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Cherokee Acculturation & the Fall of Women's Status

Danielle Rogner

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Cherokee Acculturation & the Fall of Women's Status

On the last page of the July 14, 1832 issue of the *Cherokee Phoenix*, an anonymous poem, "Matrimony", provides insight to the divergent views towards Cherokee women that surfaced during the time of President Andrew Jackson's passage of the Indian Removal Act of 1830. What is most intriguing about "Matrimony" is that in addition to the misogynic reading featured in the *Phoenix*, a footnoted set of instructions provides a reordering of the poem's lines to yield a rendition that offers a favorable view of women. The printed format of "Matrimony" appears as follows, with the alternate construction to its right:

Matrimony

1

- 1—That man must lead a happy life
- 2—Who's free from Matrimonial chains,
- 3—Who is directed by a wife;
- 4—Be sure to suffer for his pains.

2

- 1—Adam could find no solid peace,
- 2—When Eve was given for a mate,
- 3—Until he saw a woman's face,
- 4—Adam was in a happy state.

3

- 1—In all the female face appear,
- 2—Hypocrisy, deceit and pride;
- 3—Truth, daring of a heart sincere,
- 4—Ne'er's known in woman to reside.

4

- 1—What tongue is able to unfold,
- 2—The falsehood that in woman dwell;
- 3—The worth in woman we behold,
- 4—Is alonest imperceptible.

5

- 1—Cursed be the foolish man I say,
- 2—Who changes from his singleness;
- 3—Who will not yield to woman's sway
- 4—Is sure of perfect blessedness.

Matrimony

- That man must lead a happy life
Who is directed by a wife;
Who's free from Matrimonial chains,
Be sure to suffer for his pains.

- Adam could find no solid peace,
Until he saw a woman's face,
When Eve was given for a mate,
Adam was in a happy state.

- In all the female face appear,
Truth, daring of a heart sincere,
Hypocrisy, deceit and pride;
Ne'er's known in woman to reside.

- What tongue is able to unfold,
The worth in woman we behold,
The falsehood that in woman dwell;
Is alonest imperceptible.

- Cursed be the foolish man I say,
Who will not yield to woman's sway
Who changes from his singleness;
Is sure of perfect blessedness.

→To advocate the Ladies' cause, you will read the 1st and 3^d and 2^d and 4th lines together.

The dual readings reveal an opening to understanding where the contrast perspectives toward women meet on the historical timeline of the Cherokee Nation, an opportunity that holds “Matrimony” as an artifact of the change in Cherokee women’s status at the forefront of the Indian Removal.

As the eyes of the late 18th century Americans fell upon the territories occupied by the Cherokee Nation, the cultural disparities between the two nations became a source of apprehension. Most challenging to many Americans was the differences between the traditional roles of women. Instead of possessing the domestic, submissive role of the American homemaker, Cherokee women held positions of authority within society. Not only did the Cherokee Nation practice a matrilineal inheritance of property and clan membership (Smith 406), but several honored women actively participated in battle and were vocal in town councils (409). However, women achieved their highest status in the fields. While men were traditionally hunters, the female population was responsible for the cultivation of corn, a crop that the nation depended on for subsistence and trade (Perdue 25).

The status of Cherokee women provided the most glaring contrast to American ideals through the distribution of authority in marital relationships. Unlike the Americans who “viewed women as emotional creatures who had to be restrained by marriage and other social roles that reinforced their subservience to men” (Perdue 62), Cherokee women were superior to their husbands within the family unit. In Theda Perdue’s study of Cherokee women, she notes the observations of an 18th century trader, stating that “women rules the roost and wears the breeches and sometimes will beat their husbands within an inch of their lives. . .the man will not resist their power if the women was to beat his brains out” (Perdue 45). The trader’s description parallels the poet’s claim in the first stanza: “Who is directed by a wife / Be sure to suffer for his pains.” His

assertion that women in power are the source of male suffering displays the apprehension of the Americans toward the social values of the Cherokee Nation.

In view of the traditional status of Cherokee women, it seems unfitting that the misogynist perspective presented in “Matrimony” would appear printed within the *Cherokee Phoenix*. However, the series of events preceding the Cherokee Removal reveals the purpose of its publication. In order to address the cultural burden in the lands sought for American expansion, the federal government devised a plan for transforming the Cherokees into a people consistent in the social structure and moral values of the growing republic (Perdue 109). The project yielded a series of legislation, including the 1791 Treaty of Holston and the 1793 Indian Trade and Intercourse Act, which equipped the tribes with tools and agents to guide them in the ways their white superiors (Perdue 111). In response, many members of the Cherokee Nation received the efforts in accordance with Jefferson’s policy of assimilation, the belief that proving their ability to adopt the ideals of the American society was their only way to avoid removal. Cherokee households began observing traditional American gender roles, and soon Cherokee leaders began making greater efforts to imitate American culture. Evidence of this mimicry is visible in the *Cherokee Phoenix*, founded by Elias Boudinot in hopes that it would reach an American audience, becoming an instrument to present evidence of their nation’s development (Schneider 151-61). The first edition, issued February 21, 1828, features the Constitution of the Cherokee Nation, a replication of both the structure and content of the U.S. Constitution. A critical detail exposing Cherokee mimicry is in its pronouncement that rights to vote and hold office extend exclusively to free male Cherokee citizens, explicitly denying these liberties to women. As initiated in their Constitution, the Cherokee pursuit of American standards progressively diminished the status of Cherokee women.

The misogynist attitude displayed in the printed rendition of “Matrimony” positions the poem into a peculiar place within the scope of this established Cherokee imitation. Resistance from Cherokee women frustrated the development efforts, leaving an obvious stain on the Cherokee leaders’ portrayal of an enlightened nation of people. In effect, the printing of “Matrimony” in the *Cherokee Phoenix* acts to disguise the blemish by expressing disapproval that was consistent with American discontent towards the women’s conduct. Cherokee women challenged American expectations in order to preserve their traditional roles in society. Many continued working in the fields and prevented their daughters from attending missionary schools that encouraged patrilineal marriages (Dunaway 165, 74). The poem’s author degrades these women, claiming that their tongues unfold falsehood and their faces reveal “hypocrisy, deceit and pride.” While the Cherokee Nation had not actually arrived at this attitude towards women, the printing of “Matrimony” in the *Cherokee Phoenix* effectively shifts the American leaders’ attention from the acts of resistance to the Cherokees’ mirrored stance of disapproval.

With an established understanding of “Matrimony” as it appear in its printed rendition, it is crucial to determine the context of the alternative reading in order to find where the two perspectives meet in this moment of Cherokee history. The peculiar note below the poem’s final stanza instructs the readers, “To advocate the Ladies’ cause, you will read the 1st and 3^d and 2^d and 4th lines together,” producing an inverted rendition with a flattering view of women. The reference to the “Ladies Cause” suggests support of the Cherokee women’s political activism. After centuries of working in the fields and developing a cherished relationship with the land, women had the most to lose by the removal (Miles 222-23). Following the removal crisis in 1817 to 1819, the Cherokee women united to voice their concern, and under the leadership of Nancy

Ward, a renowned Cherokee leader, the women formed a petition to present before to the National Council in defense of their beloved land (Miles 225).

Despite the extensive efforts that the Cherokees made to appeal to the American leaders, they could not fully displace the traditional respect for the position of women. The historic significance of Cherokee womanhood in the social, economic, and political survival of the Nation was their best defense, a credited protection against total disempowerment at the sake of acculturation. In the alternate rendering of “Matrimony,” the poet refers back to Adam and Eve, stating that “Adam could find no solid peace / Until he saw a woman’s face”, suggesting not only that man is not complete without a wife, but also that marriage has been the divine plan from the beginning of time. While the printed version of the poem allows the Cherokee Nation to provide evidence of their civilization to the white society, the restructured reading preserves the deep-rooted respect toward Cherokee women.

The appearance of “Matrimony” in an issue of the *Cherokee Phoenix* printed at the forefront of the Indian Removal positions it as an artifact of this historical moment of the Cherokee Nation. The poem provides evidence of the Cherokee leaders’ protective attempts to mimic American civilization and exposes the denigrating effects that acculturation had on the Cherokee women. The contrast perspectives offered by the dual renditions of the poem reflect the unstable position of the Cherokee Nation between the preservation of traditional Cherokee culture and the transformation of the nation into a replica of American society. Where the two perspectives meet, in the small space on the last page of the *Cherokee Phoenix*, remains an opening in the theorized history of a removed nation that exposes the impression that the Indian Removal left upon the status of Cherokee women.

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Research Resource Narrative

A couple of months ago, the professor of my American Multicultural Literature class, Dr. Hanlon, gave out our class's first research assignment. We were required to locate a poem or piece of prose literature published in the *Cherokee Phoenix* or *El Clamor Publico*, and analyze its cultural significance to the Cherokee Removal or the Annexation of Texas. To be honest, I was not very eager to spend countless hours in the library doing research and developing an analysis because I really did not know very much about these historical periods or the affected populations of people. However, shortly after selecting my poem and beginning my investigation, I came across an immense amount of information that helped me to become fully invested in my research and produce a well-supported analysis.

I started by selecting a poem from the *Cherokee Phoenix* by using the Georgia Historic Newspapers archives offered by the Digital Library of Georgia Historic Newspapers. For the sake of clarification, this was not a Booth Library database, but was an archive suggested by our professor. After finding my poem, I was intrigued by the strong views of women that it portrayed, and set out to use to utilize Booth's resources to study what the status of Cherokee women was during the time that the poem was published.

At Booth Library, I started my search by locating the selection of books about the different Native American tribes. Out of the extensive collection, I found a few key books about the Cherokee Nation, traditional Cherokee women, and the Indian Removal. My most valuable reference material that I used was Theda Perdue's *Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change 1700-1835*. Her extensive research on the Cherokee women really enhanced my research from their traditional status all the way through to the effects of their exposure to the American culture and the civilization efforts. While this was the only text document I used directly in my report, the others I read were valuable in helping me to gain a greater overall understanding of the culture and social structure of the Cherokee Nation.

I also was able to access many scholarly journal articles through the library's databases. Using "Academic Search Complete", I found many published articles that offered studies done that were specific to various elements of my analysis. For example, in examining the traditional roles and authority of Cherokee women, I used Katy Simpson Smith's study on Cherokee motherhood to give a detailed account of the economic, social, and political power that the women held, as well as the critical perspectives of the Americans towards that power. Following, I used an article written by Bethany Schneider, titled "Boudinot's Change: Boudinot, Emerson, And Ross On Cherokee Removal" to look into the perspectives of Elias Boudinot, the founder of the *Cherokee Phoenix*, to understand the reasoning behind the items chosen for print. While these were just two, I utilized four academic journal articles to support my analysis.

Without accessing the detailed studies of other scholars through the library's database, I would have only had access to a very limited amount of information. Many of the books and internet resources I was able to find had just a brief description on the authority of women in the tribe. However, it was this peculiar aspect of the poem, the conflicting views towards women, that I was interested in studying. The many individual articles I used in addition to Theda Perdue's extensive text helped me to piece together the full picture of the Cherokee Nation, and more specifically, the effect that the removal had on the Cherokee women.

Purpose of This Work & My Research

As stated in my resource narrative, I did my research using the Booth Library to complete a research paper assignment from my American Multicultural Literature class. The subject areas and historical analysis covered in this particular class are required for my major, English with teacher certification. While I originally based the topic of my research simply on the assignment requirements, I have found a much greater personal interest in the Cherokee Nation, the removal, and the historical period of interaction between the two populations that I intend on studying further.

Annotated Bibliography

“Constitution of the Cherokee Nation”. *Cherokee Phoenix* 21 Feb. 1828: 1. *GALILEO Digital Initiative Database*. Georgia Historic Newspapers. Web. 9 Feb. 2013.

This document demonstrated one of the most significant efforts of Cherokee acculturation. The Cherokee Constitution printed in the *Phoenix* would have been seen by American leaders who were encouraging the civilization of the Cherokee Nation. Not only was the Constitution printed in a format almost identical to the U.S. Constitution, but much of the legislation was consistent as well.

I used this source to provide evidence of how the acculturation efforts had a weakening effect on the traditional status of Cherokee women. The Constitution states that the right to hold office and vote were offered exclusively to men. Therefore, this was one my references of the earliest signs of Cherokee mimicry to the male-dominated American social structure that decreased women’s power.

Dunaway, Wilma. "Rethinking Cherokee Acculturation: Agrarian Capitalism And Women's Resistance To The Cult Of Domesticity" *American Indian Culture & Research Journal* 21.1 (1997): 155. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 9 Feb. 2013.

In her study, Dunaway presents information on how Cherokee women responded to the pressures of American missionaries to transform into the ideal standard of the American woman. Her collected evidence shows how resistant the Cherokee women were in order to defend their status and authority in the tribe. For instance, Dunaway states how the women took on the domestic roles of the home, but continued to work in the corn fields. Also, they would keep their daughters home from the schools provided by the missionaries because they often encouraged patrilineal marriages.

I used this study to show that the women’s resistance could have been a factor in why a poem like “Matrimony” would have been printed. If the women were so resistant, that would make the entire acculturation efforts appear as a failure, despite all of the other progress made. Therefore, the Cherokee leaders needed to disguise their resistance by showing their disapproval of women’s behavior. This idea explains the critical view of women in the original version of “Matrimony.”

“Matrimony”. *Cherokee Phoenix* 14 July 1832: *GALILEO Digital Initiative Database*. Georgia Historic Newspapers. Web. 9 Feb. 2013.

This poem was my primary source, and the focus of my analysis. I chose to look into this poem because of the odd footnote that allowed the readers to reorder the lines into a completely different poem. The two versions offered completely different views of women. The printed version was severely critical of women, while the optional reading was favorable. This poem was specifically intriguing because it was published in 1832, right at the height of the Cherokee Removal. The fact that it was regarding women opened up an opportunity for researching how Cherokee women were specifically affected by the removal.

Miles, Tiya. "Circular Reasoning": Recentring Cherokee Women In The Antiremoval Campaigns." *American Quarterly* 61.2 (2009): 221-43. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 9 Feb. 2013.

In Tiya Miles' article, she discusses the political activism of the Cherokee women against the removal policies. She gives information on the leaders of these women, such as Nancy Ward, and the petitions that they formed to protect their cherished land. I used this information to discuss what the "Ladies Cause" could have referred to in the footnote of my poem." Because of this article, I argued that it was the Cherokee leaders underlying support of the women. Although the printed version with the negative view of women was necessary to prove their consistent perspective of social values as the American society, the alternate version that favored women and the "Ladies Cause" was an indication of the Cherokee's longstanding respect of women.

Perdue, Theda. *Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change 1700-1835*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln & Lincoln. 1998. Print.

Perdue's study was the most comprehensive study on the Cherokee women that I referenced. She lays out a foundation of the traditional role of women in the Cherokee Nation as strong, politically involved, and having a crucial significance to the economy and stability of the tribes. Even more, Perdue analyzes the spiritual role of women, and the importance of the matrilineal structure in the pre-removal culture.

She follows the changes that women endured in their society from the exposure to American expectations of domesticated, motherly women. Some of the legislation regarding marriage laws and other political documents directed towards women provided evidence of the American "push" for the civilization of the Cherokee women.

I used Perdue's study to show the effects that the removal and acculturation had upon women. By showing the before, during, and after-removal roles of the Cherokee women, I was able to make an argument for why a misogynist poem like "Matrimony" would have appeared in the Cherokee newspaper, considering the nation had such a long-standing respect of women. Much of Perdue's study supported the idea of Cherokee mimicry, which was one of the crucial elements to my thesis.

Schneider, Bethany. "Boudinot's Change: Boudinot, Emerson, And Ross On Cherokee Removal." *Elh* 75.1 (2008): 151-177. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 9 Feb. 2013.

Schneider provided a detailed account of Boudinot's founding of the *Cherokee Phoenix* and his original views on removal. She stated how Boudinot initially was in favor of Cherokee acculturation as a protection against removal, but after John Marshall's decision in *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* (March 1832), he signed a petition for their removal. This information was valuable as support to my argument that the material printed in the *Phoenix* would have been selected with the intent of proving their

transformation to the American social structure and moral values. Therefore, this was used to support my argument of Cherokee mimicry in both the Constitution of the Cherokee Nation and “Matrimony” being printed in the *Phoenix*”.

Smith, Katy Simpson. “‘I Look On You... As My Children’: Persistence And Change In Cherokee Motherhood, 1750-1835.” *North Carolina Historical Review* 87.4 (2010): 403-30. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 9 Feb. 2013.

Kate Simpson Smith’s article focuses on the traditional role of women in the Cherokee Nation, and their efforts to preserve that role after the arrival of American missionaries. Her analysis provided great detail on the economic, social, and political power that the women held, and the critical perspectives of the Americans who had an ideal of a domesticated, affectionate mother and wife.

Considering I found extensive information on the traditional status of women from other references, I chose to include only one particularly significant detail given by Smith in my research report. She gave information on the participation of War/Beloved Women in battle and their power to save enemy captives and raise their voice in town councils. I used this as one of the strongest contrasts to the American role of women.