The Revival of America's First Genre: Exploring the Panther Narrative's Feminist Principles in Post-Revolutionary War America

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THE REVIVAL OF AMERICA’S FIRST GENRE: EXPLORING THE PANTHER NARRATIVE’S FEMINIST PRINCIPLES IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY WAR AMERICA

by

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Abstract:

America’s victory in the War of Independence posed new challenges for the men who drafted the Constitution. Gender roles shifted dramatically during the war, creating a new attitude about women’s roles in the new republic. Before the Constitution was ratified, women like Abigail Adams advocated for women to have a more active role in the new nation. Radical literature regarding women’s roles also became a driving force in the movement. The Panther Narrative used the resurgence of America’s first genre, the captivity narrative, to combine the new republic’s obsession with personal freedom and radical ideas about gender spheres. The anonymous writer of the Panther Narrative criticized the subjugation of women in the new republic and asserted their desire and ability to function and contribute as full citizens of the new United States. The Panther Narrative’s commentary was unusually bold because it suggested that women could possess autonomy and ownership, a notion that was extremely radical in the eighteenth century. After the Constitution was written, it became apparent that the framers gave men progressive rights and prevented women from participating in the economic sphere by excluding them as citizens despite the push for social equality after the war. In response, Judith Sargent Murray advocated for equal rights and female education in her essay “On Equality of the Sexes” by reforming the radical ideas that Panther Narrative put forward just a few years before. Murray found a place for discussion about female autonomy within the sphere system, which began to gain traction after society was re-established by the Constitution. She recognized that the Panther Narrative’s ideas were too aggressive for society in the New Republic and worked to find new ways to improve the lives of American women. Her ideas provided a counter to the growing popularity of Republican Motherhood within early America.
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The Revival of America’s First Genre: Exploring The Panther Narrative’s Feminist Principles in Post-Revolutionary War America

The role of women dramatically shifted during the Revolutionary war, which sparked a movement that pushed for different female roles in the new republic. Captivity narratives from the French and Indian War reemerged as part of the new American ethos, and soon after the genre was reimagined to capture the spirit of the American Revolution and reflect the social upheaval surrounding the colonists. In this Capstone, I will address the resurgence of the captivity narrative and how it functioned as radical political literature during the Revolutionary war. I will also explore the way that female roles changed during the war and how they were re-established afterwards. I will focus primarily on A very surprising narrative of a young woman, discovered in a rocky-cave; after having been taken by the savage Indians of the wilderness, in the year 1777, and seeing no human being for the space of nine years: In a letter from a gentleman to his friend, referred to in this paper as the Panther Narrative, to evaluate the proto-feminist ideals that surfaced during the role shift. This literary analysis will lead to a discussion about the re-instatement of gender spheres, and how political essayist Judith Sargent Murray reformed the Panther Narrative’s ideas about gender for a more conservative audience and advocated for equal female education. Murray’s work to reform these principles shaped the way that her audience perceived equal opportunity for women by making radical proto-feminist ideas into more mainstream suggestions that would benefit both sexes.

This argument contributes to the discussion surrounding female citizenship by exploring the shifts in women’s roles during the war through the literature that reflected their desires, and how society accommodated the push for more power among women by reforming the traditional family structure. This essay explores the first time in American history where women gained
freedom in society during wartime but receded back into the domestic sphere after peace was restored. By doing so women gained more power during the transaction than they had started with. By understanding this shift, it becomes easier to trace a pattern throughout American history where women benefit from taking over masculine roles.

**Captivity Narratives and the Role of Women**

Indian captivity narratives were the first original American genre because the constant interactions between colonists and Native Americans resulted in conflicts involving captivity. After these men or women were returned to civilized society they would write narratives villainizing the native populations, which caught on as entertainment literature. One of the most famous early American narratives is the captivity of Mary Rowlandson, the wife of a prominent minister during King Phillip’s War (1754-1763). She was taken captive during a raid on her town in 1676 with her young child fatally injured in her arms. She published her work as the *Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* in 1682, and her tale of peril was a huge success both in the colonies and in England because of its appeal to religious values and its insight into the lives of Native Americans. Many critics argue that captivity narratives like Rowlandson’s served as religious propaganda during the seventeenth century, using women to spread messages condemning savage natives and praising God’s saving grace (Derounian-Stodola xii). By exploiting women who had suffered in these situations, the church convinced readers to see natives as bloodthirsty and white settlers as righteous saviors, which aligned with the ethos of colonial culture.

At the same time, however, Rowlandson’s narrative also has moments of female freedom that she experienced because she is able to participate in the economic sphere by selling knitted socks. In her four months as a captive, she learned how to conduct business with the natives and
take care of herself as an autonomous being. Her captivity is an educational experience where she learns about the native culture and economy. There is a sense of uncertainty towards the end of Rowlandson’s narrative that suggests she may have longed for the freedom she ironically discovered in captivity. Michelle Burnham, the author of *Captivity and Sentiment: Cultural Exchange in American Literature*, describes captivity narratives as “an occasion for the simultaneous invention and destruction of the self” (21). Existing within a liminal space, captivity allowed Rowlandson to experience “examples of female political and economic autonomy that transgressed the roles for women defined by her own society” (24). At the end of her narrative, Rowlandson feels conflicted as she describes, “when others are sleeping, mine eyes are weeping” (Rowlandson 51). Rowlandson’s conflicted position leaves her audience with the opportunity to read her narrative as a religious manifesto or as a rebellious act of defiance against puritan norms, and this may have contributed to its newfound popularity during the American Revolution.

Captivity narratives, both reprinted editions and new works, became popular during the Revolutionary War, possibly due to the public’s interest of themes like freedom, independence, and possession. Mary Rowlandson’s narrative was represented in a new light during its resurgence during the 1770s, when it was reprinted as *A Narrative of the Captivity, Sufferings, and Removes of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*. Rowlandson’s narrative was reprinted 7 times during the 1770s (Burnham 65). Instead of representing strong religious faith, these reprinted editions emphasized Rowlandson’s rebellion and rejection of traditional norms. Some of the new editions featured a woodcut portraying Mary Rowlandson wielding a gun pointed at a group of Indians, something that did not occur during the narrative. This editorial decision encouraged the reader to look for moments of rebellion, not piety, in Rowlandson’s account, and this new focus meshed
well with the ethos of the new republic (Burnham 63). Citizens of the new United States wanted to read literature that praised independence and represented their history with conflict. Michelle Burnham examines the close connection between captivity narratives and early American politics in her book *Captivity and Sentiment*. In this book, Burnham focuses specifically on the sentimental elements of Rowlandson’s narrative. Building on Burnham’s work, my own analysis will be taking these claims in a different direction by reading the potential proto-feminist messages in captivity narratives, looking specifically at the *Panther Narrative* and how this work pushed against the male dominated attitudes of the new republic. Before we move on to the literary analysis portion of the paper, it is important to understand how women’s roles changed during the course of the Revolution.

**Women’s Roles Before, During, and After the Revolutionary War**

Before the American Revolution, the average household was set up in a “universally understood hierarchical structure” (Norton 3), which Thomas Hobbes described as the “little monarchy” (qtd in Burkin and Norton 98). The relationship between a man and his children and servants was the main focus of family dynamics. Hobbes didn’t include women in his model because their role was “peripheral” to the male authority (Burkin and Norton 96). In this model, the man not only dealt with civic duties outside of the home, but he also was the household’s sole decision maker. He was expected to oversee the financial aspects of the family, as well as supervision of household affairs in the domestic sphere. His wife was not thought of as an equal partner within the domestic sphere. She functioned as more of a “helpmate” and didn’t have any control or autonomy, even within the home (Norton 3). As a wife, “She was legally subsumed into her husband’s identity,” making her essentially an appendage of him (Burkin and Norton 96). This type of household was the norm for pre-Revolutionary war women in the colonies, and
it was not challenged until the roles and beliefs about men and women began to shift after the upheaval of the war. Only then did equality in the domestic sphere begin to emerge.

The Revolutionary War disintegrated these roles by pushing women into traditionally male-specific responsibilities. It was necessary because most men were off fighting and didn’t have the resources to dictate their households or economic responsibilities from afar. After the initial discomfort that many women expressed when they first had to assume these roles, they came to “gain a new appreciation of their own capacity and of the capability of their sex in general” (Norton 196). Even though the war brought new freedoms for women, it also introduced destruction to their communities. Women were forced to make important decisions about their family’s welfare in the face of poverty and violence. Threats like smallpox required mothers to decide whether to inoculate their children without the father’s consent, something that would have been looked down upon before the war. Abigail Adams writes about the fear of “the Havock made by the pestilence” to her husband John Adams as she makes the decision to take her children in to the clinic (qtd. in Norton 200). Women had to step up to new challenges that they hadn’t been prepared for before the war.

Dire domestic decisions were not the only burdens that the war placed on women. Economic transactions and farm labor became commonplace activities for women as well. It was common that wives would not be made privy to the economic status of their households before the war because their husbands were the sole decision makers, even if the money or property was technically theirs through inheritance. During the war, many women completely took over the economic transactions of the household, including livestock sales and levying debt repayments. Through letters, it is evident that women showed “increasing familiarity with business and … [a] willingness to act independently of their husband’s directions” as the war raged on (Norton 217).
The pressure to singularly provide for their families brought despair to revolutionary women, but the war also provided a new found social freedom that elevated the way that women thought about their roles and capacities.

Men, however, didn’t accept their wives’ new roles as public beings because “even the most radical American men had not intended to make a revolution in the status of their wives and sisters” and wanted them to return to the hierarchy model that existed before the revolution (Kerber 9). As their husbands returned home from war, women “tended to reply testily when their husbands persisted in assuming their subservience” after months, if not years of independent living. Between the end of the Revolutionary War in 1783 and the constitutional convention of 1787, “there was no formal political context in which women might be consulted” about their political identities, which resulted in women being left out of the conversation regarding the new republican ideology (Kerber 8). Women may not have been included in the public conversation surrounding the nation, but they worked through other means to communicate their ideas. Throughout the war and the time proceeding it, women were writing and talking about radical proto-feminist ideas that were caused by the sphere shift. The Panther Narrative is a primary example of how radical these ideas could be, but the majority of this discussion likely happened within domestic communities and within families. The private nature of the female political mind gives the impression that women weren’t concerned with politics, but it is evident through the small samples of literature that we have access to, that this is a misconception.

Female influence in the private sector is most famously represented by Abigail Adams when she famously wrote, “I desire you Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors” in a letter to her husband John in 1776 where she
anticipates that the country will have to write new laws (978). Throughout the war Abigail conversed openly with husband about politics and education, she even acknowledges that he is “a more generous mind” than the people in the nation that find it fashionable to “ridicule Female learning” (983). Her persistence and open conversation provide a glimpse into the domestic sphere where women spoke about their desires for equality. Her pleas, or the question of women at all, weren’t taken into serious consideration by the founders during the convention, but it is curious that they chose gender neutral words like “‘persons,’ ‘inhabitance,’ and ‘citizens’ instead of men” in the first portion of the Constitution (Lewis 359).

Kerber claims in *Women of the Republic* that the influences behind the Constitution, like the Enlightenment writers and older classical sources, caused the men in power to avoid allowing women to participate in government or citizenship. Kerber mentions that “republican ideology primarily concerned a single sex...[because] Americans had inherited their political vocabulary from Aristotle” (7). Women during the classical era were not considered to be as elevated as men because they could only conceptualize through the lens of the household, and not the public sector, which was a strictly male polis. These ideas carried over to how the Constitution was written and caused the new republic to retain traditions like separate spheres and educational disparities among women. Some changes for women, especially ones connected to physical freedom, like easier access to divorce, came about through the state constitutions written during this time. However, the new republic’s emphasis on freedom largely ignored women’s rights and desires to be active citizens. The revolution politicized women more than they had ever been because of the active positions in policy and war efforts that they had taken in the colonies, “but the newly created republic made little room for them as political beings” (Kerber 11). For the most part, women retained the social code that had been governing them for centuries.
After the Constitution was ratified, women had to find a place within the new nation that wasn’t nearly as radical as the roles that they held during the Revolutionary War. Women were treated as political and economic bystanders and did not have equal opportunities in either the economic or domestic sphere. Even the practice of “couverte continued into the early Republic and continued to shape the relations of women to the state” by propagating the notion that women were owned by their husbands and fathers (Kerber 9). Women were not represented in the Constitution or given any rights that would define them as citizens. Instead, they were granted a political role in the new nation solely through their domestic roles as wives, and most importantly, as mothers. The ideology of Republican motherhood “integrated political values into… domestic life” and degraded education for women by suggesting that its only purpose was to make sure that mothers could teach their sons how to be good citizens (Kerber 11). This practice served as an illusion that women had political influence that was just as good, if not better, than having the right to cast a ballot (Kerber 283).

However, change for women did come out of the Revolutionary War primarily regarding their role in the home, as well as their need for education. As stated before, the household prior to the war was seen as a completely hierarchal system where women didn’t even have a separate identity from her husband. After the war, separate spheres may have re-emerged, but women started to gain a much more important role in the formation and molding of society through motherhood. “For women who had previously held no particular avenue of power of their own – no unique deference of their integrity or dignity – This represented an advance” in the status of women (Cott 200). Women began to hold much more important roles in the new republic, which sparked a movement for female education, though not as radical as the desire to exist in a public role, this set women up to be more successful later in the nineteenth century.
Before the Revolutionary War “only about half of New England women could sign their names” because “extensive learning for women was considered inappropriate or, at worst, dangerous” (Cott 101). The shift that occurred concerning gender during the American revolution seems to have instigated the growing popularity of female education in the late eighteenth century. It seems to have served two purposes: the first, according to Benjamin Rush’s *Thoughts on Female Education* published in 1787, being the new American desire to cast off “British models of fashionable womanhood” in order to distance American women from the “ornamental” purposes of femininity (Cott 104), and the second, going back to Republican Motherhood, to provide educated mothers to influence and instill patriotism into their sons. However, there was an argument about how women should be educated and to what extent. Judith Sargent Murray was a prominent advocate for equal female education, while others, like Rush, “justified female education for its social utility” (Cott 105).

The shift from the *Panther Narrative’s* strong messages of female equality and mixed gender stereotypes in 1778, and Judith Sargent Murray’s more conservative argument in “On Equality of the Sexes” published in 1790 is contextualized by the claim that radical female advocacy had to be amended to fit within the constraints of a post-Constition society. During the revolution, women had been forced into the public sphere by the economic boycott against England making them more visible than ever (Murray 8). Presumably, through reading the *Panther Narrative*, women desired to keep the status that they had gained during this time, but due to the founding fathers’ stance on women in the political polis, they had to retreat back into the domestic sphere. Murray’s argument amended the desires of women, which are evident in the *Panther Narrative*, to fit within the context of the new traditional and male-dominated American society. Pulling back the radical ideals of female equality present during the revolution, from
total equality to just educational equality made progress for women more attractive to Murray’s audience, which was saturated in the male centric ethos of early America.

**Writing Against the Grain: The Panther Narrative**

The *Panther Narrative* was first published in 1787, the same year the Constitution was ratified. The work was extremely popular and was reprinted over 20 times in the span of 17 years afterwards (Derounian-Stodola 83). The narrative embraces the captivity narrative genre, but introduces elements of frontier fiction, political commentary, and epistolary story-telling. By reading the *Panther Narrative* under a feminist lens, it becomes a metaphor for how female autonomy and independence do not destabilize or unravel the fabric of society which, in the context of the early republic, proves that female citizenship and public exposure are not a threat to the new American polis. The *Panther Narrative* was anonymously published because it is a radical piece of literature that advocated for the retention of female roles created by the war. It represents the movement of women who wanted to keep their new found status in society, by suggesting that experienced and educated women are still concerned with domesticity and morality. This narrative offers a response to the opportunity facing the early republic in regard to female roles, and pushes to prove that women thrive as members of the larger society.

The *Panther Narrative* begins with the narrator, Abraham Panther, writing letters addressed to “Sir” to relay an incredible journey he just had (86). Along with his travel partner, he finds a woman in the wilderness who has lived in a cave for nine years. He startles her at first, but she concedes to tell them her story which in her words is not “interesting or entertaining …[but will likely] excite… pity and gratify…curiosity” (87) already setting up her as a humble character. The perspective of the narrative then shifts to the Lady, and we learn that she was woman with great traditional opportunity and wealth. She describes her father as “a man of some
consequence and of considerable estate in the place he lived” (87) to establish the upper class society from which she came. A love story soon emerges, and the Lady “conceal[s] [her] attachment” to her father clerk because her father “was eager in pursuit of riches” and not likely willing to allow her to marry a man “destitute of fortune” (87). Her father limits her experiences, however, by forbidding her to marry and “unbraiding [her] lover with treacherously engaging his daughter’s affections” and tossing him out of his house (87). This forces her to defy him and “quit [his] house” with her lover, even though her “enraged” father “threatened vengeance” on both of them (88). Her act of defiance would have cued a revolutionary audience to see a parallel between the story’s characters and the war. Throughout the story, the young woman breaks away from her restrictive parentage and makes a new life for herself, learning how to thrive without direction. The fact that she acts on her own interests and defies her father signals to the audience that she is a metaphor for the colonies. It is also stated that she lives in the wilderness for nine years before she is reintroduced into society which is roughly the same amount of time that the war lasted. In 1787, the war with England was over, but tensions were still high among the two countries, and by evoking the revolutionary conditions of the United States through the character of the Lady, the Panther Narrative draws audiences to understand the feminist arguments in a context that they can relate to.

The use of revolutionary rhetoric throughout the narrative suggests that women in America were having a similar revolution to the country’s break from England. This is an important reading of the narrative because it would have been extremely relatable to either gender during the time period. The author of the Panther Narrative may have used this metaphor to ease people into the idea that women might want to break free from their restrictive lifestyles and gain greater freedom to participate in public policy, own property, or work outside of the
domestic sphere. Comparing female autonomy to national revolution would have placed women’s rights in the same light as the war, possibly convincing people that the older, traditional model of separate spheres, where women were expected to function as helpmates instead of partners in the home, was as archaic as remaining a colony of Great Britain.

The Panther Narrative continues to promote revolutionary new roles for women as the Lady takes greater responsibility for her own action. In the narrative, an interesting pronoun pattern emerges which reinforces the transformation that the Lady experiences. At the beginning of the story, the Lady only describes herself in relation to her father and puts emphasis on his ownership of her. She describes herself as “his only child” which is the only description that we get beside her age (15) and birthplace (Albany, NY) (87). As she leaves her father and runs off with her lover, the pronouns shift to “we.” The Lady and her lover form an attachment because of “his unfortunate passion” for her, and his constant attempts resulted in him “soon find[ing] a way to [her] heart” (87). As she couples herself with her lover through pronoun usage, she separates her from her father but still associates herself with another person. Even though she “agrees to quit her father’s house” the language suggests that the decision to defy her father was not on her own accord which still places her under male influence (88). After standing up to her father, the Lady and her lover run into the wilderness to escape the men her father sent after them to kill him and collect her. While in the wilderness, the Lady and her lover are caught by a band of Indians who “barbarously murder [him]… in a most inhuman manner” (88). She takes advantage of the absence of her guard and runs as the Indians burn him on the fire. She escapes immediate danger and has to learn how to become independent. This is a turning point for the Lady in the narrative as she now has to take on the wilderness alone “without a guide to direct, or friend to protect” her (Panther 88). After the lover’s murder the lady starts to express herself in
“I” statements when describing the actions that she takes to escape their camp including “I fainted,” “I perceived,” and “I withdrew” (88). This gradual and subtle transition to first person pronouns signals the Lady’s shift from existing within a traditional role to beginning her journey towards an autonomous lifestyle.

As the narrative proceeds, the Lady continues to develop independent actions, but she begins to use that action to protect and assert her morality. As the Lady wanders in the wilderness looking for a place to “dwell till a period should be put to [her] miserable existence” (88), she runs into another obstacle. She sees a “man of a gigantic figure walking towards” her who “accost[s] [her] in a language [she] did not understand” (88-89). The giant could be read as the dangers and temptations that women would have to face outside of the domestic sphere because the public sphere was thought as a place of corruption and temptation. However, her reaction to the giant’s threat suggests that women will not abandon their morality when faced with the choice. In a classic narrative, the audience would have expected the lady to run or try to hide to display her fear or weakness. Instead she stays calm and collected as he “survey[s]” her and leads her by the hand to his cave. (89). The lady describes the giant man “stretch[ed] out …upon a long stone covered with skins” where he motioned “several times for [her] to lay … beside him” (89). When she refuses to submit willingly, he threatens her with a “sword and hatchet,” then binds her hands to keep her captive (89). In this moment, the lady proves to her audience that she still is concerned with her modesty and chastity even though she broken out of society and male influence. Her will is strong and so she decides that she would “die rather than comply with his desire” (89).

The Panther Narrative takes its feminist arguments in an even more radical direction as the Lady takes on masculine qualities to murder the giant. In order to avoid a life of servitude to
him she decided that the only way to “liberate” herself is to kill him during her “only opportunity” or as he sleeps (89). She frees herself from “the bark” used to bind her by biting through it, and after “not long deliberating” she takes the hatchet to his head; “three blows effectively put an end to his existence” (89). Afterwards she beheads, quarters, and drags his body outside the cave (89). As she murders the giant, the way she describes her actions becomes much stronger and more masculine. In this part she “summons resolution,” “put[s] and end to his existence,” and found herself “in possession of [his] cave” (89), which is a drastic change from the way her actions are described earlier when she is trying to escape the Indian camp which deal mostly with fainting and escaping. The physicality of this moment is the most radical element of the Panther Narrative because of its unapologetic brutality. The murder is shocking, it reinforces the Lady’s commitment to morality, but it also elevates her to a masculine position where it becomes evident that she no longer needs the male protection she craved after her lover was murdered.

After killing the giant, the Lady proves herself equally adept at establishing and maintaining her own home through her own actions. At the end of her harrowing tale, the Lady explains that she found and planted “a kind of Indian corn” (89), which she cultivated to sustain herself and took over the living space of the giant. The opportunity that she was given may have been a “wretched situation” (89), but she used it to build practical knowledge in order to survive. Abraham Panther makes a number of observations about the Lady from the first time he hears her singing to the point where she returns home. The Lady in the story is treated almost as a naturalist case study by the men who find her. The language throughout the narrative suggests that there is a dualism in the Lady’s nature. She is described in a feminine light when Panther calls her “a most beautiful young LADY… [with an] extraordinary appearance” when he first
sees her outside of her cave (86-87), but she views herself, and portrays to her audience, that her actions and mental processes are not usually found within a female sphere. Panther makes notes about how her appearance and mannerisms as if he is perplexed by her existence as an “agreeable, sensible Lady” even though she is living outside the normative society (87). His descriptions of the Lady and her home suggest that she is fulfilling her role as a hostess and a homemaker; and since she has been living in the wilderness for so long, he is surprised she is so civil. On the other hand, her actions, which are mostly presented in the first person, focus on her abilities or non-feminine processes. Her beauty is contrasted by the men that find her with the hard wilderness outside of her cave, which is portrayed as a comfortable living environment with all the necessities. The Lady brings femininity into the wilderness even though she is not consciously engaging with her female roles. The Panther Narrative stresses the capability of women and how their current roles, confined to the domestic sphere, do not allow them to benefit society to the extent that they would be able to otherwise.

The narrative concludes by asserting that women can occupy new feminist roles without disrupting society. In the end, when the men propose to return home and request that the Lady go with them, “at first she refused to quit her cave, but after some persuasion she consented” (90). She is hesitant to leave, but she ultimately chooses to obey the travelers, which marks the beginning of her return to male centric society. The Lady resists their strong insistence that she return because life in the wilderness, as “wretched” as it was, allowed the Lady to exist without the constraints of society holding her back (89). When they return, her father becomes so overjoyed that he “expires” hours after their reunion (90). The story is resolved because she is allowed to re-enter society after experiencing the wilderness and living on her own for so many years. This part of the story proves that it is possible be away from the pressures of the spheres,
but reassume those roles anytime. The Lady is granted a “handsome fortune” after her father
dies, leaving her a wealthily and property owning unmarried women (90). This ending suggests
that women can manage property and wealth because the Lady takes control of her home and
manages it, as she did with the cave, but now in her original society. Throughout the narrative
she gains and loses independence through her captivity, but ultimately ends up in a better societal
position that she began with.

The Panther Narrative’s plot structure mirrors the pattern of women’s roles in the
Revolution. At first, the Lady is tied to the men in her life, until she is separated from them by
distance or death and she is forced to take on masculine roles. As she is introduced back into
society, she leaves some of her freedom behind but gains a new role in her father’s home. When
she kills the giant, the role that she plays doesn’t differ at all from a masculine reaction to the
situation. The narrative reveals that women are capable of performing tasks that society has
prescribed to males, but also suggests that women can keep their domestic and moral
responsibilities at the same time.

Oddly enough, the main protagonist of the Panther Narrative never receives a name from
our narrator. The people nestled within the Lady’s story, her father, her lover, and herself, are
only referred to by the roles that they play in the story. Even the real author lacks a name and
employs the pseudonym Abraham Panther to distance themselves from the radical framework of
the narrative. The anonymity allows the story to be malleable in the minds of the audience, and it
invites them to step into the lives of people who are potentially in a similar situation to
themselves. This would have functioned as a way to force perspective on readers as an attempt to
produce empathy of the female cause. The term “Lady” is even an interesting linguistic choice
for the author to make, since Lady is so easily changed to lad. Woman can easily be changed to
man as well, but the strangeness of using the word lady instead of women highlights this easy change. Using an easily transitioned word emphasized how fluid the gender lines are and suggests that the protagonist can occupy both spheres. The term Lady could have also been used by the author to signal class status and the Lady’s retention of class status outside of society. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* the title of a Lady, used to signify class status, was used very rarely after the seventeenth century, but it was, during this time period, used as a way to signal a person “behave[ing] in a superior manner” (“Lady”). Calling the main character Lady is both a way to distance the audience from her identity, as well as an opportunity for the author to call attention to her traditional female traits.

The *Panther Narrative* features several patterns starting with subtle grammar cues and extending to mirroring the way that gender roles changed in post-war society, but the most striking is how the author is portraying the Lady’s ability to learn through experience and then logically apply that knowledge to take productive action in order to survive. This pattern of adaptation occurs throughout the story to prove that women are logical and able to absorb important information gathered from their surroundings. This is important because women were not supposed to be logical according to many years of tradition associated with the intemperance and the dangerous minds of women. The *Panther Narrative* challenged the deep misconceptions that people had been propagating for centuries, but also reframing what it meant to be a woman. Out of the ideas that the *Panther Narrative* presented, some were relatively mainstream like how mild mannered and generous the Lady is to Panther, while others were considered to be so radical they upset people. Her masculine qualities and logical ability to survive in the wilderness didn’t fit with the way that society deemed women at all. Despite its radical nature, the *Panther Narrative* was extremely popular. It was widely read and printed many times well into the
nineteenth century, so it must have had a pretty profound impact on the people of the new republic. However, when women began to return to the domestic sphere as society regrouped as a whole, the radical ideas of the *Panther Narrative* needed to be reformed and reframed to fit better within the societal expectations of women. Outright violence, property ownership, and public participation were not yet in the cards for Revolutionary women, but the war stirred up new desires that had to be addressed in the new Republic.

**Judith Sargent Murray: Reforming the *Panther Narrative’s* Radical Proto-Feminist Ideals**

As the new United States evolved into a young country, and the excitement and terror of the revolution started to fade, the country’s framers began to model what they wanted the new country to look like. The Constitution was written and ratified to form a tangible nation with both explicit and tacit societal rules that dictated both the domestic sphere and polis. Within this new republic, women were not afforded the rights that they enjoyed during the Revolutionary War or the freedom that the *Panther Narrative* advocated for. Scholars like Judith Sargent Murray wrote to explore the ways that women could fit back into society after the radical lifestyle change that the war had caused. Murray’s 1790’s essay “On Equality of the Sexes” reformed and molded many of the *Panther Narrative’s* radical claims about women in society to fit into the framework of the new republic. According to scholar Elizabeth Hewitt, “Murray’s essay makes the case for female equality in the natural rights tradition” in which she claims that mental inequality is caused by deficient female education and opportunity, not due to natural male propensity to logic and reason (Hewitt 310). Murray wrote to advocate for educational opportunities for women of the new republic and fought for equality and respect. The next section elaborates on the important elements of Murray’s argument that try to reframe the ideas
and suggestions of the Panther Narrative to fit within the social restraints of new American society.

Judith Sargent Murray was a popular essayist and proto-feminist writer who was one of the first to address women’s issues in the new republic. She was born in Massachusetts in 1751 to a wealthy family. She lacked an in-depth formal education beyond reading and writing, but the large library in her family estate gave Murray access to the tools to teach herself. She was married twice, once at eighteen to a ship captain named John Stevens, and then again after she was widowed to a preacher named John Murray. She had one biological daughter, Julia Marie, who was born in 1791 when Murray was 39 years old. She began sending in her essays after her catechism for parents who wanted to teach their children “the basic tenants of the Universalist faith” was published 1782 (Skemp xi). She wrote under the pen names “Constantina” and “The Gleaner” in New England magazines, not just about women’s issues but regarding politics, theology, wealth, and fame. She was “the first woman in America to have a play produced in Boston,” and challenged female education and gender roles throughout her career, not only in her writing, but through her actions as well (Skemp xi).

In her professional work as a writer and editor, Murray devoted her life to normalizing and advocating for female education through her many published works. Female education and opportunity were main points of contention for early feminist thinkers like Murray, who was a radical advocate for equality among the sexes. She saw the America Revolution as “a new era in female history” where women had the potential to gain equality (Kerber 287). Her works feature ideas that reject traditional roles and encourage female education and self-reliance. She believed that women were not intellectually inferior to men, but they lacked equal educational opportunities that men were given early in life. She believed that if women were given the same
educational opportunities as men, they would prove to be as intelligent and capable as men. The lack of proper female education was the culprit causing women to looker intellectually inferior.

Her ideas, as radical as they may have been, were also sympathetic also to the patriarchal society that she lived within due to the concessions that she makes regarding gender roles. She confesses in her essay “On Equality of the Sexes” “that the [physical] superiority is undoubtedly yours (men’s)” and that “nature formed [men as female] protectors” (11). She employs this as a concession to make her argument about education more appealing, but it softens the effect of her overall message about gender equality. Murray used her power as a popular essayist to think critically about how to amend female roles to accommodate the freedom that many women enjoyed during the revolution into the social rules of the new republic. She reforms many of the ideas that the Panther Narrative raises and makes them more accessible to the male-centric communities who didn’t want integrated spheres.

Both the Panther Narrative and Murray agree that men and women are treated differently, and that education can promote gender equality. Murray, however, offers a revised model about the kind of education a woman should receive. In the Panther Narrative, the Lady does not really engage with any formal education. Instead, she is educated through experience and observation. At the beginning of the story, she is initially at a disadvantage because she has never been taught how to take care of herself. Throughout the narrative she is given the chance to learn and she gains practical skills through observation. She uses her skills to carve out a place in the wilderness to thrive on her own such as when she takes possession of the giant’s cave and teaches herself how to forge and grow crops. Education provided her with the means to survive and maintain a proper household. The writer of the Panther Narrative likely wanted to inspire society to allow women to exist outside of the home so they could gain their own practical
experience. Although, after American society returned back to a reformed version of the pre-war family system, many women realized they needed to find a different way to participate in society because taking on men’s roles, like the Lady does, would have been unacceptable.

Judith Sargent Murray agrees with this idea that the path to equality begins with the opportunity to obtain knowledge. In her essay she points out that it is hardly fair for men to judge female intellect if young boys are “exaulted…[and] taught to aspire” while their young women “must be wholly domesticated” early in life (6). Murray argues that, without equal opportunity “the inferiority of our sex cannot be fairly deducted from” the models that society has produced by educating the genders differently (5). Murray pushed for women to have access to the same kinds of formal education that were often expected of upper to middle class men to equalize gender inequality. Throughout the essay she fights with the stereotypical views on womanhood that reinforced the beliefs that women didn’t have the same mental capacity or logical abilities that men did. Without the opportunity to learn, Murray believed that women felt “a mortifying consciousness of inferiority’ towards men “which embitter[ed] every enjoyment” that life had to offer (6). Murray argued that women needed to have the opportunity for equal education, because without it, they would not be able to prove their exceptional mental faculties. Instead of gaining social equality through showing society that she could function like a male counterpart, like the Lady in the Panther Narrative, Murray introduces a way that women could become more equal to men without breaking any major social rules. Equal education was a desire that women had, but according to the Panther Narrative’s radical stance of female autonomy, they likely wanted much more. Equal education for women would start to bridge the gap between the sexes eventually leading to more and women allowed into the social arena, but it was a slow process that unfolded over the 19th century and beyond.
Murry’s emphasis on equal education is a reformed version of the *Panther Narrative*’s focus on productive action based on observation. Murray was an advocate for equal formal education for women. Since women were supposed to be focused on religion, Murray states that women should learn about “autonomy [because she] might catch a glimpse of the immensity of the Deity... Geography [so] she would admire Jehovah in the midst of his benevolence ...[and] natural philosophy [so] she would adore the infinite majesty of heaven” (6-7). Her argument works to prove that women would be drawn closer to their roles through education. Formal education, as useful as it is, is a method of enhancing one’s own personal mind. In order for formal education to cause change, it must be shared with others. Physical action on the other hand causes immediate change, as when the Lady overpowers and kills the giant. Her productive and necessary action changes her surroundings by reducing the threat. Formal education is a more passive and less “dangerous” form of equality; it produces opportunity but is less effective especially concerning that women were confined to the domestic sphere. Murray argues for equal education because knowledge and competence produce power, but in a more controlled environment than public action and experience does. It would have been more acceptable to the larger society to allow women to learn about math, than it would to let them actively participate in voting or the economy, because there is less of a risk associated with formal education.

One of the setbacks to Murray’s plan for creating greater equality through education was the stereotypes ascribed to women who pushed back against traditional female education and tried to obtain more equal educational experiences. In the *Panther Narrative*, the Lady is celebrated for her skills and accomplishments by Abraham Panther and her father, and is rewarded through her opportunity to receive inheritance. In the early United States, however, the idea of a well educated women was not always as well received. Opportunity for education was
incredibly important, but Murray notes that educated women were often subject to mockery, which, in turn, encouraged them to avoid those opportunities. She writes about women who “feel the want of a cultivated mind” and read books other than “the novel kind” would have been considered a “learned lady” by society (6). This implies that traditional education defeminizes women to the point that they are separated from the community. Murray counters by suggesting that if “serious studies equally employ our minds, and we [women] will bid our souls arise to equal strength” causing society to be strengthened as a whole (7). One of Murray’s goals then was to normalize female education to make it more popular. Murray is adding on to the original ideas of the Panther Narrative with her discussion on society’s perception of educated women. She makes it clear that outside of fiction, the world is not as simple. The Lady gets by just fine when she gets back to her society, and she is not judged for her education, but rewarded for it. Murray acknowledges that the new republic has more barriers to break.

Murray also takes her arguments in a slightly different direction than the Panther Narrative by admitting one weakness of the fairer sex that the Panther Narrative outright rejects. Murray writes that women “should not vie with you (men) in bodily strength” because they will never prove their superiority (11) Whereas, in the Panther Narrative the Lady shows great physical strength that is equal, if not superior, to the strength of men. This is evident when she defeats the giant who takes her captive by striking him “with three blows” to his head (89). Her actions in the narrative provide evidence to the audience that she can use brute strength to protect herself. The Panther Narrative makes a statement about the absolute equality between men and women. Murray, however, does not grant women this physical equality and she concedes to her audience that, in fact, men are physically stronger. This claim does not undermine her feminist arguments, however, because she insists that physical strength is not equal to mental strength.
Murray argues against the idea that men are mentally stronger because of their physicality by saying “a few of his (man’s) breathen in the field, he is far surpassed in bodily strength” so man should claim that beasts should have the upper-hand, if he wants to assert that women should be lower than men because of physicality alone (8). In this section of her argument, Murray focuses on the difference between the true nature of women and the manufactured one that a patriarchal society subscribed to them. She says “our souls are by nature equal to yours; the same breath of God, animates, enlivens, and invigorates us” (8). In Murray’s mind the equality of women should be inherent because it was given to women by the hand of God. Murray had to reform the more radical moments of the Panther Narrative, like the physical equality piece, because women were considered to be more moral and weak than men. Accepting the claim that women were physically weaker than men was a choice she made to highlight the mental equality of women, so men would be more apt to grant equal education to women. This is arguably more importation to further the cause of female equality because educated women became the vehicle to more tangible types of equality like citizenship and suffrage. She uses this concession to keep men feeling as though they had control, whereas the Panther Narrative hardly distinguished between sex and ability.

Like the Panther Narrative, Murray argues that granting women equal educational opportunities will not radically disrupt the status quo and, in this case, her arguments parallel the Panther Narrative very closely. In fact, she argues that equal education will improve it. She was out to prove that equal education was not a threat to traditional femininity and domesticity. Murray even states “that every female requisite in female economy is easily attained” and after they are learned “require no further mental attention” meaning that household tasks won’t be neglected because they are easy to learn and complete (11). Murray plays with society’s
expectations for women to convince her audience that equal education will enhance the way that women preformed those roles. Using equal education to strengthen marriages and families would have been particularly relevant in appealing to the audience of the new republic, because it was believed that any education surpassing traditional female education would cause women to abandon their domestic roles to become more like men. The Panther Narrative lacks the subtly that Murray uses for her female equality argument, because the Lady’s lifestyle would have been feared by society. She learns and gains experience, but she abandons society and makes her own life in the wilderness. Murray argues that female education would have the opposite effect, through education women would be able to connect with their husbands, not from a subservient stand point, but on equal footing making “an unhappy Hymen… as rare, as is now the reverse” (7).

In the end, however, Murray’s arguments ultimately reassert the traditional sphere argument that the Panther Narrative worked so hard to disrupt. She also mentions that domestic affairs are important for both sexes, and education would not harm a woman’s ability to transact those affairs. She asks “is not the elegancy of neatness as agreeable to your sight as to ours?” (11). She means that a tidy house would not disappear under an educated woman’s control, but men should acknowledge that domestic affairs do concern them. Another argument against female education is that women would not have enough mental faculties to execute their household duties, not just that they wouldn’t have the time. On the contrary Murray states that “every requisite in female economy is easily attained; and, with truth I can add, that when once attained, they require no further mental attention” (7). Her point is that cooking and cleaning leaves plenty of space to think about other more interesting things. In the Panther Narrative the Lady actually embodies this idea of domesticity despite education because her cave and her role
as a hostess are both commented on by Panther. She kept her feminine qualities and housekeeping abilities even though she was living alone in the wilderness. Murray and the Panther Narrative are both working in similar ways on this front, but Murray casts away the idea that women will leave their spheres, whereas Panther proves that with education women will thrive outside of them. Murray also argues that women will feel less inferior to others through the liberation of equal education. In fact, education is so powerful that “Females would become discreet, [and] their judgements would be invigorated” because the minds of women across the nation would be concerned with more important and interesting thoughts (7). The Panther Narrative shows that the Lady was more fit to exist within society after her time in the wilderness. After gaining experience and living on her own, she returns to society in a new role and is given responsibility, like property ownership, that she wouldn’t have been considered for before. Education, whether through experience or classical means, helps form confidence. Murray just pulls back the social consequences of this new found confidence. Instead of implying that a woman could function the same as a man in society, Murray works to reform that idea into women becoming more rational through education.

Overall, Judith Sargent Murray worked to find a new place for women affected by the war. By reforming the overtly radical elements of the Panther Narrative she gave women new opportunities and responsibilities that fit better into societies model and the new ways that gender roles functioned in the new republic. Not to say that Murray was not radical, for she has very forward ideas about women’s roles, but she made the desires of revolutionary women heard by shaping the context of the Panther Narrative’s message. Her ultimate goal was to make female education indistinguishable from male education, and change the stereotypes of women
who did considered themselves scholars. Traditional education for women was the first step towards actually equality for later generations of women to come.

**The Impacts of Studying Gender During the Revolution**

American ideology is consumed with themes like freedom, liberty, and self-determination. The two pieces of protest literature I have analyzed in this paper, as well as the numerous sources both primary and secondary exploring women in the new republic, reveal that women have wanted to be a part of the nation’s public narrative since the beginning. They played critical roles during the war and thought and wrote about what female citizenship would look like as the nation was re-built. As society settled back down it was clear that women were expected to remain in the sphere system, but not everything went back to the way it was. Women gained power in the home that they had never experienced before, and carved out a new place in society as the republican mothers of a new nation.

The *Panther Narrative* was an important piece of literature in the 1790’s because it expressed frustration with the way that women were viewed in society. It was radical yet insanely popular, which makes it a complex piece of literature that functioned both as protest literature and popular literature. An eighteenth century audience would have been obsessed with the themes available in captivity narratives; the really interesting part about this particular one is that it incorporated women’s issues in a genre that functioned as a metaphor for the Revolutionary War. The *Panther Narrative* and other captive narratives may have been an escape for women who wanted autonomy outside of their homes. Both the Lady and Mary Rowlandson are restored from their captivity after experiencing worlds outside of their communities, but Rowlandson finds herself in the same situation that she left, whereas the Lady is elevated to the role of property owner because of her experience in the wilderness. The female
sphere functions as a literal captivity because of how society viewed gender. This social
construct was broken by the necessity of war, which educated women on the world that they
were missing. When society was restored, it left women longing for the freedoms that they had
gained and the experience of making important decisions. The next best thing for women, at least
in the eyes of Judith Sargent Murray, was formal education because it opened a new world for
women to discover ideas that they hadn’t been exposed to in traditional female education.
Throughout the three texts, the theme of education, whether it was through experience or formal
scholarly work, provided women with the tools to elevate their lives in a time where separate
spheres dictated where women could and couldn’t spend their time. Murray believed that formal
education was the path that would lead women to be restored like the Lady, in positions of power
and influence.
Reflection:

The very first brainstorming session for this capstone was over a cup of coffee at Caffe Ibis last August. Sitting here, anticipating the last edits of a full and defended thesis, that afternoon feels so long ago. I have learned so much over the last year about deadlines and logistics, and long term research, but most importantly I truly learned what it meant to put my whole heart into something. It didn’t come easy; there were bouts of writer’s block, several restructuring conversations, and a last minute dash for the finish line. I couldn’t have done it without the long term support of Dr. Keri Holt or Dr. Steve Shively who kindly took over my case this last semester when Dr. Holt took her sabbatical. I feel like an honors thesis is meant to challenge the undergraduate writing it, but I came into the process as a naïve and overconfident English student. I was not particularly worried or prepared for the amount of work associated with publishable piece of literary analysis. I am glad to say that I made it, but it really was a collaborative process thanks to the professors who gave up their time to make this accomplishment a reality.

I originally intended on creating a podcast series called “The Journey to Modern Feminism” for my capstone project. It would have featured important women who wrote or are currently writing for women’s rights and the feminist cause. The challenges associated with learning how to create a podcast and obtaining the equipment to record and edit the final project finally dissuaded me from undertaking such a large and laborious creative project. I went back to the chopping block and decided to think about what piece of literature had interested me the most in my American literature classes. I considered Charlotte Temple: A Tale of Truth, but ultimately landed on the obscure little captivity narrative that I was introduced to in Dr. Holt’s Early American Literature course. I remember thinking it was pretty radical for the time period and had
potential for a feminist reading. I emailed Dr. Holt and we went through all of my options before deciding on the Panther Narrative. I was originally drawn to the idea of discussing literature as a vehicle for political thought, but we decided as a team that I would need to focus more on literary analysis than historical investigation. Dr. Holt suggested that I look at a few different female writers during the time period to read while looking at the Panther Narrative. Ultimately Judith Sargent Murray was the most relevant female author, and I thought it was cool that I would end my honors research career with the first American proto-feminist writer since I had worked my way up and down the writers of American feminism over the years. Fall semester of 2016 I did an Honors contract with Dr. Funda on Margaret Fuller, the next well known female American writer after Murray. It was interesting looking at these two women at the same time, because Fuller took a lot of her inspiration from Murray. My research was already allowing me to draw important comparisons, and that was really exciting.

As fall semester went along, I had done most of my primary research and drafted a plan with Dr. Holt to finish my capstone by early April. Previously, I had intended to get a full draft by December, but that didn’t materialize. Moving into spring semester I began chatting with Dr. Shivley about the project, and set up some new deadlines. Surprise, I didn’t make those either. By spring break I couldn’t ignore my writers block any longer. I emailed Dr. Holt about my severe lack of progress and she suggested that we meet about an argument restructure. In a blink of an eye the majority of my essay had to be cut, and I was back to square one. On the upside, I knew what I had to write about. Slowly but steadily, and then all at once over Easter break, I finally had a full draft. From then on my writing process has been a blur. I have been through the defense and editing process, presented at the Student Research Symposium, and managed to
write my final papers too. Thankfully I had a tolerant capstone committee that let me fail before I succeeded on this project.

As you probably noticed this was not an easy process for me or the wonderful people who advised me. They put in a lot of time and effort to guide me through this year, and I am so thankful of that. I learned a lot about the importance of honest communication and working towards a long term goal over the duration of this project. I believe that putting forth the effort to complete this capstone has prepared for my next step. I will be attending grad school at USU in the fall for Human Resources. Even though HR is a world away from English, I know that my capstone experience will help me succeed. I am so thankful for the opportunity to participate in undergraduate research on this scale. The Honors program creates a unique opportunity for their students to get a glimpse of the work that goes along with mastery in an academic setting. My research has contributed to my decision to become an HR professional because I want to encourage women to thrive and reach higher in the workplace. My research has been the highlight of my undergraduate degree, and I have Honors to thank for showing me how to get involved.
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Author Biography:

Abigail Bentley is an Honors student graduating with a BS in English with in emphasis in Literary Studies. Her undergraduate research included concentration on the essays, periodicals, novels, and narratives tied to the American feminist movement. Abigail served as a university Writing Fellow for a Farm Literature course and as an Undergraduate Teaching Fellow for Nineteenth Century American Literature. She works as writing tutor and mentor for student-athletes. Abigail plans to continue her education here at Utah State in the fall as a member of the Master of Human Resources cohort of 2017-2018. She plans to pursue a career in HR advocating for diversity and safety in the workplace.