts offering a parallel to Puritan typology provides a chance for her own re-entry into the community of the visible saints, and she also gains illumination as her limited appreciation of Indian culture will modify a previously monocultural perspective into a relative tolerance of Native American ways of life.

Mrs. Rowlandson reporting her experiences from an intercultural space produces a liminal narrative (Faery 66) with a ubiquitous structural discrepancy, as according to the thematic distribution of the Removes a decisive majority is dedicated to the events of the first Quest and only four sections focus on the painful reintegration process. As it has been already noted, having completed the actual journey the heroine does not return to the point of departure, thereby creating a physical and cultural lag within the archetypal cycle. Whereas compared to the length of the journey this approximately twenty-mile difference appears minuscule, it serves as a poignant warning for those who travel beyond the "threshold of adventure" that they will be forced to undergo the most severe gauntlet not in the wilderness, but on the way home.

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