

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

The Bloody Tenent of Persecution, 1644

CHAP. I.

Truth. In what *darke corner* of the World (*sweet Peace*) are we two met? How hath this present evill *World* banished *Me* from all the Coasts & Quarters of it? and how hath the Righteous *God* in judgement taken *Thee* from the Earth, *Erv.* 6. 4.

Peace. 'Tis lamentably true (*blessed Truth*) the *foundations* of the World have long been out of course: the *Gates* of *Earth* and *Hell* have conspired together to intercept out joyfull *meeting* and out holy *kisses*: With what a wearied, *tyred Wing* have I flowne over *Nations*, *Kingdomes*, *Cities*, *Townes*, to finde out precious *Truth*?

Truth. The like enquiries in my flights and travells have I made for *Peace*, and still am told, she hath left the *Earth*, and fled to *Heaven*.

Peace. Deare *Truth*, What is the *Earth* but a *dungeon of darknesse*, where *Truth* is not ?

Truth. And what's the *Peace* thereof but a fleeting *dreame*, thine *Ape* and *Counterfeit*?

Peace. O where's the Promise of the *God* of *Heaven*, that *Righteousnes* and *Peace* shall *kisse* each other?

Truth. Patience (*fweet Peace*) these *Heavens* and *Earth* are growing *Old*, and shall be changed like a *Garment*, *Psal.*102. They shall melt away, and be burnt up with all the *Works* that are therein ; and the most high *Eternall Creatour*, shall gloriously create *New Heavens* and *New Earth*, wherein dwells *Righteousnesse*, 2 *Pet.* 3. Our *kisses* then shall have their *endlesse* date of pure and sweetest ioyes? till then both *Thou* and *I* must hope, and wait, and beare the furie of the *Dragons* wrath, whose monstrous *Lies* and *Furies* shall with himselfe be caft into the *lake* of *Fire*, the *second death*, *Revel.*20.

Peace. Most precious *Truth*, thou knowest we are both pursued and laid [in wait] for : Mine *heart* is full of sighes, mine *eyes* with teares : Where can I better vent my full oppressed *bosome*, then into *thine*, whose faithfull *lips* may for these few houres revive my drooping wandring *spirits*, and here begin to *wipe Teares* from mine eyes, and the eyes of my dearest *Children*?

Truth. Sweet daughter of the *God* of *Peace*, begin ; powre out thy *sorrowes*, vent thy *complaints* : how joyfull am I to improve these precious Minutes to revive our *Hearts*, both thine and mine, and the hearts of all that *love* the *Truth* and *Peace*, *Zach.*8.

Peace. Deare *Truth*, I know thy *birth*, thy *nature*, thy *delight*. They that know thee, will *prize* thee farre above themselves and lives, and *sell* themselves to *buy thee*. Well spake that famous *Elizabeth* to her famous *Attorney Sir Edward Coke*: Mr. *Attourney*, goe on as thou hast begun, and still plead, not *pro Domina Regina*, but *pro Domina Veritate*.

Truth. 'Tis true, my *Crowne* is high, my *Scepter's* strong to breake down *strongest holds*, to throw down highest *Crownes* of all that plead (though but in thought) against me. Some few there are, but oh how few are valiant for the *Truth*, and dare to *plead my Cause*, as my *Witnesses* in *sack-cloth*, Revel. 11. While all mens *Tongues* are bent like *Bowes* to shoot out lying words against Me!

Peace. O how could I spend *eternall dayes* and *endlesse dates* at thy holy feet, in listning to the precious Oracles of thy mouth ! All the Words of thy mouth are *Truth*, and there is no iniquity in them ; Thy *lips* drop as the hony-combe. But oh ! since we must part anon, let us (as thou saidst) improve our *Minutes*, and (according as thou promisedst) revive me with thy words, which are fweeter then the honey and the honey-combe.

“*ravishing of conscience*”

“the *Parliament of England* hath committed a greater *rape* [in enforcing religious uniformity] then if they had forced or ravished the bodies of all the women in the *World*.”

Citing the King of Bohemia: “a *Soule* or *Spirituell Rape* is more abominable in *Gods* eye, than to force and ravish the Bodies of all the Women in the World”; reinforced by a margin-note

“Forcing of Conscience is a Soule rape”

“With 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, which is either a true or false, because *Cant.* 1.16.”; also reinforced in a margin-note.

“A chaste *wife* will not onely abhorre to be restrained from her *husbands* bed, as adulterous and polluted, but also abhor (if not much more) to bee constrained to the *bed* of a *stranger*. And what is abominable in *corporall*, is much more loathsome in *spirituall whoredome* and defilement.”

Queries of Highest Consideration, 1644

“’Tis true, we have been humbly bold to presume as Ester into Ahasuerus his presence, against your Order: ...

Who knows not in how few yeares the Common weale of *England* hath set up and pulle’d down? ... How doth the Parlament in *Henry* the 8. his days condemn the absolute Popery in *Henry* the seventh? How is it *Edwards* the 6. his time the Parlament of *Henry* the 8 condemned for their halfe Popery halfe Protestantisme? How soon doth Queen *Maries* Parlament condemn *Edward* for his absolute Protestantisme? And *Elizabeths* Parlament as soon condemn Queen *Maries* for their absolute Popery? ‘This true, Queen *Elizabeth* made Lawes against Popery and Papists but the Government of Bishops ... were then so high in that Queen and Parlements eye, that the Members of this present and ever renowned Parlament, would have then been counted little lesse than Hereticks.”

The Correspondence of Roger Williams in Two Volumes. Ed. Glenn W. LaFantasie. Vol. 2.

A much later epistolary exchange between Williams and a fellow Rhode-Islander over a land dispute that has only marginal references to is rather fascinating for its use of the raped woman as a desirable rhetorical position for male speakers. Only Williams’ letters are extant, but these fortunately rehearse the opponent’s position at length.

Williams apparently responds to an earlier accusation along the lines that he cries as though he was a violated woman: “As to Patience how can you say You are patient under my clamorous tounge when that very Speech is most impatient and unchristian. For ([*torn*] I told Sidrach [last night)?] A woman that [*torn*] 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?”

Williams belabors the point and further emphasizes it in signing off the letter as follows: “This shall be the Continuall Clamour or Cry of Your unworthy friend and neighbour

R. W.”

A later letter rehearses the exchange and adds a further development to it when the interlocutor had apparently claimed the rhetorical position of a raped woman for himself: “Whereas you comforted yourselfe in your Innocencie agnst my clamourous Tounge: And I had answered that a Woman being Forced that cries not out (but so far Consents as to be a Silent) is a Whore before God and Men etc. You here reply that you were the ravished Woman, for You were in peace etc. but Your Adversaries the Ravishers lay in ambush, and came suddenly upon you saying that the 25 acre Men had paid an Equall peny, and therefore should have aequall purchase: and others saying that the Towne of Providence had purchased Land and therefore Pawtuxet men should not cary it from them.”

Bloudy Tenent

Another peculiar gendered turn, referring not to Williams but to the anonymous author of one of the opening segments in defense of religious freedom:

“The Authour of these *Arguments* (against *persecution*) (as I have beene informed) being committed by *some* then in power, *close prisoner to Newgate*, for the witnesse of some truths of *Jesus*, and having not the use of *Pen* and *Inke*, wrote these *Arguments* in *Milke*, in sheets of Paper, brought to him by the *Woman* his *Keeper*, from a friend in *London*, as the *stopples* of his *Milk bottle*. ... It was in *milke*, tending to soule *nourishment*, even for *Babes* and Sucklings in *Christ*. It was in *milke*, spiritually *white*, pure and innocent, like those *white horses* of the *Word* of *truth* and *meeknesse*, and the *white Linnen* or *Armour* of *righteousnesse*, in the *Army* of *Jesus*. Rev.6.&19. It was in *milke*, soft, meeke, peaceable and gentle, tending both to the *peace* of *soules*, and the *peace* of *States* and *Kingdomes*.

Peace. The *Answer* [by John Cotton] (though I hope out of milkie pure intentions) is returned in *bloud*:”