Performing Sensibility, Proving Virtue?
Masking the Englishwoman's Oriental Fantasy in *The Female Captive*

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Elizabeth Marsh's *The Female Captive: A Narrative of Facts which Happened in Barbary in the Year 1756* presents a unique female voice relating her own experience of captivity in North Africa. The daughter of a naval officer in Minorca, Marsh embarked on a voyage to England to join her fiancé in 1756, when she was captured by corsairs. Marsh's narrative recounts her trials in Morocco where she was almost entrapped in the prince's harem, eventually ending with her return to England. As the first captivity narrative published by an Englishwoman, *The Female Captive* has been read as a textual performance calculated to protect Marsh's own reputation and prove her English female virtue intact. Marsh's biographer Linda Colley, for instance, notes how Marsh strategically converts her captivity into the plot of a sentimental novel, while critics such as Felicity Nussbaum and Stephanie Fricke emphasize that Marsh self-fashions her own cultural identity, constructing English femininity against Oriental womanhood. Yet such readings neglect how Marsh's narration often deviates from her textual persona of the virtue-in-distress, revealing a desire for the Moroccan prince that oversteps sexual modesty and class boundaries. Marsh's textual performance of refined sensibility does not simply signify her virtue, but rather acts

to mask such desires she comes to harbor in the cultural contact zone. When Marsh adopts the language of sensibility to veil and disguise her oriental fantasies, the excess of sentiment produced by this performance also reveals the undercurrent of Marsh's deviant desire. Reading Marsh's desire within *The Female Captive* complicates the moral narrative of a chaste English female who successfully escapes an Oriental despot. *The Female Captive* shows how the female body, burdened with the task of embodying virtue and national merit, manipulates and destabilizes the language of sensibility in the contact zone. Marsh's narrative performance inscribes female desire in the text and creates gaps where the virtuous female body becomes a desiring, masquerading one.

A female captive in foreign lands finds herself in a difficult predicament, since she is put under double scrutiny by both her captors and her domestic audience. Captivity in the so-called Barbary regions was by no means unheard of in eighteenth-century Britain,[1] as encounters between English and North African tradesmen, sailors, and privateers had already been frequent since the Elizabethan period (Matar 1). Barbary corsairs and the possibility of captivity loomed large in British consciousness not only as a danger to maritime trade but also as a national threat to the notion of English liberty, since slavery was considered "the negation of what England and ultimately Britain and its empire were traditionally about" (Colley, *Captives* 47). In response to this threat, captivity narratives staged the struggle of the English captive who ultimately frees himself. G. A. Starr points out that the returned captive serves as a precursor to the "narrator-hero" of the novel, a modern individual who masters an alien culture and procures liberty (35).

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1) The term "Barbary" originally referred to the indigenous Berbers of North Africa, but later became more loosely used to name North African Islamic nations, such as Morocco, Algiers, Tripoli, and Tunisia, including the Arabs and the Ottoman empire (Colley, *Captives* 43-44).

Joe Snader further argues that captivity narratives thereby reproduce "an expansionist ideology," centering the "autonomous and self-reliant Western captive" who resists, outwits, and escapes despotic foreign cultures, thereby reinforcing the idea of the modern self based on "English liberties" ("Oriental Captivity" 268). Yet the protagonists of such triumphant narratives are predominantly male. Since captivity creates an enforced intimacy with an alien culture, the captive is doubly pressured by the need to survive within the society of the Other and return with one's cultural identity intact. As Snader writes, captivity narratives produce discursive tensions as captives portray (un)willing accommodation within other cultures (*Caught* 5), while also inscribing "anxious struggle to prove that their . . . attachments to Britain and to Christianity never lapsed" (*Caught* 97). Returned female captives are additionally burdened, since to prove allegiance to her home culture, she must show that she has never compromised her sexual virtue. Her body must remain an untainted, appropriate vessel for reproducing future generations of British citizens. As Khalid Bekkaoui notes, female captives are "almost never comfortably reintegrated into their community, their stories are discredited, their national and religious identity suspected" (6). Barbary captivity narratives written by women therefore stage a double performance where the protagonist both defends (against Moorish Others) and proves (to English readers) her virtue.

With her body under the gaze of both her Moorish captors and the English public readership, Marsh performs a double masquerade in *The Female Captive.* For the Moors, Marsh poses as a married Englishwoman in order to protect herself from the Oriental monarch. Procuring a "plain Gold Ring" as a fake wedding ring and "putting up all such Letters as would have discovered my being a single Woman" (152), Marsh stages her marriage to James Crisp—her appointed guardian and future husband—by producing fabricated props and hiding counterevidence. Yet

if Marsh thus authors her false identity as a married woman, the performance endangers her modesty in English eyes. As Colley points out, Marsh breaches propriety not only by posing as a married woman, but by embarking on a solitary voyage to England in the first place—without a female chaperone on a ship full of men (*The Ordeal* 145). Accordingly, Marsh mentions the difficulties she faced as a returned female captive in England, noting the irony that her "Misfortunes" in Barbary "have been more than equaled by those [she has] since experienced, in this Land of Civil and Religious Liberty" (124). Confessing the "greater Sorrows" she experienced in "[her] *own Country,* than any [she had] ever experienced in *Barbary*" (134), Marsh remains highly conscious of the pressures heaped upon a female captive to prove her Englishness and virtue. If Marsh the captive must retain what makes her English in the eyes of the Moorish spectators, Marsh the writer must also be aware of an English reading public who judges her conduct.

As a writer, Marsh appeals to "the Generous, the Tender, and the Compassionate" readers who will sympathize with her plight and confirm her membership within English society (124). Marsh takes care to describe herself and her fellow captives as members of such a closely-knit sympathetic community. When Marsh reunites with Crisp after her detainment in the captured ship, she reads "the Anguish of his Mind" and concern for her person upon "His Countenance" (126). Moreover, the "Sight of our Sailors tied together" draws "Tears" from her, and her own appearance has "the same Effect on them" (126). From the beginning of her narrative, Marsh presents herself as a sympathetic and sentimental body—both an object of sympathy and a sympathizing agent, simultaneously weeping for and drawing tears from her captive countrymen. The bodily reaction of tears forge links of reciprocal sympathy between English subjects: whenever Marsh "melt[s] into Tears at [her] Sufferings," she writes that her "Friend" endeavored to "relieve me by many comfort-

able Expressions" (135), while it simultaneously "grieved" Marsh "to be an Eye-Witness to the Sufferings of [her] Friend" (137). Emphasizing her companions' sympathy, Marsh implicitly entreats the same from her readers as well.

Such propensity for tears of sympathy—and of distress—marks Marsh as a woman of delicate sensibility. Nussbaum points out that Marsh thus uses her "femininity and naivete as a ploy" to escape the sultan (129), while Fricke views Marsh's narrative voice as a "testimony to her agency" and a way of self-fashioning herself as "a virtuous heroine" (125). As such critics note, Marsh's tremulous, tearful body becomes the center of the narrative, calculated to elicit both excitement and sympathy from readers. The bodily signs of weeping and near-faints allow her to make her distress legible and claim a "superior Share of Sensibility" (131)—especially since female bodily weakness signified "moral superiority" in the tradition of sentimental novels (Barker-Benfield 34). This becomes most evident when Marsh lingers on her reactions to the plan to fabricate her marital status. When the Minorquin slave Don Pedro first suggests Crisp pose as Marsh's husband, the mere mention of false marriage so "greatly alarm[s]" Marsh that she "earnestly wishe[s] to be removed from a World, wherein [she] ha[s] no Reason to expect any Felicity" (131). This tearful reaction leaves her in "a very melancholy Condition" and "State of Despondence" (131). Marsh's melancholy here serves as a sign of virginal modesty on the part of an engaged, yet-unmarried woman; she thereby insists on her reluctance to the false marriage ploy, performing the part of virtue-in-distress. When Don Pedro later produces a letter that would "spread that Report" of Marsh's married status, Marsh is again reduced to unstoppable tears (134). The prospect of masquerading as Crisp's wife and publicizing this identity deprives her of verbal agency: "This sudden Change shocked me beyond Expression, and I could only answer with my Tears; my Heart was too

deeply oppressed to give my Opinion for or against it" (134). The plan puts Marsh in a compromised position, since to refuse it would endanger her in the sultan's palace, while her ready approval would be a breach of propriety. Marsh's professed "oppress[ion]" of heart and loss of voice, then, excuses her from giving "Opinion" that would either way be hazardous to her reputation. While she is incapable of speaking in that very moment, Marsh the writer eloquently presents herself as a modest woman of refined sensibility. The hyperbolic reaction of bodily fluids turns the English reader's attention away from the feigned marriage and to the 'appropriate' response of a proper female sensibility. Marsh's body hence becomes a means of signifying virtue.

Marsh's captivity narrative places this sentimental female body in an alien environment where such refined sensibility is neither recognized nor sympathized with. In Morroco, she is surrounded by foreign men devoid of sentiment and driven by mercenary interest. The nephew of the Moorish admiral who captured her ship, for instance, is "a Man void of every Sentiment of Honour or Honesty" (128), and, deaf to all pleas, he returns the captives' luggage only after he receives a "considerable Gratuity" by Crisp (132). In Marsh's eyes, the Moors form an unindividuated, insensitive crowd whose only concern is to consume the spectacle of captive Europeans. Upon Marsh's arrival, she is met with "some Thousands of Moors "shouting and hallooing like so many Infernals" who gaze hungrily at her paraded body (127). The mass of Moorish bodies infiltrate Marsh's residence, "croud[ing]" her apartment "with Men, Women, and Children" (128). Constantly demanded by a crowd that "striv[es] to get a Sight of [her]," Marsh's privacy is assaulted by curious but unsympathetic eyes (136). Within the Moroccan palace, an "old Castle dropping to Pieces with Age" (139), Marsh is conveyed through confusing passages to the seraglio and surrounded by insensitive, anonymous "blacks," where she takes care "not [to] venture [her]self out of

Sight of the Door" lest she get lost in the mass of Moorish women (146). As with the heroine of a gothic novel, Marsh's delicate virtue is endangered as she is locked in badly kept rooms, constantly subject to the intrusion of curious Moors and "mortifying Examinations" from "indelicate" women (129).

Yet Marsh's appeal to sympathy comes to hold sway with the sultan, if not the Moorish crowd or ladies of court. After Marsh "imprudently" yet "innocently" repeats Morisco phrases proclaiming Muslim faith (146), the prince, Sidi Muhammad, first "cruelly" informs her that she cannot renounce the Muslim religion without suffering death (147). Marsh receives a "severe" shock from this, and "with Difficulty . . . support[s] [her]self from falling": this near-faint, followed by a "resolute Declaration" to die rather than comply to the Muslim order, has the power to "greatly perple[x]" the prince (147). Marsh's ensuing tears move the prince to recant and dismiss Marsh from the palace:

> I, therefore, on my knees, implored his Compassion, and besought him, as a Proof of that Esteem he had given me to leave him for ever. My Tears, which flowed incessantly, *extremely affected* him; and, raising me up, and putting his Hand before his Face, he ordered, that I should be instantly taken away. (148, my emphasis)

While Marsh's incomprehension of foreign languages results in the perilous moment where she 'converts' to the Muslim religion, the "incessant" tears of a suffering, virtuous woman oversteps linguistic and cultural difference. If the English language fails in Sidi Muhammad's court, the English female body emanating signs of distress succeeds in communicating Marsh's will to retain her virtue, which eclipses the Moroccan prince's authority itself. Marsh's body, speaking a now internationally understandable language, ensures her safety in the encounter with the prince, transforming it into a triumph of English virtue.

As she gains authorship of her own cultural identity, Marsh, then, seems to participate straightforwardly in the discursive production of English femininity, converting her contact with an alien culture into a language of sensibility shared by the imagined community of English readers—a language which also comes to have international currency. Nussbaum and Fricke insightfully point out that Marsh's narrative thus negates the idea of a female body as a passive screen on which virtues are written, and rather centralizes her own agency in such reproduction of English femininity. Yet if we read Marsh's narrative solely as sentimental self-fashioning, we overlook two important points. First, the emphasis on Marsh's performance of female *virtue* neglects other desires that arise in Marsh through contact with a foreign culture. For Marsh, Barbary is what Mary Louis Pratt calls a "contact zone," a space where "cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (34). Placed in this contact zone, Marsh is not simply burdened to act as a virtuous female; wooed by a Moroccan prince, she momentarily slides away from the position of a middle-class Englishwoman and becomes a desirable lady who merits the attention of royalty. Marsh uses her narratological performance of virtuous sensibility to veil both her own attraction to the foreign prince and a desire to overstep her class position. It follows that second, the female body within the text does not straightforwardly embody English morality. Barbary becomes a stage where supposedly coherent signifiers of virtue are used as masks which conceal (and inadvertently reveal) hints of such deviant fantasies. The highly sensitive female body does not simply signify virtue, but can also be a body teeming with—and masking—sexual desire.

Even as she fears acculturation, Marsh is drawn to the prince himself. Whereas Marsh excludes any physical description of Crisp—emphasizing that he treats her as "a Sister and Friend" (143) and even acts as

a "most affectionate Parent" (156)—she takes keen note of the prince's physicality and gallant manner: "tall, finely shaped, of a good Complexion," with an "agreeable" figure and "polite and easy" address (144).[2] While Marsh's distress during her journey to Morocco divests her narrative of detailed descriptions, the narrative tone changes in her encounter with the prince. Abruptly turning to a more observational tone, Marsh details the luxuriousness of the prince's dress: "a loose Robe of fine Musline, with a Train of at least Two Yards on the Floor" along with a diamond-buttoned vest, bracelets and gold-wrought slippers (144). This sudden interest in Oriental decorations reads as an effort to displace her attachment from the prince's body to objects of luxury—yet Marsh's emphasis on material ornaments has the opposite effect, rather embellishing the prince's bodily grace and wealth. The copious detail of the objects surrounding the prince—the tea table with japanned cups—reveals her fascination with the luxurious (and luxuriant) oriental body in front of her. Even after her frightening removal to the seraglio, Marsh is "amazed" by, rather than fearful of the "the elegant Figure [the prince] ma[kes]," surrounded by gold and highly ornamented objects (147). Face to face with this alluring figure of the prince, Marsh's female body becomes not merely a virtuous sentimental body, but a desiring one that conflates the prince's body and the Orientalized commodities as exotic objects of attraction.

Critics linger on Marsh's fascination yet maintain that her refusal to succumb to it ultimately establishes her as a virtuous woman. Nussbaum argues that Marsh's relative ease with the male ruler, compared to her fear of Moorish women, is a textual strategy through which she

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2) Such description of the prince's attractive demeanor is deeply influenced by Marsh's own attraction. For instance, Marsh's biographer Colley notes that Sidi Muhammad was actually in his mid-thirties (*The Ordeal* 64), rather than "about Five-and-twenty," as Marsh claims (144).

constructs Oriental femininity as a crude, deceitful, and threatening counterpoint to the delicate English femininity that Marsh herself embodies (129). Fricke notes how Marsh shows "pride that such a ruler would be interested in her," but concludes that Marsh paints an alluring portrait of the prince to make "her resistance all the more heroic" and to present herself "as a staunch Englishwoman defending her virtue and religious and national integrity" (124). While this is partly true, it is doubtful that Marsh enhances the prince's charm for narrative strategy alone. Notably, Marsh's hair is "done up in the Spanish Fashion" during this encounter (144), which, as Colley points out, is "the only gesture of physical vanity she admits to" (*The Ordeal* 73). On the one hand, this rare detail about her appearance seems to visualize the danger imposed upon English femininity in a foreign land: the Englishwoman must change her dress to a foreign style to accommodate her Moorish onlookers. But this is not the first time that Marsh has adopted a foreign style. Traveling to the palace, Marsh uses "a Machine as the Moorish Women make Use of, instead of a Saddle," but instead of lying in it as Moorish women do, she purposefully retains the English manner of horse-riding by sitting "with [her] Feet on one Side the Mule's Neck" (136). Marsh self-consciously adds excuses for making use of Moorish customs, writing that she "could not have continued" her journey without "such a Conveniency" (136) and that it was "prudent" to "screen" herself from the Arabs (137). In contrast, the Spanish hairdo is left unaccounted for. If the Moorish riding device is used reluctantly, Marsh's Spanish hairdo is voluntarily done. As if to deny that she has made herself attractive for the prince, Marsh presents herself as entirely ignorant of the dangers—and possible connotations—of donning a foreign style: whereas Mr. Court, a European merchant and companion, is "surprised" and worried about her changed appearance, Marsh pleads innocent by writing that she "could not then account for" such behavior (144). The hairdo itself,

however, reveals Marsh's desire through her effort to appear attractive, compared to her earlier meeting with the Moroccan court, where her disheveled appearance had nothing that "could prejudice them much in [her] Favour" (141).

While Marsh is frightened in earnest by the possibility of detainment in the seraglio, she is captivated by the prince's charms to the extent that she entertains an oriental fantasy of being courted by Moorish royalty, destabilizing the virtuous modesty supposedly embodied in her trembling figure. This fantasy comprises both her unspoken sexual desire and a desire for class mobility. Even before her attraction to the prince, Marsh is fascinated by the social position afforded her in Barbary. While Marsh is no lady in terms of social class—her father being first a ship's carpenter then a naval administrator in Menorca (Colley, *The Ordeal* 39)—she is treated as such by the European merchants in New Sallee. Upon her arrival, she is "received by a Number of Merchants of all Nations with the greatest Respect" and "entertained with as much Elegance as such a Place could admit," receiving more invitations from other "Gentlemen" than she can accept (132). Marsh becomes somewhat like a city socialite surrounded by a band of solicitous men: "I was sorry I could not have that Pleasure, My Time being very short, and having a great deal of Preparation to make for so long a Journey" (132). Once in the palace, Marsh is treated with even more respect, served tea by the prince himself and presented with "a great Collection of Rarities" (145). She is courted rather than compelled by the prince, who "desire[s] [her] to be convinced of his esteem" and persuades her to stay "more with the Air of a Supplicant than that of a Sovereign"(147). If Marsh attracts such attention, the Moorish ladies of court are unremarkable and unattractive: Marsh especially focuses on one of the women who is "out of Temper" at the sight of her, drawing a rather unflattering picture of a "large Woman" with "a sallow Complexion" and "broad flat Face" (145).

Rather than sensuous, exotic beings, the oriental women become a mere background to Marsh's position as a desirable (and desir*ing*) lady.[3] As she travels across national borders, then, Marsh oversteps boundaries of class.

Marsh's desire for the Moroccan prince complicates her story, since it no longer becomes a straightforward narrative of a chaste Englishwoman resisting a foreign prince's attempt on her virtue and confirming her decorous womanhood. As Marsh must disguise her oriental fantasy in an acceptable form, the latter half of the narrative becomes a performance which Marsh undertakes to hide her deviant desire—a desire for the Moroccan prince that endangers Marsh's position as a virtuous woman who must enter English society by marrying an Englishman. Hence Marsh's performance of refined sensibility becomes obsessive when she recounts the events after her release from the palace. On her detainment in Safee—when she is already moving away from the seraglio, and technically on the road home—Marsh writes insistently that she was most dejected at this period, lingering on her insomnia and "perpetual Misery" due to fear of recapture (152). Peppering her narrative with signs of her delicate sensitivity—oppressed spirits, melancholy, and sorrow—Marsh repeats that she remained resolutely depressed. Although the accompanying merchants do their best to entertain her,

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3) One lady of English descent in the prince's court remains an exception. Marsh notes that this lady of mixed parentage is one of the "most agreeable," "shew[ing]" her "the greatest Civilities" (142). While Nussbaum argues that this "creolized woman most exemplifies Marsh's fears of becoming one of them" (127-8), Marsh's gaze toward her is more amiable than fearful. This figure of the half-English woman in the sultan's court is a mirror image of Marsh, embodying what she would become should she accept the prince's proposal. As Fricke suggests, the lady is a "Muslim double of Marsh herself," whose gift of bracelets create a connection between Marsh, the lady, and Sidi Muhammad, ultimately tempting Marsh into her "unwitting apostasy" (124).

she concludes that "any Recreation" is "irksome" (152). Even dressing "any farther than what Decency required" becomes painful, and despite her birthday celebration, Marsh emphasizes that "[her] *Spirits* were oppressed" and her sorrows "heightened" (152, my emphasis).

The word "spirit' is central here. From the beginning of her captivity, Marsh continually refers to the state of her spirits: "[f]ear seize[s] [her] Spirits" when Crisp does not return from the corsairs (126), while Moorish music renders them "violently agitated" (127), and directly on the night after she meets the prince, Marsh finds it "impossible . . . to sleep" due to "such a Dread on my Spirits" (148). Drawing from physician George Cheyne's theories of nervous systems, Barker-Benfield notes that in the mid-eighteenth century, spirits indicated both "psychological and physiological" states, as "a sensitive register of one's disposition and response to the world" (18). It is the "exemplars of sensibility" who most often suffer from "'lowness of spirits' . . . in what was always a vulnerable situation in relation to 'the world' that was being mediated" (18). Moreover, the vulnerability of the spirits also registers "the wounds given women by men" in the "sexual warfare" of seducers and "hunted" women (19). In this cultural context, Marsh's oppressed spirits mark her as a woman of refined sensibility and a traumatized victim of sexual advances in the Orient—thereby veiling her own desire. Marsh thus manipulates the strict norms of virtue that constrain the English female body, descending decidedly in "perpetual Misery" and—somewhat theatrically—wishing "to be taken from this World" that affords her "no Consolation" (152).

Such signs of nervous sensibility, however, also *reveals* the existence of desires or passions that are not part of refined virtue. Writing on the "melancholy, delirium and defeat" that sensibility engenders, John Mullan notes that by the mid-eighteenth century, sensibility was already no longer "the sign of a privileged susceptibility to pain and pleasure"

(153), but constantly "poised on the edge of excess" (155). Mullan reviews physicians' records on pregnant or menstruating women, which connect feminine sensibility to infirmity and delirium brought on by the womb. The female body in particular becomes a problem, since "the body of the young woman, unresolved into matrimonial stability" becomes either "the repository of virtue, necessary cipher in the arrangement of inheritance and connection" or a "site of possibly inordinate desires and unregulated passions"—passions which were labeled hysteric disorders, and considered curable by marriage (162). While Mullan does not delve into the issue of female sensibility, his research suggests that the female body of heightened sensibility is by no means a straightforwardly moral body, but rather embodies an ambivalence—but not simply because women are "deficient," as eighteenth-century medical experts would have it (Barker-Benfield 26). Mullan notes that overflowing, excessive sentiment was not simply a defective imitation of a "hegemonic style," but possibly the expression of "a covertly oppositional recourse" to dominant ideologies (171). While Marsh's excessive sentimentality does not immediately signify such an open opposition, Marsh's narrative twice mentions—with bitterness and indignation—the "greater Sorrows" suffered in English society where she was judged harshly by its standards of female virtue (134). Mullan's insight sheds light on the fact that Marsh's excessive sentiment is both a product of the pressures heaped upon her and her way of responding to the cultural codes that demand women embody virtue and become emblems of national merit.

This is especially so since Marsh does not completely censor the moments which reveal her oriental fantasies but leaves them unexplained and ambivalent in her narrative, creating a gap between her performance of sensibility and her desiring body: a space where Marsh's own desire becomes visible. Marsh's "desponding Reveries," for one, are not simply due to her terror of being recaptured by the prince. In fact, her

fear stems from the possibility that Moorish spies might hear of or detect her attraction to him: "I was ever in Dread, that his Imperial Highness would again send for me, having heard, *from undoubted Authority*, that I was not indifferent to him" (152, my emphasis). What exactly the "undoubted Authority" might be is left ambiguous. While seemingly pointing to malicious rumors forged by spies to bring her back, Marsh leaves the possibility that this "Authority" refers to her true heart and inclination. The expression therefore becomes slippery, both pointing to Marsh's self-conscious indignation at 'false' rumors posing as "Authority," and almost becoming an open admission of her attraction to the Moroccan prince. The ambiguity reveals that Marsh fears capture not because she is terrified of losing virtue, but rather because of her own desire.

Lest this attraction be detected, Marsh redoubles her performance of virtue-in-distress—ironically coloring her journey home with tremulous fear rather than the joyous hope of a safe return. On the homeward road, her mind becomes captive to—and her spirits ostensibly "oppressed" by—the unarticulated fantasy of herself as the consort of the foreign prince. Notably, Marsh includes a scene of a Moroccan wedding procession where she implicitly places herself in the position of the Moorish bride. If Marsh's first experience of Moorish music stroke her "with the greatest Terror imaginable," sounding to her ears "more dismal . . . than a Funeral Drum" (127), the same music now "dr[aws]" her "to the Window" during one of her "extremely melancholy" moods (153). On the one hand, this observation of the wedding seems to quietly critique Moorish marriage customs that compel young women to wed unknown grooms.[4] Yet Marsh refrains from such explicit commentary.

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4) This reading would push Marsh's text toward a "safer" narrative that "corroborates pre-existing and dismissive European viewpoints about other societies"(Colley 15). Diane Hoeveler advances such a reading, labeling Marsh'

As with Marsh's preoccupation with Sidi Muhammad's clothes and the objects surrounding him in the palace, the neutral, ethnographic tone in this passage rather constitutes a conscious narrative strategy, displacing her emotional investment in the scene by turning to a more empirical mode of traditional travel writing. This is especially since the wedding procession uncannily restages Marsh's own journey to the palace. According to "the Fashion of the Country," the bride is invisible, just as Marsh herself had been screened from onlookers by the Moorish riding device, and the fact that the bride "had *never seen*" her husband recalls Marsh's own predicament of being carried to a (then) faceless Oriental tyrant (153). The absence of commentary, then, points to Marsh's unspoken but implied identification with the Moorish bride. Marsh quietly inserts herself in the bride's place—and having been entranced by the prince, not so unwillingly.

This moment of identification with the Moorish bride is strategically ensconced between two other occurrences that intensify Marsh's oppressed spirits. First, Court leaves her company. Court, "an agreeable, sensible Companion," comprises not only Marsh's circle of sympathetic companions (143), but also serves to remind Marsh of the English cultural norms she must adhere to—especially through his "thoughtful" disapprobation of her Spanish hairdo. The departure of this vanguard of English virtue "so greatly afflict[s]" Marsh that she "b[ids] Adieu to chearfulness" itself (153). Second, Marsh receives news of the prince,

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s narrative a "Christian Oriental Text" (59) that reinforces the ideology of British cultural superiority by critiquing Islam as "a religion that permits the legal practice of polygamy" or the "buying and selling of women" (62). While Marsh's text does participate in such rhetoric, Hoeveler neglects the fact that Marsh's textual performance as an Englishwoman colors this participation. The complex motives behind this performance beg the question whether quoting dominant ideologies equals reinforcing them, or constitutes a strategy of self-representation.

who reportedly wishes to have Marsh "again to *Morocco*" (153), and hears that the prince is quite enamored with her to the extent that he refused to see her before her departure, "*lest [he] should be obliged to detain her*" (154). Marsh takes care to write that she responded with "greatest Uneasiness" at this rather flattering remark (154). The narration turns away quickly from the prince, as Marsh worries instead about the possibility of her family letters being intercepted. Placed between such displays of distress, Marsh's fantasy—of herself as a Moorish bride being carried over once again to the prince—is screened from the casual reader's eyes, but only just so. Marsh's depressed spirits do not translate neatly into virtue, since the excessiveness of her dejection also reveals the undercurrent of her fascination with the foreign prince. *The Female Captive* includes such moments of disruption where the excessive performance of sensibility almost discloses the prohibited fantasy of becoming a consort to the prince. Marsh's narrative, then, is a more daring—rather than simply defensive—textual operation.

The seams of this performance begin to show when the narrative nears its conclusion. Marsh becomes increasingly despondent, and more convinced of never returning home. When a Swedish merchant in Safee confirms the arrival of an English admiral at Gibraltar, this "gain[s] little Credit" with Marsh, who purports to "ha[ve] been accustomed to this Sort of Deception, and even inured to Disappointments" (154). While such caution is understandable, it is not entirely justified, as Marsh has not yet been openly deterred in her journey home nor exactly deceived by the prince. Marsh's desponding reveries here turn to paranoia as her textual performance of distressed sensibility becomes almost neurotic. When Marsh learns by letter that "a Moor of some Consequence" will be sent by the prince to Safee, the mere news of this threat produces "many melancholy Reflections, which almost deprive[s]" Marsh of any "Hope" (156). Marsh fixates upon this information to the extent that the letter

itself is "never out of [her] Mind" (156). While this anxiety is not without cause—her room is later broken into "with great Violence" by an unnamed Moor (156)—, Marsh is affected by the incident to the extent that she falls ill and is examined by a doctor, diagnosed as a case of "a Dejection of Spirits" (157).

While the captivity narrative is predicated on the prospect of returning home, Marsh's exaggerated performance of melancholy makes her unable to comprehend or believe in the possibility of return at all, the oppression of her spirits spilling over into the very moment she procures her freedom. Marsh's textual performance of dejected spirits creates an over-sensitive body at the center of her narrative, a body that loses its self-control; the effort to conceal what would be labeled "inordinate passions" produces an inordinate display of melancholy sensibility. There are, of course, occurrences that warrant such tremulous fear, such as the gothic figure of the Moorish spy—"a most forbidding Object" (156)—, followed by "two Shocks of the Earth" that disrupt her briefly-recovered hopes of return (157). Yet it is more that Marsh's melancholy mood colors every incident with foreboding, even when she is delivered from Moorish shores. When Marsh's negotiator returns with "joyful Tidings" of departure the following day, Marsh is still unable to believe that she "should be permitted to quit the Country" (159). Even when she professes her elation at the news, Marsh echoes the language of depressed spirits that marked her most dejected period: the sudden emotion "*oppress*[*es*] [her] Spirits," and it is "with Difficulty" that she recovers (159, my emphasis). The sea that will provide her passage home, moreover, makes "a most dismal Appearance" (159).[5] Marsh's narrative highlights the irony

5) It is probable that Marsh's record of sea conditions is not entirely accurate—her descriptions of landscape throughout the narrative are deeply colored by her own sentiments. The road to the Moroccan palace, for instance, is described as a primal desert, filled with "the Roarings of the different Kinds

that the female captive's struggle to perform virtue makes her unable to rejoice at the return to England. Marsh is kept in "extreme Dread" up to the very moment that she finds herself in a private apartment in the ship: "I cannot express the Comfort I felt in having an Apartment allotted to myself" (159). It is only her return to a private space—one where Marsh has no spectators to be conscious of—that terminates this theater of excessive sensibility.

Marsh's rescue from the Moors, of course, does not guard her from the gaze of the English readership: hence Marsh inserts three letters from Court that displace the hints of her attraction to the Moroccan prince and celebrates her untainted chastity. Court's voice stabilizes the slippery ambivalence of excessive sentiment, normalizing it into the proper sign of an English sensibility that fears, rather than fantasizes of, becoming Moor. Court shares Marsh's dejected state: the threat upon Marsh's virtue "fixes a Melancholy" that he is "not capable of shaking off, for some Time" (155). Yet in Court's words, this melancholy becomes a sign of chivalrous concern for female virtue, a stance that dismisses the possibility of Marsh's desire for her captor. In his letter, Marsh's "fatal Day at Morocco" is transformed into a gothic episode that "never occurs to [his] Mind but with Horror" at the possibility of her "*sunk* . . . *down to Infamy and Perdition here and hereafter*" (154-55). Sharing the same "melancholy" condition as Marsh, Court's male voice clears away the ambivalence of Marsh's nervous symptoms—the letter, situated at the end of the narrative, has the effect of re-modifying Marsh's earlier

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of Beasts" and wholly unpeopled: "no Castle was seen, or so much as a house, or a Track, where any human Foot had ever been" (135). Marsh misrepresents a possibly well-known road from Sallee to the capital as "a large Tract of Country, abounding with high Mountains, affording little worthy of Notice" (138). In contrast, the landscape on her reverse journey is agreeable: "the Roads were very good, and the Prospect of the Country extremely delightful" (150).

melancholy into coherent signs of morality and virtue. Moreover, if "the most popular prescription" for the susceptible, unruly female body—trembling with possibly deviant passions—is "marriage" (Mullan 161), Marsh's narrative follows this formula by announcing her marriage to Crisp—her original engagement broken off by her fiancé's misbehavior—and including Court's congratulating voice on this "Height of Felicity" (161). Replacing her own voice with Court's, Marsh ends with a male voice that seemingly contains the excess of sensibility that would otherwise destabilize the performance of female virtue.

Yet Marsh's erasure of her own voice is not only strategic, but pointed: appointing a man as the spokesperson of her virtue instead of insisting on it herself, Marsh deliberately plays to the gendered prejudices that run through her homeland, where women must embody virtue yet the female voice is met with skepticism. Marsh cannot—or will not—judge her own "Conduct" without a man to support her (161). Even as Marsh submits to the gaze of her English readers who judge her, the very erasure of her voice foregrounds—and problematizes—the obsession surrounding the female captive's virtue and the male authority that can (in) validate it. Marsh's performance of sensibility plays with and navigates through such cultural obsessions that require the female body to become a repository of virtue. Marsh's desiring, performing, and self-consciously desponding body show that, in the contact zone, the supposedly coherent signs of virtue can be employed as masks that disguise the female captive's oriental fantasy. Through Marsh's despondence, the possibility of the Englishwoman turning Moorish bride haunts the narrative almost to the very end—a possibility that ostensibly frightens Marsh, but lies at the center of her oriental fantasy where she is courted as a lady by an attractive foreign prince. Although the narrative itself is sutured by Court's letter, this excessive despondence stages Marsh's response to the pressures put upon her to prove her virtue—a pressure that comes less

from her Moorish captors than from the "Land of Civil and Religious Liberty" itself (124). Marsh's final narrative choice thus leaves English readers with what they expect to see—a predictable, moralistic male voice that clinches the tale—while the *female* narrator's voice remains as slippery as it can be.

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ABSTRACT

Performing Sensibility, Proving Virtue?
Masking the Englishwoman's Oriental Fantasy in *The Female Captive*

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This paper examines how the performance of refined sensibility allows Elizabeth Marsh to navigate through cultural obsessions that require the female body to become a repository of virtue and national merit in *The Female Captive: A Narrative of Facts which Happened in Barbary in the Year 1756*. As the first captivity narrative published by an Englishwoman, *The Female Captive* has been read as a textual performance calculated to protect Marsh's own reputation and prove her English female virtue intact. Yet such readings neglect how Marsh's narration often deviates from her textual persona of the virtue-in-distress, revealing a desire for the Moroccan prince that oversteps English norms of sexual modesty and class boundaries. I note how such textual performance both masks and marks such desires she comes to harbor in the cultural contact zone. When Marsh adopts the language of sensibility to veil and disguise her oriental fantasies, the excess of sentiment produced by this performance also reveals the undercurrent of Marsh's deviant desire. Marsh does not completely censor these moments which reveal her oriental fantasies but leaves them unexplained and ambivalent in her narrative, creating a gap between her performance of sensibility and her desiring body. This paper reads such spaces where Marsh's own desire becomes visible. Through Marsh's despondence, the possibility of

the Englishwoman turning Moorish bride haunts the narrative almost to the very end—a possibility that ostensibly frightens Marsh, but lies at the center of her oriental fantasy where she is courted as a lady by an attractive foreign prince. Reading Marsh's desire within *The Female Captive* thus complicates the moral narrative of a chaste English female who successfully escapes an Oriental despot. Marsh's desiring, performing, and self-consciously desponding body show that, in the contact zone, the supposedly coherent signs of virtue can be destabilized and employed as masks that disguise the female captive's oriental fantasy.

Key Words performance; sensibility; captivity narrative; contact zone; desire; Elizabeth Marsh; *The Female Captive*