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Roger Williams' Women's Voices: Gendered Rhetoric in Puritan Polemics

CW: apologize in advance; a section of my paper deals with rather gratuitous rape imagery; not graphic, but easily uncomfortable

Consideration of female speech and dissent in the early New England Puritan colony reliably brings to mind the figure of Anne Hutchinson. While it was heresy as well as a challenge to the authority of the established ministry that led to her banishment in 1638, the trial records leave little doubt about the centrality of Hutchinson's gender in the accusations. Especial scrutiny surrounded her approximation of a masculine mode of public speech at communal gatherings hosted in her house. In a broader examination of New England politics of speech, Jane Kamensky identifies the outspoken woman as a locus of especial anxiety, undermining the marriage institution and with it "portend[ing] the dissolution of state and society" (Kamensky 22).

The Puritan wariness of female speech makes it quite surprising, then, to find the other famous exile—Roger Williams—employing a rhetoric of femininity on several polemical occasions. The core of Williams' religious intervention is condensed in a printed dispute with the influential Puritan minister John Cotton: the *Bloudy Tenent* volumes of 1644-1652. Essentially, Williams contests the justice of his banishment by arguing for a wide-ranging freedom of religious belief and calling for a full separation between Church and State. Both of Williams' volumes are striking in their presentation as dialogs between the allegorical sisters "Truth" and "Peace," putting in female mouths Williams' otherwise conventional abstruse theological-political argumentation. "Queries of Highest Consideration," 1644, a short pamphlet arguing for

freedom of conscience on the English mainland, does not adopt this rhetorical stance, but in its introduction Williams directly aligns himself with the biblical Esther. In another gendered turn of speech, Williams is unnervingly fond of comparing political intrusion into a believer's religious conscience to the rape of a woman. It is worth adding that these rhetorical positions are unlikely to have stemmed from progressive gender politics; Williams had scandalized Massachusetts early on by demanding that women should veil their faces in church (Goodman 71).

Despite his banishment, Williams remained surprisingly well-regarded, commended for his "Wisedome and Gentlenes" by John Winthrop and for his "judgement" by John Cotton (qtd. in Kamensky 91). While Winthrop's 1644 *Short Story* of the Antinomian controversy disparagingly compares the "monstrous births" of Hutchinson's erroneous opinions to her subsequent miscarriage, Williams' publications of the same year attests to a measure of cultural validity, confirmed by Cotton's response (qtd. in Hall 214). Williams' leadership of the Rhode Island colony involved extensive negotiation and cooperation with the surrounding colonies and their leaders. His distinguished life career attests to sufficient currency for his rhetoric, too, to be worthy of a sustained examination.

The most extensive example of Williams' employment of a feminine voice is the framing of the *Tenent* volumes as a dialog between Truth and Peace. Past several introductory sections, the first chapter dramatizes a long-sought meeting between the two sisters.[1] The presentation is emotional as well as embodied to a remarkable degree; thus, Peace exclaims: "Mine *Heart* is full of sighes, mine *eyes* with teares: Where can I better vent my full oppressed *bosome*, than into *thine*, whose faithfull *lips* may for these few houres revive my drooping wandring *spirits*, and

[1] The characters are not directly identified as sisters, but that is easily inferred from the general tone of the text, supported by concrete indications such as the feminine pronoun attached to Peace early in the text and a later reference to "Our Sister *Patience*" (*Bloudy Tenent* 55,424).

here begin to *wipe Teares* from mine eyes" (*Bloudy Tenent* 56). The arguments unfolded over hundreds of pages are thus framed as a spontaneous emotional expression rather than, or at least in addition to, carefully plotted cerebral reasoning. Further, the plaintive tone of the conversation harnesses the vulnerability of the conventional female gender role to intensify Williams' presentation as a sympathetic victim of "persecution"—rather than, for example, a recalcitrant rule-breaker. Later on, however, when Peace and Truth recede into the background as largely formal labels, they can ambivalently serve either to remind of their initial effect or, on the contrary, to invest Williams' arguments with an impersonal objective quality as "the spiritualization of feminine imagery had the effect of erasing the earthly femaleness from it" (Schweitzer 27).

In fact, such spiritualization is operative from the start, as the embodied femininity is modified by Peace's opening reference to her "wearied, *tyred Wing*," which turns the sisters—obvious allegories to begin with—into angelic forms distinct from women with earthly bodies (*Bloudy Tenent* 55). This resonates especially with Winthrop's cruel comment on Hutchinson's miscarriage: whereas the female body, conventionally associated with materiality and especially with reproduction, could be employed to silence women's speech, Williams constructs his feminine speakers with just enough of the bodily for rhetorical effect, but not quite a human biology.

Another eye-catching rhetorical appeal to the feminine is Williams' frequent association between political interference in a believer's religious opinions and a woman's rape—spread throughout his works, but especially prominent in *The Bloudy Tenent*. An early reference to the "*ravishing of conscience*" foreshadows stronger expressions later on (*Bloudy Tenent* 4). Thus, Williams argues that in enforcing a uniform religion across England, the Parliament "hath

committed a greater rape than if they had forced or ravished the bodies of all the women in the world" (*Bloudy Tenent* 9). This is repeated almost verbatim later on when, citing the King of Bohemia, Williams posits that "a *Soule* or *Spirituall Rape* is more abominable in *Gods* eye, than to force and ravish the Bodies of all the Women in the World"; a margin-note ensures that even in only leafing through the pages, a reader will not miss that "Forcing of Conscience is a Soule rape" (*Bloudy Tenent* 182). In yet another close variation, this time with a familial cast, Williams warns that "[w]ith lesse sinne ten thousand fold may a naturall Father force his daughter, or the Father of the Commonweale force all the maydens in a Country to the marriage beds of such and such men whom they cannot love, then the soules of these and other subjects to such worship or Ministry"; this is also reinforced in a margin-note (*Bloudy Tenent* 259).

The violence of the figure communicates the extent of Williams' veneration of a believer's religious conviction as well as his abhorrence of a forceful intrusion into that realm. Williams had personally experienced religious persecution in his banishment, but on a broader scale the issue extended to over a century of bloodshed with millions of casualties in the European wars of religion. The particular choice of rape may be further clarified with reference to Schweitzer's investigation of Puritan subjectivity. In brief, Schweitzer finds that the Puritan subject (always implicitly masculine) undergoes a feminizing operation in the conversion experience, especially by being cast in a feminine position in relation to the figure of God. The believer's soul was commonly envisioned as betrothed in marriage to Christ, and, conversely, marriage was viewed as the closest earthly approximation of the soul's union with God; the theme was used to explicate detailed matters of individual faith as well as communal relationships (Schweitzer 4). Since intense religious experiences were conventionally depicted as the soul's ravishment by Christ, it is likely that the immediate referent of "rape" here was the

spiritual metaphor more than the material rape of a woman. Williams himself articulates a similar connection: "A chaste wife will … abhor … to be constrained to the bed of a stranger. And what is abominable in corporal, is much more loathsome in spiritual whoredom and defilement" (*Bloudy Tenent* 38). In fact, if a believer's soul is meant to be married and ravished by God, then in figuring the forcing of conscience as rape, Williams is amplifying his accusation of the authorities according to the understanding of rape as a transgression of the husband's—God's—rights.

A peculiar slippage seems to take place, however, at the margins of Williams' rhetoric, once he extends the metaphor of rape outside this spiritual context. In addition to his printed works, a good amount of his correspondence has been preserved, and one exchange is particularly striking in this regard.[2] In a 1669 territorial dispute, Williams responds to his interlocutor John Whipple's accusation of a "clamorous tong" by comparing himself to "[a] woman that … can not but cry when she is forct and ravished: she that cries not, she is a whore before God and Men. And what are those women but Barbarians and Indian Women (ordinarily) when being in Pains and Sorrowes they cry not out?" (*Correspondence* 588). Later in the conversation, Whipple apparently mimicked Williams' rhetorical strategy, as Williams recapitulates: "You here reply that you were the ravished Woman, for You were in peace etc. but Your Adversaries the Ravishers lay in ambush" (*Correspondence* 600).

Given the prevalence of the metaphor of the believer's soul's marriage to God, it stands to reason that Williams' rape imagery in the *Tenent* volumes would be easily identified with that convention so as to operate with minimal sense of disruption of normative gender assignments.

[2] Technically only Williams' side of the correspondence is available; however, Williams is generally prone to restating his interlocutors' positions to such an extent that even his letters read as a dialog.

However, once that image is transferred into a worldly argument between two men, it becomes rather ambivalent as the referents are more material than spiritual. The attribution of a "clamorous tong" to Williams is gendered to begin with in the conventional view of quarrelling as a feminine failing in contemporary moralizing discourse (Kamensky 19). In defending himself as though a woman crying out against rape, Williams forbears to contest the feminine gendering itself, but shifts his image from the despised "scold" to a chaste woman, positioning his opponent as the violator. It is particularly noteworthy (and demands fuller treatment than I can give here) that at the same time as Williams compromises on his rhetorical gendering, he foregrounds not only the moral propriety of his response but also cements his racial standing as white or European by pointedly invoking a somatic difference from "Barbarians and Indian Women." In this deployment of femininity as a marker of moral propriety, Williams appears to have won the contest over the terms of the dispute, if not its outcome, as Whipple not only copies Williams' claim to a violated femininity but also echoes his racial stance in speaking of "Adversaries" lying "in ambush," an image that would have evoked Native American anxieties even before Whipple directly identified the contenders for the lands in question as Pawtuxet.

The last strand of feminine voicing to be pursued here dates back to 1644, when in addition to his broad defense of the freedom of religious conscience in *The Bloudy Tenent*, Williams also published a pamphlet weighing in on current tensions between Presbyterians and Independents in Parliamentary ranks, essentially breaking with both sides in arguing against State enforcement of either model of Church polity. Rather than presenting his argument though allegorical figures, Williams speaks in his own voice in this text, though anonymously.[3] The

[3] Technically, *The Bloudy Tenent* was published anonymously as well, but Williams' identification of Cotton as his opponent made his identity an easy guess for anyone following the Bay Colony controversies.

opening of the text, however, feminizes him in a different manner, as in an elaborate rhetorical apology he casts his public challenge as "*hav[ing] been humbly bold to presume as* Ester *into* Ahasuerus *his presence, against your Order*" ("Queries" 253). Though relatively minor, this allusion is striking in its rhetorical effect. The topos of feminine modesty is evident first as Williams positions himself as a woman deferring to superior authority. The unfolding of the biblical allusion, however, adds on a militant layer. The Book of Esther depicts the title character's deliverance of the Jewish people—matched with the true Christians in standard typological reading—from an evil councilor's plot. Given the dynamics of religious persecution in that text, it is easy to see that the factions Williams was addressing would be far more appropriately matched with the councilor, Haman, executed at the end of the story, rather than with King Ahasuerus as per Williams' direct identification in the opening.

Notably, Williams' self-presentation as the biblical queen Esther comes in the context of recent English queens who had left a deep mark on the public imagination, including with regard to religious policy. Invoking the changeability of state regulations (at odds with the eternal verities of faith), Williams tracks shifts between Protestant and Catholic leanings of English rulers starting with Henry VIII. The list ends with Elizabeth at an ominous note that spells out the veiled threat of the Esther analogy: "'Tis true, Queen *Elizabeth* made Lawes against Popery and Papists but the Government of Bishops, the Common Prayer, the Ceremonies were then so high in that Queen and Parlaments eye, that the Members of this present and ever renowned Parlament, would have then been counted little lesse than Hereticks" ("Queries" 260). A concluding reminder that "the Common-weale cannot without a spirituall rape force the consciences of all to one Worship" ties together the different strands of Williams' figurations ("Queries" 260). Haman's execution, sealed in the wake of a suspicion of sexual assault on

Esther, is mapped onto the issue of religious persecution through the image of spiritual rape. The appearance of The Virgin Queen Elizabeth reinforces the Parliamentarians' culpability as with Elizabeth mirroring Esther, English divines become the assaulting Haman; moreover, her political legacy brings Williams' threat closer to home, though still of course confined to the rhetorical level.

Throughout this survey, feminine representations appear highly ambivalent in themselves, and further complicated as they are formulated by a man for concerns that have little to do with actual women. In chanelling the arguments of the *Tenent* volumes through allegorical female speakers, Williams joins in a long tradition of idealized representations of women, from poets' muses to Catholic Saints. His concurrent tendency to compare the forcing of religious conscience to women's rape has likely stemmed from a particular Puritan stress on another idealized feminine figure—that of the soul of a believer of any gender as the bride in their relationship to God as the spiritual husband. The inherent gender instability of that image is curiously compounded as Williams adopts the rhetorical stance of a raped woman outside of the religious context, capitalizing on the position of the unjustly wronged and framing his opponent as the figurative rapist. Williams' move to shore up his racial position at the same time as he strategically compromises on his gender is particularly intriguing given his extensive engagement with Native Americans in both actual life and printed legacy. Finally, an invocation of the modesty topos through self-presentation as a biblical female figure curiously unfolds into a surprisingly combative position intensified through reference to Queen Elizabeth, whose idealized femininity has not precluded at times a violent exercise of political power.

Clearly enough, these rather divergent examples of gendered rhetoric do not come to a neat concluding line. Particularly, they do not come to an essential notion of gender with a stable

assigned meaning. In fact, in a short book of spiritual exercise originally written for Williams' wife, and dedicated to Lady Vane the Younger, Williams omits the expected feminine soul in favor of consistently talking about their "inner man." Gender thus becomes strikingly and almost consciously a rhetorical construct imbued with different meanings depending on the situation—even if that is of course only true within a very circumscribed scope that functions against a background of a strictly gendered society and culture.

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