

**REVENGEFUL VIOLENCE – HANNAH DUSTON’S CAPTIVITY
NARATIVE AND THE PURITAN PARADOX**

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Abstract: *The story of Hannah Duston brings forth a new image of the captive Puritan woman, one that is bearing the horrifying specter of violent revenge. The essay dwells on the captive’s way of dealing with the experience of captivity by touching upon Walter Benjamin’s approach on the matter and also by analyzing the moral paradox that arises.*

Keywords: *captivity, frontier, natural law, Puritan, violence*

1. Introduction

The Indian captivity narrative, a genre directly connected with physical as well as psychological violence, has been viewed by critics as a staple of the American letters covering a multitude of purposes, connected to religion and implicitly to morality, politics, and sentimental literature. It is undoubtedly an archetypal expression of the American values and attitudes as its transformation closely followed that of the New World – in the 17th and 18th centuries the colonists’ religious mission and their utter fear of failure, the 18th and 19th centuries with the shift from religious to secular utopia and finally the 19th century and the birth of the sensationalist fiction (Reinwater 2003:566). Interestingly enough, this type of texts was mainly written by women and/or presented a woman victim while encountering a wilderness both physically

and spiritually. The model that they generally followed was that given by the movement from sin to redemption of the spiritual autobiography and the jeremiad. A Puritan woman was taken from her familiar context and brought to the unknown land beyond the frontier, into the so-called “devil’s territory”. In such a situation the captive waited for God’s intervention by placing all trust and hope in a just and merciful divinity being aware of the fact that this would help passing the most important test in order to reach the certitude of being one of the elect.

2. Hannah Duston’s Story

By the end of the 17th century, after Mary Rowlandson’s famous account [first published in 1682, both in Massachusetts and London], the work that established in fact the tradition of the Indian captivity narrative in America, there appeared another case which presented the reader with the image of the woman captive, but one of a different type. Unlike Mary who found a way to survive and cohabitate with the savages despite their initial cruelty towards her, Hannah Duston, also Christian wife and mother, belonging to the Puritan community, takes arms against fate and acts upon her captors with the violence that was specific to them, re-activating the Old Testament law of an-eye-for-an-eye in the imaginary of the readers and fellow countrymen. She thus becomes an acclaimed hero and the first woman in the honor of whom a statue has been erected. The image of the spiritual model of patience and pious resistance is replaced by that of the courageous mother and community warrior-like savior as Cotton Mather, member of the ministerial elite at the time, sees her when writing the first account of the story entitled – *A Notable Exploit; wherein Dux Faemina Facti* (A Woman Leader in the Achievement, 1820). Jay Fliegelman

(1982:146) even calls Mather's narrative a "turning point in American intellectual history" as it celebrates self-reliance at the expense of human resignation to God's will.

In short, on March 15, 1697, during King William's War, a group of Canadian Indians, called Abenaki, allied with the French in the before mentioned war, attacked the frontier town of Haverhill, Massachusetts, and killed a large number of inhabitants, set villages on fire and took a dozen of captives. Among them there was a woman named Hannah Duston (also named Dustin in some ulterior text), her newborn baby and Mary Neff the nurse who was taking care of the two. Strangely enough, the husband Thomas ran to save his other children while leaving Hannah helpless in the house. The three that were left with no protection, were taken by the Indians, who stopped on the way to kill the infant by smashing his head against a tree. A few days later, the war party split up and Hannah and Mary were left on an island under the watch of a family of Praying Indians consisting of two warriors, three women, and seven children of various ages. Here they found out that when they reached the village in Maine they were going to be forced to strip and run the gauntlet. On the night of March 30, Hannah, together with Mary Neff and Samuel Lennardson, a boy who had been staying as a captive with the Indian family for almost a year, arose and tomahawked their sleeping captors. Only one squaw, severely wounded, and one boy escaped. After scalping their victims, the whites made their way down the Merrimac River to an outlying settlement, where they were welcomed as heroes. The Massachusetts General Assembly awarded them fifty pounds, and Francis Nicholson, Governor of Maryland, added his own generous contribution to the reward (Mather 1820:552). In later years, Mrs. Duston sought, and was granted by the state, an additional

sum of money in recognition of her services as an Indian slayer. A few days after her return, Mrs. Duston journeyed to Boston, where she told her tale to Samuel Sewall, who recorded it in his diary, and to Cotton Mather. The latter regarded Hannah's escape as one of the wonders of the Christian religion and, as Robert Arner (1973:20) underlines, transformed her into a Puritan saint, at once a self-reliant frontier woman and an afflicted Christian saved by God's infinite power.

3. Morality on the Frontier

The story has been retold many times, since its entrance into American literature by means of inclusion in Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana* up to the twentieth century and the variants present different attitudes towards her violent act ranging from great admiration (Cotton Mather 1820), mixed feelings of horror and awe (John Greenleaf Whittier 1965) to neutrality and undisturbed affection for the Indian way (Henry David Thoreau 2003) or total rejection (Nathaniel Hawthorne 1836), to name only some of the ulterior authors and the most important ones. Still, there is no personal account, Hannah does not author a variant of her story except the fact that she herself told Mather about the captivity and the conversion letter that she writes, strangely enough, 27 years after her captivity. In this letter, discovered in 1929 in a vault of the Center Congregational Church of Haverhill, she confesses that the captivity period was the most valuable time of her life, the most comfortable for her soul.

I desire to be Thankful that I was born in a Land of Light & Baptized when I was Young; and had a Good Education by My Father, Tho I took but little Notice of it in the time of it; –I am Thankful for my Captivity, twas the Comfortablest time that ever I had; In my Affliction God made his Word Comfortable to me. I

remembered 43d ps. ult – and those words came to my mind – ps118.17....I have had a great Desire to come to the Ordinance of the Lord's Supper a Great While but fearing I should give offence & fearing my own unworthiness has kept me back; reading a book concerning Suffering Did much awaken me. In the 55th of Isa. beg. We are invited to come; –Hearing Mr. Moody preach out of ye 3d of Mal. 3 last verses it put me upon Consideration. Ye 11th of Matthew has been Encouraging to me – I have been resolving to offer my Self from time to time ever since the Settlement of the present Ministry; I was awakened by the first Sacrament Sermon (Luke 14.17) But Delays and fears prevailed upon me; –But I desire to delay no longer, being Sensible it is My Duty–, I desire the Church to receive me tho' it be the eleventh hour; and pray for me-- that I may hon'r God and obtain the Salvation of my Soul. Hannah Dustin wife of Thomas Aetat 67. (Hannah Dustin's Letter to the Elders of the Second Church in Haverhill, 1724, <http://www.hawthorneinsalem.org/page/11866/>)

She specifies that her delay was caused by feelings of unworthiness and one may speculate that she felt guilty for having murdered the 10 praying Indians even if the entire community saw her as the embodiment of justice. But one may also speculate that she did not really want or care to enter the Church until old age came upon her with all its hardships.

The question that arises and is directly related to the idea of violence is the real motivation for her act. A variety of suppositions may appear in this respect: revenge, temporary insanity, financial reward, escape from physical injuries or a combination of all these. What I would like to dwell upon first is the concept of violence in Hannah Duston's story as related to Walter Benjamin's view on the matter. As the German philosopher states in the *Critique of Violence*, the elementary relation of any juridical order is that between means and ends and violence has to be looked for only as regards the means (Benjamin 2007:269). We may consequently say that Hannah committed a genuinely violent act. But to

what end? A cause, Benjamin adds, however effective, becomes violent, in the precise sense of the word, only when it bears on moral issues. At this point, it is worth mentioning the juridical motivation that Cotton Mather gives for Hannah's killing and then returning to get the scalps of the ten Indians:

...and being where she had not her own life secured by any law unto her, she thought she was not forbidden by any law to take away the life of the murderers by whom her child had been butchered. (Mather 1820:552).

In other words, she is situated outside the laws of her community; the wilderness accounts for a lawless land not in the sense that it is anti-law, but beyond or without it. What we encounter here is, in Kierkegaardian terms, a teleological suspension of the ethics, but this time the purpose does not seem to be religious. [Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish existentialist philosopher, employs this concept when talking about the significance of Abraham's readiness in killing his son as sacrifice to God and thus not being viewed as a killer but as a worthy worshiper of God.] In Mather's view, her act is morally justifiable because she is outside the boundaries of civilization and she is a mother whose child has been killed. Furthermore, she is the exponent of an entire community. We would assume that the law as a concept is regarded almost as a physical reality that is limited by spatial boundaries. The question arises: could violence be used as a moral means to just causes? Benjamin (2007:269-270) points out the distinction between natural law and positive law. The first concept implies violence as a natural datum; in Darwinian perception, besides natural selection there is only violence as the natural means appropriate to all the vital ends of nature. The second concept deals with violence as a product of history. The

former stresses the ends, the latter the means employed to reach a certain aim. By applying this discussion to Hannah's case and Mather's perspective on it, we would conclude that natural law was at work at the moment of the scalping. In "Notes on Walter Benjamin's Critique of Violence", Mathew Abbott (2008:81) shows that in the German philosopher's view, natural law is dependent on a paradox because justice must be found in an alignment between means and ends, where the attainment of one will establish legitimation through the guaranteed attainment of the other – just cause-legitimate means. However, this can only be obtained

through inquiry into one half of the nexus at the expense of leaving the other entirely undetermined. There is a kind of sleight of hand whereby a relation is claimed to be established between two terms, when what in fact takes place is simply the elimination (or bracketing out) of one of them. Natural law, Benjamin says, is blind to the contingency of means. (Abbott 2008:81)

But what was the moral end that justified Hannah's deed? Is revenge a moral value? Or is she the mouthpiece, so to say, of a whole community affected by Indian cruelty and, therefore, does her act become a symbolical one, bearing communal value towards which all look with fascination? Benjamin points to the figure of the great criminal and explains its historical ability to both horrify and captivate the masses. Such figures confront the violence of law "with the threat of declaring a new law" (Benjamin 2007:273). [Benjamin talks about violence outside/above law but within the state, and the actor becomes an intolerable figure for the state whereas Hannah's case is special.]

Mather compares Hannah to Jael, an Old-Testament woman. In the biblical story, before Jael appears, there is a prophecy stating that God was going to use a woman in order to defeat the enemies of Israel. The Book of Judges, chapter 24 gives the following account: “But Jael wife of Heber took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, until it went down into the ground he was lying fast asleep from weariness and he died.” (Judges 4:21) While using the same biblical tone, Mather offers a similar image: “at the feet of these poor prisoners, they bow'd, they fell, they lay down; at their feet they bow'd, they fell; where they bow'd, there they fell down dead.” (Mather 1820:551) Seen through the lenses of the typological thinking specific to the Puritan community, Hannah is the avenger of the whole people of the so-called “visible saints”. Hence, her act as exponent of the natural law is a just one and violence is a natural means for reaching highly moral ends.

Returning to the Biblical character Jael, it is worth mentioning that she is depicted as an independent women; she takes the decision without her husband’s consent and against his wishes. We have here again the case of reverted moral rules with the aim of accomplishing a sacred deed. Moreover, Hannah’s story is included in The Seventh Book of *Magnalia Christi Americana* (Mather 1820), which is entitled “Ecclesiarum Praelia” or “a book of the wars of the Lord”. Hannah Duston is, then, one of God’s warriors on earth. Violence is justified by this special status, by textual authority and by clerical acceptance, and becomes worthy of generous reward.

As we have already mentioned, Cotton Mather insists on the law and his approach on the story becomes more understandable in the light of Duston's violent family history. As Ann-Marie Weis (1998:49) shows, in

1676, Hannah's father was fined for having cruelly beaten Hannah's younger sister Elizabeth Emerson, who was eleven years old at the time. After seventeen years, the sister herself was accused of killing her newborn twins, illegitimate children delivered at home, without her parents' knowledge. She had hidden their bodies in a chest by her bed and later buried them in the garden. She claimed not to have hurt the infants, and it is possible that they were stillborn (one of them had its umbilical cord twisted about its neck). But the colonial laws had been revised in 1692 to make "concealing of the death of a bastard child" a capital crime (Weis 1998:49). Consequently, Elizabeth was tried by a jury and hanged on June 8, 1693. Interestingly enough, one of the women who examined Elizabeth at the discovery of the dead babies was Mary Neff, the widow who four years later assisted Hannah in killing six Native American children.

Most of the variants of the story belong to the 19th century when, it seems, readers' imagination was ignited especially by such narratives. That was because apparently, under the impetus of the romantic interest of the past, the New England people rediscovered their own colonial history and exploited it in novels and tales. Stories of captivity of the colonists had a wide appeal, not only because they were straight-forward and exciting, but because the ancestors of many New England men and women had been among the captives, as Katryn Whitford (1972:304) points out. One account belonging to this period is that of Timothy Dwight, who included the story in *Travels in New England and New York*, published in 1821. Dwight (1821:413) brings to the reader's mind the question of the morality of Hannah's conduct: "Whether all their sufferings, and all the danger of suffering anew, justified this slaughter may be questioned by you or some other exact moralist" – and answers:

A wife who had just seen her house burnt, her infant dashed against a tree, and her companions coldly murdered one by one; who supposed her husband and her remaining children, to have shared the same fate, who was threatened with torture, and indecency more painful than torture, ...would probably feel no necessity... of asking questions concerning anything, but the success of the enterprize. (Dwight 1821:413)

Once more she is placed above any law by mentioning the special situation as annulling all moral limitations.

If we approach other variants like that of John Greenleaf Whittier, entitled *The Mother's Revenge* and included in his *Legends of New England* (1831), then it seems that the whole violent story stems from Hannah's being forced to witness the killing of her baby. Transformation is a major sub-theme:

She has often said, that at this moment, all was darkness and horror – that her very heart seemed to cease beating, and to lie cold and dead in her bosom, and that her limbs moved only as involuntary machinery. But when she gazed around her and saw the unfeeling savages, grinning at her and mocking her, and pointing to the mangled body of her infant with fiendish exultation, a new and terrible feeling came over her. It was the thirst of revenge; and from that moment her purpose was fixed. (Whittier 1965:127).

Worth mentioning though is the fact that the author feels the need to give first a description of the 19th century woman as being delicate and sensible in order to establish a contrast with the strange fascination that Hannah Duston could exert. Unlike the feminine model endowed with the virtues of “meek affection, of fervent piety, of winning sympathy” and of that

“charity which forgiveth often”, there had been “astonishing manifestations of female fortitude and power... of a courage rising almost to sublimity” (Whittier 1965:125), which Whittier sees as belonging to the realm of dark passions, a mark of the collective subconscious that could disturb human existence by being activated. This is however regarded as belonging to a twilight time, when superstitions were often appealed to and in the end the account seems to contain both feelings of admiration for such an amazing overthrowing of the natural order of the gender roles and the idea of the *illo tempore* long gone and not affecting the present anymore, as if a danger has been annihilated by reaching a new and superior level of existence.

Nathaniel Hawthorne instead, in an article published in 1836 in *American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge*, expresses his rejection directly, first by ironically justifying Thomas’s leaving his wife alone while the Indians were approaching: “he had such knowledge of the good lady’s character as afforded him a comfortable hope that she would hold her own, even in a contest with a whole tribe of Indians” (Hawthorne 1836:395). Secondly, Hawthorne admits his preference for a Hannah who would have died on her way back than for the one being honored as a hero. His words are rather harsh and angry:

Would that the bloody old hag had been drowned in crossing Contocook River, or that she had sunk over head and ears in a swamp, and been there buried, till summoned forth to confront her victims at the Day of Judgment; or that she had gone astray and been starved to death in the forest, and nothing ever seen of her again, save her skeleton, with the ten scalps twisted round it for a girdle! But, on the contrary, she and her companions came safe home, and received the bounty on the dead Indians. (Hawthorne 1836:397)

Hannah Duston is the “raging tigress” (Hawthorne 1836:396), the awful women descending from what Whittier Greenleaf called the twilight times. Moreover, the illustration that accompanies the text and connects the reader to the original story is fragmentary. We can only see Thomas while rescuing the children. This would be, in fact, what Hawthorne considered the focus, the essence of the episode, while Hannah’s captivity and self-liberation only come to shed an unpleasant shadow upon the idea of courage.

All the variants mentioned depict the captors as “formidable salvages”, “furious tawnies”, “raging dragons” (Mather 1820:551), “furious natives” (Dwight 1821:412), “fierce savages in their hunt for blood” (Whittier 1965:126), “the bloodthirsty foe” (Hawthorne 1836:396). At the same time, Mather, Sewall, Dwight and Hawthorne mention the fact that the praying Indians were of Catholic faith, which portrays them as an even greater danger than that of being excessively violent. The family that Hannah and Mary had to stay with used to pray three times a day, before each meal; they were Christian, but there was not one word of it when Hannah returned with the ten scalps. A new motivation, even if secondary, namely that of being favoring the Catholic faith, seems to justify the killing. If not from Hannah’s perspective, then from the point of view of the authors (except Hawthorne who mentions the fact only to disagree with Mather whom he calls an old-hearted, pedantic bigot) who unveil through their text the dialectic relationship between their writings and the mentality of an entire community and also its reading habits.

Henry David Thoreau, in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, is the only one who does not dwell on the act itself, but rather on

the harshness of life in those time and the precious value of the Indian way of life that had been lost:

These are the only traces of man,— a fabulous wild man to us. On either side, the primeval forest stretches away uninterrupted to Canada, or to the “South Sea”; to the white man a drear and howling wilderness, but to the Indian a home, adapted to his nature, and cheerful as the smile of the Great Spirit. (Thoreau 2003:694)

In such an existential formula, Hannah Duston’s story is one of trespassing, and its consequence is the overthrowing of moral laws. Still, in Thoreau’s words, the reader finds Hannah and Mary as only having done something in order to preserve their lives and be believed by their community – the reward is not mentioned. The former captives are portrayed as overcome with fear and remorse, a more human image than that of the almost mythical figure presented before: “their clothes stained with blood, and their minds racked with alternate resolution and fear (...) they are thinking of the dead they have left” (Thoreau 2003:692). Only subtly does Thoreau touch upon the unrighteousness of their deed: “Every withered leaf that winter has left seems to know their story, and in its rustling to repeat it and betray them.” (Thoreau 2003:692)

4. Conclusion

Had Hannah left a personal written account, we would have had a clearer image of what and how she felt. Cotton Mather’s text, written after having heard the words from the very mouth of the woman, and each subsequent variant bear signs of each author’s subjective attitudes and are under the dictates of the community meanings at the time of their publishing. Still, the fact remains: violence was paid with violence, a

practice that has been perpetuated until the present days. No one would have expected a Puritan woman to react so harshly just as no one would expect people that voice their belief in peace and justice to act violently.

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