Transatlantic Hermitage: Creating Society through Solitude in The Female American

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ABSTRACT

The figure of the hermit plays a significant role in transatlantic culture and literature of eighteenth and nineteenth-century Great Britain and the Americas. During this period, the trope of the hermit is frequently utilized in the genre of travel and castaway narratives. Unca Eliza Winkfield in The Female American (1767) exemplifies an intriguing combination of the female castaway and the hermit within the genre. This is supported through comparative analysis of earlier representations of the female castaway and the hermit, found in The Strange Adventures of the Count de Vinevil (1721) and Robinson Crusoe (1719). Hermitic narratives, as well as the practice of hermitage in estate gardens, were incredibly popular during the Enlightenment. The hermit represented the practice of increased self-awareness through voluntary solitude, and the hermitic retreat provided opportunities for personal growth before a return to civic engagement. These dualistic qualities of the Enlightenment hermit illuminate the dichotomy of egoistic and altruistic motivations for the actions of Unca Eliza and her companions in The Female American. Unca Eliza, a multiethnic and bilingual Anglo-American woman standing on the threshold between Old and New Worlds, embodies the liminal qualities of the Enlightenment hermit, and pushes acceptable gender boundaries for the role of the female castaway as a hermit. Despite Unca Eliza’s participation in the masculine creation of a new utopian society, her strictly missionary agenda with the natives and her unwavering modesty ultimately secure her character within the conventionally feminine confines of religious and moral activities within the masculine travel sphere.

Key Words: Eighteenth Century, British Travel Literature, England, America, Colonialism, Imperialism, Castaway, Narrative, Native American, Religion, Missionary, Female Castaway, Hermit, Hermitage, Garden, Enlightenment, Gender, Gender Roles.

Unca Eliza Winkfield, heroine of The Female American (1767), emerges as a salient figure of the female castaway hermit in travel narratives. The trope of the hermit plays a powerful role within the context of eighteenth and nineteenth-century transatlantic culture; a culture concerned with colonization of the Americas, imperialism, national identity, religion, individualism, and civil liberties. During this period, the hermit represents a shift toward philosophical questions of the Enlightenment, and a reconciliation of tension between social participation and personal growth within solitude. The dualistic qualities of the hermit during the Enlightenment illuminate the dichotomy of egoistic and altruistic motivations for Unca Eliza and her companions in The Female American. Furthermore, the liminal qualities of Unca Eliza’s character are reflective of the hermitic figure’s movement between society and solitude. Within the narrative development of The Female American, Unca Eliza exceeds the accomplishments of earlier representations of both the hermit and the female castaway within eighteenth-century travel literature. She accomplishes this through her unique situation as a woman who is both Native American and British, with bilingual abilities and an Anglican Christian upbringing. However, the success of Unca Eliza’s narrative, within the historical context of its publication, is only possible because her character adheres to the moral expectations of a colonial Anglo-Saxon woman existing within the masculine travel sphere. Unca Eliza retains the quintessentially feminine practices of religion, modesty, and virtue, while participating in the masculine creation of a new society in the Americas. Adherence to gendered participation within the moral and social spheres, through Unca Eliza’s missionary enterprises, allows her daring accomplishments and unconventionally hybridized character to remain within the moral and social conventions of eighteenth-century travel narratives.

Within the genre of eighteenth-century travel literature, The Female American is a curious narrative, and the unknown identity of the author mirrors the inherently dualistic and liminal qualities of the text. Both the author’s gender and nation of origin are unknown—they could be female or male, British or American. The anonymous author evades categorization, just as Unca Eliza’s character evades strict categories of national identity and gender roles within her narrative. For the purposes of claiming authenticity, the narrative is attributed to Unca Eliza Winkfield, and is structured as a personal account; however, it is likely that the story is a fiction, fashioned in part on the historical character of Pocahontas. In The Female American, Unca Eliza is the daughter of a Native American princess, Unca, and a Virginia colonist and owner of a tobacco plantation, William Winkfield. When Unca Eliza’s mother dies, her father sends her to live with his family in England. After receiving an Anglican religious education in Great Britain, Unca Eliza plans a return voyage to Virginia, arriving only to find that her father is dead. Unca Eliza purchases a ship to return to England; however, the captain abandons her
on an island when she refuses to marry his son. Alone and terrified, Unca Eliza begins a trial of survival and exploration on the uninhabited island. These trials are the recurrent themes of castaway narratives during this literary period.

Reading *The Female American* within the context of earlier travel and castaway narratives, particularly those of Penelope Aubin and Daniel Defoe, reveals the situation and development of Unca Eliza as the female castaway hermit. Penelope Aubin achieved commercial success in the early eighteenth-century with her novels, frequently featuring a female traveler as her protagonist. In "Virtuous Voyages in Penelope Aubin’s Fiction," Aparna Gollapudi states that Aubin combined “two supremely popular genres of her day—travel fiction and the amatory novel. Into this hybrid she [Aubin] incorporates a strident Christian morality” (669). Gollapudi explains the function of religion and morality in Aubin’s novels, stating that “In the dangerous and exotic world of travel literature, there were really very few legitimate and sanctioned ideological spaces in which a female globetrotter could locate herself” (674). Women, relegated to existence within the domestic and social spheres, could not easily engage in the masculine activities of travel fiction. Gollapudi notes that “[the female body] could not participate in the myth of technological, imperial, or commercial conquest…” (674). In Aubin’s first commercially successful novel6 *The Strange Adventures of the Count de Vinevil*, published in 1721, Aubin utilizes the male hermit to guide the chaste female castaway Ardelisa. The hermit serves as Ardelisa’s source of religious support, comfort, and assistance.

Aubin’s novel models the conventional formula for the role of the hermit in female castaway narratives, a formula that *The Female American* both follows and disrupts. In Aubin’s novel, the young Ardelisa escapes the wrath of the villainous Turk Mahomet, after he kills her father Count de Vinevil in Constantinople (Aubin 37). In seeking safety, she discovers the hermitage of Father Francis, who agrees to assist Ardelisa’s party in their journey to reconvene with Ardelisa’s betrothed. Ardelisa tells Father Francis, “your Words convey a Balm into my sickly wounded Soul, have still’d my Passions, and cur’d my Frailty…” (Aubin 60). Later in the novel, when the travelling party has been shipwrecked, the women sit in a tent assembled by the men in their castaway party, while the men attempt to provide for the women by hunting (Aubin 105-106). Father Francis provides comfort to the seemingly inconsolable women:

> And now the good Father, seeing the Ladies sad, address’d himself thus to Ardelisa: “Madam, ever since I have had the Honour to know you, I have observ’d something so Noble and Christian in all your Deportment, that… I believ’d you incapable of Fear or Ingratitude to God…it would be an unpardonable Sin to distrust him now. Summon then your Faith and Reason to aid you, and be not cast down.” These words seem’d as Cordials to them all...

(Aubin96-97)

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6Gollapudi 670

Aubin’s text portrays the female traveler and castaway as “Noble” and “Christian,” but also as helpless and “fearful.” Conveniently, Aubin’s characters are rescued after only two months on the island (Aubin 106). The struggles of Aubin’s castaway party, particularly the women, seem trivial in comparison to Unca Eliza’s experience as a female castaway. While Aubin’s male characters hunt for food, the hermit Father Francis offers unrelenting sustenance through his faith. Whenever the castaway party despairs, Father Francis provides his religious and emotional support.

A hermit, like Father Francis in Aubin’s text, attempts to offer comfort and assistance to Unca Eliza in *The Female American*; however, his success in the role as religious and emotional supporter of the female castaway is limited, and arguably nonexistent. When Unca Eliza is initially stranded on the island, she discovers the hermit’s abandoned dwelling. Frightened and hesitant to enter, a startling sound, “like the hallooing of a human voice, forced [her] precipitately to rush in, fearless of the danger within” (Winkfield 57). The hermit, weak and sick with fever, welcomes Unca Eliza by incoherently yelling from afar, at what he believes to be a spirit; terrified, Unca Eliza runs into the cave dwelling (Winkfield 76). Once inside, she discovers the hermit’s manuscript, left in the cave, which conveniently provides her with a guide for the island. It also provides the exact page on which he has left his observations regarding the natives, who travel to the island to worship an idol of their sun deity (Winkfield 58). Unlike Father Francis in Aubin’s tale, this is the extent to which the hermit comforts and provides for Unca Eliza. He later returns to the dwelling, and Unca Eliza’s fears are briefly assuaged by his presence. However, he dies the next day, and she is burdened with moving to another location in the underground dwelling, since “it was impossible for me to remove him, had I been ever so desirous…” (Winkfield 77). Father Francis provides unwavering strength for Ardelisa’s party; conversely, Unca Eliza is left with a dead body, instead of companionship. Unca Eliza distances herself from taking direction and solace when she ultimately rejects the hermit’s written advice. She ignores his warnings against the natives, in favor of attempting a religious conversion.

It is this decision to interact with the natives that further disrupts the conventional role of the “fearful” female castaway in need of support from the male hermitic figure. In "Re(Playing) Crusoe/Pocahontas: Circum-Atlantic Stagings in *The Female American,*" Betty Joseph compares this decision to other portrayals of the female castaway in travel narratives. She states that Unca Eliza’s decision to interact with the natives “recasts the female castaway as missionary rather than as helpless victim of circumstance or exemplary survivor of extraordinary adventures…” (Joseph 321). Thus, Unca Eliza is a departure from depictions like the helpless Ardelisa and her female castaway companions in Aubin’s text. Joseph addresses the similarities between *The Female American,* and its predecessor *Robinson Crusoe,* published in...
1719. *Robinson Crusoe* is the castaway narrative of a young British man, who finds his way to the Americas to develop a plantation, only to be stranded after his ship wrecks during a journey to buy plantation slaves. The novel imparts devotional wisdom upon the reader, as Robinson deals with isolation, illness, and a former lack of faith, through his belief in the hand of Divine Providence in his survival. He records his experiences on the island in a manuscript, which serves as the textual narrative of the novel. He develops the island into his own fortress, and he spends years in solitude before he discovers natives who use the island as a place to kill and consume their enemies. After much terror and paranoia at the thought of cannibalistic natives, he finds the courage to save a man who is attempting to escape his native captors. Robinson educates and molds this native, whom he names Friday, into his loyal subject and servant. Robinson masters both the cannibalistic natives, and Spanish sailors, eventually returning to the civilized world and leaving the island to be developed into a colony. Joseph describes Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* as “a parable of individualist success,” and emphasizes that the experiences of the male hermit castaway on the uninhabited island—the experiences of both Robinson himself, and the hermit in *The Female American*—are “a tale of Christian failure,” because both Robinson and the hermit avoid interaction with the natives (321). Joseph argues that Unca Eliza’s use of the hermit’s manuscript in *The Female American*, almost identical to Robinson’s manuscript, “retroactively reduces Defoe’s Crusoe to a survival manual” (321). Unca Eliza uses the manuscript for knowledge of the island and the natives, ignores the hermit’s advice to avoid.

Through Unca Eliza’s defiance from this expected behavior—the act of avoiding the potentially dangerous native Other—modeled by both Robinson and the hermit, Unca Eliza moves beyond mere survival on the island. Instead of avoidance, focuses on her religious goals of converting the natives to Christianity through her bilingual abilities. As Joseph suggests, “The rather instrumental use of the Crusoe-like hermit in Female American...is merely a foil for supplantation and supersession” (321). Unca Eliza supplants *Robinson Crusoe* by becoming the hermit herself, then becoming the religious guide that ultimately Robinson, and the hermit in *The Female American*, could never achieve on a comparable level. Unca Eliza becomes a unique formulation of the female castaway hermit through her rejection of both the conventional notions of the hermit, as well as notions of the female castaway in eighteenth-century travel literature. Enlightenment notions of the hermit provide context for the narrative directions of *Robinson Crusoe* respectively.

The explosive popularity of the figure of the hermit during the Enlightenment, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, is evident by the hermit’s curious development as a fixture within estate gardens in Great Britain in European countries. Beginning in the seventeenth century, buildings and structures designed in the style of hermitages became attractions for elite travelers (Harwood 272). In “Luxurious hermits: asceticism, luxury and retirement in the eighteenth-century English garden,” Edward S. Harwood explains that “what made a structure a hermitage was not its form, but its inhabitant and purpose, i.e. the implied presence of a hermit, and the idea that a hermitic life was pursued there” (277). These structures were often built as a retreat for the estate owner to use themselves (Harwood 283-284); however, estates also employed hermits, and even used automatons. Harwood details an advertisement for employment of a garden hermit, in mid-eighteenth century England: “The successful applicant would be provided ‘with a Bible, optical glasses...He must wear a camel robe, and never, under any circumstances, must he cut his hair, beard, or nails, stray beyond the limits of Mr. Hamilton’s [the estate owner’s] grounds, or exchange one word with the servants’” (278-279). While this advertisement has a humorous tone, and the exact date and origin is not clear, hermits were undoubtedly employed to live in estate garden hermitages throughout Georgian England. In *The Hermit in the Garden: From Imperial Rome to Ornamental Gnome*, Gordon Campbell describes accounts of a garden hermit, coincidentally also named Father Francis, residing at a garden attraction in the English West Midlands. From the end of the eighteenth century, into the nineteenth, “Father Francis continued to seem ‘about 90 years of age’...” and “There is some evidence... that Father Francis was from time to time replaced with a stuffed hermit...[with the] ability to move and speak” (70).2

While it may seem extravagant or eccentric to employ or even fabricate a symbolic hermit, the hermit and the hermitage were treasured by the British during the Enlightenment. Harwood discusses the value of the hermitic figure within British (and European) society during this period:

Still in the eighteenth century, and surely earlier as well, [hermitic] retirement was fundamentally a move towards an intellectual, moral and/or spiritual way of life sanctioned by both classical and religious traditions. It was profoundly valued by the elite for precisely that reason. As a result, the hermit augmented rather than diminished his power and prestige in society. (270)

Despite this cultural sanction of hermitic retreat as a valuable factor in the ability of the individual to participate within society, the changing role of religion during the Enlightenment required a change in the purpose or value of the hermitic figure for society. Harwood states that, “If the hermitage was to remain a valued cultural type, then the hermit must be seen as performing valued tasks, or fulfilling valued roles”(286). This performance of “valued tasks” and “fulfilling valued roles” is embodied in the colonialist enterprises of *Robinson Crusoe* and Unca Eliza. Robinson, the white male European colonist, focuses on material conquest; however, Unca Eliza—the biracial, bilingual female Anglo-American missionary—focuses on religious conquest of the natives.

Although Unca Eliza, according to these terms, may

2Although the mechanisms of this automaton are unknown, automatons were popular at the end of the eighteenth century (Campbell, 70).
seem like the ideal castaway hermit through her religious and explicitly non-imperialistic values and goals, other aspects of the text complicate such a reading. In some ways, Unca Eliza’s altruistic goals as Christian missionary—as well as those of Mr. Winkfield, who is both her cousin and later her husband, and those of their friend and fellow Englishman, Captain Shore—are motivated by underlying self-interests. Conquest of wealth and land are presented as ancillary and even nonexistent factors for this trio of characters. After her cousin finds her, Unca Eliza has no desire to leave the missionary relationship she has developed with the native community (Winkfield 132). Her cousin Mr. Winkfield, an Anglican clergyman intent on staying with Unca Eliza, joins her religious cause (Winkfield 135). Captain Shore wishes to leave his former life of piracy behind, along with all of Europe, in favor of a life of repentance on the island with the Winkfields and the natives (Winkfield 154). When the trio takes it upon themselves to retrieve the gold from the natives’ ancient tombs and blow up the subterraneous passages on the island, it is done with religious intent, ensuring that the natives will never again worship an idol (Winkfield 154). Despite these events appearing as actions in service of the group’s missionary agenda, the text subtly contradicts these altruistic motives throughout the second volume of the narrative.

The first volume of the narrative ends with Unca Eliza’s first encounters with the natives, by speaking to them through the statue of their sun deity. After the beginning of the second volume, Unca Eliza makes the decision that attempting to convert the natives to Christianity is less dangerous than her alternative of staying on the island alone. She reasons, “…how could I, with any possible degree of comfort, continue to live under ground even in the summer? And in the winter I should be entirely confined under ground. This last thought affected me so much, that I saw the absolute necessity of going to live among the Indians, whatever my success in teaching, or reception, might prove” (Winkfield 109). From this quote, it appears that Unca Eliza has concerns for self-preservation, which supersede her explicitly missionary intentions with the natives. Mr. Winkfield is primarily motivated to stay on the island because of his love for Unca Eliza. Their missionary goals are secondary to his wish for Unca Eliza to be his wife (Winkfield 135). Meanwhile, Captain Shore’s turning in of the villainous captain who had abandoned Unca Eliza on the island is motivated by his desire to receive pardons for himself and his crew (Winkfield 147). The trio blow up the sun deity to discourage future idolatrous worship; however, they ship the gold from the tombs back to the Winkfield family, and gain personal profit by trading the gold for material goods (Winkfield 154).

These actions, seemingly motivated by philanthropy and benevolence, harbor underlying motives of self-interest. This dual existence of egoistic and altruistic motives, found in the actions of Unca Eliza and her companions, embody the notion of the Enlightenment hermit and the practice of hermitage. Harwood’s description of the “belief,” or the practice of hermitage, expresses this concept of self-interest as coinciding, rather than clashing, with interest in society. Harwood describes the value of the hermitic retreat as a philosophical notion rooted in antiquity, and considered necessary for the individual to successfully participate in society:

…the belief that the ideal, balanced life was dialogically formed through the alternation of periods of active civic engagement with ones devoted to contemplative and restorative solitude. The ideal of a reciprocal relationship between one’s public and private lives that emerges inevitably from this dialogue became increasingly attractive and valued as more attention was paid to the significance of the private self…. (269-69)

In this “dialogue,” the inevitable inwardness of personal reflection and solitude ultimately has benefits to civic engagement within society. The act of separation from society to focus on the self, and the return to it, results in a reconciliation of this tension between the personal and public spheres. These notions of a balance between self-interest and self-sacrifice, found through the practice of the Enlightenment hermitage, suggest a context that provides validation for the actions of Unca Eliza, Mr. Winkfield, and Captain Shore. In this context, their self-serving actions can be viewed as beneficial for their relationship with the native society. Unca Eliza and her companions’ decision to separate from Europe and remain in a self-constructed utopian reflects the classical notion of a hermit’s temporary separation from society; but in doing so, it deviates from contemporary hermitic narratives.

The hermitic tale within The Female American deviates from its contemporaries by engaging in the theme of permanent separation from traditional notions of developed society and the Old World. This theme resounded in a post-Revolutionary America, founded upon Enlightenment ideals. Colby Dowell suggests that the post-1800 editions of The Female American speak to “America’s greater interest in the tales of hermits” (150, note 15). While The Female American was published once in London in 1767, it was published twice in America after 1800. Dowell explains that castaway narratives, which utilize the hermitic manuscript as a narrative form, follow the hermit’s transformation of involuntary to voluntary solitude, and conclude with the ultimate rejection of national identity and society, were incredibly popular after America’s separation from Great Britain. Ultimately, the hermit’s tale was representative of “republican democratic practice as existing in the pause or retired moment between cultural binaries…” and a “…national identity situated precariously at the boundary between solitude and society, public and private, Britishness and Americanness” (Dowell 122). The culture of a young America was still amidst completion of its transatlantic journey, just as young Unca Eliza is amidst the formation of her own hybrid identity within the narrative of The Female American. It is this liminality, or as Dowell calls it, the existence on the “threshold,” between two worlds, that represents the participation of the hermit in both literature and society itself (137). Unca
Eliza’s hybridized character, as a woman who stands at the intersections of the Old and New World, in every aspect—gender, ethnicity, and language—is further representative of this liminality ascribed to the figure of the hermit. While Unca Eliza embodies the liminal qualities of the Enlightenment hermit and effectively disrupts the role of female castaway through her ability to survive alone and her empowerment to interact with the natives, she is still relegated to the feminine sphere of the Enlightenment era. This is evident by her chaste behavior, and her missionary agenda with the natives. Just as the actions of Aubin’s characters are dictated by religious and moral ideals, Unca Eliza complies with gendered expectations for colonial women during the Enlightenment. While women received a higher level of education and were expected to have agency in their choice of a husband, women “had to be moral actors prior to marriage in order to exercise a beneficial moral influence in the household afterwards” (Timm & Sanborn 25). Although women are given perceived agency and independence, their movements and actions are still restricted to the domestic and social spheres. Timm and Sanborn’s study coincides with Gollapudi’s aforementioned argument about the limitations of the female body within the masculine travel sphere. They state that “morality was part of the female ‘sphere,’ so women could become active” in moral issues within the colonies “without challenging the established gender order” (Timm and Sanborn 110). Unca Eliza is well educated and has control over whom she will marry; yet curiously, she gives into her cousin Mr. Winkfield’s repeated proposals, despite a lack of any romantic interest on her part. Unca Eliza claims that her decision to favor the marriage stems from her personal concern for the appearance and maintenance of her chastity. Although Unca Eliza believes that the natives would not be concerned by her company with an unmarried man, she believes that she must marry Mr. Winkfield to preserve her moral reputation and her personal sense of virtue. She states, “…I could not satisfy myself with the reflection of being much alone with a man, as it hurt my modesty” (Winkfield 139).

Her explicitly moral concern over the religious and physical wellbeing of the natives further affirms that while Unca Eliza accomplishes a variety of daring feats independent of gendered expectations for the female castaway hermit, she still safely remains within the parameters set forth for Anglo-American colonial women during the eighteenth century.

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