

Bringing out Censored Stories and Reassessing the Past in Catharine

Maria Sedgwick's Hope Leslie

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Abstract: Catharine Maria Sedgwick's texts and achievement have been long overshadowed by the undisputed recognition of some of her male contemporaries. James Fenimore Cooper, Washington Irving or William Cullen Bryant have received all the credit for having shaped -and for many, created- U.S. literature. However, Sedgwick's contribution to the development of a specific native tradition in American letters is undeniable. Long before Ralph Waldo Emerson's call for a specifically national subject-matter, Sedgwick was consciously giving her texts an American perspective by combining the techniques used in sentimental fiction with the historical romance.

Set in colonial times, *Hope Leslie or Early Times in the Massachusetts* (1827) constitutes one of Sedgwick's poignant explorations of the Puritan past of the country and its interrelation with issues of gender and race. By fusing Puritan historical accounts with fiction, Sedgwick's technique succeeds in foregrounding the partiality of historical accounts in opposition to their supposedly objective exposition of facts and in this way the text manages to challenge Puritan self-righteous historiography. Moreover, the use of the Puritan past as material for her fiction together with the inclusion of Native American characters makes Sedgwick an extremely interesting foil to other contemporaries such as Nathaniel Hawthorne or James Fenimore Cooper. This paper wishes to explore Sedgwick's version of the Puritan presence in the American colonies and compare it with Nathaniel Hawthorne's to demonstrate how the former made gender indistinguishable from the construction of a national narrative. The paper also tackles Sedgwick's sexual and racial politics in her treatment of fully developed Native American characters thus constituting an enlightening counterpart to the stereotypical and reductive portrayal found in James Fenimore Cooper's work.

Keywords: Catharine Maria Sedgwick, *Hope Leslie*, historical romance, Puritan historiography, colonial America, ambivalent feminism.

Catharine Maria Sedgwick was one of the most popular writers of the first half of the nineteenth century in the United States. Praised by critics, writers and readers alike, Sedgwick enjoyed widespread popularity, comparable to that of James Fenimore Cooper or Washington Irving. She wrote novels, novellas, and children's stories. She

pursued her literary career at a time of major social and ideological redefinition in the United States. Her texts, written between 1820s and 1860s engaged in a dialogue with the utter transformation of a Republic that witnessed the advance of Jacksonian politics; the triumph of market values; and an impending division that would culminate in 1861 with the outbreak of the Civil War. In this context, Sedgwick poignantly set out to reveal the fundamental ideological lapses and actual omission of disenfranchised groups from the revolutionary rhetoric while at the same time Sedgwick paradoxically adopted its very same language.

The topics she addressed in her fiction ranged from the attack of religious hypocrisy in, for instance, *A New England Tale* (1822, which had a controversial reception precisely for that reason); the revision of the Puritan past in *Hope Leslie* (1827); marriage and the possibility of remaining single in "Married or Single" to the appraisal of the American Revolution in *The Linwoods: or, Sixty Years Since* (1835).

Sedgwick's pioneering role in the creation of a national literature falls within the now recognized contribution of women writers to nineteenth-century US Literature. Specifically, in the work carried out by Nina Baym in the 1970s, *A New England Tale* (1822) was singled out as the text that began a specific literary genre written by women which Baym termed "woman's fiction" and has been popularly known as sentimental fiction ever since then. Sedgwick became the first of the "literary domestics" -- a term used by Mary Kelley in *Private Women, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* to refer to a writer who successfully stepped into a public arena traditionally ruled by men-- to make her appearance on the public sphere. She, like other writers of the time, saw how the changes in the publishing world -- a developing national publishing industry, a nascent profession of authorship, an increasing reading audience-- made it possible for any writer to reach a national audience. Thus, like other women writers of the time such as Maria McIntosh, Susan Warner or E.D.E.N. Southworth, Sedgwick would become a best-selling author and major money-makers although the money usually engrossed the publisher's arcs rather than the writer's (Kelley 12).

Sedgwick's new visibility has been granted on the grounds of her being a major contributor to the frontier romance and the historical novel. Actually, the expansion of the canon of American Literature to include forgotten writers has led to a revision of the American Literary tradition. As critics such as Carolyn Karcher or Judith Fetterley have argued, Sedgwick has to be seen as the founder of a home-grown novel of manners, a pioneer in the development of realism.

Sedgwick's work has for some decades now elicited a wide array of critical reactions. I want to focus on her use of history and memory in one of her most popular narratives, *Hope Leslie or Early Times in the Massachusetts* (1827), although it is common to other of her texts to hark back to historical episodes as a backdrop for her narrative. In *The Linwoods*, for instance, Sedgwick sets the time of the story in the American Revolution, an extremely popular subject-matter in the first half of the 19th century for a domestic literature that was searching for a parallel way to reinforce the political break with Britain (Kafarilis xvii). *Hope Leslie* (1827) constitutes one of Sedgwick's poignant explorations of the Puritan past of the country and its interrelation with issues of gender and race.

Hope Leslie is set in Puritan America. It tells the story of the Fletchers, a family of Puritans in Massachusetts in the 17th century, who suffer the retaliation for the Pequod War in their own Flesh. The story revolves around three main characters: Everell Fletcher, a survivor of the attack of the Pequods, Hope Leslie, his distant cousin and heroine, and Magawiska, the Pequod girl, the daughter of the Pequod Chief who, despite her origins, serves in the Fletcher's household and eventually develops a sincere love for the family. Despite the various impediments, Everell and Hope eventually marry and Magawiska chooses to return to her tribe.

The story is a complex tangle of subplots and temporal references that include the colonial past of the nation, comments on Sedgwick's contemporary time, and even some comments about a future time. From the literary point of view, it is also a combination of genres: the historical romance --with references to actual Puritans and other historical characters as well as Puritan historical sources-- ; the sentimental tradition; the use of national myths such as the Pocahontas story, with the addition of the severed arm in Magawiska's intervention to save Everell from her own father; the captivity narrative in the story of Hope Leslie's sister and her marriage to a Native American-- which is actually an incident which Sedgwick seems to have drawn from a similar event in her family.

In short, Sedgwick is keen on mingling popular material drawn from some of the nations' literary myths with high cultural forms such as Puritan historiography at a time in which history-writing was becoming one of the most reputed forms of writing, hence Sedgwick's emphasis in the preface and in the text to distinguish her narration from "true history". By fusing Puritan historical accounts with fiction, Sedgwick's narrative technique succeeds in foregrounding the partiality of historical accounts in opposition to their supposedly objective exposition of facts and in this way the text manages to challenge Puritan self-righteous historiography. In this sense, the text importantly participates in a revisionist trend that questions the Puritan accounts of the Pequot War, thus advancing the concern of revisionist historians in the late 20th century, who have interrogated the reliability of Puritan accounts on the motives, the reasons for the outbreak of the conflict, even whether this was a defensive war or an imperialistic one (Gould 641).¹

Early critics of Sedgwick's text such as Michael D. Bell discussed Sedgwick's work as either an accurate or unreliable account of the historical sources used in the text. Thus, Bell argued that Sedgwick's vision of history embodied a typically 19th century attitude toward history in its belief in 'progress', that is the belief that history had been a movement towards the 'natural' outcome in which Hope Leslie and Everell marry and Magawiska returns to her tribe, order restored (214). Bell continued to argue that such belief was paralleled by the also conventional narrative plot that featured an inevitable progress towards the eventual marriage of heroine and hero. Thus tracing the accuracy or inaccuracy of Sedgwick's reference to history, Bell concludes that *Hope Leslie* constitutes an exercise of identity formation for the nation in which Hope embodies the qualities of naturalness as opposed to the artificial ways associated with England and

¹ The Pequot War initially entered history as an instance of mass murder of Native Americans, a genocide. Reassessment has been pursued on the grounds that the Puritans may have had an imperialistic interest behind the attack since the Pequots did not mean an actual threat for the colonists. See Gould for the controversy over the historical origins of the conflict.

the Puritans (219). If England's sectarianism and paternal authority prevented the marriage of Alice and William Fletcher, Hope and Everell can overcome all difficulties to eventually marry.

Sedgwick's *Hope Leslie*, however, is far from conventional although it certainly has typical conventional elements of the sentimental tradition such as the orphaned heroine who through her courage and moral virtue overcomes all obstacles to do what she feels is right. Actually, Sedgwick, like most of the early nineteenth century women writers, is caught in a political ambivalence that leads her to voice traditional views on questions such as history or gender roles while at the same time her plots are punctuated with transgressive incursions that challenge her own conventional assumptions.

In *the Linwoods*, for instance, Sedgwick affirms that the novel is designated for young readers to "deepen their gratitude to their patriot-fathers; a sentiment that will tend to increase their fidelity to the free institutions transmitted to them" (Sedgwick 5). Thus, *The Linwoods* "marked undercurrent of conciliation that leaves the reader with the sense that continued revolution and discord are to be put aside." (Kafarilis, xxix) As Kafarilis further argues, *The Linwoods* therefore performs the conservative work of containing revolt and revolution at a moment when the nation was facing precisely this possibility" (Kafarilis, xxix). In this sense, Sedgwick retorts to history as part of her utopian project of healing the nation.

Despite Sedgwick's incursions in the field of conventional politics, there is a clear dissident political stance as regards both historical authority and gender constructs in *Hope Leslie*. As regards history, the text offers a complex web of past references to the 17th c Pequod war; references to the text's moment of production; the 19th c, and even some comments of the narrating voice to the future of the country. It is However, Sedgwick's significant alteration of the authoritative voice for the account of the Pequod war what has attracted the attention of criticism, especially New Historicist readings. Instead of reproducing the Puritan version of the attack -- an defensive attack launched by the Puritans against the Pequods in order to defend the Puritan settlements in Massachusetts --, Sedgwick crucially situates the only account of the conflict in Magawiska's voice, and thus, it is the version of one of the "savages" --the voice suppressed from official histories-- the one that we hear. As it has been argued, Sedgwick's crucial retelling of the Puritan attack from the perspective of a Native American woman questions 17th-century accounts of the conflict found in Puritan sources -such as John Winthrop's *The History of New England*, which had just been reprinted at the time Sedgwick wrote the novel (Gould 641). By having Magawiska speak in representation for the victims, Sedgwick focuses on the cruelty and brutality of the Puritan attack as well as the superior technology the English used in order to defeat the Pequods.

Jeffrey Insko has extended and complicated this argument by both questioning New Historicist readings of the novel and arguing that the complex tangle of historical references found in the text are not flaws but rather very conscious narrative strategies that work towards a common interest: that of showing the ideological bias of all representation. By criticising the New Historicist impulse "to keep each historical event (and text) assigned to *its* proper temporal slot in the past" (182) Insko suggests that *Hope Leslie* asks for a reading that, like the text itself in its self-conscious use of anachronisms, transcends that assumption. Thus, Insko argues that new historicist

readings of *Hope Leslie* have rightfully placed the writing of the text in its context. He has, however, contended that such readings have tended to regard Sedgwick's use of history as a tangle of anachronisms. Insko, however, far from deeming those apparently contradictory historical time-frames as a flaw in the novel, claims that it is precisely such inconsistencies what make *Hope Leslie* a metahistorical narrative that challenges the historicist will to encapsulate texts in a context (180)

Insko's thesis reinforces *Hope Leslie's* modernity, even postmodernity in its self-conscious use of history --and representation at large-- as a construct and its contention that history is a scientific search for knowledge, but rather a matter of who has the power to tell the story. Insko's analysis highlights Sedgwick's reluctance to accept "History" as a matter of single truth, a notion found in the Puritan conception of the world and by extension, in Puritan historiography when they proclaimed The Book the only source of authority. As Insko has contended,

Hope Leslie's insight into the narrative character of history anticipates postmodern theories of history by more than a century and a half, emphasizing the mutability of historical truth, challenging the scientific objectivity claimed by twentieth-century historians, and affirming textualist versions of historical representation (183-84)

Certainly, the preface offers good proof of Sedgwick's self-conscious writing, in which she admits to having altered the chronology of events as told in traditional narratives of the Pequod War and therefore, making a metahistorical reference (Insko188) that foregrounds history and representation as constructs. And as Insko suggests, the use of anachronism in *Hope Leslie* reinforces the text's self-conscious historicity, thus engaging in the politics of representing history and representation at large (Insko 187). Certainly, Sedgwick recurrently uses self-conscious narrative strategies in order to break the illusion of reality and thus foreground the hypocrisy of the Puritan social world. In this sense, the narrative voice presents itself as a historian; the narration is interrupted by expressions that bring the reader back to either the time of production or to a future time (such as "this is no romantic fiction" (12), "in the quaint language of the time (9))

I certainly concur with Insko's analysis of Sedgwick's historical revisions through metanarrative and metahistorical strategies. Insko, However, fails to significantly include in his analysis the parallel effects that such strategies have in the reassessment of gender constructs that Sedgwick is also carrying out in *Hope Leslie* through her two heroines (Hope and Magawiska), and the comments of the narrative voice, mainly. It is because the reassessment of Puritan historiography is carried out through the voices of two female characters that Sedgwick's project of reassessing historical representation cannot be severed from her parallel political statements as regards gender.

If the project entails a radical dissidence from established notions of historical reception, Sedgwick's equally radical position in relation to gender evinces two relevant points. First, that women are also political subjects in the glorious past of nation-building and, therefore, clear political agents, active members in the construction of the nation. The combination of the historical past of the nation with comments about the present allows Sedgwick to reflect upon the role of women both in the proto-nation as in the New Republican period. Thus, Sedgwick's plot reinforces the idea that women are effective

political agents and thus they become a reminder of women's important and often unrecognized roles they played in the American past (Kafaralis xxx). Certainly, Magawiska's testimony contests the ethnocentric and patriarchal authority of Puritan historians and thus foregrounds the "political aspect of all historical representation" as regards race and sex (Dana D. Nelson qtd. in Gould 642).

The second important assumption is that *Hope Leslie* demonstrates the utility of appropriating the revolutionary rhetoric of the Founding Fathers for political uses other than independence. As the women's rights movement and other reform movements of the time contended, the revolutionary rhetoric of the not-so-distant Revolution could be successfully re-appropriated to serve the interests of women and other groups. In this sense, the tyranny that the Founding Fathers fought is shown in the book to be the same yoke that women experienced under patriarchal regimes (both the Puritans and the Pequods).

Thus, the narrative voice criticises the Puritan wives' blind obedience their husbands: "Mrs. Fletcher received [her husband's decision] as all wives of that age of undisputed masculine supremacy (or most of our less passive age) would do, with meek submission" (16). The reference to the time of the text's production becomes thus a self-reflexive statement on the narration, which, in the same way continues to emphasize the tyranny under which women still live in the New Republic. The text presents Hope and Magawiska as characters who, in different ways, transgress codes and behaviours: Hope is a female Huckeleberry Finn who follows her own dictates at whatever cost. In the same way, Magawiska disarms the Puritans by pointing at the hypocrisy of a religion that teaches mercy, compassion, forgiveness but then justifies the onslaught of natives (51). The most significant element, however, in the narration is that both Hope and Magawiska are allowed to publicly speak in a trial. It is in this way that Sedgwick gives Hope and Magawiska the chance to subvert the rigid gender codes that dominate their patriarchal universes. By allowing them to speak in their trial and thus publicly occupy a space that had been traditionally banned to women and female characters, Hope and Magawiska experience the same transition that was taking place for women writers in early nineteenth-century. Sedgwick -- like other women of the time -- was for the first time able to leave aside the private voice to be heard publicly and therefore, their experience was antithetical to what had been woman's historical experience (29). In the same way, female reformers reinterpreted the famous revolutionary slogan of "no taxation without representation" to claim that they could not be sentenced by a jury that did not recognise women as subjects. This is the very same claim that Magawiska makes during her trial.

The significance of such acts may seem dated to contemporary readerships today. Nina Baym in *Woman's Fiction* noted, however, the significance of such characters in woman's fictions,

representations of gender behavior in woman's fiction, no matter how retrograde they seem today, were challenging the male-defined status quo. Then, as now, most male writers would rather write about vapid angels and malign temptresses than about what Louisa May Alcott called 'good, useful women'; and they prefer to represent women as men's auxiliaries rather than center them in worlds of their own (Baym xi)

Indeed, the daring showed by Hope and the significance of her voice is felt by the jury. When Hope testifies to defend Nelema, an old woman accused of witchery, Judge Pynchon affirms: "You are somewhat forward, maiden, in giving thy opinion; but thou must know, that we regard it but as the whistle of a bird; withdraw and leave judgement to thy elders" (109).

Sedgwick's significance, despite her extremely ambivalent proto-feminist stance, comes to the forefront when she is compared to other writers of historical fiction of the time such as Cooper. In opposition to other texts, Sedgwick's characters remain icons of empowerment for a female readership that was disenfranchised in the political and public arena while her achievement in terms of narrative form and questions of self-conscious representation have been only lately assessed. It is when we take into consideration narrative form and its relation to ideology that Sedgwick's talent can be fully appreciated and can still speak to contemporary debates about the representation of history and of the past.

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