

'[T]hey, like inhumane creatures, laughed': Calvinist Humor in *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*

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A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson may not appear, at first glance, to be an appropriate text for categorization under American humor; however, the humor that emerges for a modern audience from Rowlandson's often hypocritical actions and descriptions during her captivity align well with what Michael Dunne describes as Calvinist humor.

What is Calvinist humor?

According to Dunne, there are two types of Calvinist humor. The first is "the very normal and only-to-be-expected perception on the part of nearly everybody that there is something odd in the location and that he or she is the very first one to have noticed this" (1). The second "shows us that other people are fallen from perfection without any necessary recognition that we may be in the same boat ourselves" (1).



Where Dunne and I Disagree

Dunne claims that "Rowlandson is willing to write about herself in terms of the less censorious form of Calvinist humor, the side that is more willing to see that the speaker is not always right, that she can laugh at herself, that she is just another fallen creature among many" (30-1).

- She acknowledges that she has strayed from God's path and is being punished for "how careless [she] had been of God's holy time; how many Sabbaths [she] had lost and misspent, and how evilly [she] had walked in God's sight" (5).
- She refuses to acknowledge the humanity of "the barbarians" who captured her, despite listing numerous examples of their kindness.
 - She is quick to recite a Bible verse, but does not practice Christian ideals towards the natives.
 - She considers herself superior, more cultured, and more civilized, but her misunderstandings of indigenous culture make it easier to laugh at her mistakes than to sympathize with her errors because she's *unwilling* to learn or change.
- She sees herself as fallen in faith, but does not see the natives as her equals.

Moments of Humor in Rowlandson's *Narrative*

"Then they set me upon a horse with my wounded child in my lap, and there being no furniture upon the horse's back, as we were going down a steep hill we both fell over the horse's head, at which they, like inhumane creatures, laughed, and rejoiced to see it" (4).

"It was a cold morning, and before us there was a great brook with ice on it; some waded through it, up to the knees and higher, but others went till they came to a beaver dam, and I amongst them, where through the good providence of God, I did not wet my foot" (8).

"There came an Indian to them at that time with a basket of horse liver. I asked him to give me a piece. 'What,' says he, 'can you eat horse liver?' I told him, I would try, if he would give me a piece, which he did, and I laid it on the coals to roast. But before it was half ready they got half of it away from me, so that I was fain to take the rest and eat it as it was, with the blood about my mouth, and yet a savory bit it was to me" (9).

She carries a piece of stinking bear around in her pocket (11).

"My mistress's papoose was sick, and it died that night, and there was one benefit in it - that there was more room" (15).

"[T]he squaw was boiling horses feet; then she cut me off a little piece, and gave one of the English children a piece also. Being very hungry I had quickly eat up mine, but the child could not bite it, it was so tough and sinewy, but lay sucking, gnawing, chewing and slabbering of it in the mouth and hand. Then I took it of the child, and eat it myself, and savory it was to my taste" (17).

"They mourned (with their black faces) for their own losses, yet triumphed and rejoiced in their inhumane, and many times devilish cruelty to the English" (22).

Rowlandson and UNCP Students

While the narrative does provide excellent discussion on typology, Rowlandson's promotion of her faith, and her cultural hybridity, my students are always drawn more intently to other aspects of the narrative and find themselves uncomfortably laughing at her

- religious hypocrisy
- representation of indigenous people
- offensive critiques of indigenous culture
- lack of empathy, especially for other women and children
- self-righteous superiority against 'the Other'
- constant quoting of Bible verses

Other Scholars

Two scholars have noted the humor comes from lack of cultural understanding:

Laura Arnold claims that "Rowlandson's misunderstanding of Algonquian custom causes her to insult and disobey her captors more often than even she intends" (3).

Tiffany Potter explores how "Rowlandson's sense of superiority does seem to come from a deeply ingrained sense of cultural privilege" (156).

PRIMARY SOURCE

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Could the text's humor ultimately be meta-Calvinist? Rowlandson laughs at her captors because she thinks she's better than them; we laugh at Rowlandson because we think we're better than her.