A Summary of Tiffany Potter’s “Writing Indigenous Femininity: Mary Rowlandson’s Narrative of Captivity”

Potter’s article begins with the rather simple assertion that by paying close attention to the way that Rowlandson describes herself and her surroundings during her captivity narrative, one can learn quite a bit about women’s gender roles in 17th-century colonial New England. Potter then delivers historical information about Rowlandson’s life as well as what is known of the three major leaders of the Algonquian tribes, revealing the rather remarkable fact that the Pocassets, who held Rowlandson captive, were led by “Weetamoo, [a] squaw-sachem…a title equated to Queen by most colonists” (154). Potter goes on to say

Weetamoo was the squaw-sachem or warrior-leader of the Pocassets by birthright. Her power and her authority in the larger Wampanoag and Narragansett communities came from the status of that birthright, her experience as a ruler, and her familial alliances. During King Philip’s War, Weetamoo was married to Quinquapin, the sachem of the Narragansetts, and her sister was married to Metacom, the Wampanoag sachem. These marriages solidified alliances and united the power of the three tribes into a single extended family…. [Weetamoo] was the only one of the three Indian leaders of King Philip’s War to hold such an identifiable position of status in all of the tribes in the alliance. (154)

When Rowlandson first mentions her Indian master and mistress in the Third Remove, she writes in an aside, “by my master in this writing, must be understood Quinquapin, who was a Sagamore, and married King Philip’s wife’s sister,” giving no indication that her mistress, Weetamoo, held any significant social standing outside her marriage to Quinquapin and her standing as the sister of King Philip’s wife (Norton Anthology, 8th edition, Volume A, p. 262). In the Eight Remove, Rowlandson mentions her mistress once more, and here describes her as a “proud gossip…[who] would eat nothing” that Rowlandson attempted to cook for her (Norton Anthology, p. 268). In the Twelfth Remove, Rowlandson goes on to describe an occasion when she was traveling with her master and mistress (happily in the direction of her home in Lancaster), when her “mistress gives out: she would go no further,” implying, it would seem, that her mistress was either frail or driven by a sort of impetuous temperament (Norton Anthology, 270). Rowlandson goes on to say that her master would not “turn back again” and that Rowlandson “must go back again with her [mistress…who] called her sanump [husband], and would have him gone back also, but he would not, but said he would go on, and come to us again in three days” (Norton Anthology, 270). As Rowlandson describes this interaction between husband and wife, readers are left with the impression that either (a) Quinquapin was impatient with his wife’s refusal to continue on or (b) Weetamoo was trying and failing to influence her husband’s decision making process.

Potter’s essay examines each of these scenes (and others from later in the Narrative of Captivity) and asks: Is it possible that Rowlandson was unaware that she had been the servant of Weetamoo, arguably the most powerful military leader of the Algonquian tribes? Potter answers this question by saying, yes, it’s possible she didn’t know this during her captivity, but Potter also claims that Rowlandson must have learned of this fact after her return to Lancaster in May of 1676 and during the six years that passed before she published her narrative in 1682. Potter also notes that the 1682 edition of Rowlandson’s Narrative of Captivity contains a preface written by Increase Mather, a leading minister in the Massachusetts Bay Colony and author of Brief History of the War with the Indians in New England (published in 1676), which recounts Weetamoo’s accidental drowning (after Rowlandson’s release), “her subsequent beheading, and the display of her head on a pole with the Puritan moral: ‘Now here it is to be observed, that God himself by his own hand, brought this enemy to
destruction. For in that place, where the last years, she furnished Philip with Canoos for his men, she her self [sic] could not meet with a Canoo…so that she drowned’ (Potter, 154, quoting Mather, p. 46).

So, what might explain why Rowlandson failed to mention her mistress’ social standing when composing her narrative? And, why wouldn’t have Increase Mather, who was known to have repeatedly warned the British government of Weetamoo’s threat as a military advisory, have encouraged Rowlandson to similarly depict her mistress as more than just her master’s ill-behaved wife? The answer Potter gives is that it suited Mather—and possibly Rowlandson—to present Weetamoo as a wife and not a military leader because it allowed the Narrative of Captivity to function as a text that testifies to Indian inferiority, specifically the failure of Indian women to embody the Puritan ideals of womanhood.

Potter concludes her essay with the following assessment of Rowlandson, her narrative, and Mather’s role in its publication:

I am not convinced that Rowlandson herself knew the full extent of Weetamoo’s status until after her captivity, or that she necessarily made the larger ideological connections outlined here [in this essay] in terms of the effect of the narrative, but certainly Increase Mather did, and this adds one last layer of implication to Rowlandson’s construction of indigenous femininity as failure. In approving Rowlandson’s publication of her tale with his guiding preface, Mather gives to a selected woman an acceptable public voice that allows him to ventriloquize his own political agenda against the Indians and in favor of passive feminine purity. He confirms for both colonial women and British readers back home the validity and essential nature of the status quo—of Christianity’s limiting of the feminine role—using the most powerful Indian woman in New England as a cipher….Femininity is narrated to be so entirely natural here that even heathen squaws recognize their gendered place. Weetamoo’s powerful, threatening, and even violent acts in the public realm render her a failure in Rowlandson’s imperialist gaze…. (164)

Potter supports these claims by citing Edward Reyner’s Consideration Concerning Marriage (published in 1591), which states that a woman’s role is “to build a godly family; not onely [sic] by the procreation and religious education of children (which is the pillar of the house) but by a wise and godly Government and ordering of the house, in which the wife ought to act her part” (Potter 156, quoting Reyner, p. 7). Thus, Potter asserts, by presenting Weetamoo merely as a wife and woman, Rowlandson depicts Weetamoo as one who measures up poorly against the gender norms for women most likely held the narrative’s 17th-century readership.

Additional Recommended Readings:


