



Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

**OPPONENT'S REPORT
MA THESIS**

**Indians as the Imminent Threat: The Portrayal of Indians in Captivity Narratives
Bc. Tereza Brožová**

The thesis aims to discuss the depiction of Native Americans in selected seventeenth- and eighteenth-century captivity narratives, particularly in the narrative of Mary Rowlandson. Brief explorations (rather than a systematic analysis) of Rowlandson's text are complemented with sketches of the historical context, and with observations about the genre of the captivity narrative as a whole.

The defense should elucidate several issues. First, the phrasing of some passages is misleading. In the abstract it is claimed that the thesis “focuses on the confrontation of savagery and civilization from the point of view of common presuppositions and prejudices about the Native Americans that are very often depicted in several captivity narratives” (5) and that “the confrontation between civilization and savagery stood as a source material for many writers and thinkers” (6). It would have been more appropriate to discuss the conflict in other terms because the opposition between savagery and civilization is a construct that reflects the logic of the colonizers—a logic that the thesis aims to deconstruct, I think. Likewise, statements such as “in the early captivity narratives, captivity suffering and final redemption were all part of God's plan, and the publication of these events was a Christian duty” (7), “[Rowlandson's] ability to endure and adapt therefore marks her spiritual progress, which is only possible through the reading of Scripture” (15) and “by ways of Providence, Rowlandson is taken captive and serves the very chief leaders of the tribe” (51) imply that Ms. Brožová identifies herself with the colonialists' interpretation of these events rather than distancing herself from them. Again, clearly, if captivity narratives cast the events in terms of God's plans and Providence, it reveals more about the colonizers' own ideological mindset than about the events themselves. Certainly the Native Americans interpreted the conquest differently. Their perspective is not represented in the thesis; moreover, claims such as “Indians reveled in lying and it can be stated that through lies they partially maintained their role as cruel cannibals” (60) demonstrate the Puritans' failure to understand a culture that was radically different from their own. They do not demonstrate what the thesis suggests later, namely that captivity narratives “provided a useful device for the understanding of Native American culture and life of the period” (68), but rather that they functioned as an ideological device for the control of the Other. Nevertheless, there are critics in whose view Rowlandson's narrative does have a subversive subtext. Does she manage to question some prevailing stereotypes, including the binary civilization/savage? Is there any concrete evidence of this in her narrative? Could Ms. Brožová address this issue?

In addition, statements such as “Mather talks about ‘a rightful Possession of the land the Lord had given to [them]’ but the imposed superiority of the white civilization caused severe fights and losses on both sides” (24) should be probed further. It is true that there were losses and deaths on both sides but everything happened within the colonial framework, which is not to be lost sight of. In this context, is Roy Harvey Pearce's analysis on pp. 24-25 represented correctly; does he not refer (once again) to the Puritans' rather than his own justification of the conquest? By all means, the quote should not conclude the section “The



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Puritan Captivity Narrative” uncommented. The reference to David Minter's article on p. 69 is equally unclear: it appears as if the critic argued that “Rowlandson's faith is tested through the suffering from which she is delivered by God's will, and providence leads her to the final stage of Puritan conversion, assurance” (69). Again, does Minter argue that this is what happened—or does he argue that this is how the Puritans perceived what happened? Such distinctions need to be drawn when secondary sources are incorporated.

The thesis presents useful albeit somewhat superficial data to sketch the historical background, and it would have been interesting had Ms. Brožová delved further into the actual narrative of Mary Rowlandson (or into other captivity narratives), as she does for example in the section on the depiction of Weetamoo.

On the whole, for an MA thesis, “Indians as the Imminent Threat: The Portrayal of Indians in Captivity Narratives” is rather uneven. Depending on the defense and the rigor with which the above issues are clarified by the candidate, I propose the grade “good” (3) or “very good” (2).

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