

A VICTIM OF KING PHILIP'S WAR (1675-76): MARY ROWLANDSON AND THE ACCOUNT OF HER CAPTIVITY

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In the years 1675-76 the war between the Algonquian tribes of New England, led by Metacomet (sachem of the Wampanoags), and the white settlers, brought unprecedented destruction to both sides. The two cultures which, up to that point, had co-existed side by side, awkwardly perhaps, but with only relatively minor frictions (except for the 1636-37 Pequot war), finally collided. The most direct and concrete cause of what is usually referred to as King Philip's war (from the name with which the colonists called Metacomet) was a trial that was held in Plymouth, Massachusetts, in June of 1675. Three Wampanoags were prosecuted for the alleged murder of the Christian Indian John Sassamon who, only a few days before his death (January 29), had warned the authorities of Plymouth Colony that a series of attacks against the settlers were being prepared by that tribe (Leach 31). Found guilty, the three Indians were executed on the 8th of June. Any consideration on the legitimacy and rightfulness of the trial may only be speculative, but what remains to be observed is that the episode not only exemplified but also, in a sense, dramatized the mounting confrontation between the English and the Indians. A confrontation arising mainly from territorial competition: on one side the Indians, reacting against the increasing pressure of Colonial expansionism, on the other the settlers, regarding that reaction as a threat to what, in their view, was the God-granted authority of the Colonial government.

Among the fifty towns attacked by the Indians in the course of the war, was that of Lancaster, Massachusetts, a frontier settlement of perhaps fifty families, about thirty miles west of Boston. On February 10, 1676, a party of four hundred Narragansetts stormed this community, burning several buildings and houses, including that of its minister, Mr. Joseph Rowlandson. The clergyman was absent at the time of the attack, having gone to Boston to ask the local authorities for assistance in the defense of the town. On his return, he discovered that his wife Mary and their three children had been captured and taken away by the Indians. Mrs. Rowlandson was released after eleven weeks of captivity, upon the payment of twenty pounds. As for her children, the youngest daughter Sarah, wounded on the day of the capture, died in her mother's arms in the early stages of the march through the wilderness; Joseph and Mary, separated from their mother during most of the captivity, were not set free until several weeks after her return home. It is likely that Mary Rowlandson began to record her experience in written form shortly after her deliverance. The account was published as a book in 1682, with the following title: *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God, together With the Faithfulness of His Promises Displayed; Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restauration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*. It enjoyed enormous popularity, both in America and in England, going through at least thirty editions, and it inaugurated a new genre: the Indian captivity narrative.

In exemplarily terse and direct style the book combines a precise description of highly dramatic circumstances with a religious reading of their ultimate meaning. On the one hand, Rowlandson conveys the confusion and pathos of succeeding events, on the other, the numerous biblical citations inserted in the narrative insistently and, one is tempted to say, rhythmically reiterate God's role in the life of man. The narration opens with a graphic description of the Indian attack, and the reader is instantly confronted with the din and frantic activity of the battle. It is a scene of ruin and violence, with the lives of several individuals coming to abrupt ends in rapid succession. From the start, there is a sense of inevitability in the way in which the besieged succumb, one after the other, to the destructive fury of the assailants. The impression is almost that of assisting to a sacrificial ritual, and one with cannibalistic undertones. The Indians, we are told, jump upon their victims, strike them with their hatchets, strip off their clothes, and "split open" their "bowels" (33) ¹ as if to devour them. Confronting the colonists, as they emerge from a house in flames, the warriors are likened to gigantic jaws waiting for prey ("the Indians gaping before us with their guns, spears, and

1. All quotations are from the second edition of Mary Rowlandson's narrative (Cambridge: Samuel Green, Sr.), as reprinted in *Puritans among the Indians*, eds. Alden T. Vaughan & Edward W. Clark (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981).

hatchets" 34). And the idea is once again reinforced in the close of the first section through the use of animal imagery; the scene evoked thus becomes that of "ravenous beasts" (35) about to tear to pieces a group of helpless and frightened creatures.

It is a solemn sight to see so many Christians lying in their blood, some here and some there, like a company of sheep torn by wolves, all of them stripped naked by a company of hell-hounds, roaring, singing, ranting and insulting, as if they would have torn our very hearts out. (35)

One of the things that is most likely to attract the modern reader's attention is the extraordinary variety of epithets Rowlandson uses to refer to her captors. She calls them, to name just a few examples, "murderous wretches" (33), "merciless heathen" (34) ("heathen" is by far the term recurring most frequently), "barbarous" or "inhuman" creatures (35-36), "roaring lions and savage bears" (70), and it is almost as if she were striving to find the appropriate definition for something that ultimately escapes her understanding. Interestingly enough, her disparaging expressions become less frequent as the narration progresses, as she finds herself thrown more and more deeply in the wilderness, that world of which the Indians seem, to her eyes, an emanation. Rowlandson herself may be said to be devoid of a clear identity, having been removed from what defined her socially (husband, children, relations, friends, home and property). And as we follow her in a sort of *via crucis*, cadenced by twenty changes of camping site (the "removes"), we witness what is, among other things, a quest for a lost self. The journey through the wilderness is characterized by many a revelation: Rowlandson discovers that she can endure exhausting marches, severe cold and sleeping in rough shelters or outdoors, that she can eat food which in her former situation she would have regarded as inedible or repellent. She discovers in herself, in short, unsuspected strength and great adaptability. Following her story, the reader may at times be reminded of the resourceful heroines of many a folktale. The narrative contains in fact some of the typical elements of that form: The removal of the hero or heroine from home, the journey through a threatening natural environment, the ordeal (overcoming the grief for the death of the six-year old daughter and enduring occasional death threats, among other things), the magic helper (i. e. the character who gives the protagonist a special object that helps him or her to overcome any obstacle; in Rowlandson's case, the friendly Indian who gives her a Bible), and the happy denouement (the return to white society). Undoubtedly, the Bible Rowlandson receives in the course of the third remove proves to be an invaluable gift. Functioning very much like a magic talisman, it provides her with comforting answers in her most agonizing moments of doubt. At the same time it also helps her to preserve her sanity by

enabling her to interpret a highly destabilizing condition, and it sustains her as a symbol of the fundamental element in her experience: her religion. Characteristically, Rowlandson views the gift as a sign of the “wonderful mercy of God” (41) and the donor as merely an unconscious agent, a puppet moved by divine hands. Indeed, throughout the narrative the Indians are only regarded as masters of their acts when behaving cruelly and viciously, whereas their acts of kindness or civility are almost never acknowledged as originating from them. Thus, for instance, when an old Indian and his squaw give Rowlandson food and shelter during the twelfth remove, she comments as follows: “through the providence of God I had a comfortable lodging that night” (51). And when she receives from Quinnapin (her master) some water and a mirror, as well as a good meal, it is in her bible that she finds the explanation for the sachem’s benign behavior: “Psal. 106: 46, ‘He made them to be pitied, of all those that carried them captives.’” (61). When acting compassionately, Rowlandson implies, the Indians are acting against their real nature, which is intrinsically malignant. And only when such nature is temporarily suppressed by God, only when they are, in a sense, possessed, can they show signs of humanity. Even their ability to survive in the wilderness, in spite of the scarcity of food and the hardships of outdoor life, is not viewed as bespeaking their resourcefulness and ingenuity, but rather as evidence of God’s wrath against the settlers. The main reason for the existence of the Indians, it is strongly suggested, is their being an instrument of punishment for the moral shortcomings of the colonists.

I can but admire to see the wonderful providence of God in preserving the heathen for further affliction to our poor country . . . Strangely did the Lord provide for them that I did not see (all the time I was among them) one man, woman, or child die with hunger . . . our perverse and evil carriages in the sight of the Lord have so offended Him that instead of turning His hand against them the Lord feeds and nourishes them up to be a scourge to the whole land. (68-69)

Early in the narrative, Rowlandson reflects on the ways in which she has often abandoned the right path in the past. She reads her present condition as a just chastisement and, what is more, one from which she can profit greatly from a spiritual point of view. As it has been frequently observed, it was essential for the Puritan mind to frame the captivity experience in the context of God’s infinite wisdom and inscrutable designs. The pain, the anguish, the privations, were all part of the lesson the unfortunate victim and, by extension, his or her community, had to learn. The acknowledgment of one’s failings as a Christian was the first necessary step toward both physical and spiritual salvation. Accordingly, when Rowlandson looks back at her past sins, at a period in her life marked by

complacency and carelessness, she implicitly invites her readers (the society to which she belongs and which she typifies) to do the same. Her moment of self-examination is both a call for reformation and an expression of gratitude ("as He wounded me with one hand, so He healed me with the other" (38)). She has come to realize, in fact, that while she has known grief and has been separated from all that was of worth to her, her life has been preserved and her condition of utter destitution and solitude has made her feel God's presence more forcefully than ever. Having been sternly reminded of the precariousness and vanity of human life, she has learnt to bear her misfortune with patience, and to confide totally in God's providence. Crucial in the movement toward redemption is the recognition of one's helplessness and frailty. As Rowlandson, in the course of the story, alternates between moments of hope and moments of despair, she explains her instability in terms of her dependence on God's mercy. It is God who, as we have seen, can make the Indians act kindly toward her. It is God who sends her a Bible and, guiding her hand, makes her find those passages which can bring her comfort and reassurance. Yet, just as it can be easily given, relief can be also taken away. Telling of a time in which she had nearly lost all hopes of deliverance, Rowlandson describes her agony as part of her punishment. She emphasizes in particular how, because of God's disfavor, even her Bible ceases to possess that healing quality which had sustained her up to that moment, and is momentarily turned into an ordinary book, a simple object.

Then also I took my bible to read, but I found no comfort here either, which many times I was wont to find. So easy a thing it is with God to dry up the streams of scripture-comfort from us. (53)

The lesson Rowlandson offers her readers is that, however trying, her moments of utter dejection never result in expressions of resentment toward God's will ("in all my sorrows and afflictions God did not leave me to have my impatience work towards Himself, as if His ways were unrighteous" (53)). On the contrary, the narrative shows her simply accepting the fact that her devotion is being constantly and justly tested and is increasingly strengthened in the process.

In her article on *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*, Ann Stanford examines the various stages of Rowlandson's adaptation to Indian customs, a key factor in her survival as well as a recurring theme in most captivity narratives. As a result of her reeducation, Stanford maintains, Rowlandson comes to "discriminate between good shelter and bad, between kinds of food . . . [and] to recognize diverse human qualities among her captors" (34-35). She learns, in other words, to make the best of her condition and to look at things in new ways. It is significant, however, that this capacity to endure, and conform to, certain aspects of her captors' way of life, is consistently counter-balanced by an irrepressible

yearning for her own culture. Every little sign or trace of the world from which she has been abruptly severed brings an intense emotional response. Thus, for instance, the simple sight of “a place where English cattle had been” becomes a source of consolation, and that of “an English path” affects her “deeply” (“[it] so took with me that I thought I could have freely laid down and died.” (45)). Later in the narrative, she tells of a day in which she saw in the distance a company of about thirty horsemen approaching the camping site, and how her heart “skipped within” her upon recognizing their English apparel. For a few moments, she rejoices at the glimpse of their “hats, white neckcloths, and sashes about their waists, and ribbons upon their shoulders” (58), but sharp is her disappointment when she realizes that those familiar induments cover the menacing figures of her captors (“when they came near there was a vast difference between the lovely faces of Christians and the foul looks of those heathens” (59)). Often in the narrative, we read of Rowlandson’s practice of making articles of clothing for the Indians, in exchange for food or money. Her skill and industry were not only valuable for practical reasons but also, I believe, because they enabled her to recreate, however temporarily, a sort of familiar sphere. By sewing shirts and caps, and knitting stockings, she could, in a way, connect once again with her lost domesticity. At times, her desire to retreat to a self-made realm of known and reassuring customs, takes the form of a momentary withdrawal from the surrounding reality.

I cannot but remember how many times sitting in their wigwams and musing on things past I should suddenly leap up and run out as if I had been at home, forgetting where I was and what my condition was. But when I was without and saw nothing but wilderness and woods and a company of barbarous heathens, my mind quickly returned to me. (52)

The sense of security and protection she derives from an enclosed space, as opposed to the highly disquieting quality of the wilderness, is powerful enough to make her transcend her situation. For a few moments then, the simple interior of a wigwam leaves its place to the walls, pavement and ceiling of her house. Significantly, leaving the enclosed space means breaking the spell, as the impact with what lies outside causes Rowlandson to confront the actuality of her captivity. If, on the one hand, Rowlandson’s adaptation to outdoor life is certainly remarkable, on the other she consistently retains a view of nature as threatening and hostile. From the day of her capture to that of her release, the wilderness remains to her eyes “vast and desolate” (37); it is the “land of the enemy” (43), full of wild beasts and countless other treacherous hazards. More than once, the landscape through which Rowlandson is forced to march is described in such a way that its vastness, rather than suggesting openness, evokes the image of a

gigantic prison. Swamps (“a deep dungeon” 45), steep hills, and rivers become then like snares, always ready to entangle the unfortunate creature who happens to direct his or her steps toward them. In what is perhaps the most poignant moment in the narrative, Rowlandson recalls the death of her six-year old daughter Elizabeth, during the third remove. Summoned to the presence of her master, Rowlandson is forced to abandon momentarily the wake of her dead child. And when she tells of how, upon her return, the Indians show her the place where they buried the body, it is as if the little girl had been swallowed by that wild, hostile region. And the impression is that the mother herself, a captive in the hands of those she regards as barbarous creatures, feels to be in a death-like condition, with the ground, woods, and sky around her forming a massive tomb (“there I left that child in the wilderness and must commit it and myself also in this wilderness condition to Him who is above all” (39)). The redemption from captivity and the subsequent reunion with husband and children bring Rowlandson happiness, but not serenity. As she relates in the final section of her text, her experience has affected her to the point that she is no longer able to “sleep quietly without workings in my thoughts whole nights together” (74). While everybody else is fast asleep, she cannot help musing “upon things past”, and how they display the “wonderful power” (74) of God. But, perhaps, what still haunts her more than anything else is the recollection of the open spaces and untamed forces she had to confront daily during her captivity.

Sound and food are prominent elements in Rowlandson’s characterization of the Indians. Several are the references to war cries and celebratory songs, as well as to various kinds of plants and animals that were part of the Indian diet, with the narrator consistently emphasizing their outlandish, barbaric character. Remembering her first night as a captive, Rowlandson observes that “the roaring and singing and dancing and yelling of those black creatures in the night, . . . made the place a lively resemblance of hell” (36). As we know, this was to become one of the most frequently recurring images in both fictional and non-fictional depictions of Indian life. Thus, for instance, we find that as late as 1958 the author of *Flintlock and Tomahawk*, a study of King Philip’s war, describes an Indian war dance as follows: “with their faces painted and their naked limbs glistening with sweat, they [the Indians] must have resembled fiends in Hell” (5). From the start, the sound of Indian voices in Rowlandson’s story is identified as one of destruction and death, a sound that cannot but fill Christians with horror. And the impression one is likely to gather from her comments on different rituals, is that there is no significant difference between the vocal and rhythmic expressions preceding or following a battle, and those lamenting the death of a child. They are hideous, brutal cries and howls, the sounds one commonly associates with wild beasts. The barbarity of the Indians is also reflected by their eating habits. Interestingly enough, after mentioning various kinds of

unusual (to English standards) food throughout the story, Rowlandson feels the need to compile a sort of typical Indian diet in the final part of the narrative. She enumerates once again many of the plants and types of meat that she herself ate during her captivity, after hunger had prevailed over repugnance. Also mentioned, and for the first time, are several other food items, distinctively odder and more sensational than the ones we have encountered before (they include, among other things, old bones which sometimes have to be freed from worms and maggots, and rattlesnakes). If, as Rowlandson explicitly declares, her purpose here is to call the reader's attention to "the wonderful power of God in providing for such a vast number of our enemies in the wilderness" (69), she also effectively uses food to reaffirm incisively the deep-rooted savagery of her captors. Relevant, in this sense, are also her observations on the Indians' use of provisions and animals taken from colonial towns. It must be remembered that, among the Indians, a sudden abundance of food as that resulting from a raid in a white settlement, usually provided the occasion for a huge feast in which great quantities of victuals were consumed at one time. Several early captives comment in dismay on this practice which, to their eyes, represented a denial of moderation and prudence. Setting the example for many other writers, Rowlandson describes the feast following the attack on Lancaster with words evoking a pagan orgy.

miserable was the waste that was there made of horses, cattle, sheep, swine, calves, lambs, roasting pigs, and fowl (which they had plundered in the town), some roasting, some lying and burning, and some boiling to feed our merciless enemies who were joyful enough though we were disconsolate. (36)

Two passages in the narrative are undoubtedly of great interest for the anthropologist as much as for the literature critic. They reveal, in fact, a narrator who is capable, at times, of pausing, of leaving aside the religious interpretation of her condition to assume the role of straightforward observer and annotator of the customs of a foreign culture. In scrupulous detail Rowlandson describes a ceremony of preparation for war (nineteenth remove (63)) and a dance (twentieth remove (66)); for a few moments, rather than presenting her captors as either sinister embodiments of the wild or as God's scourge, she simply relates their behavior. One cannot but marvel at the vividness with which she is able to recreate two events that, alone perhaps in this sense, do not involve or affect directly her predicament. We expect Rowlandson to retain well impressed in her memory the moments of physical and psychological suffering, the alternating of fear and hope, the violence, the hunger, the cold, the exhaustion, but these two descriptions come as a surprise. They stand apart in her account, being the only instances in which her captors, instead of causing fear, resentment, or puzzlement, engage her interest.

During King Philip's war, the inhabitants of frontier settlements such as Lancaster lived in constant fear of Indian attacks. As Rowlandson recalls in the opening section, she used to believe that if ever such a dreaded event took place, she would have preferred to be killed rather than be captured. But, she admits somewhat apologetically, when it came to the real thing her "mind changed" (35); the sight of her captors' weapons was so terrifying that she chose the uncertainty of captivity over the certainty of death. In a sense, it is the narrative itself, as a document, that justifies that choice. As the anonymous author of the preface (by many critics believed to be Increase Mather) expressly indicates, the text is meant to be of benefit to others. It is a personal story, originally intended as a private record of an extraordinary experience and an acknowledgement of Divine mercy, that is offered to the public for its exemplary value. A story in which every little incident is regarded as a sign of Divine providence and is, accordingly, reported with utmost precision and simplicity. The directness of expression of Rowlandson's work has been seen as characteristic of the early Indian captivity narrative as a literary genre. Like Rowlandson, other victims of Indian attacks during King Philip's war and its aftermath described their life as prisoners and their daily struggle for survival. Most of them were Puritans and their tales reflect a deep concern for the religious implications of the events in which they participated. Because of their belief in the representative value of their stories (what they told of their own and their society's fate), these authors strove for exactness of detail and immediacy in relating their experiences. Both qualities characterize in fact such narratives as those of Quintin Stockwell (1684) and John Williams (1707) which, together with Jonathan Dickenson's *God's Protecting Providence Man's Surest help and Defence* (1699), have been indicated by Roy Harvey Pearce as being "in the pattern" (3) of *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*. They represent the initial phase in the development of the genre, and their unifying element is to be found chiefly in their common attempt at an unadulterated reconstruction of facts. The religious content is also, of course, of extreme importance, but here differences are greater. We pass, in fact, from the dominant presence of the question of Divine providence in Rowlandson, with that repeated pattern of biblical quotations, to the much more secular tone of Stockwell's narrative, whose religious significance is emphasized not by the author, but by Increase Mather (in whose *Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences* the text first appeared in 1684). Early in the eighteenth century, the captivity narrative began to undergo significant changes, progressively moving away from the Rowlandson model. The voice of the captive that, in *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*, had spoken directly to the reader, began to be filtered and adapted for particular ends. The reconstruction of the painful experience of captivity came more and more to be reported in written form by individuals who had not actually lived it, and it was their sensibility that the text often

reflected. Factual accuracy gradually ceased to be a major concern of the author who, instead, increasingly tended to concentrate on narrative devices to capture and hold the reader's attention. The elements of pathos and horror contained in the first captivity narratives had certainly contributed to their popular appeal. They were simply inherent in the kinds of incidents which were related, and their impact did not depend significantly on the way they were described (which was, in most cases, surprisingly matter-of-fact). But with authors like Cotton Mather, the murders and tortures that were part of almost every captive experience began to be exploited to promote violent anti-Indian and anti-French sentiments. His *Decennium Luctuosum* (1699) and *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702) include the narratives of Hannah Swarton and Hannah Dustan as well as four "Relations" on the conditions of captives, and the excited, melodramatic tone with which scenes of violence and cruelty are evoked clearly indicates a move toward sensationalism. Both this phenomenon and the practice of editorial intervention on the texts, to conform the narration to a conventional literary style, were part of a conscious effort to respond to changing popular tastes. Analyzing textual differences between three different versions (1728, 1754, 1760) of *God's Mercy surmounting Man's Cruelty, Exemplified in the Captivity and Redemption of Elizabeth Hanson*, Pearce points out the passage from the original straightforwardness and plainness (reminiscent of Rowlandson), to the literary tone of the latest edition, related by Samuel Bownas. The changes revealed by the comparison exemplify in his view the "stylization" of the captivity narrative (4). Also relevant is the fact that the Hanson account does not contain biblical quotations, a sign of the progressive secularization of the genre. By the mid-eighteenth century, Pearce notes:

Religious concerns came to be incidental at most; the intent of the typical writer of the narrative was to register as much hatred of the French and Indians as possible . . . The captivity narrative was shaped by the interests of the popular audience towards which it was directed; French and Indian cruelty, not God's providence, was the issue. The writing of the hack and the journalist, not the direct outpouring of the pious individual, became the standard of, and the means to, this new end. By 1750 the captivity narrative had become the American equivalent of the Grub Street criminal biography. (7)

With fiction prevailing over fact, the genre lost one of its main sources of interest for the modern reader. The not numerous, but significant descriptions of Indian rituals, physical appearance and clothing made by Rowlandson and some of the other early authors offer in fact a fascinating glimpse in the life and customs of their captors. But in the works of later writers the portrayal of native Americans loses almost all realistic connotations. The Indian becomes a purely literary figure, to be either demonized or idealized.

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