Finding Aid for the Elizabeth Marsh Narrative of her Captivity in Barbary [...et al.], [between 1760 and 1795]

Cataloged by Manushag Powell, with assistance from Jain Fletcher and Laurel McPhee, July 2004; machine-readable finding aid created by Caroline Cubé.
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Descriptive Summary

Title: Elizabeth Marsh Narrative of her Captivity in Barbary [...et al.]

Date (inclusive): [between 1760 and 1795]

Collection number: 170/604

Creator: Marsh, Elizabeth

Extent: 106 leaves extant, 3 have been removed: paper; 240 x 190 mm. bound to 249 x 200 mm.

Abstract: This bound manuscript contains two separate narratives. Narrative of her Captivity in Barbary, a draft of the earliest Barbary captivity narrative to be published by an Englishwoman, details Elizabeth Marsh's 1956 capture by pirates. The second piece, Journal of a Voyage by Sea from Calcutta to Madras, and of a Journey from thence back to Dacca, written considerably later circa 1775, describes her travels around India.

Language: Finding aid is written in English.

Repository: University of California, Los Angeles. Library Special Collections.

Los Angeles, California 90095-1575

Physical location: Stored off-site at SRLF. Advance notice is required for access to the collection. Please contact the UCLA Library Special Collections Reference Desk for paging information.

Restrictions on Access

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Provenance/Source of Acquisition

Ex libris John Marsh [author's brother]; his bookplate on upper paste-down (see also note on leaf 69v). Library's acquisition source and date unknown.

Preferred Citation

[Identification of item], Elizabeth Marsh Narrative of her Captivity in Barbary [...et al.] (Collection 170/604). UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library.

UCLA Catalog Record ID

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Processing Note

Cataloged by Manushag Powell, with assistance from Jain Fletcher and Laurel McPhee, July 2004, in the Center For Primary Research and Training (CFPRT).

Biography

Elizabeth Marsh, a middle-class Englishwoman, was born in 1735 to a naval dockyard manager and his wife. She was living with her parents in Minorca when the start of the Seven Years' War in 1756 forced the family to relocate to Gibraltar. On a sailing voyage to visit friends in England, her ship was attacked by corsairs. Marsh, along with the other passengers and sailors, was taken captive and sent to Sallee (Salé) and then Marrakesh (Marrakech), Morocco. Her sufferings were politically motivated; the soon-to-be sultan, Sidi Mohammed, had responded to the insulting behavior of an envoy of the British government with a wave of aggressive captive-taking. Marsh was ransomed by the British government after several months, and returned safely to Gibraltar.

During her initial voyage, she was traveling (she states) under the protection of a family friend, a young merchant named James Crisp. The two claimed to be siblings upon the commencement of their captivity, and later claimed to be married, ostensibly to protect Marsh from the sexual interest of Sidi Mohammed. Marsh narrates that, by repeating some words spoken to her by one of his women, she converted or was tricked into converting to Islam. It took a great deal of tears and pleading to convince Mohammed to respect her preference of remaining a “married” Christian woman. After her release, Marsh returned to her parents and married Crisp legally. The pair settled in England until financial troubles forced Crisp to relocate to India, where his wife eventually joined him and where the two remained until the ends of their lives. If her journal of her tour of the Indian coast is any indication, her traumatic Barbary experience did not quash her taste for adventure, and she seems to have enjoyed traveling despite the dangers and discomforts she sometimes faced. The couple had two children, a son and a daughter. Both their son and son-in-law worked for the East India Company.
Some of the details of Marsh's life as she gives it in these works have indeed been verified (see Linda Colley's work), although this does not mean that all aspects of her narratives are invariably true.

Scope and Content
The first account, Narrative of her Captivity in Barbary (1r-59), begins with the author’s capture by Barbary pirates. Marsh describes her captivity and her travels therein from Sallee (Salé) to Marrakesh (Marrakech) to Safee (Safi), and her eventual return to Gibraltar. The second, Journal of a Voyage by Sea from Calcutta to Madras, and of a Journey from thence back to Dacca (69v-102r), details her travels around India in an effort to improve her health. The manuscript records the places she visited, and her impressions of the climate, people, and landscape.

Organization and Arrangement
The narrative sections are as follows:

- Narrative I: Narrative of her Captivity in Barbary (ca. 1760).
- Narrative II: Journal of a Voyage by Sea from Calcutta to Madras, and of a Journey from thence back to Dacca (ca. 1775).

Indexing Terms
The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the library's online public access catalog.

Genres and Forms of Material
Manuscripts.

Related Material
Bound Manuscripts Collection (Collection 170). Available at UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library.

Narrative I: Narrative of her Captivity in Barbary (ca. 1760)
Scope and Content Note
Elizabeth Marsh composed the Narrative of her Captivity while living in Chatham (according to a handwritten note in William Musgrave's copy of The Female Captive), around 1760. Her husband, whose mercantile business had failed in England, was attempting to start over in India. In general, this is a calm, straight-forward, geographically-driven narrative with only a secondary emphasis on elaborating details. There are a few vivid descriptions of the captives' physical suffering (long marches in the heat with little water, vermin, and bad food), the sometimes reasonable and sometimes impenetrable behavior of their captors, and of the personalities and households of some Moroccans and transculturated English. Marsh also describes encounters with Moroccan women, and transcribes letter extracts from an English merchant she befriended. Although the author makes occasional appeals for God's protection, particularly in the conversion incident with Mohammed, as a whole the narrative focus is not overtly Christian or religious, though it is certainly hostile to the Moroccan sojourn.

This captivity section of the manuscript appears to be a fair-copy early version of The Female Captive: A Narrative of Facts, which Happened in Barbary, in the Year 1756, published anonymously by subscription in 1769 by C. Bathurst, London. This manuscript differs in several points from The Female Captive. The printed version of her tale is occasionally more detailed than the manuscript, offering specific information on the physical suffering of Marsh and Crisp, the sexual threats Marsh feared from the Moors and Arabs, and Crisp's gallantry towards her. This shift in emphasis may reflect a decision by the author, for reasons Orientalist, commercial, or both, to emphasize (or invent) the romantic aspects of her story. The historian Linda Colley notes that the "considerable" state correspondence around Marsh's very real captivity makes no mention of any sexual threats against her (Captives 128).
Narrative II: Journal of a Voyage by Sea from Calcutta to Madras, and of a Journey from thence back to Dacca (ca. 1775)

Scope and Content Note

Journal of a Voyage by Sea from Calcutta to Madras, and of a Journey from thence back to Dacca does not seem to have been intended for publication, although the author is obviously aware that someone (family or friends) besides herself is intended to read it. Marsh, by 1774 Mrs. Crisp, had moved to Bengal to join her husband. At the end of the year she took a journey without her family along the coast due to her "extreme ill health." Beginning in December 1774, the author sailed from her home of Dacca (now the capital of Bangladesh), to Calcutta (after 1772, the capital of British India), meeting "my Dear Crisp & sweet Boy" who were there on business. She then sailed further south to Madras, before traveling back to Dacca, often by land. The resulting journal of the trip is a neat, carefully dated document, full of names and places as it charts her movements.

The journal entries are generally diurnal and fairly brief, covering mundane details like descriptions of the weather (awfully hot), when and with whom Marsh breakfasts and sups, and the names of people she meets and whose homes she visits. Overall, more attention is given to the white people she encounters than the native population, although the latter are never entirely absent either, and often register as an ominous, unruly presence. Although she obviously takes pleasure in the varied scenery, even bathing (swimming) as often as she can, the journey is frequently an unpleasant one. Marsh complains steadily of the stupefying heat – at one point she notes the thermometer at 115 degrees [F] - and of her thirst, her inability to sleep or rest because of the heat, and so on. Towards the end of the trip, monsoons appear and make the narrow roads extremely hazardous.

Travel in India was dangerous for reasons beyond the weather as well. On more than one occasion, Marsh's group is harassed by locals, who sometimes demand bribes and sometimes evince physical hostility. British control of India and its population, though being aggressively pursued, was far from complete in 1775. Furthermore, Marsh never fails to visit and comment on every military fort they pass. As in Morocco, she is surrounded by men, but she now travels in a large company which can protect her. The travel train is headed by her cousin, Captain Smith, and features not only several white gentlemen, but also a number of Sepoys and other hired native servants and guards. She has several slave girls and woman servants of her own. The middle-class status which no doubt helped to secure her release in Barbary remains an important part of her identity, as the thrill of adventure is juxtaposed with the trappings of polite Anglo society.