

Hope Leslie: Novelistic Rewriting of American History

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Catharine Maria Sedgwick begins the preface to her novel, *Hope Leslie; Or Early Times in the Massachusetts* (1827) by describing her unique representation of American history. Arguing that her novel is neither a “historical narrative” nor “a relation of real events,” she maintains that her purpose is to illustrate “the character of the times” (3). Although she denies that her novel is “a substitute for genuine history,” Sedgwick at the same time emphasizes that her ambition is to make her readers “investigate the early history of their native land,” implying that her main purpose in *Hope Leslie* is to propose a new historiographical model by which her “young countrymen” can view American history in a different light (4). In other words, her claim is that her historical romance can offer a new, yet even truer, version of early American history.

Set in the aftermath of the Pequot War, *Hope Leslie* offers a different perspective on the “Indian problem” in particular. Locating the novel in the context of seventeenth-century Puritan historiography, Philip Gould notes that the novel specifically questions Puritan accounts of the Pequot War, which usually accentuate Indian “savagery” in order to justify the westward drive and its consequences for Native Americans, namely Puritan violence (644-67). As is evident from Sedgwick’s characterization of Magawisca as a noble, intelligent, and heroic figure, Sedgwick’s portrayal of Native Americans obviously challenges the Puritan perception of Native Americans. Also, as Gould correctly observes, Sedgwick’s “slight” inversion of the chronological sequence of the Pequot War is not slight at all, given the implication of the change; by transferring the story of the murders of three Englishmen—John Stone, John Norton, and John Oldham—to “a moment *after* the massacre of the Pequots has occurred” (646), Sedgwick challenges Puritan historians’ basic assumption that justifies the Puritans’ attack on Native Americans. More specifically, the massacre scene at Bethel in *Hope Leslie* takes place after the Puritans’ assault on Magawisca’s tribe, which provides a motivation for Mononotto’s for revenge and engages the readers’ sympathy. Furthermore, as many critics point out, Sedgwick gives Magawisca an opportunity to give accounts of the Pequot War from the perspective of a victim. In her introduction to the novel, Carolyn L. Karcher argues that Sedgwick undermines “the authority of Puritan historians by allowing Indians to give their own accounts of their bloody confrontations with the English” (xxix). Gustavus Stadler also draws attention to the radical nature of Sedgwick’s choice of investing narrative authority in a Native American.

In this paper, I examine Sedgwick’s interrogation of the relationship between fiction and history in her attempt to illuminate historical truths about Native Americans. As a novel writer, Sedgwick was quite conscious of the subversive power of fiction and adroitly uses it in her revision of early American history. At the same time, she was also

aware of the determining power of history, as well as the limitations of fiction in undermining the existing public discourse. In my discussion of Sedgwick's investigation of the possibilities of fiction, the focus will be on her portrayal of two characters: John Winthrop and Magawisca. As a personage that actually existed in American history, Winthrop offers an enlightening case in considering the implications of the fictionalization of historical figures. His status as a public figure is also significant in discussing Sedgwick's awareness of both the power and limitations of fiction in revising Native American history. On the other hand, Magawisca, a purely fictional Native American character, who loses her status as a heroine to Hope Leslie, a Puritan Anglo character, serves as a site for reconsidering recent critiques of the limitations of existing discourses available for representing Native American characters in Sedgwick's novel. Although most critics acknowledge Sedgwick's contribution to the problematization of Puritan accounts of the Pequot War, at the same time they point out Sedgwick's limitations in her representations of Native American characters, especially Magawisca. For example, Maria Karafilis maintains that the novel ultimately provides a conservative perspective on the "Indian problem" and that Hope's appropriation of Magawisca's place at the end reveals the novel's complicity with "Jacksonian Democratic society's narrative of Indian dispossession as necessary and humanitarian" (343). Karcher also sees Hope as a "feminine version of the 'white Indian,' a fantasy figure who . . . acquires the traits Anglo-Americans most admire in the Indian, yet remains racially 'pure'"(xxxix). Her assumption is that Sedgwick had to invent the character of Hope Leslie because an Indian heroine was not an acceptable object of narrative identification. Countering the common interpretation that the complementary relationship between Magawisca and Hope illustrates Sedgwick's belief that the Native needs to be replaced by the Puritan Anglo, I contend that the character of Magawisca reveals Sedgwick's complex understanding of the relationship between fiction and history.

In understanding Sedgwick's problematization of American history through her fictionalization of Winthrop, Michael Warner's discussion of the question of authority and ideology in printed culture in his book *The Letters of the Republic* provides an insightful point of consideration. According to Warner, in contrast to the printed Constitution, which is heavily invested in elevating "the values of generality over those of the personal" (108), a novel serves as "a site of private imaginary identifications" (170) through its focus on the lives of individual characters, complicating any simple dichotomy between the public and private spheres. Warner also argues that as an essentially private experience, the fictitious identification that novel-reading presupposes was a matter of concern until the development of "the independent language of value for novels" (176) in the nineteenth century, because it posed a hazard to the republican public sphere by being unable to entail public virtue.

By re-imagining a public figure in a privatized scene, Sedgwick's characterization of Winthrop utilizes fiction's power to destabilize the authority of the public discourse. Given her culture's dominant tendency to venerate Winthrop as a founding father of America, however, Sedgwick had to take a cautious approach in her presentation of

Winthrop in the novel, and the narrator's "disclaimer" that the novel does not aim to provide an account of the public life of Winthrop can be understood in this context:

Our humble history has little to do with the public life of Governor Winthrop, which is so well known to have been illustrated by the rare virtue of disinterested patriotism, and by such even and paternal goodness, that a contemporary witty satirist could not find it in his heart to give him a harsher name than 'Sir John Temperwell.' . . . Madam Winthrop's matrimonial virtue never degenerated into the slavishness of fear, or the obsequiousness of servility. If authorized and approved by principle, it was prompted by feeling; and, if we may be allowed a coarse comparison, like a horse easy on the bit, she was guided by the slightest intimation from him who held the rein. (150-51)

Here, the narrator keeps her¹ tone apparently "polite" and "humble," as if she wants to make it clear that her purpose is far from challenging the general view of John Winthrop as a model of virtue. Despite the narrator's "humble" gesture, her project is in fact quite ambitious in that it adds a new, but not unimportant, dimension to the reader's understanding of Winthrop. Though the narrator apparently seems to suggest that her account of Winthrop's private life has nothing to do with the established view of his public life and thus is less important, her narration actually proves that looking at the personal side can make a change in the prevalent view of Winthrop. The narrator's comparison of Madam Winthrop to "a horse easy on the bit" is particularly enlightening. Right after emphasizing that Madam Winthrop's obedience to her husband arises not out of "the slavishness of fear, or the obsequiousness of servility" but out of voluntary will, by using a "coarse comparison" between her and "a horse easy on the bit," the narrator undermines the meaning of her "voluntary" obedience. By thus picturing Winthrop's domestic relationship with his wife as one based upon his artful manipulation of his wife's will, the novel challenges a generalized view that simply sees Winthrop as a model of "even and paternal goodness." Though the novel does not make an explicit connection in the first half of the novel, the ideological implication of the novel's destabilization of the established and simplistic view of Winthrop through a focus on his private side is quite significant in understanding the novel's treatment of the issue of Native Americans. By problematizing his virtuous image as an individual, it leads the readers to question his authority in public affairs, including of course the "Indian problem." In this sense, the character of Winthrop illustrates fiction's power to challenge the dominant discourse.

At the same time, however, there are obvious limitations to the freedom to re-create historical figures in fictional texts, and Winthrop's attitude toward Magawisca provides a efficient example of Sedgwick's awareness of the complicated nature of fictionalization of history. When Magawisca gives a powerful speech on her people during her trial, Winthrop is moved and even sheds tears: "The Governor rose, waved his hand to command silence, and would have spoken, but his voice failed him; his heart was touched with the general emotion, and he was fain to turn away to hid tears more

¹ Although the relationship between Sedgwick and the narrator might be much more complicated, I will refer to the narrator as "her" for convenience's sake.

becoming to the man, than the magistrate” (309). The narrator is here distinguishing “the man” Winthrop from “the magistrate” Winthrop, or in other words, his personal self from his public self. No matter how earnestly Winthrop, the man, wishes to grant Magawisca her prayer and set her free, Winthrop, the magistrate, cannot neglect his public duty of protecting his own people. Winthrop thus says to Magawisca “in a voice of gentle authority, ‘I may not grant thy prayer; but what I can do in remembrance of my solemn promise to thy dying mother, without leaving undone higher duty, I will do’” (310). The magistrate Winthrop’s voice may be “gentle” here, but it is spoken in a tone of authority, and more importantly, he keeps his priorities straight: he can keep his promise to Magawisca’s mother only if it does not interfere with his “higher duty.” That the public self of Winthrop plays a more important role in the narrative course of the novel than the private self of Winthrop suggests that though fiction can revise the way we view historical events, it cannot revise those events themselves.

The Native American character, Magawisca, offers another interesting case in considering Sedgwick’s interrogation and manipulation of narrative historiography. As stated earlier, Sedgwick’s characterization of Magawisca clearly departs from the Puritan perception of Native Americans as inferior human beings. The narrator’s description of Magawisca’s physical appearance effectively illustrates the novel’s sympathetic view of Native Americans:

Her form was slender, flexible, and graceful; and there was a freedom and loftiness in her movement which, though tempered with modesty, expressed a consciousness of high birth. Her face, although marked by the peculiarities of her race, was beautiful even to an European eye. . . . The moccasin, neatly fitted to a delicate foot and ankle, and tastefully ornamented with bead-work, completed the apparel of this daughter of a chieftain, which altogether, had an air of wild and fantastic grace, that harmonized well with the noble demeanor and peculiar beauty of the young savage. (22-23)

As is evident from the narrator’s statement that Magawisca’s face “was beautiful even to an European eye,” her ethnic background constitutes an important part of her beauty and charm. In addition, the adjectives used to describe Magawisca, such as “wild,” “fantastic,” and “noble,” are the terms frequently found in a positive portrayal of Native Americans. Magawisca’s status as “the daughter of a chieftain” also contributes to her noble image by drawing attention to her “consciousness of high birth.” One might argue here that Sedgwick is merely exploiting the concept of the “noble savage” in her characterization of Magawisca and point that out as her ultimate limitation. As a term expressing “a romantic concept of humankind as unencumbered by civilization” (*Wikipedia*), the “noble savage” is often considered a form of racism especially because of its heavy reliance on stereotypes. After all, a savage is a savage, whether blood-thirsty or noble. As if to prove this point, the narrator calls Magawisca “the young savage.”

In the course of the narrative, however, Magawisca is presented as a character with much deeper emotional and psychological dimensions than a “noble savage”—that

is, Sedgwick establishes the character of Magawisca as an individualized human being, not as a type. Though her first appearance impresses readers as a typical “noble savage” figure, her internal conflicts that follow after her interaction with Everell’s family humanize her, compelling strong narrative identification with her on the part of the readers. The cause of Magawisca’s inner conflicts is clearly put forth in the following passage: “Magawisca’s first impulse had been to reveal all to Mrs. Fletcher; but by doing this, she would jeopard her father’s life. Her natural sympathies—her strong affections—her pride, were all enlisted on the side of her people; but she shrunk, as if her own life were menaced, from the blow that was about to fall on her friends” (57-58). Here, aware of her father’s intention to take revenge on Everell’s family, Magawisca is torn between her duty for her people and her affection for Everell and his family. At this moment, Magawisca is no longer a noble savage princess—that is, some racial stereotype—but a woman in love struggling with a moral dilemma, which renders her more available for fictitious identification.

What really compels the reader’s sympathetic identification with Magawisca, however, is the way narrative events unfold. When Magawisca begins to behave in a strange manner—more specifically, she sneaks out of the house in the middle of the night and goes somewhere as if she is involved in some conspiracy—her motive is not explained, and readers are left wondering whether they can sympathize with her. The narrator then reveals the conflicts that have been tormenting Magawisca and clears her of all suspicions, which produces the effect of strengthening the reader’s sympathy for her. After the bloody scene at Bethel where Magawisca’s father and his men brutally kill Everell’s mother and his sisters, Magawisca’s whole attention is focused on one thing: to help Everell escape from her father. From this point on, readers can completely identify with Magawisca without any reservation, because their attention is also focused on whether she can succeed in saving Everell’s life. Considering Stadler’s point that “A white woman writing a historical novel with a noble, honorable, erotically attractive, powerful Indian female character did not quite make sense to the bourgeois public sphere of 1827” (45), the reader’s sympathetic identification with Magawisca is indeed crucial to understanding the way Sedgwick uses her fiction to rewrite American history. Even though the novel is set in seventeenth-century America and most readers today know what course American history has taken, narrative events take place in the present for the reader, and Sedgwick uses the power of fiction to encourage the reader’s fictitious identification with Native American characters like Magawisca and challenges the prevalent view of Native Americans that emphasizes the inferiority of their race and culture.

The problem, however, is that despite this radically positive perspective on Native Americans that it provides, in the end the novel does replace Magawisca as a heroine of the novel with Hope Leslie. Until chapter 7, Hope is almost absent from the novel; in other words, until Magawisca loses her arm to save Everell’s life, she seems to be the heroine of the novel, if not the heroine of the narrator, who insistently calls Hope “our heroine.” Hope’s letters to Everell in the very next chapter, however, make it clear that Hope has displaced Magawisca as a romantic lover. Just as Magawisca and Everell share

thoughts and feelings that no one else could understand early in the novel, in her letters to Everell, Hope writes down every detail of her life, communicating feelings that she would not share with anyone else. This explains why the first volume does not end right after Everell's escape—it shows the continuity between Magawisca's role and Hope's in terms of their relationship with Everell. Nor is it a coincidence that the first volume of the novel ends at the very moment of Hope's first encounter with Magawisca.

The question then is whether this complementary relationship between Magawisca and Hope points to Sedgwick's limitations in her ability to speak for Native Americans. Before answering this question, I think it is necessary to consider the significance of Magawisca's loss of her status as a heroine of the novel. Everell's mother's concern about the blooming romance between Magawisca and Everell provides a clue to why their union is considered undesirable. In her letter to her husband, Mrs. Fletcher urges him seriously to consider separating Magawisca and Everell:

. . . it is for thee to decide whether it be not most wise to remove the maiden from our dwelling. Two young plants that have sprung up in close neighbourhood, may be separated while young; but if disjoined after their fibres are all intertwined, one, or perchance both, may perish." (33)

Here, Mrs. Fletcher's concern arises from the assumption that there is a "natural" barrier between Magawisca and Everell that could make "one, or perchance both. . . perish" (33), if they were joined together. In other words, deeply aware that Magawisca's union with Everell would cause great disruption to the Puritan community, Mrs. Fletcher wants to eliminate Magawisca's presence. The potential threat that Magawisca's affection for Everell may bring to the Puritan community, however, is quite easily resolved with Hope's appearance, and as demonstrated in the following passage, Everell's attention is safely focused on Hope later in the novel: "While Hope's life was in peril, even Magawisca was forgotten" (295). As for Magawisca, far from posing any threat to the stability of Puritan society by emphasizing her role in saving Everell's life, she seems to have no trouble sacrificing her affection for Everell "on the altar of national duty" (203) and blessing the marriage of Hope and Everell. Considering the political implication of Magawisca's removal from the narrative, it is not surprising that most critics believe that in spite of all the positive representations of Native Americans, the novel eventually endorses the idea that the Native American culture needs to be replaced by the Western culture.

The narrator's historical consciousness, however, raises a question about this kind of reading that hastily concludes the novel supports a conservative view of the "Indian problem." During the course of the story, the narrator frequently reminds her readers that the novel is a retrospective look at the past; in other words, the narrator is writing her story when history has already taken its course. Phrases like "our ancestors" or "our forefathers," for example, not only emphasize that the narrator and her readers have the same ancestry but also remind the readers that the novel is set in "Early Times in the

Massachusetts,” not in their contemporary society. The narrator’s retrospective assessment of Native American history can be understood in this regard:

Had the Indians been capable of a firm combination, the purpose of Mononotto might have been achieved, and the English have been then driven from the American soil. But the natives were thinly scattered over an immense tract of country—the different tribes divided by petty rivalships, and impassable gulfs of long transmitted hatred. They were brave and strong, but it was brute force without art or arms: they had ingenuity to form, and they did form, artful conspiracies, but their best-concerted plans were betrayed by the timid, or the treacherous. (204-05)

In this passage, the narrator speculates on how differently American history would have turned out if Native Americans had had a better system of cooperation and better resources. The narrator’s purpose here, however, is neither simply lamenting Native Americans’ tragic fate nor celebrating Puritans’ conquest. Rather, the narrator’s speculation emphasizes the fact that what has already happened is not reversible because it belongs to the past. Given this acute historical consciousness of the narrator, Karcher’s interpretation of Magawisca’s amputation needs some revision. According to her, Magawisca’s loss of her arm signifies Sedgwick’s attempt to “[defeminize] and [remove] her as a potential sexual partner” (xxiv). Karcher’s point that Magawisca’s loss of her arm indicates a loss of her sexual power is quite convincing, especially given the brotherly gesture that Everell makes immediately after Magawisca’s amputation: “He threw his arms around her, and pressed her to his heart, as he would a sister that had redeemed his life with her own” (97). Although Everell never explicitly declares his love for Magawisca, the fact that Mrs. Fletcher suggests to her husband that Everell and Magawisca should be separated before they get too attached to each other implies that at least up until the moment she loses her arm, Magawisca has the potential to be Everell’s lover. Nevertheless, Karcher’s point that Magawisca’s loss of her arm can be interpreted as Sedgwick’s deliberate attempt to deprive her of her potential status as the heroine does not aptly explain the significance of the narrator’s historical consciousness in the novel. What the narrator’s retrospective view of Native American history suggests is that just as the Native American culture has already been replaced by the Western culture in the past, Magawisca’s disqualification as Everell’s lover has already happened in history. In other words, Magawisca does not become ineligible for marriage because she has lost her arm; rather, she loses her arm in the novel because she has already become ineligible back in American history. In short, history has determined the narrative course. The narrative disposal of Magawisca and the forfeiture of her status as a heroine, then, suggest that what we assume as fictional events can be stabilized in the historical (or real) past as immutable.

In her novelistic revision of American history, *Hope Leslie*, Sedgwick posits a complicated relationship between fiction and history. On the one hand, her vivid accounts of individual lives demonstrate that fiction can revise history through the immediacy of its reading experience. Whereas history is about the past and therefore has an end point,

fiction exists in the present. As readers go through various experiences with the characters in the novel, their uncertainty about what is going to happen next makes them feel as if the story is taking place in the present. It is this power of fictitious identifications that makes readers re-examine what has happened in the past. When it is presented in a novel form, seventeenth-century American history bears a new meaning for readers in the nineteenth century—it is not any more the story of the past. On the other hand, history influences fiction, as is evident from the magistrate Winthrop's treatment of Native Americans and Magawisca's fate. Native Americans have already vanished in history, and, therefore, despite the narrator's sympathy for Magawisca, Magawisca can neither be set free by the governor nor be "our heroine" who marries Everell to live happily ever after. Nevertheless, the mutability of fiction and the immutability of history that is presented in a historical romance suggests that how one tells history can indeed make a difference, making *Hope Leslie* a powerful revision of American history. Although Magawisca is only a fictional character whose narrative function has already been established by American history, her power to elicit our sympathy illustrates the mutable historical possibilities that fiction can have.

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