
In early colonial America, arithmetic was primarily useful for measuring the population of settlers, finding passages in the Bible, and keeping time. Molly Farrell’s “‘Beyond my Skil’: Mary Rowlandson’s Counting” interprets Rowlandson’s captivity narrative in numerical terms presenting the context, significance, and application of arithmetic within the narrative. Farrell explains, “As a woman, Rowlandson would have achieved a basic level of numeracy not through a primer on arithmetic, but in the process of learning household tasks” (Farrell 63). In other words, because she is a woman, Rowlandson has learned only rudimentary arithmetic in so far as it is necessary to competently perform duties to her household and religion. In this manner, numbers and arithmetic symbolize the order and structure which Rowlandson has been raised to depend on and submit to. Upon her capture, Rowlandson seeks refuge in numbers to mollify herself in spite of chaotic surroundings. Rowlandson’s arithmetic ability is integral to her survival, but the rudimentary nature of her arithmetic ability is often a source of distress. Rowlandson’s counting fails her repeatedly in nearly all her attempts to gain some sense of exactly how many Indians surrounded her at a given moment. Rowlandson describes her own arithmetic skills in a somewhat self-effacing manner, “When all the company was come up, and
were gathered together, I thought to count the number of them, but they were so many, and being somewhat in motion, it was beyond my skil” (Belasco & Johnson 227). In essence, Rowlandson’s tenuous grasp of arithmetic was hardly suited to non-domestic use. Farrell juxtaposes Rowlandson’s arithmetic with that of Increase Mather, “it is hard to imagine how Increase Mather, who authorized Rowlandson’s narrative, tolerated Rowlandson’s repeated failure to tell us how many Indians were alive, or at least dead, around her. A central tactic of his account on King Phillip’s War… is to insist that every English death is matched by a greater number of Indian deaths-and to reinforce this insistence with careful accounting” (Farrell 76). This context is significant because it questions Mather’s motives for authorizing Rowlandson’s narrative despite its lack of careful accounting. Perhaps Mather authorized Rowlandson’s work because he appreciated her humility and adherence to cultural norms which dictated that advanced arithmetic ability was unnecessary for a woman if it was outside the domain of housework or Bible reading.


While Farrell’s article provides a semi-empowering image of Rowlandson fending for herself with arithmetic ability acquired from the necessity of her position in Puritan society, Davis’ article “Mary White Rowlandson’s Self-Fashioning as Puritan Goodwife” expands on the role of women in Puritan society and provides evidence of Rowlandson as an exemplar of Puritan virtues. Increase Mather, the Puritan minister who authorized Rowlandson’s narrative, relied on a set of guidelines for approving women’s writing. Davis outlines the Puritan
guidelines as follows, “a woman’s rhetoric must be confined to pious or otherwise traditional subjects, offered in humility, presented in deference to husband or other male authority, and composed in time not stolen for domestic responsibilities” (Davis 49-50). The aforementioned guidelines show that a Puritan woman was expected to be pious, humble, and completely submissive to male authority; women’s writing, as well as arithmetic, were dependent on their positions as wives and subjects of the church. Due to this position, Rowlandson’s writing is heavily dependent on the Bible. Davis states, “Mary White Rowlandson maintains her stance of pious and industrious nurturer, fiercely protective of her own kind while excluding the alien other, and always justifies her position by the authority of scripture and the God she knows from its pages” (Davis 56). In plain English, Rowlandson caters to Puritan notions of the ways in which a woman should behave by using her religion as a reference tool. Essentially, God is the primary male authority to whom Rowlandson must submit herself, given the lack of any other Puritan male authorities during her time in captivity. The use of the Bible as a reference for female behavior begs the question of whether Puritan sensibilities were entirely derived from scripture or if scripture was merely used to justify current social norms.


The article “Mary Rowlandson and the Psalms: The Textuality of Survival” by Dawn Henwood addresses the role of the Bible in Mary Rowlandson’s narrative. Although the Bible granted Puritans with a means to justify the subjugation of women, it also provided a powerful outlet of emotional expression. As Henwood explains, “Rowlandson finds in the Psalms a
reserve of hope as well as an arsenal of curses against her enemies” (Henwood 170). Strictly speaking, Rowlandson was able to keep her composure by relating her anger and frustration to the Psalms, thus resolving her difficult feelings to a point where she could turn her thoughts in a more hopeful direction. The Psalms are especially significant given their context in puritan society. Henwood outlines the Psalms’ context in the following quote, “For women, the Psalms represented a special opportunity for public expression, since an exemption from the church rule of silence allowed them to join in congregational singing (Hambrick-Stowe 114)” (Henwood 173). This exception would have cast the Psalms in a positive light for Rowlandson, an example of empowerment granted by a religion which at the time provided justification for the subjugation of women. Henwood’s article presents a more positive view of religion’s role in Rowlandson’s narrative, when compared to Davis’ article. However, it is important to keep in mind that Rowlandson’s narrative would not have been published if she had not justified her position with the authority of the scripture. Rowlandson was undoubtedly aware that the authorization of her narrative was predicated on her giving the credit of survival to God, rather than by virtue of her own rhetorical and arithmetic prowess.

Interpretive Conclusion

The role of women in Puritan society provides vital context for Rowlandson’s narrative and is thus the key to understanding it. The preamble to Rowlandson’s work begins with the quote, “Reader, if thou gettest no good by such a Declaration such as this, the fault must needs be thine own. Read therefore, Peruse, Ponder, and from hence lay by something from the experience of another against thine own turn comes, that so thou also through patience and consolation of Scripture mayest have hope” (Belasco & Johnson 219). In other words, Rowlandson is deferring credit for the work to God because she is framing her work as a
declaration of her enduring faith in the face of adversity. Why does it matter that she is drawing so much attention to her faith? It matters, because were her narrative not framed in such a light, it would have never been published. Puritan cultural norms were heavily dependent on religion; and as a result, women were expected to abide by the authority of God, their husband, father, or any male authority figure. Women were expected to look after domestic affairs, obey their husbands, and live in accord with scripture (Davis 49-50); therefore, a woman’s interests had to align with these expectations. However, a few cases in which women could gain empowerment, albeit to a limited degree, were present in Puritan society. Women were allowed to break their mandated silence when singing the Psalms in church (Henwood 173) as well as permitted to learn arithmetic to assist them in domestic affairs (Farrell 63). Given this context and the distress which Rowlandson experiences during her captivity, there is a strong possibility that Rowlandson would have positively viewed the role of women in Puritan New England. Puritan society was highly restrictive and afforded women little room of personal growth, although it also provided familiarity, structure, and order. These qualities were all absent in Rowlandson’s life in captivity, and it is evident in her misery that she preferred comfortable, yet restrictive, Puritan stability to a chaotic life in the wilderness plagued by starvation.

To look back on Rowlandson’s time period and imagine that modern progressive cultural ideas would have been adopted had the chance presented itself would be all too easy. Rowlandson never gives any hints in her narrative that she is upset with the status quo of women in Puritan society. The fact that Rowlandson does not voice grievances with Puritan culture can be accepted at face value or interpreted that Rowlandson’s work would not have been published if she had voiced any grievances she may have had. The latter is more likely because Rowlandson had to gain approval for her narrative from a minister who would have been
supremely displeased with any disparagement of male authority. This concern implies that Rowlandson would have had to censor herself before even submitting her narrative for approval, which would effectively rob history of any kind of record of the way women genuinely felt about Puritan Society. Such a sentiment is doubtful whether Rowlandson had any strong grievances with Puritan society and her place within because any grievances which she may have had were not enough to sway her to consider integrating into Indian society. Rowlandson’s decision was simple; either she could choose a comfortable, stable life as a second class citizen or a freer life with less comfort and more danger.