

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Mary Rowlandson (c. 1635-1711)

From A True History of the Captivity And Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson

Beyond what she tells in this narrative, little is known of Mary Rowlandson. The wife of the Reverend Joseph Rowlandson of Lancaster, Massachusetts, she was captured in a raid on Lancaster in February, 1675/76, while her husband was on a journey to Boston to obtain aid for the town's defense. She was ransomed in Princeton, Massachusetts, May 2. The following year she and her husband moved to Wethersfield, Connecticut, where he returned to the ministry. He died in 1678, and she married Captain Samuel Talcott of Connecticut.

A careful and patient reader of this narrative, however, can learn a lot about her and about Puritanism. The full title of the first American edition, Boston, 1682, was *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*-a title which assigns all credits to the deity. God willed all these events as punishments for her sin, tests of her faith, and signs of his mercy. These lessons are reinforced in her numerous quotations from scripture. Even the Indians are part of the plan: they are devils unknowingly serving as agents of God.

The full title of the English edition, also 1682, was *A True History of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson, A Minister's Wife in New-England: Wherein is set forth, The Cruel and Inhumane Usage she underwent amongst the Heathens for Eleven Weeks' time: And her Deliverance from them. Written by her own Hand, for her Private Use: and now made Public at the earnest Desire of some Friends, for the Benefit of the Afflicted.* This second title places more emphasis on Indian cruelty and her suffering.

The careful reader can also see that Mary Rowlandson was one tough lady, a woman who kept up her courage and did not just wilt in self-pity. In the course of her captivity and its "removes" from place to place, she learned to eat food she would once have scorned. She knitted and did other kinds of work, sometimes to please her captors and sometimes to be independent of them. She even began to take a certain interest in Indian manners, finding King Philip rather polite and appreciating the fact that no one physically molested her. Even her turning down of the chance to run away may be a sign of her fortitude and good sense, rather than meek passivity, as some people have thought. She "desired to wait God's time."

Thus Puritanism not only exalted God, it also exalted the individual and the individual's experience as the microcosm in which, as in Puritan society and Puritan history generally, and the workings of God could be examined. This gave Mary Rowlandson both the strength to endure her captivity and the reason to write about it.

The text, including bracketed editorial notes and preserving original punctuation, spelling, and italics, is from the selection edited by Amy Schrager Lang, in *Journeys in New Worlds: Early American Women's Narratives*, ed. William L. Andrews (Madison: Univ of Wisconsin Press, 1990). For critical commentary, see Lang's introduction to the selection in that volume and *Held Captive by Indians: Selected Narratives, 1642-1836*, ed. Richard Vander Beets (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1973).