
Wilderness Womanhood: Devolving Motherhood in the Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson

Mary McCartin Wearn*¹

¹Middle Georgia State University – United States

Abstract

Mary Rowlandson's Colonial American life presents a rich and complex case study of diasporic identity, border crossing, and cross-cultural violence. A native of Somerset England, Rowlandson left her homeland, settling on the Massachusetts' frontier. In 1675, in a violent attack during King Philip's War, she was taken captive by Native Americans. Separated from her Puritan community and carried into the wilderness in a series of what she calls "removes," Rowlandson suffers a deep crisis of her womanly identity. In her captivity narrative, she figures Native American violence as a violation of domestic bonds. "The infidels," as Rowlandson calls them, haul "mothers one way, and children another." Describing the calamitous effects of the attack on her community and her subsequent captivity in terms of the degradation of her domestic and-more specifically-maternal role, Rowlandson writes: "All was gone, my husband gone . . . my children gone . . . our house and home and all our comforts . . . all was gone. . . There remained nothing to me but one poor wounded babe . . . and I had nothing refreshing for it, nor suitable things to revive it." When her youngest child dies in captivity, Rowlandson commits her dead baby and her traumatized self to what she calls a "wilderness condition." Although she interacts with two of her other children intermittently throughout her captivity, as she goes deeper and deeper into the wilderness, she finds herself ever more removed from the maternal values she claims to espouse. This paper will explore Rowlandson's devolving motherhood, shedding light on the cultural capital necessary for "good" mothering.

*Speaker