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Samual Willard: An Unreliable Narrator

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In “The Possession of Elizabeth Knapp,” Samuel Willard observed and wrote about the afflictions of Elizabeth Knapp, but his report is not without flaws. Willard framed his report on Elizabeth Knapp’s affliction as a narrative of himself, a self-portrayed holy figure, facing off against the devil, an evil creature possessing a powerless young woman. Willard does this by discounting Knapp’s own experiences and by framing her as a character without agency. His report is also affected by his privilege, which causes him to disregard and dehumanize Knapp in the narrative. Overall, Willard’s report comes off as an argument for the existence of diabolism—Knapp’s diabolism, in particular—that is rooted in patriarchal values. Therefore, Willard’s summary of events is questionably reliable, and historians should take caution when approaching it as a factual account of Knapp’s affliction.

Willard, despite his good intentions, consistently asserted his authority over Knapp in his writings. Often, as a way of doing this, he doubted her and believed her to be lying, and even from the beginning of Knapp’s condition, he questioned her. When she first began to act strangely by shrieking and laughing at odd moments, many would ask her how she was, and she would reply, “well” (Willard 235). Willard wrote that this answer made him “wonder,” not trusting his sixteen-year-old servant (Willard 235). As it turned out, of course, he was correct to wonder, but that he was right about this suspicion does not matter as much as that after looking back on the incident, early on he believed that something was wrong with Knapp, even if she would not admit to it. Again and again he questioned her personal accounts of what happened, claiming that they “seemed contradictory,” that he was “suspecting the truth of her former story” and that he had “a suspicion of the truth of the relation” (Willard 237, 238, 242). Willard addressed the discrepancies of her stories, mainly those concerning whether or not she had covenanted with the devil, at the end of his report, writing, “Her declarations have been so

contradictory, one to another, that we know not what to make of them” (Willard 245). Willard clearly saw Knapp as an unreliable narrator of her own experiences, and his perception of events overpowered her personal experiences.

Willard also often conferred with third parties about Knapp's state rather than asking her directly. At the beginning of her unusual activity, he received “credible information” that she clapped her hands on various parts of her body, all the while exclaiming (Willard 235). Also, when deciding to take Knapp to the bay and have ministers pray for her, Willard consulted Knapp's friends on the matter, but not Knapp herself (Willard 244). By lacking belief in her personal experiences, and by favoring the opinions of others over Knapp's, Willard showed condescension towards and lack of respect for Knapp, thus calling into question his understanding of, and account for, what happened to her.

Willard's reliability was also questionable in his insistence on diabolism being related to Knapp's affliction. From the beginning, he had assumptions that her fits were diabolic, or as he said, a “dark resemblance of hellish torments” (Willard 236). This is evident in that he repeatedly mentioned whether or not she had signed a covenant with the devil. Moreover, he recorded a few instances in which he asked Knapp directly whether she had covenanted with the devil, including, “Being pressed to declare whether she had not consented to a covenant with the devil, she with solemn assertions denied it” (Willard 237). As previously mentioned, Knapp was contradictory in her accounts of whether or not she signed a covenant with the devil, and this frustrated Willard, who wrote, “Her declarations have been so contradictory, one to another, that we know not what to make of them” (Willard 245). Willard framed his entire report of Knapp's behavior as an argument for her demonic possession. When it seemed that the devil first spoke through Knapp, he wrote that before that point, it was uncertain whether or not Knapp's

afflictions were demonic, but on that day (December 17), there was no doubt (Willard 242). He built his argument so that from the beginning, Knapp seemed to show signs of demonic possession, and by making her seem like an unreliable witness to her own experiences, he forced his readers to see the events solely from his point of view. This report, then, read more as an argumentative essay than as a factual account of Knapp's behavior.

In general, Willard seemed much more concerned with uncovering information than with being involved, at least directly, in helping Knapp. Although she called on him for help at times, Willard rarely detailed instances in which he helped her. In fact, he often wrote of himself doing the opposite. He left her alone in instances where she was obviously in a concerning state. In one instance, Knapp's senses were "stupefied" and she seemed to be watching the devil, all the while unresponsive to Willard's questions (Willard 242). In another, the devil completely took over her body and spoke through her to Willard, making heretical comments about God (Willard 243). In yet another, an emotional Knapp related how she felt about her sins and her demonic possession to Willard (Willard 241). In all three of these instances, Willard left her without helping her. It seemed that Willard's reasons for meeting Knapp were often to extract information; when Knapp became emotional and confessed her sins, for instance, Willard left, but commented that he would return because he was not "satisfied in some things" (Willard 241-2). Why Willard was so hard-pressed to prove Knapp's behavior to be related to the devil is unknown for certain—that it was related to his position as a pastor was not unlikely—but it seemed as though he was indeed driven to study Knapp more for information and for uncovering the truth than for helping her.

His insistence on the devil's perceived involvement overshadowed any other possible explanations for Knapp's behavior. Although they did visit with a physician who gave a medical

explanation for the fits, Willard did not fail to point out that, not long after this diagnosis, the same physician returned to diagnose Knapp with a diabolical affliction (Willard 238). When Willard reflected on why Knapp might have had contradictory answers as to whether or not she signed a covenant with the devil, he did not account for the possibility of Knapp having an afflicted mental state that might have caused her to have inconsistent answers (Willard 235). This could have been worsened by how people constantly pressed her for the truth about her situation (Willard included, as we have seen), and could have also affected her answers to questions by making her say, however consciously, what everyone else wanted to hear (Willard 236). There is not enough evidence to support this claim from what Willard provides in his report, but that Willard, who knew more than us, did not suggest this as a possibility brings into question to what extent he was letting his conviction that Knapp was affected by the devil influence his observation of the woman.

The way in which Willard described Knapp being possessed by the devil gave her no agency. When Willard faced off against the devil that he believed spoke through Knapp, he gave the devil a male pronoun, creating a scene in which not just the devil, but a man took away Knapp's agency. At one point, the devil told Willard, "I am not Satan, I am a pretty black boy; this is *my* pretty girl" (Willard 243, emphasis mine). The use of the word "my" further emphasized Willard's characterization of Knapp as a woman stripped of agency and possessed by a masculine devil in two senses: diabolically possessed as well as possessed in a manner pertaining to ownership. In this scene, too, Willard clearly paired himself with God and Knapp with the devil. When he spoke to the devil, who was speaking through Knapp, he spoke "through God's grace" (Willard 243). The point here was not so much that Knapp could be painted as evil—in the rest of the report there was no evidence for this—but rather that Willard

was painted as the ultimate good. While Knapp was losing her agency to the devil, Willard was a holy figure, thus legitimizing his narrative of Knapp's affliction and continuing to strengthen his argument for diabolism.

Outside of this possession scene, Knapp lacked agency in other parts of Willard's report. The devil often put words or vocalizations into her mouth, whether those were excuses for shrieking or "words of presumption" (Willard 237, 238). He also made her do physical actions, such as sign the covenant by moving her hand for her (Willard 241). However, most significant is that for much of her possession, the devil made Knapp mute or made her make odd noises. In some cases, Knapp's speechless caused her to have to resort to "strange gestures" for communication, and in other cases she shrieked or made animal noises (Willard 240, 244). In another instance, she only said nonsensical words over and over, such as "money, money," and, "sin and misery" (Willard 236). Either way, when the devil controlled Knapp, she could only vocalize in unintelligible ways. When she did speak intelligibly, as has already been pointed out, she was dismissed or not believed by Willard. In all ways in this narrative, Knapp was silenced.

Although in many of these cases describing Knapp's lack of agency, Knapp herself was relating these events to Willard, it is important to keep in mind that Willard wrote about many of these events months later, and could not have feasibly remembered every word spoken. What he chose to put into this report is indicative, then, of how he chose to portray Knapp's situation and Knapp herself as a person. He excluded possible instances in which she might have been actively doing things on her own, and instead only included instances which supported his perception of her as an individual who required constant male assistance, was regularly bombarded by a masculine devil, and had other characteristics of a dependent and inactive person.

This is, of course, not to say that Willard did not feel sympathy for Knapp. Although he did maintain a somewhat removed position from her situation, he did call upon the community to help her and to offer her compassion (Willard 245). However, the language he used to refer to Knapp depicted her less as a human and more as a kind of symbol. He called her “an object of pity,” a subject of hope,” and a “monument of divine severity” (Willard 245). Even at the beginning of his report, he called her a “poor and miserable object” (Willard 235). Willard’s inability to imagine Knapp as a human being, despite his sympathy, added to his unreliability as a narrator. Willard was not completely to blame for this, as he was a product of his time, but it cannot be ignored that objectifying Knapp by turning her into a symbol of the righteousness and power of God helped him strengthen his argument that Knapp was possessed by the devil. To readers of Willard’s report, Knapp’s affliction would have seemed to be proof of God’s power, as it was God that decided to let the devil do as he wished.

As previously mentioned, Knapp was assisted by male figures other than Willard, which included Mr. Rowlandson, Mr. Bulkley, and Mr. Estabrooke, most likely ministers who prayed with and counseled Knapp (Willard 239); Willard’s father, who kept her from signing a covenant with the devil (Willard 239); several other ministers who also prayed for Knapp, including Mr. Cobbet (Willard 244); and, of course, the physician. The only other women mentioned in Willard’s report were a maid she was with when she saw a man’s head outside a window on October 19, and a witch Knapp saw in the form of a dog with a woman’s head (Willard 237, 240). The maid, unlike the authoritative and helpful men, was just as afraid as Knapp and offered her no help. And the witch was, needless to say, a witch. This did not mean that no women assisted Knapp while she was afflicted—her mother, for instance, was implied to be around when Willard mentioned Knapp’s parents—but it does mean that Willard chose to

exclude these helpful women from his report (Willard 242). This was likely not a conscious decision, but rather one influenced by Willard's patriarchal society and by his own privilege as a man. The sense, then, is that Knapp was a woman completely without agency who was surrounded by men, controlled by men, and whose personal life was eventually narrated by a man.

At the end of the day, Willard was a man of high status in the community, and Knapp was his teenaged female servant. While he perhaps could be excused for the inclusion of patriarchal values in his report, as seventeenth-century New England did not have the values that we have now, that he used these values to argue for Knapp giving into diabolism is more questionable, especially because the presence of the physician indicates that diabolism was not the only explanation for fits and other afflictions at the time. This, then, calls into question the validity of other primary sources during this time, since men wrote most (if not all) of these reports, especially men of high status such as Willard. It may be easy for historians to fall into the trap of believing that women acted and behaved in the way that men like Willard portrayed them: as quite passive and without agency. This can lead to modern historians dehumanizing these women just as Willard and his contemporaries did. Recognizing that these primary sources are flawed can open new ways of thinking about points in history such as the witch trials in colonial New England, especially concerning women. When trying to understand history, it is important to imagine the people of the past as humans just as us, as different as their beliefs or situations might have been, and this open-mindedness about history would benefit from including women as well.

Works Cited

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