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# “Sprinkled, Cleansed, and Comforted”

## The Early American Jail

*Jacob Johnson*

The jail, gallows, whipping post, and other structures of the penal system play a critical role in early American society and literature. As historian Daniel Williams notes, “American printers invested their time, energy, and materials in publishing criminal narratives” because publishers understood the demand for these accounts within American society (xiii). Due to the demand, the criminal narratives were “an exception to the standard practice of importing English literary products” (Williams xiii). In their works, both Williams and the philosopher Michel Foucault focus on the public aspects of the early American penal system—the public torture and execution. Williams argues that the ritual drama of public executions was “important in spreading attitudes and ideas that reaffirmed the social order and reasserted the powers of government” (11). Similarly, in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues that in early American society—as well as many European cultures—“public torture and execution must be spectacular, it must be seen by all almost as its triumph” (34). These scholars effectively argue for the critical role of public torture, shame, and execution in the early American penal system. I, however, will focus on the role of the more private aspects of the penal system, which occurred not on the gallows, but in the jail. I will argue that the jail represents more than simply

the holding grounds before the public execution. The jail replaces the home and church, thus offering comfort, care, and religious reformation for the “outsiders” in early American society. I will examine these complexities of jail through a critical reading of the criminal narratives of Esther Rodgers, Joseph Quasson, and Patience Boston. The jail plays this unique role of home and church for the first half of the eighteenth century—by 1850, the criminal conversion narrative begins to transform into a more secular and crime-focused text.

In order to understand the role of the jail for disadvantaged citizens in early American societies, readers must first understand the identity of the convict. Daniel Williams writes, “according to the most recent statistical surveys, condemned criminals in all probability were ‘outsiders’ of some sort” (25). Each of the criminals could be considered an outsider because of his or her gender, social status, or ethnicity. One of these ‘outsiders’ is Esther Rodgers. Esther was born around 1680 in Maine, but by the age of thirteen she had become an apprentice to Joseph Woodbridge in Massachusetts. There were two different fathers, both of whom were African American, to the two different children. Though it is never stated in the text, it is possible that she was partially of African descent herself, since there is no discussion of miscegenation in her criminal narrative. Patience Boston and Joseph Quasson are also considered outsiders because of their ethnicity; they are both identified as American Indians. Though Boston and Quasson were both Protestant Christians, they were more likely to be suspected of serious crimes, including witchcraft and murder, because of their ethnic identities. This suspicion—and the general racism of early Americans towards American Indians—pushed Boston and Quasson to the outside of civil society. None of the criminals in these narratives were from the upper or even middle class; each was a member of the working poor.

Esther Rodgers’s narrative—or maybe more correctly, the narrative about her—provides a strong archetype for the criminal conversion narrative. Though her crimes are detailed, the bulk of the narrative describes her personal redemption, which occurs in a small prison in Ipswich, Massachusetts. In that prison, Esther describes the personal redemption from her sins she experiences and the physical and emotional support she receives from those who visit her. This redemption and comfort represent the roles generally played by the church and home. On the day before her execution, she tells visitors, “I have had the joyfullest day to day that ever I had in my whole life. I bless God that

ever I came into this Prison" (102). These feelings of joy and gratitude are unexpected, particularly on the day before her death. However, earlier in her narrative, she says, "It pleased God after some time to come in with much Comfort into my Soul" (Williams 103). From the phrase "come in," Rodgers intimates that she experienced personal ministrations from deity while incarcerated. However unlikely the location, Rodgers experiences profound spiritual episodes in prison.

In addition to these heavenly ministrations, many earthly ministers also visit Rodgers. Seven ministers, at least, take some credit for her spiritual conversion (Williams 61). Though some scholars use the word "manipulate" to describe the ministers' actions, I believe that these godly servants deserve a more sympathetic analysis (Harvey 255, Williams 282–89). While she steps toward the gallows, Rodgers "takes leave of the Ministers, giving them many thanks for all their kindness to her, and this she does with a mixture of Tears" (Williams 106). These emotional expressions show that her gratitude and the ministers' work were sincere. During Rodgers's trial, the judge Samuel Sewall records, "by her answers she did discover a considerable knowledge of the Mystery of Christianity" (104). Considering Rodgers's admission that she did not take her early religious study seriously, if her answers were truly impressive, as this narrative records, then her education within prison must have been useful and effective partially due to the efforts of the ministers. Her knowledge, gratitude, and peaceful perspective reveal a sincere and complete conversion. In this way, the prison plays the role of the church for Rodgers and other condemned sinners.

Not only does Esther Rodgers experience spiritual conversion but she also receives great emotional comfort in prison before her death. Her tears and words at the gallows reveal that the ministers clearly showed great kindness and offered comfort as a part of their ministry. Standing at the gallows, Rodgers declares, "I have found more Comfort in Prison, than ever before" (Williams 106). This poignant declaration of Rodgers's narrative reveals the tragedy of her life and how the jail might, however insufficient, replace the home. Despite being born to two parents and indentured in a religious home, the greatest comfort that she experiences is found in a prison directly before her death. Considering the crimes she commits and the low status she holds in society, it is clear that Rodgers's life was difficult and filled with sorrow. However, one can expect that she would have experienced some love and concern in her youth at home.

Instead, her greatest comfort is found in prison. Thus the prison supplants both the church as the center of conversion and the home as the source of comfort in Rodgers's life.

A quarter of a century after Esther Rodgers's death, Joseph Quasson was imprisoned and executed. His narrative also highlights this process of spiritual redemption for prisoners and underscores the ways the jail could become a church for prisoners. Quasson's narrative is unique because of the emphasis on his spiritual conversion. This conversion is revealed through an interview between Quasson and an unnamed visitor in addition to a detailed description of his words and actions preceding execution. The length of his stay is also uniquely long—a total of nine months. During that long imprisonment, he struggled for his spiritual redemption with the help of the minister Samuel Moodey, who also published the narrative after Quasson's death, and others. Moodey describes this struggle and Quasson's ultimate victory: "for the most part he was a Prisoner of Hope . . . yet he was almost ready to despair" (Williams 11). Moodey, through his account, reveals the spiritual transformation from despair to hope in Quasson's final days.

During the last few days of his mortal life, Joseph Quasson had an interview with a visitant that reveals the extent of his spiritual conversion. Initially, Quasson reveals his fears of going to hell, his prayers offering no avail, and not having any right desires (Moodey 11, 13–14). Despite this despair, he continues to attend church, meet and pray with ministers and other visitors, and read from the Bible "wherein he had scores of Leaves turned down" (14), indicating a serious study of the holy book. Moodey also notes that in the final week, Quasson "prayed seven times daily" (33). Even though he was despairing and hopeless, Quasson put a great effort into his own conversion through serious study of the Bible and frequent prayer. Moodey observes that though Quasson proclaims that he has no faith, Quasson holds "a secret hope Rooted in him . . . so that his Purpose of Seeking and Waiting to the End, was never quite broken off" (Moodey 19). Regardless of an overwhelmingly tragic scene—imprisoned and waiting for death—Quasson was hopeful for spiritual salvation.

While Quasson continued to seek out God and redemption, he ultimately found the object of his search—hope for salvation. "On the last Morning of his Life, his Faith and Hope was found to continue," and as he left the prison and began to walk to the gallows he responded in the

affirmative when asked “whether he could venture upon the Ocean of Eternity in the Ark Christ” (Moodey 24).

At this point in the story, Moodey takes greater control over the narrative as the “Penitent” (Quasson) is executed. Moodey relates that Quasson’s “Countenance, his Words; for Matter and Manner” reveal the inner faith of the criminal. In addition, standing at the gallows, Quasson “prayed so freely, so distinctly, & and so pertinently, that it was to the Admiration of the Wisest and Best” (25). These descriptions reveal Quasson as a man of faith who ultimately experienced spiritual conversion. His conversion is all the more remarkable because it occurred in the darkness of the prison.

After the execution of Quasson, Moodey records the “Lessons of Instruction, Admonition, [etc]” that could be learned from Quasson’s conversion narrative. Moodey encourages “Awakened Sinners” “Not to be discouraged” because “this believing Penitent found Rest to his Soul, when he could find it no where else” (34). For Quasson, this prison played the role of the church: the site of spiritual conversion and communion with God and Christ. Quasson performed the actions found often in churches: praying, reading the Bible, and meeting with a minister. The interviews and meetings with ministers, generally unique to the church, were critical to Quasson’s spiritual conversion. Without the ministers’ encouragement and scriptural knowledge, Quasson would have been unable to find the energy or knowledge to gain faith. Quasson’s narrative—in addition to the admonitions of Moodey—provides spiritual instruction and enlightenment for witnesses of the execution, but even more for those who read the account afterwards.

In the last of the three criminal narratives, Patience Boston accentuates how the early American jail could play the role of a home for its disadvantaged prisoners. Following a trend in criminal narratives of the first half of the eighteenth century, Boston’s narrative contains the account of her conversion. Toward the end of her stay, she recounts that in prison, “I met with Christ here, and have had Communion with God in holy Duties” (Williams 131). Though the narrative offers an interesting insight into Boston’s conversion, it is best used for understanding how the early American jail was a home to prisoners and offered comfort and peace in a time of great personal turmoil. In her narrative, Boston gives details of the visitors who comforted her. This list includes ministers who have also made appearances in each of the previous narratives (Williams 126). Boston explains that the ministers

“would encourage [her] to hope” (126). In addition to the ministers, Boston recalls that “the Prison-Keeper came to [her], counseled and comforted me” and that his wife also frequently called and ministered to Boston (131). While the ministers’ support is significant, it is not surprising. Their purpose is to minister to their congregation, which would include prisoners like Boston. On the other hand, the prison keeper and his wife are not obligated to provide comfort or counsel to Boston. Out of concern for Boston—as a person, not a congregant—this couple begins to play the role of mother and father as they offer counsel and comfort in an extremely difficult time for Boston. They are not as concerned with Boston’s spiritual salvation; instead, the prison keeper and his wife focus on ministering to her physical and emotional needs.

Boston recognizes and appreciates this outpouring of love. The prison becomes more than simply a holding cell before her imminent execution and becomes something similar to a home for her. Immediately preceding her execution, the minister records that she rejoices, “I have reason to bless God for putting me into the Hands of such as are so kind to me and tenderly concerned for me (Williams 131). In poignant words, Boston describes how in “Chains of Iron,” she is “more comfortable than I could have been with a Chain of Gold.” While she faces execution, and an unknown fate, her “Soul is carried out in Love to good experienc’d Christians that come to see me. Methinks I can understand their Language and sweetly relish it” (135). With descriptions of comfort and “Chains of Gold,” Boston records the physical and emotional comfort she received while in prison, which comfort she was not accustomed to previously in life. Further, Boston begins to understand these visitors, the ministers, the prison-keeper and his wife, and others. In speaking their language, Boston finds a group to which she belongs and “relishes” in it after leading a lonely life at the bottom of society. This early American jail has provided her with things she had never before experienced: loving and concerned parental figures, physical and emotional comfort, and a welcoming and concerned group of individuals.

The criminal conversion narratives of Esther Rodgers, Joseph Quasson, and Patience Boston reveal what role the early American jail could play in the lives of incarcerated “outsiders”—including women, the poor, and ethnic minorities. For these groups, the prison became an imperfect substitute for the home and church. Disadvantaged prisoners found in the jail good role models, a supportive community, parental figures, and potentially, spiritual redemption. When the prison doors opened and the

prisoners took their final steps toward their execution, they were “sprinkled, cleansed, and anointed,” spiritually and emotionally (Williams 95).

Somewhere between 1750 and 1770, the criminal conversion narrative began to shift from a focus on the prisoner’s spiritual state to the prisoner’s crimes before incarceration. Williams suggests that this change occurred as printers “responded to the changing interests and perceptions of their consumers” (13). The witness and reader of the criminal narrative is more secular in the second half of the eighteenth century while the conversion aspect of the criminal narrative isn’t as successful.

Along with the positive change in public opinion of the penal system, as a result of criminal conversion narratives, the penal system in America also began to change through the work of reformers, including Benjamin Rush, who signed the Declaration of Independence and argued against public punishment and executions. In 1829, the Eastern State Penitentiary opened its doors and soon after other penitentiaries were built throughout the states. In *Reports of the Prison Discipline Society*, published in 1852, one inspector considered the value of some aspects of the early American prison system, “That community which first conceived the idea of abandoning the principle of mere physical force . . . and of treating their prisoners as *redeemable beings* . . . must occupy an elevated place” (Prison Discipline Society 665, emphasis added). Over a hundred years after the criminal conversion narratives were published, the influences still had positive effects, and prisoners are seen as redeemable. Punishment may have become more private, and the prison larger, but prisoners retained much of the virtue that they held in criminal narratives. The criminal conversion narratives of Esther Rodgers, Joseph Quasson, and Patience Boston provide critical insight into this process of personal redemption within the prison system and lay a foundation for understanding the more recent developments of the American penal system. Presenting these protagonists as sympathetic criminals set the stage for future developments in the penal system that emphasized the rehabilitation and redemption of criminals.

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