

Narrating Violation: Harriet Prescott Spofford's "Circumstance"

Rita Bode



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/15057>

DOI: 10.4000/ejas.15057

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Rita Bode, « Narrating Violation: Harriet Prescott Spofford's "Circumstance" », *European journal of American studies* [Online], 14-3 | 2019, Online since 11 November 2019, connection on 11 November 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/15057> ; DOI : 10.4000/ejas.15057

This text was automatically generated on 11 November 2019.

Creative Commons License

Narrating Violation: Harriet Prescott Spofford's "Circumstance"

Rita Bode

1. Introduction: "Circumstance" as Rape Narrative and Methods of Representation

- ¹ Harriet Prescott Spofford (1835-1921) authored some of the most enigmatic stories in nineteenth-century American literature. Her elusive story "Circumstance," first published in the *Atlantic* in May 1860, startled even Emily Dickinson into declaring: "I read Miss Prescott's 'Circumstance,' but it followed me in the Dark—so I avoided her—" ("To T. W. Higginson," 25 April 1862, *Selected* 173). "Circumstance" is an unsettling story: a pioneer woman, "seized and borne aloft" into a tree by a particularly ferocious type of panther, commonly called the "Indian Devil" (Spofford 85), struggles to keep herself alive through one long night in the Maine woods by singing to her attacker. The range of critical interpretations of Spofford's story suggests that it continues to resonate strongly with readers and critics alike in its engagement with female development, especially of the female artist; its deployment and re-envisioning of the captivity narrative pattern; its awareness of the environmental issues of human and non-human interactions; and its commentary on American culture and history, among other readings.¹ Even after careful critical scrutiny, however, Spofford's stories often retain their enigmatic edge. Part of the unresolved quality in "Circumstance" seems to stem from the critical attention itself. The narrative details, the language and imagery repeatedly point to a representation of rape, but even as critical commentaries acknowledge the story's physical violence, the various contexts through which they complicate Spofford's narrative tend to de-center the sexual violation, glossing over it or enlisting the nature and implications of rape to serve other ends. Theresa Strouth Gaul, for instance, directly addresses the story's sexual violence but then diverts to arguing that the "scene of rape ... function[s] *simultaneously* ... as a scene of childbirth" (35) which she then positions as a statement on the pending civil war. Her reading

accepts, with no direct questioning, the sexual assault on the story's protagonist, but in her effort to uncover "the history of motherhood – and more particularly, childbirth," which she rightly sees as having "been suppressed in the literature of preceding centuries" (35), Gaul suppresses the aspect of women's history enacted in the violent encounter at the heart of the story. The displacement of the story's physical assault in the critical responses to it exemplifies Sabine Sielke's contention in *Reading Rape* that "transposed into discourse, rape turns into a rhetorical device, an insistent figure for other social, political and economic concerns and conflicts" (2).

- 2 In the second decade of the twenty-first century, revelations of sexual harassment, assault and violation are finding a place in public discourse with women speaking their experiences openly, but as Susan Brownmiller, in her influential study, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, reminded us more than four decades ago, sexual violation has a long history. Spofford's story adds to the record of rape. In this paper, I argue that in "Circumstance," Spofford presents a rape narrative. My approach positions Spofford's story in the kind of recovery process that Lynn R. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver discuss in *Rape and Representation*, when they propose "that we recuperate what has too often been left out: the physical violation and the women who find ways to speak it" (3). By encoding the violation in the panther's assault on her pioneer woman, Spofford finds a "way to speak" of physical rape; imply its trauma; and consider its social and personal implications in a time that demanded silence on sexual matters. Her story resists the elision of violence against women, and makes rape visible in a way acceptable to her time.
- 3 In their collection of essays, *Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives: Violence and Violation*, Sorcha Gunn and Zoë Brigley Thompson attempt to consider "not just whether we speak about rape or not, but *how* we speak about rape and to what end" (3). The volume's focus on "the subversive work being done by modern and contemporary writers on the subject of sexual violence" (4) and on the "radical readings" (3) that these rape narratives invite resists granting "narrative power to the rapists" (9), and, instead, aims to "establish new spaces for the subjectivity of the women who either have been raped or have been threatened with rape" (3). Neither "modern" nor "contemporary," at least not chronologically, Spofford's 1860 story is a fitting precursor, indeed, an exemplary paradigm, for a narrative of sexual violation that invites radical readings. Gunne and Thompson contend that their examples of rape narratives, while displaying considerable overlap, all fall into one of four categories, three of which readily accommodate "Circumstance" in straightforward as well as more intricate ways. The first category, "subverting the story," follows Carine Mardorossian's call in "Toward a New Feminist Theory of Rape" to challenge and transcend "the conventional binaries between victim and perpetrator, passivity and agency that perpetuate women's subjugation" (12):² "Circumstance" is subversive, deliberately undermining gender hierarchies and, through the threatened female protagonist's singing, granting her some agency. Gunne and Thompson's second category focuses on "metaphors for resistance," which, drawing on Elaine Scarry's study on "the body in pain," considers works in which the writers approach "the physical suffering and emotional pain of rape" obliquely translating the anguish into "complex symbolologies" (13): Spofford relies on indirect representation and figurative language as she substitutes the panther for the male attacker, and extends her methods to her story's form by enlisting the American captivity narrative with its ambivalence

surrounding the occurrence of sexual assaults on female captives. Gunne and Thompson consider their third category, "the protest of silence," to be "a particularly relevant topic to rape narratives" as they invoke Ernestine Schlant's theories that "silence is a language like any other" (14):³ "Circumstance" seems initially silent about rape, since the word, "rape," is never used directly either by the narrator or the protagonist—Susanne Opfermann first observed that there is "not one line of dialogue" in "Circumstance" (120)—but the language that reinforces the act is nonetheless present, for Spofford uses the silent background of language to convey her intents. Like Emily Dickinson, she draws on the etymology of words to suggest levels of meanings beyond the obvious. "Circumstance"'s "language of silence" conveys the presence and representation of the story's rape.

- 4 As a nineteenth-century writer, Spofford remains aware of the restrictive social mores of her time concerning the representation of sexual violation. While the sexual vulnerability of female slaves forms a standard aspect of slave narratives, and, as David Reynolds shows, erotic literature was amply present in the century's publications, explicit engagement with sexual subject matter, especially by women writers, was not acceptable for the fiction pages of the *Atlantic* and similar venues. Spofford's oblique approach, moreover, provides the additional benefit of circumventing exploitation and voyeurism, moral issues that representations of rape often call into question. And her indirect methods of recounting rape also reflect the historical way of proving rape in the legal system, that is, through "circumstantial evidence." The revised 1856 edition of *Bouvier's Law Dictionary*, "adapted to the constitution and laws of the United States of America and of the several states of the American Union," associates "circumstances" with "evidence," defining them as "the particulars which accompany a fact" ("Circumstances"), and near the end of the century, the first edition of Henry Campbell Black's *A Dictionary of Law*, published in 1891, has an entry for "circumstantial evidence:" "evidence which inferentially proves the principal fact by establishing a condition of surrounding and limiting circumstances." Like the act of rape, Spofford's telling of rape is "inferred from one or more circumstances" ("Circumstantial Evidence"), which her story carefully elaborates. In its suggestive language, its inferences and allusions, its ambiguous and ambivalent details, all of which speak to the story's powerful literary achievement, "Circumstance" relentlessly conveys the sense of sexual violation. Whether deliberate or not, Spofford's title points to her methodology. She tells her story of rape subversively and obliquely. Especially significant to her indirect method of representation is the ambiguous positioning of the Indian Devil between human and animal identities.

2. The Nineteenth Century's "Indian Devil"

- 5 Judith Fetterley's influential Introduction to "Circumstance" in *Provisions*, the important "reader from 19th-century American women," acknowledges the story's sexual violence. Her specific comments on the woman's encounter with the panther foreground the "physical violation," whose "overtones" Fetterley identifies as "clearly sexual;" but her conclusion "that the woman's experience can be read, then, as an experience of 'rape'" shows hesitancy in its phrasing, and she places the word rape in quotation marks, thus creating uncertainty about the actual physical enactment of the violation (266). While Fetterley does not allow metaphorical meanings to displace the

transgression, she sees the rape itself as metaphoric rather than actual; the confrontation of the woman and the panther resembles the situation between a woman and a rapist, or, put slightly differently, what happens to the woman is like rape, but not necessarily rape itself. Spofford's method of representation, however, is more metonymic than metaphoric. Through descriptions closely associating man and beast, and a focus on qualities easily transferable between them, she substitutes an animal for a human predator.

- 6 For many contemporary critics well-versed in intersectional theories of race and gender, the designation of the predatory beast as the "Indian Devil" is especially problematic in implying the story's racist attitude towards Indigenous peoples. Fetterley comments that "'Circumstance' exemplifies the insidiousness and pervasiveness of the racist imagination in white American literature" (267), a view that has been taken up by other commentators. Carol Holly, for example, sees an "imperialistic ideology, deeply racist," linked to manifest destiny at work in the story (160). But in admitting that "it would [...] be a mistake to assume that, as a group, nineteenth-century white American women writers were free from racist thinking" (267), Fetterley implies that Spofford is neither more nor less racist than her contemporaries, including, to various degrees, the many male writers who for so long constituted nineteenth-century American literature's canon. I follow Elaine Showalter's observation in *A Jury of Her Peers* that while "some critics have read ... ["Circumstance"] as racist ... I think the meanings are much more complex" (522, n. 33).
- 7 Nineteenth-century references to the Indian Devil suggest a misguided approach to interpreting the term as racist, for both John S. Springer in his 1851 study on forest life in Maine and New Brunswick and Henry David Thoreau in *The Maine Woods* imply that the "Indian" designation for this vicious specimen of wild feline roaming the Maine woods originates with Indigenous peoples themselves rather than in the derogatory, racist attitudes of white settlers. According to Thoreau, the "Indians" consider this creature "the only animal in Maine which man need fear" (Thoreau 128); to the Indigenous people, the lunxus is demonic, and hence arises the term "Indian Devil" to reflect their perspective. Spofford seems aware of this origin, when she specifies, in her first reference to the creature, that the attacking "wild beast" is "known by hunters as the Indian Devil" (85, emphasis mine).⁴
- 8 Spofford does, however, make the problematic and pointed connection between the Indian Devil's attack on the woman and the "Indian" raiders' attack on the settlement at the end, which, as Matthew Wynn Sivils points out, seems to put the two "in league ... to systematically terrorize the area" (24). The family's salvation—by the first attack's keeping them conveniently out of the way of the second—provides a certain narrative satisfaction which suggests that Spofford is employing the "Indian" term for her own aesthetic purposes that may include its racist connotations. A racially-charged interpretation of the designation "Indian Devil" demeans the human "Indian" to the level of beast, but the term then also carries the contrary implication that this beast may be human especially since Indigenous peoples were often characterized by white settlers as bestial and demonic. Spofford's entire introduction to the panther is in language applied equally to Indigenous peoples in early accounts when she designates the "wild beast – the most savage and serpentine and subtle and fearless of our latitudes" (85).⁵ Not only are the descriptors for animal and human interchangeable, but, at times, they would seem more appropriate if applied inversely. Spofford speaks

of "stealthy native or deadly panther tribe" but it is "stealthy ... panther" and "deadly [native] tribe" that come to mind more readily and that the story, in fact, bears out (84). The story's language allows for an easy slippage between an animal and human binary. Sivils observes that the narration "never once refers to the [Indian Devil] as a panther" (24). Spofford hesitates to identify the woman's attacker as a specific animal species, referring to the panther instead in more vague, dehumanizing terms such as "creature" (86 and passim), "monster" (87 and passim), and, most often, as already noted, "beast" (85), the term that brings the panther closest to animal identity but is also a common description for brutish humans.

- 9 The indeterminacy surrounding the attacker's species does not translate to the panther's sex. The creature is never an "it" but always "he" (85 and passim). The Indian Devil functions as a camouflage for a violent male aggressor. Fetterley notes that "in the context of mid-nineteenth-century America," Spofford's descriptions of the panther constitute "a familiar code for referring to unrestrained male sexuality, that lower nature often let loose on the bodies of women" (266). The violence of the encounter makes reciprocity impossible, compelling the woman to position her violator as the deviant, alien other. Spofford engages species and race identifications, and the common prejudicial preconceptions around these, to subvert the ordered hierarchy of the male/female binary; she looks not only to human ascendance over animal life, but to degrees of human status, and in the nineteenth century's racist context, an "Indian" readily fulfils the abject position. Spofford asserts her violated protagonist's worth by devaluing the woman's attacker. Spofford's focus is not on racial stereotyping. The creature's maleness trumps any other qualities and emerges as the only certainty. The dehumanizing of the attacker into wild animal and racializing into heathen savage are forms of resistance to a threatening male presence. Spofford's handling of the encounter enables the expression of the woman's perceptions in this violent incident. Spofford furthers, moreover, the understanding of female experiences of violation by drawing on the genre of the captivity narrative.

3. Captivity Narrative Frameworks and Family History

- 10 Within the social mores of mid-nineteenth-century America, the Indian captivity narrative, which Spofford invokes as a framework for her story through the Indian Devil's capture of a pioneer woman, is a particularly suitable genre for a telling of rape: the captivity narrative rarely speaks of rape, but at the same time, in its very situation of capture and forced confinement, it foregrounds women's vulnerability to physical violation. The extent of the sexual abuse of female captives by their Indian masters remains historically undetermined. Christopher Castiglia concludes that while documented instances of white women raped in Indian captivity are rare, they nonetheless do exist.⁶ In her introduction to *Women's Indian Captivity Narratives*, Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola provides a brief summary of "whether or not Indians raped captured women:" she identifies "two dominant and differing responses: overt or covert appeals to white women's vulnerability and Indian men's alleged sexual prowess (often made by male writers or editors) and decisive claims that rape was virtually nonexistent in Native American culture (often made by women writers or captives)." Stodola affirms that sexual violation, whether as threat or act, hovers over the captivity narrative when, following Castiglia, she concludes that "both discursive strategies play

into the 'sexualization of the captive's vulnerability'" (xvi). Condemning her Indian captors as "roaring Lyons and Salvage Bears, that feared neither God, nor Man, nor the Devil," Mary Rowlandson nonetheless insists several times in her famous narrative that although in their midst, "by night and day, alone and in company: sleeping all sorts together, and yet not one of them ever offered me the least abuse of unchastity to me, in word or action" (57). In his edition of Rowlandson's *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*, Neal Salisbury comments on the rumors implying Rowlandson's compromised sexual purity on her return from captivity (43). The stigma of sexual violation for women, which still endures, may very well have been one reason, stronger than others, that led Rowlandson to proclaim unequivocally her preserved chastity. Her assertions show a pro-active resistance to any possible positioning of her as a fallen woman. But her strong avowals of sexual preservation only serve to underline that captivity carries the fear and threat of sexual violation.⁷

- 11 If Spofford was drawing on a familiar literary genre in early American writing to tell a story of rape, she was also, as her biographer Elizabeth Halbeisen points out, invoking family history in "Circumstance." Halbeisen recounts that "according to family tradition it was an experience of" Spofford's maternal great grandmother, Mrs. Hitchings, "that gave her great granddaughter the inspiration for one of her finest stories, 'Circumstance' Mrs. Hitchings was said to have sung all night in the grasp of a panther, as does the heroine of 'Circumstance' in the grasp of the 'Indian Devil'" (12). Halbeisen's source was Louisa Hopkins, the daughter of Spofford's good friend, Louisa Stone, later Hopkins, whom Spofford first met at the Putnam Free School and who became her dear and lifelong friend (Halbeisen 12, n. 21). That Louisa, the daughter, should know about this incident in the family of her mother's friend suggests its importance in Prescott family lore. The story's unique nature makes it compelling to pass from one generation to another, but the need to tell and re-tell the experience suggests also deep roots in trauma. In telling her grandmother's story, Spofford is placing herself in a matrilineal context of storytelling and interpreting female experience. And, perhaps, too, her own method of expressing female violation was also her great grandmother's. In her great grandmother's time, as much as, if not more so than, in Spofford's own, the violent captivity by the panther could provide an acceptable way to recount rape without the distress and exposure of speaking the experience directly; and at the same time, the telling of the violent experience would create a legacy of healing, in allowing family members to bear witness in this way to a female violation that even several generations later remained unspeakable.⁸
- 12 Rowlandson's captivity narrative would have been accessible to both Spofford and her great grandmother, but other significant models of the captivity story circulated during their lifetimes. June Namias writes that "between 1787 and 1812, twenty-four different printings and several editions of a highly popular narrative were published in a collection of New England cities and towns ... entitled *A Surprising Account of the Discovery of a Lady Who Was Taken by the Indians in the Year 1777, and after making her escape, She retired to a lonely Cave, where she lived nine years.*" By the eighth known printed edition of 1794, the ordinary "Indian" of the initial title had become "Savage Indians of the Wilderness" and the narrative was designated to be contained *In a Letter from a Gentleman to his Friend*. The "letter" bore the signature of "one Abraham Panther," and the narrative, in its various editions, became widely known as "The Panther Captivity" narrative (94). To see a connection between this late eighteenth-century captivity tale

and Spofford's "Circumstance" because of the presence of two very different panthers is inviting but also too facile; nonetheless, a pattern of similarities suggestively links the two accounts: Panther's "gigantic" Indian, like Spofford's Indian Devil with his "giant's vice," is of abnormal proportion (Namias 94; Spofford 90). In both stories, the woman's singing draws men to her rescue. In both, the men's masculinity is reinforced by their carrying guns. And in both, when the men appear, the woman's independence weakens: the Lady of the Panther captivity, who has, by the time her rescuers arrive, singlehandedly slain the giant, faints, and Spofford's protagonist, when "her eyes trembled on her husband's" (95), loses her saving voice. But the most suggestive association between the Panther captivity and Spofford's story arises from a significant difference between the Rowlandson narrative and the Panther captivity story, for while both privilege female strength, Rowlandson, as already noted, downplays sexual violation and the Panther captivity foregrounds it. Central to the "Panther Captivity" is, as Namias puts it, "sexual explicitness, indeed erotica mixed with sadomasochism" (94). The "gigantic" aggressor who accosts the female protagonist and carries her off to his cave leaves no doubt about his intents. Namias quotes from "The Panther Captivity:" "He then motioned to me that I must either accept of his bed, or expect death for my obstinacy" (95). The expected violence ensues, but, surprisingly, it is directed at the violating male, who, while asleep, is dismembered by the potential female victim with his own hatchet, after which she calmly lives for the next nine years in his place until her gentleman callers find her in the wilderness. Spofford's and her great grandmother's familiarity with the Panther captivity has not been ascertained beyond its general popularity, but the blatantly sexual suggestions of the panther's assault in "Circumstance" reflect the Panther rather than the Rowlandson captivity narrative model. The resemblances between Spofford's story and the Panther narrative further reinforce the suggestion that Spofford's primary focus in "Circumstance" is the representation of rape.

- 13 The Panther captivity narrative speaks directly to the sexual threat of female captives but places its narration at a distance. In contrast to Rowlandson's personal account, it is generally considered a work of fiction. The female captive's account occurs within the story of a hunting trip recounted in a letter, as already mentioned, by the pseudonymous Mr. Panther to a male friend. Derounian-Stodola and James Arthur Levernier offer an intriguing theory when they note that commentators assume Panther is male although "it is well-known that women who published in the eighteenth century often did so under a pseudonym." "Given the feminist subtext," they write, "it is tantalizing to speculate that the author could well have been a woman wishing to present a female viewpoint under the guise of the outrageously fake pen name Abraham Panther" (50). Spofford's panther seems to serve a similar function of narrative distancing for addressing female violation, while at the same time, her story also insists on conveying the woman's perspective.

4. The Language of Rape: Absence and Presence

- 14 The captivity narrative, as Castiglia notes, has a link to rape through the word "rape," itself, and its origins (123). Such a link is particularly important for the study of Spofford, for words and their multiple meanings hold a special significance in her work. Spofford built her first literary success in the short story genre, "In a Cellar," on

the double meanings of a word: cellar, as a subterranean space, and cellar, as a container for salt. Her excesses in language, that have frequently been the source of the critical denigration of her work, also point, as Dorri Beam's study suggests, to her intense engagement with words, which recalls Emily Dickinson's devotion to her dictionary. The 1844 edition of Webster's Dictionary locates "rape" in the Latin "rapio, raptus," and defines its "general sense [as] a seizing by violence" and also "a seizing and carrying away by force, as females" (Def. 1). The word's meaning enacts the defining event of the captivity narrative, the abduction itself, the Indian's "seizing by violence ... and carrying away by force" the white woman, just as the panther seizes and carries into the tree Spofford's protagonist. Webster gives today's more common definition as the second, specifically legal one. "In law," according to Webster, rape means "the carnal knowledge of a woman forcibly and against her will" (Def. 2). In the captivity narrative, the word's Latin origins link the male violence against women that the first instance implies with the possibility of the second definition. If the story omits the word rape, the captivity narrative form contains its meaning.

- 15 Through its etymology, the word "rape" and its origins seem to hover over "Circumstance" as a rape narrative in other ways as well. In her discussion of representations of rape in Chaucer, Christine M. Rose points out that "the comparable word to the Latin 'raptus' in Old French, 'ravis,' spawned 'ravisement' and the English 'ravis,' and became used as a synonym for rape *or* for the spiritual action of a soul's being carried to heaven, transported by enthusiasm or bliss" (28, emphasis mine). Through her hymn-singing response in her adversity, Spofford's protagonist experiences a "divine rapture" (Spofford 93) of spiritual transcendence. In her night long vigil, she undergoes spiritual ravishment: "Her vision climbed to that higher picture where the angel shows the dazzling thing," Spofford writes. Her description suggests that her protagonist is "carried" away in multiple ways as she describes the woman's vision of "the holy Jerusalem descending out of heaven from God," climbing to a crescendo, "with its splendid battlements, and gates of pearls, ... with its great white throne, and the rainbow round about it, in sight like unto an emerald" (93). Her experience of spiritual ecstasy through her hymn-singing corresponds to Mary Rowlandson's influential paradigm that sees the hardships of captivity as an opportunity for spiritual transformation and the renewal of faith in God, but her "divine rapture" also suggests that in attempting to endure one kind of ravishment, she turns to another. Ann Wolbert Burgess and Lynda Lytle Holmstrom, whose pioneering work on coping with rape and rape trauma syndrome continues to inform the understanding of rape, point out that "victims of rape often cope by mentally focusing and directing their attention to some specific thought to keep their minds off the reality of the events and focus on their survival" (415). The terrifying "fabulous flying-dragon" (Spofford 85) who captures the protagonist seems not so distant from "the Lord descended from above" who in the protagonist's hymn-singing "on the wings of all the winds / came flying all abroad" (92). Like the Indian Devil's human and animal coextension, the simultaneous presence of anguish and ecstasy disrupts any straightforward understanding of the woman's rapture as exclusively spiritual and transcendent. The ostensible meanings in Spofford's diction of rapture hint at or indeed collapse into their more hidden ones opening up to the multiplicity of the woman's experience. As suggested above, Spofford's awareness of these verbal connections to situate her story as a rape narrative is more likely deliberate than not. Alfred Bendixen sums up Spofford's intense language in this way: "Spofford's daring

experiments with sound and image represented nothing less than an attempt to revitalize language itself, an attempt to transform the literary word into a force capable of challenging and enlarging the reader's perception of reality" (xii). In "Circumstance," Spofford's silenced words emerge with intensified meanings. Throughout the story, Spofford's language continues suggestively to imply rape providing a vivid representation of both the assailant's aggressions and the woman's reactions to them. Spofford presents the panther moving immediately to attack the woman's clothes "worr[ying] them sagaciously a little," but finding his claws caught in the clothing, he initiates fleshly contact by "licking her bare arm with his rasping tongue" (86). These descriptions of the creature's aggressive and violent behaviors insist on a human rather than animal presence. They suggest a human physicality—the panther "held her in his clutches ... in his great lithe embrace" (85-6)—as well as human consciousness. The male predator acts immediately upon becoming aware of the woman's movements toward escape: "as if he scanned her thoughts, the creature bounded forward with a yell and caught her again in his dreadful hold ... clasping her with invincible pressure to his rough, ravenous breast" (88-9). Spofford makes the woman's experience palpable. The beast holds, embraces, yells, creating an image of human assault. His exertion of complete bodily control over the woman as he encompasses her fully in his physical presence speaks powerfully to an enactment of rape; she feels "pouring over her the wide streams of his hot, foetid breath" (86), a sensation to which Spofford persistently returns to suggest the woman's entrapment in a forced intimacy. "Only the breath like the vapor from some hell-pit still swathed her" (87), Spofford writes; her danger is vividly imminent in "the torrent of his breath [that] prepared her for his feast as the anaconda slimes his prey" (88). Spofford continually emphasizes their close, physical proximity. The beast's "diabolical face fronted hers" (88); the woman sees "his white tusks whetting and gnashing, his eyes glaring through all the darkness like balls of red fire" (86); she watches the "lifting of the red lip from the glittering teeth" (88). To the woman, the beast is a "living lump of appetites" (89). The intensity, intimacy and sensuality of the encounter all imply forced sex.

- 16 Spofford positions the beast over the woman in the stance of a rapist, as he drips on her from "foaming chaps" and "slaver[s] above [her] with vitality" (89). When the husband finds his wife in the forest, he beholds "the monster *covering* his wife with shaggy form and flaming gaze" and sees her looking "so ghastly white, so rigid, so stained with blood, her eyes so fixedly bent above" (94, emphasis mine). He seems to come upon—perhaps interrupt—a scene of rape; significantly, as Webster's states, one of the meanings of "cover" throughout the nineteenth century was "to copulate with a female" (Webster's 1844; 1913). Spofford's phallic language supports this understanding. In her descriptions, the panther's "long sharp claws," "rasping tongue" (86), and "dagged tooth" (88) are "weapons" (86) that "plunge" (86), "pierce" and "penetrat[e]" (88) the woman's flesh and body. "The long red tongue thrust forth again" (87), Spofford writes, and the woman feels its "rough, sharp and multiplied stings" (86). His "savage caresses ... hurt like wounds" (90). The woman reacts like a victim of sexual assault. She feels "agony" and "quivering disgust" (86), and, as Burgess and Holmstrom state about the rape victim's focus on survival, fears for her life (415).

5. Spofford and Dickinson: Rape Narratives in Different Genres

- 17 Spofford's panther provides the kind of narrative distancing that Dickinson, too, employed. Dickinson's declaration to Higginson that she wished to avoid Spofford is only partially true, for to her sister-in-law, Susan Dickinson, who had sent her the May, 1860 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* with "Circumstance" "marked in the table of contents by a heavily inked 'X'" (St. Armand, *Emily Dickinson* 173), she wrote something quite different: "Dear S.: That is the only thing I ever saw in my life I did not think I could have written myself. You stand nearer the world than I do. Send me everything she writes" (Dickinson, Susan). This is a powerful declaration. Perhaps the initial need for avoidance comes from Dickinson's recognition of her own startling imagination flashing back at her from Spofford's work. Sue's account of her sister-in-law's reaction in her own 1903 letter to the editor of the *Springfield Republican* praising "Harriet Prescott's Early Work" led the way to modern criticism's recognitions of the affinity between the two writers. "From Spofford, Dickinson learned a vocabulary of passion associated with tropical flowers, rich stuffs, fabulous jewels, and fantastic colors," Barton Levi St. Armand concludes (*Emily Dickinson* 186).
- 18 Several critics link "Circumstance" to Dickinson's "'Twas like a Maelstrom, with a notch" (*Poems* #425), the poem that Maryanne Garbowsky interprets as having "more than coincidental" relationship to Spofford's story (17).⁹ In the close resemblances of diction, "content and structure," Garbowsky perceives a "causal relationship" between "Circumstance" and Dickinson's poem and identifies Spofford as a "maternal muse" for the poet (17). She sees Dickinson translating Spofford's description of "a literal attack by an animal, ... into a figurative one," but nonetheless finds that the subject matter of the poem and the story correspond. In "'Twas like a Maelstrom," according to Garbowsky, Dickinson "relates an equally horrifying experience [to "Circumstance"] which also threatens to overwhelm its female victim" (14). Garbowsky finds in Dickinson's language expressions of pain—the capitalized "Agony" of the fourth line—and extreme, incomprehensible fright, like the "Goblin with a Gauge—" (l. 10); she comments that "the sense of helplessness that both victims experience is also dramatically alike" (15), with the imagery describing both women as benumbed. Garbowsky's interpretations of the women's reactions and responses in both story and poem are in keeping with the experience of sexual violation. Burgess and Holmstrom cite paralysis, both physical and psychological, as a significant state in the experience of rape (413-15).¹⁰ While acknowledging the poem's engagement with female victimhood, Garbowsky observes that "Dickinson never specifically identifies the central incident of the poem." Perhaps this is because at the poem's center lies the unspeakable act of rape.
- 19 Garbowsky's interpretation of "'Twas Like a Maelstrom" points to the possibility that the poem is Dickinson's creative response to reading "Circumstance" as a rape narrative. Daneen Wardrop's study on "Dickinson's gothic" identifies a number of Dickinson poems that treat rape as their subject matter. In the context of Dickinson's well-known fondness for punning as a poetic technique as well as of the sexual explicitness of some of her poetry, as, we see, for instance, in "Wild Nights" (*Poems* # 269), the idea of "'Twas like a Maelstrom" presenting a rape narrative does not seem so far-fetched. The homophonic "Mael" of the first syllable of "Maelstrom" specifies the

sex of the overbearing, assaulting force that "maelstrom's" ordinary meanings suggest;¹¹ the definition from Webster's, moreover, of the "notch" in the line's completion, "'Twas like a maelstrom with a notch," is "1. A hollow cut in any thing ... 2. an opening or narrow passage through a mountain or hill" (def. 1 and 2). The definitions describe female genitals, and brought together with "maelstrom," describe a vivid and indeed graphic depiction of violent, forced sex. The speaker's opening "'twas like" suggests that the poem is a reminiscence of a violent act, as she goes on to re-tell painfully the aggressor's assault on her person, stripping her clothes, "Toyed coolly with the final inch / Of your delirious Hem—" (l. 5-6), and commanding her body, "helpless, in his Paws" (l. 13). The debilitating psychological and physical effects of the assault intensify with a relentless focus on the speaker's suffering and victimization, much like the terror endured by Spofford's woman: "As if your Sentence stood – pronounced –," reads the second last stanza, "And you were frozen led / From Dungeon's luxury of Doubt – / To Gibbets, and the Dead –" (l. 18-21). "'Twas like a Maelstrom," Dickinson's own rape narrative in poetic form, emerges as highly reminiscent of Spofford's tale.

- 20 The affinity between Dickinson and Spofford reflected in their formidable imaginations is also evident in their literary methods. "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant" (*Poems* #1263), Dickinson writes, a thought that seems to express Spofford's intent and method as much as her own. Literary history's elision, as suggested earlier, of the representations of rape may be in part also because the act itself resists representation. Mieke Bal points out "that rape makes the victim invisible" on several counts: "literally – the perpetrator ... covers her ... figuratively, the rape destroys her self-image, her subjectivity ... [and] finally, ... because the experience is physically as well as psychologically, inner. Rape takes place inside" (230). Both Spofford and Dickinson struggle to find ways to speak the anguished experience that seems inexpressible in its simultaneous and intense violation of both body and mind. The visibility of rape through representation, moreover, presents its own problems. The public exposure that representation entails must answer to the ethical dilemma that Tanya Horeck probes in *Public Rape: Representing Violation in Fiction and Film* when she questions "the ethics of reading and watching representations of rape" and asks, "are we bearing witness to a terrible crime or are we participating in a shameful voyeuristic activity?" (vi).¹² Representation, with its propensity toward exploitation and voyeurism, carries the threat of repeating the initial violation. Attempts to represent extreme violation result at times in extreme expressions which mid-nineteenth-century America, in both sentimental and sensational forms, found particularly compelling. Both Spofford and Dickinson venture into Gothic spaces where the spectacular slides into spectacle, with its too ready embracement of the subject of violated womanhood. But the "slant" (l.1) ensures that they "dazzle gradually" (l. 7) permitting the slow adjustment of sight rather than the blindness that often accompanies public outrage or backlash following controversial exposure. Like Dickinson in more minimalist fashion, Spofford readily pressures emotional and psychological limits. The panther and the maelstrom provide a means of controlling expression and thereby disallow the double victimization of the assaulted woman.

6. Endings and Conclusions

- 21 Neither story nor poem ends with violation. Like many of Dickinson's poems, "Twas like a Maelstrom" closes oddly couching what should be a triumphant declaration of "Reprieve" in ambivalence: "And when the Film had stitched your eyes / A Creature gasped 'Reprieve!' / Which Anguish was the utterest – then – / To perish, or to live?" (l. 23-5). Once again, Dickinson seems to be interpreting some crucial moments in "Circumstance." Hearing "a remote crash of brushwood," Spofford's singing woman mistakes her approaching husband for "some other beast on his depredations" (93). Her confusion is momentary, but nonetheless again associates the male presence with threat and fear. As critics, like Dalke and Fetterley, have noted, moreover, in the presence of her husband and child, the woman's voice fails, and in the context of women's struggles to find and project their own voices, this failure is open to disturbing implications for the female artist, as Dalke argues, but also for independent womanhood.¹³ "The fervent vision of God's peace," which the woman's inner strength has figured forth, fades as "her eyes trembled on her husband's, and she could only think of him, and of the child, and of happiness that yet might be." The "earthly hope" (95) that replaces the divine vision deserves her full commitment, but it also endangers her, weakening her focus on self-preservation. In her fiction, Spofford repeatedly shows her awareness of the complex nature of women's lives. Her handling of the husband's arrival is a more muted version of Dickinson's ambiguous "Reprieve" (l. 23), creating a small drama in which the difficulty of balancing individual selfhood with the demands, however ultimately rewarding, of the self in relation momentarily emerge.
- 22 The world of the story is clearly a dangerous place. Neither forest nor home, wilderness nor settlement, offers safety. Copse and woods temper the stark demarcation of the "great forests that stretch far away into the North" (84). The settlers' habitats and lives occupy the "fringe" of this wilderness with their only "half-cleared demesnes" (84) still participating in it. This is not a knowable space. At both the story's beginning and end, Spofford introduces inexplicable details concerning the woman's experience. Practical and sensible, the woman nonetheless has what the story presents as a vision:
- Walking rapidly now, and with her eyes wide-open, she distinctly saw in the air before her what was not there a moment ago, a winding-sheet,—cold, white, and ghastly, waved by the likeness of four wan hands,—that rose with a long inflation, and fell in rigid folds, while a voice, shaping itself from the hollowness above, spectral and melancholy, sighed,—'The Lord have mercy on the people! The Lord have mercy on the people!' Three times the sheet with its corpse-covering outline waved beneath the pale hands, and the voice, awful in its solemn and mysterious depth, sighed, 'The Lord have mercy on the people!' Then all was gone, the place was clear again, the gray sky was obstructed by no deathly blot. (85)
- 23 Both apparition and panther come, suddenly and unexpectedly, out of nowhere. The threatening tone of the vision gives way to the possibility of an unknown assailant stalking the woman. The apparition is meant to intimidate, the "winding-sheet" suggesting pending death and making its appearance in the fading light of dusk that reminds human selves of their susceptibility to the dangers of the dark. Its "ghastly" quality speaks to making the prospective victim feel vulnerable and therefore more defenseless in the coming attack. Despite the incident's spectral quality, the "four wan hands" waving the sheet point to an embodied presence, and the "solemn and mysterious" voice speaks familiar words from the woman's own culture and religion.

There is no hint of a native presence, or indeed of an animal one, in this odd and threatening image in which the human menace that precedes the violent attack is evident. Beyond the apparition's illustrating the woman's mental sturdiness in her ability to shrug off its hints of danger, its presence is never explained. It ties in with another detail coming at the story's end which is problematic because, although equally inexplicable, it is too readily explained, that is, the woman's discovery of the "singular foot-print in the snow" (96). The woman lingers over the footprint but then connects it through a "hurried word" (96) to the presence of raiding Indians which her husband momentarily confirms. The attribution is very quick, and seems too facile. There is no sense of the kind of terror that literature's most famous single footprint inspires in *Robinson Crusoe* because there is no questioning of it—either of its origin or its oddity. The woman and her family, after the night of anguish, clearly need a ready answer. The footprint's singularity invites explanation yet the need for an explanation is not even acknowledged. It remains unknown, suggesting perhaps, without beleaguering this detail more than it deserves, that the source of evil is not so easy to discern. Is it Indian, animal, savage, male? The "wan hands" of the spectral image waving the winding sheet suggests a pale, white presence. Was the attacker from the settlement? And does the settlement's burning, then, offer a kind of poetic justice, the instrument of which is the Indian raid, giving it then an entirely different role than the evil enemy? Spofford is a subtle artist. A distinct lack of certainty informs much of her work. Her aesthetics involve destabilization at every turn.

- 24 The end of "Circumstance" is not completely mired in ambiguity, however. The story of Spofford's singing woman recalls other literary figures and patterns that bring clarity to her situation. She is like Sheherazade and Orpheus at once, as Opfermann points out, singing one song after another to keep death at bay, and using her music to tame the wild animal. But song also connects her to another violated woman, the ravaged Philomel, who, defying all odds to proclaim the wrongs done her, eventually transforms into a nightingale. Like the transformed Philomel, Spofford's woman does not speak, but only sings, and her songs demand listeners bear witness to her past life. The encounter between the woman and the "serpentine and subtle" (85) enemy inevitably recalls Eve's temptation, and the story's last line, from *Paradise Lost*, "the world was all before them, where to choose," confirms Spofford's awareness of Milton's epic poem on humankind's history (Book 12, l. 181; Spofford 96). Spofford's resolution to the panther's assault pointedly ends in the woman's literal fall. Catching "a sidelong hint of the man standing below with the raised gun," the beast, "sprung round furiously," writes Spofford,

and seizing his prey, was about to leap into some unknown airy den of the topmost branches The woman, suspended in mid-air an instant, cast only one agonized glance beneath,—but across and through it, ere the lids could fall, shot a withering sheet of flame,—a rifle-crack, half-heard, was lost in the terrible yell of desperation that bounded after it and filled her ears with savage echoes, and in the wide arc of some eternal descent she was falling;—but the beast fell under her. (95)

- 25 In her ending, Spofford re-writes the nineteenth century's vision of the fallen woman. This falling woman lands softly, on her tormentor. The physical inversion of the woman and beast's fall retains the female ascendancy over her male attacker discussed earlier in this essay. Throughout her ordeal, moreover, the woman inverts the relationship between womankind and serpent as well, for in a sense, her singing seduces the beast, not the other way around. The central motif is the woman's songs

echoing in the beast's ears rather than the devil whispering in hers as he did with Eve. Spofford's musical protagonist is no culpable Eve, nor any kind of tainted woman. The woman and her family move beyond the violation. Spofford describes the woman's sense of herself as "someone newly made ... the present stamped upon her in deep satisfaction" (96); the woman gives herself over to the moment disallowing the past and its burdens to intrude on her happiness. Spofford emphasizes their normalcy as they walk toward home after the ordeal while also invoking Romantic nature's healing power, with the woman stopping to "gather a spray of the red-rose berries ... or a handful of brown cones for the child's play" (96). The effects of the traumatic experience seem to fade too quickly, but Spofford's emphasis on new beginnings in the context of a rape narrative is particularly important for it resists the prejudice and stigma associated with sexual violation. There is no hint of recoil or rejection. Spofford offers another response. She empowers her female protagonist, and the image of the united family, the woman, man and child continuing on, provides a model of resilience that insists on resistance to the evil that both man and beast do.

- 26 In rejecting the image of the attacked woman as passive victim and, in the aftermath of rape, as tainted subject, Spofford offers a revisionist interpretation of nineteenth-century attitudes towards women who experienced sexual assault. Many of Spofford's stories reflect her keen interest in women's experiences, whether these be fulfilling, challenging or threatening. In "Circumstance," the literariness of Spofford's storytelling powers leads readers to witness an aspect of women's lives that has frequently been silenced and often ignored. In entering into dialogue with Dickinson's poetry, Spofford's story points to a literary history of nineteenth-century rape narratives, a tradition that calls for further recuperation. Spofford's willingness to broach the difficult topic of rape in a time that was particularly wary of addressing sexual subjects is daring, and her method of presentation both compelling and astute. Like Dickinson, she presents obvious details but then mutes them to reveal her subject obliquely but powerfully. Spofford finds ways to express an unspeakable female experience that demands the understanding of her readers. Spofford's and Dickinson's indirect methods point also to the possibility that other hidden sustained stories of sexual violations which speak to female experience and women's history lie unrecognized in the rich output of nineteenth-century women's writing.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Armstrong, Nancy and Leonard Tennenhouse. *The Imaginary Puritan: Literature, Intellectual Labor, and the Origins of Personal Life*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1992.
- Bal, Mieke. *Double Exposure: the Subject of Cultural Analysis*. NY: Routledge, 1996.
- Beam, Dorri. *Style, Gender and Fantasy in Nineteenth-Century American Women's Writing*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2010.

Bendixen, Alfred. "Introduction" in *Harriet Prescott Spofford, The Amber Gods and Other Stories*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1989. ix-xxxiv.

Brownmiller, Susan. *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*. NY: Simon and Schuster, 1975.

Burgess, Ann Wolbert and Lynda Lytle Holmstrom. "Coping Behaviour of the Rape Victim." *American Journal of Psychiatry* 133.4 (1976): 413-418.

Castiglia, Christopher. *Bound and Determined: Captivity, Cultural-Crossing, and White Womanhood from Mary Rowlandson to Patty Hearst*. Chicago: UP of Chicago, 1996.

"Circumstances." *Bouvier's Law Dictionary*. 6th ed revised 1856; accessed at: <http://www.constitution.org/bouv/bouvier.htm>

"Circumstantial Evidence." *Henry Campbell Black, A Dictionary of Law*. 1st edition. St. Paul's Minn: West Publishing, 1891. Internet Archive: <https://ia902804.us.archive.org/1/items/BlacksLawDictionary-Editions1-9/Black's%20Law%20Dictionary%20-%20Editions%201-9/1st%20Edition.pdf>

Cody, David. "'When one's soul's at a white heat': Dickinson and the 'Azarian' School." *Emily Dickinson Journal* 19.1 (2010): 30-59.

Coleman, Robert. "A Miniaturization of Epic Proportions: Harriet Prescott Spofford's 'Circumstance.'" *Scribbling Women and the Short Story Form: Approaches by British and American Women Writers*. Ed. Ellen Burton Harrington. NY: Peter Lang, 2008. 15-27.

"Cover." v.t. Def. 13. *Noah Webster's American Dictionary of the English Language 1844*. "Emily Dickinson Lexicon." <http://edl.byu.edu/webster/term/2390534/>

"Cover." v.t. Def. 11. *Noah Webster's American Dictionary of the English Language 1913*. <https://ia800500.us.archive.org/15/items/webstersunabridg29765gut/29765-8.txt>

Cramer, Jeffrey S. "Notes." *Henry David Thoreau. The Maine Woods: A Fully Annotated Edition*. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2009.

Dalke, Anne. "'Circumstance' and the Creative Woman: Harriet Prescott Spofford." *Arizona Quarterly* 41.1 (1985): 71-85.

Derounian-Stodola, Kathryn Zabelle. "Introduction" to *Women's Indian Captivity Narratives*. NY: Penguin, 1998. xi-xxviii.

Derounian-Stodola, Kathryn Zabelle, and James Arthur Levernier. *The Indian Captivity Narrative 1550-1900*. NY: Twayne, 1993.

Dickinson, Emily. *Selected Letters*. Ed. Thomas H. Johnson. Cambridge, MA: Belknap P of Harvard UP, 1971.

---. *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition*. Ed. R. W. Franklin. Cambridge, MA: Belknap P of Harvard UP, 1998.

Dickinson, Susan. "Harriet Prescott's Early Work." Letter to the Editor *Springfield Republican*. *January 1903*. <http://archive.emilydickinson.org/susan/tshdcpb31.html>

Donnelly, Colleen. "Singing and Survival: Empowering the Female Voice in Harriet Prescott Spofford's 'Circumstance.'" *CEA Critic* 79.2 (2017): 167-76.

Feagin, Joe R. *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing*. NY and London: Routledge, 2010.

- Fetterley, Judith. "Harriet Prescott Spofford (1835-1921)." *Provisions: A Reader from 19th-century American Women*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985. 261-68.
- Garbowsky, Maryanne M. "A Maternal Muse for Emily Dickinson." *Dickinson Studies* 41 (1981): 12-17.
- Gaul, Theresa Strouth. "Captivity, Childbirth, and the Civil War in Harriet Prescott Spofford's 'Circumstance.'" *Legacy* 19.1 (2002): 35-43.
- Grimwood, Michael. "Circumstance in 1860." *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 58.4 (2012): 446-492.
- Gunne, Sorcha, and Zoë Brigley Thompson. "Introduction: Feminism Without Borders: The Potentials and Pitfall of Re-theorizing Rape." *Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives: Violence and Violation*. NY: Routledge, 2010. 1-20.
- Halbeisen, Elizabeth K. *Harriet Prescott Spofford: A Romantic Survival*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1935.
- Hansen, Kevin. *Bobcat: Master of Survival*. Oxford and NY: OUP, 2007.
- Hesford, Wendy S. "Reading Rape Stories: Material Rhetoric and the Trauma of Representation." *College English* 62.2 (1999): 192-221.
- Higgins, Lynn A. and Brenda R. Silver. "Introduction: Rereading Rape." *Rape and Representation*. NY: Columbia UP, 1991. 1-11.
- Holly, Carol. "'Grand and Sweet Methodist Hymns': Spiritual Transformation and Imperialistic Vision in Harriet Prescott Spofford's 'Circumstance.'" *Legacy* 18.2 (2001): 153-66.
- Horeck, Tanya. *Public Rape: Representing Violation in Fiction and Film*. London and NY: Routledge, 2004.
- Jeffords, Susan. "Rape and the New World Order." *Cultural Critique* (Fall 1991): 203-15.
- Ladin, Jay. "'Goblin with a Gauge': Teaching Emily Dickinson." *The Emily Dickinson Journal* 9.2 (2000): 32-41.
- Logan, Lisa. "'There is no home there': Re(his)tor(iciz)ing Captivity and the Other in Spofford's 'Circumstance.'" *Creating Safe Space: Violence and Women's Writing*. Eds. Tomoka Kuribayashi and Julie Tharp. Albany: State UP of NY, 1998. 117-29.
- Marshall, Ian. "Literal and Metaphoric Harmony with Nature: Ecofeminism and Harriet Prescott Spofford's 'Circumstance.'" *MLS* 23.2 (Spring 1993): 48-58.
- Mardorossian, Carine M. *Framing the Rape Victim: Gender and Agency Reconsidered*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2014.
- . "Toward a New Feminist Theory of Rape." *Signs* 27.3 (2002): 743-75.
- McDonald, David W. and Andrew J. Loveridge (eds.). *Biology and Conservation of Wild Felids*. Oxford and New York: OUP, 2010.
- Milton, John. "From Paradise Lost." *Broadview Anthology of British Literature. Vol. 2: The Renaissance and the Early Seventeenth Century*. Eds. Joseph Black et al. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2006. 842-909.
- Namias, June. *White Captives: Gender and Ethnicity on the American Frontier*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993.

Neuwirth, Steven. "Her Master's Voice: Gender, Speech, and Gendered Speech in the Narrative of the Captivity of Mary White Rowlandson." *Sex and Sexuality in Early America*. Ed. Merrill D. Smith. New York: New York UP, 1998. 55-86.

"Notch." n. Def. 1 and 2. *Noah Webster's American Dictionary of the English Language 1844*. "Emily Dickinson Lexicon:" <http://edl.byu.edu/webster/term/2305952>

Opfermann, Susanne. "How Woman Came to Be Somebody, Which Is All Body and No Body: Harriet Prescott Spofford's 'Circumstance.'" *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 45.2 (1997): 119-28.

"Panther Captivity": A Surprising Account of the Discovery of a Lady Who Was Taken by the Indians by Abraham Panther (1787). *Women's Indian Captivity Narratives*. Ed. Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola. NY: Penguin, 1998. 81-90.

"Rape." Def. 1 and 2. *Noah Webster's American Dictionary of the English Language 1844*. "Emily Dickinson Lexicon:" <http://edl.byu.edu/webster/term/2379943>

Reynolds, David S. *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1987.

Riley, Glenda. *Women and Indians on the Frontier, 1825-1915*. Albuquerque, NM: U of New Mexico P, 1984.

Robertson, Elizabeth, and Christine M. Rose. "Introduction." *Representing Rape in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*. Eds. Elizabeth Robertson and Christine M. Rose. New York: Palgrave, 2001. 1-20.

Rose, Christine M. "Reading Chaucer Reading Rape." *Representing Rape in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*. Eds. Elizabeth Robertson and Christine M. Rose. New York: Palgrave, 2001. 21-60.

Rowlandson, Mary White. "from A Narrative of the Captivity and the Restauration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson." *The Aunt Lute Anthology of U. S. Women Writers*. Vol. 1: 17th through 19th Centuries. Eds. Lisa Maria Hogeland and Mary Klages. San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books, 2004. 42-60.

St. Armand, Barton Levi. *Emily Dickinson and Her Culture: the Soul's Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984.

---. "'I Must Have Died at Ten Minutes Past One': Posthumous Reverie in Harriet Prescott Spofford's 'The Amber Gods.'" *The Haunted Dusk: American Supernatural Fiction, 1820-1920*. Eds. Howard Kerr, John W. Crowley, and Charles L. Crow. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1983. 101-119.

Salisbury, Neal. "Introduction: Mary Rowlandson and Her Removes." *Mary Rowlandson. The Sovereignty and Goodness of God, Together with the Faithfulness of His Promises Displayed Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson and Related Documents*. Boston: Bedford Books, 1997.

Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. NY and Oxford: OUP, 1985.

Showalter, Elaine. *A Jury of Her Peers: American Women Writers from Anne Bradstreet to Annie Proulx*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009.

Sielke, Sabine. *Reading Rape: The Rhetoric of Sexual Violence in American Literature, 1790-1990*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2002.

Sivils, Matthew Wynn. "'The Base, Cursed Thing': Panther Attacks and Ecotones in Antebellum American Fiction." *Journal of Ecocriticism: A New Journal of Nature, Society and Literature* 2.1 (2010): 19-32.

Spofford, Harriet Prescott. "Circumstance." *The Amber Gods and Other Stories*. Ed. Alfred Bendixen. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1989. 84-96.

Strong, Pauline Turner. *Captive Selves, Captivating Others: the Politics and Poetics of Colonial American Captivity Narratives*. Boulder, Colorado: Westview P, 1999.

Thoreau, Henry D. *The Maine Woods: A Fully Annotated Edition*. Ed. Jeffrey S. Cramer. New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2009.

Wardrop, Danee. *Emily Dickinson's Gothic: Goblin with a Gauge*. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 1996.

NOTES

1. Fetterley's commentary in *Provisions*, and Alfred Bendixen's introduction to his 1989 edition of Spofford's *The Amber Gods and Other Stories* raise many of the critical issues addressed by other commentators: like Anne Dalke's reading of the story as a bildungsroman "in miniature" in which the female protagonist discovers her "creative power" (74), Fetterley sees in the story "an extraordinary, compelling, and harsh vision of the circumstances of the woman artist" (264), and Bendixen finds "a female counterpart to the more familiar stories of male initiation in which the protagonist journeys into a psychic wilderness" (xxvii); both Fetterley and Bendixen recognize the protagonist's religious experience (266; xxviii) which Carol Holly develops in her focus on "the heroine's consciousness as she moves ... [toward] evangelical Christian renewal" through her singing of Methodist hymns (Fetterley 153); Colleen Donnelly, on the other hand, offers a compelling counter-argument to interpreting the protagonist's experience as a spiritual and religious awakening locating in her singing and choice of songs an empowering female voice that speaks to the strength of her earthly bonds with husband and child; Ian Marshall's eco-feminist reading situates the protagonist's development in her relationship to nature as she rejects views of nature as sentimental and then indifferent "in favor of an incipiently ecological perspective" (49) through which "the spiritual values represented by the woman's singing grow out of and make possible communion with nature" (55); Fetterley's suggestion that Spofford challenges "the idea of home as safe" (265) is explored by Lisa Logan through Spofford's use of the captivity narrative pattern and its engagement with a racialized discourse determining national identity; continuing the story's ability to address American culture and history, Susanne Opfermann focuses on the "construction of gendered subjectivities" (121) to comment on "the relation of corporeality and femininity as the nineteenth century saw it" (122) and to suggest that Spofford is staging a "psychic drama: the attempt of woman to control and transcend her sexual nature" (123). Michael Grimwood argues for the story's "full engagement with contemporary discourse" (450) which includes the "yearning for a Republican victory over the Slave Power" of the South (481). He writes: "For most readers of 'Circumstance' in 1860, the story would have signified not the victimization of one race or gender by another but the threat to one group of white people by other white people" (469).

2. For Mardorossian's ideas, see also her book, *Framing the Rape Victim*.

3. Gunne and Thompson's final category, the representations of rape in visual and physical media, the stage, art, and television, is not applicable.

4. Jeffrey S. Cramer, the editor of the annotated *The Maine Woods*, glosses Thoreau's account of his conversations with an Indigenous person about the "lunxus or Indian Devil" with a passage from Springer as follows: "There is an animal in the deep recesses of the forests of Maine, evidently belonging to the feline race, which, on account of its ferocity, is significantly called 'Indian Devil'—in the Indian language, 'the Lunk Soos'; a terror to the Indians, and the only animal in New England of which they stand in dread. You may speak of the moose, the bear, and the wolf even,

and the red man is ready for the chase and the encounter. But name the object of his dread, and he will significantly shake his head, while he exclaims, 'He all one debil!'" (*The Annotated Maine Woods* 128, n. 171). Attributing the origins of the term "Indian Devil" to white settlers may be erroneous and thus mitigate readings of it as racist. See also Robert Coleman who, like Showalter, finds "something more than the metaphysics of Indian-hating" at work in the story's Indian presence (22). Calling "Circumstance" "a captivity narrative with a twist" (15), he sees Spofford displacing the tradition of "savage eloquence," found, for instance, in Cooper (19), with the protagonist's singing, "a style or rhetoric appropriate and pleasing not only for the beast [but] for herself" and one that masks Spofford's romantic "rhetorical penchant ... in a marketplace attuned to realism" (20). Coleman's reading makes Spofford's presentation of Indigenous peoples a part of her literary strategies in both story-telling and marketing. As Fetterley concedes, the presence of "racist assumptions" in nineteenth-century literary texts comes about often because "they are so readily available and so easy to invoke" (267). Opfermann, moreover, notes that Spofford perhaps "critiques a racist practice since she explicitly links the term "Indian Devil" to a male tradition of naming when she writes, 'known by *hunters* as the Indian Devil' ... and later has her protagonist wonder 'lest his name of Indian Devil were not his true name'" (127). In a seminar session that she chaired and organized at the 2013 Northeast Modern Language Association Convention in Boston, MA, Paula Kot presented her work in progress on Spofford's non-fiction publication of 1871, *New England Sketches*, arguing that in this work, Spofford takes a strong stand against bigotry, a position that, Kot suggests, might lead to new readings of her work, including "Circumstance," and to a reassessment of her racist designation among white nineteenth-century American women writers.

5. Joe R. Feagin writes: "In war settings Indians who fought back were asserted to be less than human and depraved murderers, a part of the anti-Indian subframe of the white racial frame. Like their predecessors, eighteenth-century colonists periodically framed Indians as animals —'beasts of prey,' as Colonel John Reid put it in 1764 or as 'animals vulgarly called Indians' and a 'race' who had no right to land, as Hugh Brackenbridge put it in the 1780s" (61). The captivity narratives provide many examples of this kind of negative terminology applied to native peoples.

6. I found Castiglia's discussion particularly helpful (especially 122-23). See also Glenda Riley. June Namias further notes that "in several pieces of early republican writing, erotic motifs occur within the captivity literature, extending the possibilities of sexual encounters across racial, ethnic, and cultural lines. Titillation and eroticism are apparent, 'fact' and 'fiction' are blurred, for white women, Indian brutality is reported as being more explicitly against them, and what is claimed as retaliatory violence against Indians (in the Dustan mode) is sanctioned" (97).

7. See also Steven Neuwirth and Pauline Turner Strong for further discussions of rape and Rowlandson's assertions of her chastity. Susan Jeffords also makes a similar point about Rowlandson's protestation: "since most of the early narratives of those who survived such capture were written by women, the question of physical abuse, particularly rape, played some part in reinforcing both the fear of capture and the threat of the captors. (Mary Rowlandson, whose *The Narrative and Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* in 1762 was the first of this genre, expressed wonder at the fact that her captors did not rape her, establishing that the fear of rape was already an elemental part of tales of capture.)" (206). Susan Brownmiller notes that references to "rape shrouded in ... polite language ... began to make an appearance in the later narratives of white female captives, and male captives who lived to tell the tale offered succinct commentary on the treatment of the female captives that they saw" (143). By "later," Brownmiller means mid-nineteenth century, beginning just prior to the time of the publication of "Circumstance" in 1860. The association of the captivity narrative with the eighteenth-century

seduction novels of Samuel Richardson also recognizes the presence of the rape threat in the captivity narrative. See Armstrong and Tennenhouse.

8. This possibility that "Circumstance" is a camouflage story for rape, growing out of an actual event in Prescott family history, gains further credence in the context of animal biology. Kevin Hansen points out: "It is now believed that prey-capture behavior is very similar in all species of wild cats. After locating a rabbit or a rodent, the bobcat fixes his gaze on the animal, lowers itself to the ground in a crouch, and begins to maneuver closer, taking care to remain hidden. [...] Once [the prey] is seized and pinned with the bobcat's forearms and paws, it is usually killed with a bite to the nape of the neck or head" (42-43). See also McDonald and Loveridge for a description of the force of the felid bite and its effectiveness in killing (94-95). As residents of Maine, both Spofford and her great grandmother would likely have been familiar with the behavior of wild cats for whom attack and kill are synonymous activities; wild cats drag only dead carcasses, not living bodies, into trees or other areas for their feasting. The fictional panther's actions of carrying off a live human body breach usual animal behavior, but are consistent with a potential human rapist's seeking a secluded and isolated spot to facilitate his aggression.

9. See St. Armand and David Cody. Like Garbowsky, they offer suggestive thoughts on the relationship between Spofford's story and Dickinson's poem that support but do not offer the rape narrative interpretation. Discussing Dickinson's spiritual outlook, St. Armand suggests that she found in Spofford's panther a "model of feline perversity" (*Emily Dickinson* 173) corresponding to her own conceptions of the "Calvinist cat-god," "capricious ... predatory" and powerful who haunted her imagination (*Emily Dickinson* 176, 174). David Cody's more recent study situates Spofford's connections with Dickinson through the "Azarian" school of emotional and linguistic intensity, so called after Spofford's 1864 novel, *Azarian: An Episode*. He finds a similar stylistic intensity characterizing the conversion experience in "Circumstance" and several Dickinson poems, including "'Twas like a Maelstrom."

10. Rape crisis centers emphasize in their information that the experience of rape affects women differently, and they provide a broad range of possible responses. These possible responses, however, show consistency, and align with Holmstrom and Burgess' early work. Dissociation, fear of death, and paralysis, both physical and psychological, are consistently cited. See, for example, Rape Crisis Scotland and its "I Just Froze" campaign (2017): <https://www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk/i-just-froze/>.

11. See also Jay Ladin's account of the various responses to this poem put forth by his students in the Homestead seminars at the Emily Dickinson Museum in Amherst, especially one student's reading of the poem as a "rape allegory, whose subject ... was the psychological effect of male-dominated language and literary institutions on the female poet." Ladin's student locates the rape once again figuratively, but his reasoning also speaks suggestively of its enactment. Drawing on Dickinson's knowledge of German, the student reads the opening line's "Maelstrom" as her pun on "male stream" (33), that is, semen.

12. See also Wendy Hesford.

13. See also Opfermann for a very different interpretation of the woman's silence. She queries if Spofford's descriptions leading up to the woman falling silent—"She shuddered now One gasp, a convulsive effort, and there was silence,—she had lost her voice—" (95) suggest "a climactic moment of terror or of another climax, a sexual one?" (119).

ABSTRACTS

The several critical interpretations of Harriet Prescott Spofford's short story, "Circumstance," generally acknowledge the presence of sexual violation, but they also tend to de-center it, either glossing over it, or enlisting the nature and implications of the assault to serve other ends. In contrast, "Narrating Violation" sees the story's sexual assault as its main subject; it explores the methods that Spofford employs to present the sexual violation and the implications for reading "Circumstance" as a rape narrative. Spofford's multiple ways of speaking the violation at the heart of "Circumstance" align with Emily Dickinson's treatment of rape. The possibility that Dickinson recognized in "Circumstance" a story of rape and wrote her own poetic version of it begins to identify a literary stream in nineteenth-century American women's writing that resists the elision of violence against women and tells of rape in a way acceptable for its time.

INDEX

Keywords: captivity narrative, Emily Dickinson, Harriet Prescott Spofford, nineteenth-century American women writers, rape, rape and representation, rape narrative, sexual assault

AUTHOR

RITA BODE

Rita Bode is professor of English Literature at Trent University, Canada. She has published on Spofford's "Amber Gods," "Her Story," detective stories, and children's stories. She has a special interest in transatlantic relationships and influences among women writers as shown in her work on George Eliot and Harriet Beecher Stowe, and George Eliot and Edith Wharton. Other publications include articles and book chapters on Cather, Hawthorne, Melville and the Canadian writer L.M. Montgomery, among others.