

Mary Rowlandson's Journey to Redemption

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FOR those who adopted the Calvinistic doctrine of salvation and damnation, there was no place in between. The individual was a saint or a sinner, his redemption or punishment ordained by God for all time. The American Puritans with their penchant for allegory found it easy to transfer the sharp division between the saved and the damned into the world around them. To them, the European settlements and clearings were plainly the places where Saints might live; the dark, uncleared forests were inhabited by those who had not yet had the chance to embrace Christianity, perhaps because they had been chosen for damnation anyhow. As Cotton Mather said: "We know not when or how these Indians first became inhabitants of this mighty continent yet we may guess that probably the Devil decoyed these miserable savages hither, in hope that the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ would never come to destroy or disturb his absolute empire over them."

In the settlements at the edge of the forest a double battle went on — the struggle for salvation within the souls of men and women and the struggle for the conquest of the wilderness, often through conflict between the native tribes and the English settlers. The conflict between Indian and settler did not often break out into open war. Often the two cultures lived side by side for decades with only minor and limited hostilities. The peace between the people of Massasoit and those of William Bradford lasted until the deaths of those two leaders. But in the summer of 1675 war broke out between the colonists and the Indians under the Wampanoag sachem, King

Philip, the son of Massasoit. The war, which caused the destruction of settlements throughout western Massachusetts and in the valley of the Connecticut River, produced a remarkable literary work, the story of one of the captives.

In February, 1676, Mary Rowlandson, a minister's wife living in Lancaster in western Massachusetts was captured by Indians after a bloody battle in which many of her relations were shot or burned or felled by hatchets or knives before her eyes. After eleven weeks of captivity she was ransomed and returned to her own people, where she set down her narrative as "a memorandum of Gods dealing with her, that she might never forget, but remember the same, and the severall circumstances thereof, all the dayes of her life." In 1682 John Foster, the Boston printer who had brought out the American edition of Anne Bradstreet's poems, published the story of Mary Rowlandson under the title *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God, Together with the Faithfulness of His Promises Displayed; Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*. Mrs. Rowlandson's narrative might be considered the epic of seventeenth-century New England, for its outward events represent in literal form an inner psychological and religious redemption and propose such redemption for New England herself.

Mary Rowlandson's book was an immediate success. Within the year John Foster brought out the second edition "corrected and amended," and a reprint was published in England. Eventually the book went through at least thirty editions; perhaps no contemporary New England publication received more attention in England or in America. The successful story launched a new genre—the Indian captivity narrative—which would be popular for two hundred years as the settlers moved across the continent and encountered tribe after tribe.

By its very nature the captivity narrative has a formal

literary structure, moving from the capture through the ordeal of captivity—with its incidents of the captive's becoming reconciled to circumstances—to the final return to the society from which the captive came. The narrative ends with reflections on the nature of the experience and its larger meanings.¹ Rowlandson's narrative makes full use of the opportunities of the form. It opens with a description of the Indians' attack upon her house and the bloody battle, the deaths of family and friends, and the capture of the narrator herself and her wounded six-year-old daughter. From there she moves her narrative rapidly along by marches and encampments, twenty different "removes" during her captivity.

Like most captives Mary Rowlandson hoped for the restoration of herself and her children to their own culture. As in other rituals, the path to restoration involves a number of stages before the captive emerges into freedom and a new self-knowledge. First of all, the captive must survive. Survival means adaptation to the ways of the captors physically and psychologically. The Indians moved frequently, especially in time of war, and the captives must be able to keep up with the march and to carry heavy burdens. In another such narrative, John Williams' *The Redeemed Captive*, published in 1707 and kept in print for over a century, the author recounts that his wife, unable to keep up, was slain with one stroke of the hatchet by "the cruel and bloodthirsty savage who took her." Cotton Mather in *Decennium Luctuosum* (1699) recounted the trials of seven-year-old Sarah Gerish, who, having overslept in the forest, awoke to find her captors had gone off without her, leaving her "a prey for Bears and Wolves, and without any Sustenance, in an howling Wilderness many Scores of Leagues from any Plantation."² She survived by tracking the Indians through the new-fallen snow, which had been sent by an all-seeing Providence. Mrs. Rowlandson always managed to keep pace with her captors, though the journey took her west

and north and back again over a distance of 125 miles, without counting the twists and turns of the trails, which made it actually much longer. The next to last remove was the longest; Mrs. Rowlandson traveled over fifteen miles, crossing through a great swamp up to the knees in muddy water, where she thought she "should have sunk down at last, and never gat out."³

Captives also had to adapt to sleeping outdoors or in temporary shelters of bark or branches. The second night of the captivity Mrs. Rowlandson spent sitting in the snow by a little fire, a few boughs behind her, her wounded child on her lap. In another remove they "came to a desolate place in the Wilderness, where there were no Wigwams or Inhabitants before; we came about the middle of the afternoon to this place, cold and wet, and snowy, and hungry, and weary, and no refreshing for man, but the cold ground to sit on, and our poor Indian cheer." By this time Mrs. Rowlandson has so far adapted to her harsh life that, where during the first night away from Lancaster she had asked to stay in an English house which stood near by, now she regrets the absence of wigwams.

A similar change took place with regard to food. Indian fare was indeed poor. The Indians had either lost their stores of corn and other provisions or their travels had taken them too far from their sources of supply. They depended on what they could find in the forest or take during raids on the settlements. Mrs. Rowlandson's diet included—besides corn, peas, ground-nuts and acorns—boiled bear meat, horses hooves, horse foot broth, and ridding of the small guts, all of which in her hunger she ate "wolvishly." Rowlandson reports her gradual adaptation to the food of her captors, an experience repeated in many of the captivity narratives. She tells how "they boyled an old Horses leg which they had got, and so we drank of the broth, as soon as they thought it was ready, and when it was almost all gone, they

filled it up again." This reminds her of her change with regard to food. "The first week of my being among them, I hardly ate any thing; the second week, I found my stomach grow very faint for want of something; and yet it was very hard to get down their filthy trash: but the third week, though I could think how my stomach would turn against this or that, and I could starve and dy before I could eat such things, yet they were sweet and savoury to my taste."

Another problem for captives was to respond appropriately to the capricious moods of their masters, who varied greatly in their treatment of captives, sometimes even slaying them in moments of exasperation. Rowlandson did not get along well with her mistress, the squaw sachem Weetamoo, who once almost felled her with a huge club. At other times Weetamoo refused her food or shelter, and Mrs. Rowlandson had to beg at other wigwams, at which her mistress grew angry and told her she disgraced her master by begging.

Mrs. Rowlandson also speaks of the kindness of various Indians to the captives. Often she was given food by unnamed squaws and allowed to sleep in their crowded shelters. One couple fed her well and invited her to return whenever she was hungry. In the corner at the time were colonial coats filled with bullet holes and stained with the fresh blood of Englishmen, trophies of a recent raid.

The incident points up the odd juxtaposition of the two cultures. The colonists and Indians had been living side by side for fifty years, learning something of the ways of one another. From the Indians the colonists learned how to plant Indian corn and use fish as manure; they learned the value of the canoe as a light convenient vessel and the moccasin as the best footgear for walking long distances in the forest. In turn the Indians adopted much of the clothing of their neighbors, coats being especially valued; they also obtained guns whenever they

could. The planters had also learned from the earliest settlements in Virginia the use of tobacco.

Mrs. Rowlandson gave up smoking a pipe at the beginning of her captivity. But she had other solaces to sustain her. Among them must have been her knitting and needlework, those skills so insisted upon in the education of Puritan maidens. Perhaps she carried her knitting needles away from Lancaster in that capacious apron pocket in which she stowed bits of corn, bear meat, and her Bible. At any rate, we have constant visions of the sturdy colonial dame knitting white stockings for the Indians. She also made shirts and caps out of cloth the Indians brought to her. The Indians, who for the most part, dealt justly with Mrs. Rowlandson, paid her for her work. She received corn cakes fried in bear grease—a great delicacy—from King Philip for making his son a shirt. She received meat, peas, or shillings from other customers.

Out of this wigwam industry grew one of the strangest dinner parties of literature. Mary Rowlandson had received a piece of bear meat for making a shirt and some peas for knitting a pair of stockings. She invited her master and mistress to dinner. But she committed an unforgiveable social *faux pas*, for she served the master and mistress in the same bowl, "and the proud Gossip," Rowlandson reports, "because I served them both in one Dish, would eat nothing, except one bit that he gave her upon the point of his knife."

Weetamoo had every reason to be proud; she was an important personage. She was the widow of King Philip's elder brother, Alexander; after that chief's death, she married Quinnapin, a sachem of the Narragansetts, who was Mary Rowlandson's master. Even more important, Weetamoo was herself a chief, the sachem of the Pocassets, a tribe related to the Wampanoags. Mary Rowlandson's is one of the few accounts that describe the activities of the Indian women and their varied human qualities, from

arbitrary cruelty to the hospitality and generosity of individual Indians, a hospitality customary with them and carried on even in the face of starvation and war. Over the period of her captivity she also gives a portrait of the character and appearance of the imperious Weetamoo.

In accord with her high station, Weetamoo spent much time on her appearance. We have a view of this queen, like Belinda at her toilet, far out in the forest among a starving tribe: "A severe and proud Dame she was, bestowing every day in dressing herself neat as much time as any of the Gentry of the land: powdering her hair and painting her face, going with Neck-laces, with Jewels in her ears, and Bracelets upon her hands." Thus jeweled and powdered after the fashion of the English, Weetamoo spent her time as did the English gentlewoman of high station, in delicate needlework. Rowlandson tells us "her work was to make Girdles of Wampom and Beads."

We have a further glimpse of Weetamoo and Quinnapin performing a dance with one other couple before the colonial representative who came to ransom Mrs. Rowlandson. Their costumes were an amalgam of Indian and English clothes. "Quinnapin was dressed in his Holland shirt, with great Laces sewed at the tail of it, he had his silver Buttons, his white Stockins, his Garters were hung round with Shillings, and he had Girdles of Wampom upon his head and shoulders. She had a Kersey Coat, and covered with Girdles of Wampom from the Loins upward; her arms from her elbows to her hands were covered with bracelets; there were handfulls of Necklaces about her neck, and several sorts of Jewells in her ears. She had fine red Stokins, and white Shoos, her hair powdered and face painted Red."

Quinnapin was an important sachem among the Indians and over the time of her captivity Mrs. Rowlandson began to respect him and regard him as a friend. On April 9, when she had been a captive for six weeks, Quinnapin left for a three-week trip, and Mrs. Rowlandson remained

at the encampment with Weetamoo. "A sore time of tryal," Mrs. Rowlandson concluded, "I had to go through. My master being gone, who seemed to me the best friend that I had of an Indian, both in cold and hunger, and quickly so it proved." Weetamoo gave full reign to her capricious treatment of the captive during that time. At last, Mrs. Rowlandson came again to a camp where Quinnapin was "and glad I was to see him."

Mary Rowlandson's relief was matched by Quinnapin's concern. He asked when Mrs. Rowlandson, who had just walked through the great swamp, had last washed herself. She replied "not this month." Quinnapin himself brought her water and bade her wash. Then he handed her a mirror. This gesture, which she recalls so matter-of-factly, is a touch worthy of the later tales of Hawthorne, for in the mirror she must have seen herself, both literally and symbolically, at the very depths of her degradation. Thenceforth her fortune turns. Quinnapin told his squaw, a wife older than Weetamoo, to give the captive something to eat: "so she gave me a mess of Beans and meat, and a little Ground-nut cake. I was wonderfully revived with this favour shewed me," says Mrs. Rowlandson. Things were going well. She had the old squaw to stay with instead of Weetamoo, she received a hat and a silk handkerchief for knitting three pairs of stockings, and negotiations were under way for her ransom. Tom and Peter, two Christian Indians brought a letter from Boston about the captives, and Mrs. Rowlandson greeted them with joy. "Though they were Indians, I gat them by the hand, and burst out into tears; my heart was so full that I could not speak to them."

Thus the captive's immersion in the forest, which she, with other Puritans, calls "the vast and howling wilderness" is complete. She has come to accept the Indian way of life, the discomforts, the sleeping in temporary shelters, the eating of "outlandish" food. She has come to discriminate between good shelter and bad, between

kinds of food, such as that given her in her reunion with her master and the ordinary merely life-sustaining food of the wandering tribe. She has come to recognize diverse human qualities among her captors. Though she continually refers to them as heathens and pagans, she distinguishes between those who are kind those who are not. Mary Rowlandson's tale is much more than that of an earthly restoration. It reveals a growing awareness of the self and its relation to others. Mary Rowlandson, the redeemed captive, can never look at the world in the old way again.

As for so many Puritans, trust in the Lord gave Mary Rowlandson the strength to endure her trials. Shortly after the death of her wounded child, one of the Indians returning from a raid upon Medfield gave her a Bible, which she read when she could. She followed the practice sometimes of turning at random to a passage for comforting words, and many times found phrases she could apply to her situation. She regarded the affliction that had come upon her as an ordeal sent by God to test her piety, just as she described the war of the Indians upon the colonists as a scourge. "Our perverse and evil carriages in the sight of the Lord, have so offended him, that instead of turning his hand against them [the Indians] the Lord feeds and nourishes them up to be a scourge to the whole land." In her captivity she worked out literally the allegory of a descent into hell and a redemption and return and she views her experience in such allegorical terms, saying "Thus hath the Lord brought me and mine out of that horrible pit, and hath set us in the midst of tender-hearted and compassionate Christians." The pit is the "vast and howling wilderness," inhabited by those she often refers to as heathens, pagans, and devils. Both the saving of New England and the restoration of Mary Rowlandson came only after there seemed to be no help but in the Lord; and this of course is the pattern recited by those who were assured of their

salvation by the experience of saving grace. They must first come to the full realization of their sinfulness and depravity, the knowledge that they cannot save themselves before they begin to feel the spirit of grace and the knowledge of salvation within themselves. So with New England—"When the Lord had brought his people to this, that they saw no help in any thing but himself: then he takes the quarrel into his own hand: and though they [the Indians] had made a pit in their own imaginations, as deep as hell for the Christians that Summer, yet the Lord hurl'd them selves into it." As for herself, "we may see a remarkable change of Providence: At first they were all against it [her going home], except my Husband would come for me; but afterwards they assented to it, and seemed much to rejoyce in it; some askt me to send them some Bread, others some Tobacco, others shaking me by the hand, offering me a Hood and Scarfe to ride in; not one moving hand or tongue against it. Thus hath the Lord answered my poor desire."

The earthly price of Mary Rowlandson's redemption—£20—was paid by some gentlemen and a Mrs. Usher, the wife of a bookseller, all of Boston, all wealthier and doubtless more in touch with England than the wife of a frontier minister. Mary Rowlandson herself represents another kind of American, the second generation of settlers who were even then plunging into the interior, cut off from roots in the culture of Europe by the circle of the forest, interacting with the new world and its native people. She embraces to the full the Puritan desire to be tested by affliction: "*for whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every Son whom he receiveth* The portion of some is to have their afflictions by drops, now one drop and then another; but the dregs of the Cup, the Wine of astonishment, like a sweeping rain that leaveth no food, did the Lord prepare to be my portion. Affliction I wanted, and affliction I had, full measure (I thought) pressed down and running over; yet I see,

when God calls a Person to any thing, and through never so many difficulties, yet he is fully able to carry them through and make them see, and say they have been gainers thereby."

Pious, capable, ruggedly self-reliant, conscious of her value as an individual, Mary Rowlandson embodies in most dramatic form the qualities demanded of the early settlers of New England. She had an ample store of the faith, toughness, and resilience required of one who would make the real and allegorical journey to redemption.

NOTES

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¹Richard VanDerBeets in "The Indian Captivity Narrative as Ritual," *American Literature*, 43 (1972) 548-562, gives an excellent summary of the archetypal and ritualistic phases of the captivity narratives.

²*Narratives of the Indian Wars 1675-1699*, ed. Charles H. Lincoln, New York, 1913, p. 200.

³A *Narrative of the Captivity and Restauration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson in Narratives*, ed. Lincoln, cited above, pp. 149-150. All further quotations from Rowlandson are from this source, pp. 129-131, 135, 139, 149-151, 156, 157, 160, 161, 165, 167.