Chapter 2

“We have seen Strange things to Day”

THE HISTORY AND ARTISTRY OF COTTON MATHER’S REMARKABLES

When Cotton Mather set about the task of compiling and writing his “Remarkables of the Divine Providence Among the People of New England,” book six of Magnalia Christi Americana, he found no shortage of models for this curious type of publication. Books of wondertales were printed and reprinted in the late seventeenth century largely because there was a substantial and enthusiastic readership for compendia of the world’s curiosities that Cotton Mather would later term “remarkable providences” or simply “remarkables.” In 1646 Samuel Clarke published A mirrou or looking-glasse both for saints and sinners, an enormous volume of over 700 pages of wonder stories; with five editions in twenty-three years, this book enjoyed considerable popularity. The wonder stories in this book take place in ancient, medieval, and early modern Europe, but similarly curious events in the New English colonies were the subject of Mr. James Janeway’s Legacy to his Friends, a 1674 publication that offered uncanny accounts of maritime disasters and rescues at sea.

Both Increase and Cotton Mather were readers of Clarke and Janeway, and other similar popular books. When Increase Mather published his own Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences in 1684, he acknowledged both Clarke and Janeway, among other authors, as the source of several of his providence tales. Likewise, when Cotton Mather wrote the sixth book of Magnalia Christi Americana, he borrowed directly from Clarke, Janeway, Edward Johnson’s The Wonder-working Providence of

Sions Saviour (1654), and his father’s book. He also reprinted material that he had published earlier in such works as Memorable Providences, Relating to Witchcrafts and Possessions (1689), The Wonderful Works of God (1690), Terribilia Dei (1697), and Pillars of Salt (1699).²

However redundant these publication projects may seem, the remarkable providences recorded in the sixth book of Magnalia assume different coloring for the reader precisely because these tales are found in Magnalia. Placed near the close of his epic history of New England, Mather’s providence tales are read against the backdrop of the biographies of the early Puritan leaders, the history of Harvard College, the annals of the early New England Church, and the accounts of wars with the native Americans. Within the context of political, economic, religious, and military history, the sixth book of “Remarkables” emerges as social history; that is, it is less a catalogue of curiosities than a historical narrative of the people of New England. This is not to say that the earlier texts of Janeway and Increase Mather are in any way less than sober, but the same tale reprinted in the sixth book of Mather’s epic history takes on weight and import by virtue of its context and the implicit equivalence of the magnalia dei on behalf of a William Bradford or a John Winthrop with those magnalia dei on behalf of seaman Philip Hungare or young Abigail Eliot, who are otherwise common folk. Correspondingly, God metes out his terribilia or terrible judgment upon the servant Mary Martin just as he did on the earlier Goodwife Anne Hutchinson.

Indeed, prior to the publication of Magnalia Christi Americana, historical books written in New England only rarely included narratives of the private lives of private men and women alongside accounts of the public events of public individuals. Edward Johnson’s History of New England (1654), more familiarly known by its subtitle, The Wonder-working Providence of Sions Saviour in New England, focuses primarily on the installation of civic leaders and the establishment of churches throughout the New English colonies, including wondertales concerning public figures, while William Hubbard’s The Present State of New-England (1677) chronicles economic and military encounters with the native Americans. Nathaniel Morton’s New Englands memorall (1669), like William Bradford’s Of Plymouth Plantation, includes limited material concerning private lives, Morton recounting such events as James Pierce’s death by lightning and Mrs. Mary Dyer’s “monstrous birth.”³

2. While book six of Magnalia is, in many ways, a culminating statement of Mather’s persistent inquiry into “remarkables,” it is not his final publication of providence tales. For example, his Mirabilia Dei appeared in 1719.

3. The tale of Mary Dyer (or alternately, Dier) is also found in Clarke, 259; Winthrop,
However, what we now consider social history represents a minor portion of the entire historical tract. To this extent, Cotton Mather’s *Magnalia* departs from the model of historical texts in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in America in that he incorporates the extraordinary occurrences in the lives of common men and women into his history of the political, religious, and economic leadership of New England. Indeed, he devotes an entire book of *Magnalia Christi Americana* to *magnalia dei* and *terribilia dei* of private individuals. Recognizing that this is an exceptional shift in historical writing, Mather notes in his “General Introduction,”

> And into the midst of these Actions, I interpose an entire Book, wherein there is, with all possible veracity, a Collection made of Memorable Occurrences, and amazing Judgments and Mercies befalling many particular persons among the people of New-England.

> Let my readers expect all that I have promised them, in this *Bill of Fare*; and it may be they will find themselves entertained with yet many other passages, above and beyond their expectation, deserving likewise a room in History. (1:25)

Thus, at the outset of *Magnalia*, Mather acknowledges that his subject matter will include elements of social history as well as the accounts of the great deeds of great public figures, and argues that the exceptional narratives concerning private individuals constitute history. In this way, he is able to fuse two seemingly disparate modes of writing: recounting wonder tales and accounting for more traditional historical events.

Furthermore, the earlier wonderbooks and many of the earlier historical tracts cannot be considered true histories to the extent of Mather’s

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2:266; and Mather, *Magnalia* 2:519.

4. In part, book seven of *Magnalia* shares this narrative orientation. The volume announces that it documents the activities of “adversaries” of the church, and could be understood as part of Mather’s ecclesiastical history. However, Mather elides ecclesiastical history and social history when he focuses on the actions of private individuals, such as Quakers, Separatists, Familialists, accused witches, and native Americans.

5. In this respect, Mather may have found a model for the authorship of *Magnalia* in the oeuvre of Samuel Clarke, who during his career wrote biographical narratives of such figures as Herod, Alexander the Great, Elizabeth I, and Charles the Great, as well as theological tracts (*A demonstration of the being and attributes of God and other writings* and *A discourse concerning the connexion of the prophecies in the Old Testament, and the application of this to Christ*, for example), religious conduct books (such as *Whole duty of a Christian* and *A Warning-piece to all drunkards and health-drinkers*), in addition to his magnum opus, *A mirrour or looking-glasse*. While Mather writes in each of these disparate veins in individual publications, he fuses his interest in political, historical, religious, and social argument within a single work, *Magnalia*. 
accounts of often the same events. The collections authored by Clarke, Janeway, and Johnson—and one could include in this category Morton’s *Memoriall*, the second book of William Bradford’s *Of Plymouth Plantation*, and the journals of John Winthrop—should be more appropriately understood as chronicles rather than histories. Indeed, David Hall terms the works of Bradford and Winthrop “journal histories” (90), a journal relating a chronological sequence of events without the unifying structure that subsequent reflection and revision might supply. According to Hayden White, a chronicle or “journal history” may narrate a sequence of historical events, but a history creates a rhetorical framework that supports an argument surrounding those same events. Given that the building blocks of historical narrative are discrete details that can be readily organized in terms of chronology, when the historian asserts other than chronological relationships among otherwise discrete details, that historian fills in the logical gaps that the organizing principle of chronology cannot itself accomplish. That is, a historian not only recounts and thus represents events but also creates a narrative structure that points to the relative value of sets of historical detail, and then associates one element of the narrative to another by positing causation and ultimate significance. In this way, a historian emplots the events in a narrative that argues his or her coherent vision of those details.6

In addition, Hayden White insists that “historical events are value-neutral” (*Tropics*, 84). A set of events takes on value by virtue of the way in which a historian emplots these events.

The same set of events can serve as components of a story that is tragic or comic, as the case may be, depending on the historian’s choice of the plot structure that he considers most appropriate for ordering events of that kind so as to make them into a comprehensible story. (*Tropics*, 84)

White also finds that the plot and form of a historical narrative give evidence of the culture’s values. To be sure, White goes considerably further in his analysis of the relationship between ascribing value to a historical detail and emplotting historical events. He asserts that

6. My understanding of the distinction between the historical texts of these authors is informed by Hayden White’s theory of annals, chronicles, and histories; for a full exploration of his argument, see *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), especially 1–25, and *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 51–63.
narrativity, certainly in factual storytelling and probably in fictional storytelling as well, is intimately related to, if not a function of, the impulse to moralize reality, that is, to identify it with the social system that is the source of any morality that we can imagine. (Content, 14)

To that end, a historian’s ability to create closure in his or her narrative, and to build a coherent plot that works toward that resolution, is a direct result of his fusing his chronicle of events with an ideology that is otherwise extrinsic to those events. This fusion creates meaning and argument, and, thus, fully realized historical narrative.

For example, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, which, next to Mather’s *Magnalia*, has attracted the most critical commentary of the above-mentioned histories, has been problematic to critics because it lacks the fully articulated rhetorical unity of historical narrative. Stephen Carl Arch finds that Bradford’s book one is “integrated and carefully ordered,” going so far as to characterize the work as “mythic.” At the same time, he determines that book two “spirals down” and is the work of a “frustrated historian” (*Authorizing*, 5). Walter Wenska is less convinced of the structure of the first book and asserts that “our view of the history as a whole and of the second book in particular remains partial, sometimes confused, and often contradictory,” while Robert Daly characterizes Bradford’s second book as “a tedious account of unsorted administrative details . . . in which all coherence and confidence seem gone.” The diffuse and episodic construction of Bradford’s text marks it, in White’s terms, as a chronicle rather than a fully realized history. One need only look to the two final entries in Bradford’s second book as evidence of his inability to construct historical narrative. The author lists anno 1647 and anno 1648, but these are empty entries, which, according to Bernd Engler and Oliver Scheiding, “seem to document the historiographer’s failure to order secular history along the lines of an overruling master-narrative.” Closure, an essential element of argument, is impossible for Bradford, which bespeaks his inability to construct a fully articulated history of the events of Plymouth Plantation.

10. For important statements on Bradford’s historiography, see also Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 45 and David
However, in the case of Cotton Mather’s remarkables in book six of *Magnalia Christi Americana*, it is clear that the author makes sense and makes story of enigmatic events within his community by configuring them according to the imperatives of his culture’s religious belief. Specifically, Mather creates history surrounding his wonder stories consistent with his belief in the agency of God in every event of man’s life, divine providence. That is, Cotton Mather creates a history by investing every element of his narrative with argument toward the agency of God. We see this at every level of narrative construction beginning with the title, *Magnalia Christi Americana*. From the title page onward, let no one be misled as to Mather’s mission. The opening paragraph of his “General Introduction” to *Magnalia* supports the title in asserting his thesis:

* I write the Wonders of the Christian Religion, flying from the depravations of Europe, to the American Strand; and, assisted by the Holy Author of that Religion, I do with all conscience of Truth, required therein by Him, who is the Truth itself, report the wonderful displays of His infinite Power, Wisdom, Goodness, and Faithfulness, wherewith His Divine Providence hath irradiated an Indian Wilderness. (1:25)

The historian has set as his objective the recording of evidence that God shaped the Puritan colonial venture in America and continues to shape the public and private ventures of his people. Mather’s central argument is restated regularly throughout his text, and in the title of the sixth book, the reader is again returned to the import of his history, “Thaumaturgus. The Sixth Book of the New-English History: Wherein Very Many Illustrious Discoveries and Demonstrations of The Divine Providence in Remarkable Mercies and Judgments on Many Particular Persons Among the People of New-England, Are Observed, Collected, and Related” (2:339). The title

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11. Cotton Mather’s impulse to create fully realized historical narrative is not exclusively a feature of his public posture as a minister; his understanding of his private life is also informed by his faith in divine providence. As we see in his diary, many entries exhibit similar plotting and conclusion. See, for example, his account of the March 1693 death of his infant daughter due to immature development of the rectum. He yokes this tragedy to an earlier event when a witch frightened his pregnant wife, causing her temporary bowel dysfunction and promising much worse for the unborn child. Mather concludes his narrative with the moral that he “submit unto the Will of my Heavenly Father without which, Not a Sparrow falls unto the Ground” which is an expression of his faith in God’s continual intervention in the life of man. See *Diary of Cotton Mather 1681–1709*, 2 vols. (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1957), 1:164.
of each chapter and each subsection within the chapter as well as the introduction to each set of narratives issue an identical refrain. However tedious and unsophisticated this practice may seem to the modern reader, these assertions and reassertions are central to Mather’s production of history as argument.

The motivation of book six of *Magnalia* is not exclusively that of asserting God’s providence. This theological tenet is the underpinning of his larger design for the work. In the manner of Edward Johnson and Increase Mather, earlier writers whose work he emulated and at times borrowed from, Cotton Mather’s primary goal for his *Magnalia* was to revive a waning commitment to Calvinist orthodoxy in New England.\(^{12}\) In 1679 Increase Mather lamented that “there is doleful degeneracy appearing in the face of this generation, and no man can say but that the body of the present generation will perish both temporally and eternally.”\(^{13}\) In the opening pages of *Magnalia Christi Americana*, Cotton Mather echoes his father’s words and confesses to being “smitten with a just fear of incroaching and ill-bodied degeneracies” in New England (1:40). To thwart the loss of Calvinist community in the colonies, Mather offers his *Magnalia*.

[C]ertainly one good way to save that loss, would be to do something that the memory of the great things done for us by our God, may not be lost, and that the story of the circumstances attending the foundation and formation of this country, and of its preservation hitherto, may be impartially handed unto posterity. This is the undertaking whereto I now address myself. (1:40)

Thus, Cotton Mather’s intention is to display the providential design for New England in order to inspire the present generation with the sacred role of their Puritan ancestors. To emphasize the relationship between those exalted ancestors and his contemporary readers, Mather speaks of the “great things done for us by our God,” and, in this way, he asserts that the sacred role and lofty mission of the early New English Puritans are also those of the present colonists.

\(^{12}\) Stephen Carl Arch details the specific challenges to the church and religious culture in New England that Mather wished to counter by publishing his *Magnalia*. See especially *Authorizing the Past*, 138–59. Arch also identifies the earlier challenges of the 1640s and 1650s to which Edward Johnson responds in *History of New England*, and those of the 1670s and 1680s that Increase Mather addresses in his historical writing. See *Authorizing the Past*, 59–87 and 92–135, respectively.

\(^{13}\) *A Call from Heaven To the Present and Succeeding Generations* (Boston, 1679), 19.
When Mather turns to social history in the sixth book of *Magnalia Christi Americana*, his “Remarkables of the Divine Providence Among the People of New England,” he expands this claim. Not only has God worked wonders on behalf of the exalted public figures among us, but he also acts on behalf of private individuals.\(^{14}\) Just as Mather laments the loss of awareness of New England’s past glories in his preface to *Magnalia*, in his introduction to book six, he speaks to his contemporaries’ loss of awareness of the wonderful works of divine providence in their daily lives.

Unaccountable therefore and inexcusable is the *sleepiness*, even upon the most of good men throughout the world, which indisposes them to *observe* and much more to *preserve* the remarkable dispensations of Divine Providence towards themselves or others. (2:341)

Calling his readers to recognize their exceptional relationship to God, Mather also elides the history of the Puritan greats with the stories of his contemporaries to further assert the continuity of the Puritan errand in the new world. However, the *magnalia dei* on behalf of God’s people is only one manifestation of God’s providence. God also visits *terribilia dei* on New England, and book six documents many such testaments to God’s wrath. For those readers who will not be called to religious vigilance by inspirational accounts of God’s marvelous blessings, in chapter six of book six Mather speaks to the wisdom of fearing the Lord, and offers accounts of sinners and their inevitable discovery and punishment.

Additionally, in book six of *Magnalia*, Mather responds to current interest in scientific inquiry, chapter three being devoted to “Brontologia Sacra: The Voice of the Glorious God in the Thunder.” Mather, who authored many scientific documents and was elected to the Royal Society in 1713 for his contributions in the field of natural history, acknowledges “the common laws of matter and motion” that describe this natural phenomenon. Yet, he immediately counters this assertion with a series of rhetorical questions: “But, still, who is the author of those laws, according whereunto things are thus moved into thunder? yea, who is the *first mover* of them?” For Cotton Mather, the answer is obvious. “Christians,

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14. Mather’s fusion of political, ecclesiastical, and military history with social history is another example of what Jan Stievermann has identified as Cotton Mather’s project of *copia*. As Mather’s “authoritative voice integrat[es] and transcend[s] all other voices,” it also integrates and transcends disciplines—theology, politics, social history, and science, among them. See “Writing ‘To Conquer All Things’: Cotton Mather’s *Magnalia Christi Americana* and the Quandary of *Copia,*” *Early American Literature* 39.2 (2004): 270.
'tis our glorious God” (2:366). Trumping the scientific truths held by his contemporaries with the wisdom that is the exclusive purview of the minister, Mather then attempts to decode God’s message in the thunder. Mather wishes to ensure that contemporary science does not encroach on theology, so he subsumes science under the great umbrella of religion and asserts that all seemingly new knowledge simply manifests Christian theology and Calvinist religious practice. In this way, Mather again is able to bind the experience of his contemporaries with the experience of the earliest Puritans in New England. Moreover, once he establishes the authority of theology over that of science, he is able to disquiet those readers who found solace in a materialist explanation of the natural phenomenon of thunder. Mather has reclaimed the mystery of thunder, and uses it to both exemplify God’s providential design and encourage fear of the Lord, two of his objectives for *Magnalia Christi Americana.*

As prelude to his work, Mather asserts the special authority of the minister to serve as the historian of Puritan society. In Mather’s judgment, there is no one better suited to interpret God’s meaning for man and woman as He operates in the daily events of their lives. Throughout the *Magnalia,* and at the opening of the sixth book, Mather stakes his claim: “To regard the illustrious displays of that PROVIDENCE wherewith our Lord Christ governs the world, is a work, than which there is none more needful or useful for a Christian: to record them is a work, than which, none more proper for a minister” (2:341). The laity is exhorted to marvel at the works of God, but a minister, such as Cotton Mather, is privileged to “record” those works, that is, to invest them with meaning within his historical narrative. Mather’s assertion of the ethos of the minister *cum* historian is consistent with Hayden White’s theory of the imperative of the historical narrator’s pretense to moral authority. Indeed, White asks, “Has any historical narrative ever been written that was not informed not only by moral awareness but specifically by the moral authority of the narrator?” (*Content,* 21). Finally, at the center of Cotton Mather’s argument is the axiom that all meaning is inherently religious, and thereby the exclusive purview of the minister. For Mather, there is meaning in worldly, temporal events only in their relationship to the divine and the eternal. Any earthly event is personally significant only as it speaks to one’s spirituality, the condition of one’s soul, and the prospect of one’s eternal salvation.

15. Winship speaks to the ways in which both Increase and Cotton Mather respond to scientific rationalism. See especially 93–110.
16. See also David D. Hall’s discussion of Mather’s attempt to wrest interpretation of natural phenomena from secular writers (109–15).
We have seen Strange things to Day or damnation. More pointedly, a worldly event—be it a magnalia dei or a terribilia dei—has import in that it offers an unambiguous statement regarding the condition of one's soul.

As a means of compelling his readers with God's message in the events of New England, Cotton Mather's prose in Magnalia Christi Americana is marked by rhetorical flourishes that are rarely found in his father's more dispassionate narratives. Where his father is concerned with precise historical detail—dates, the number of survivors, the cargo and tonnage of the ship, the direction in which the devil hurled the bricks at the house—Cotton Mather's accounts in Magnalia Christi Americana argue their case both by a surfeit of historical detail and by the tenor and structure of the prose. In a general introduction to Magnalia, Cotton Mather is mindful of his sacred charge as author of the ecclesiastical history of American Puritanism, and clearly states that his text is written with “all historical fidelity and simplicity” (1:25). Yet, Kenneth Silverman describes his prose as “distinctively showmanlike” (Cotton Mather, 159).

Although Cotton Mather fashions himself as an “impartial historian” (1:29), he also acknowledges that readers may fault his writing for exhibiting “too much of ornament” (1:31). Even more important to the Calvinist minister, he worried that God would fault his prose style. Mather's biographer, Kenneth Silverman, reports that Mather was concerned that his passion for “plush language” should be met with God's retribution by making him stutter (Cotton Mather, 48–49). Indeed, the prose of Magnalia Christi Americana is replete with allusion not only to scripture, but also to the imaginative literature of the Greeks and Romans.

17. This is consistent with William J. Scheick's observation concerning Cotton's Mather's Parentator, his biography of Increase Mather, as compared to Increase Mather's biography of his father, Richard Mather. Scheick describes Parentator as “more full-bodied [than his father's text], including glimpses of Increase as a person, details about his setting, and even transcripts of some of his dialogue with others” (Two Mather Biographies, 22). That is, Cotton Mather employs the devices of fiction—characterization, setting, and dialogue—that were not part of the earlier model of the genre of religious biography. In his discussion of the disparity of their prose styles, Michael Winship places weight on Increase Mather's interest in adhering to the standards of writing objective natural history, which were set by Robert Boyle (64–67).

18. David Levin issues a more moderate statement about the variety of Mather's prose styles in Magnalia, explaining that it varies widely depending upon the specific chapter, and he concludes that "the prose of the Magnalia is both baroque and plain." See Cotton Mather: The Young Life of the Lord's Remembrancer, 1663–1703 (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1978), 266. See also Arch, 155–59. I would add that the prose of Mather's book six, which is the focus of this study, is more often artistic—even to the point of baroque—than otherwise.

19. See Gustaaf Van Cromphout's 1977 essay that explores the rhetoric of Magnalia as the work of a "Renaissance humanist."
Increase Mather’s *Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences*, book six of *Magnalia* is marked by its emphatic prose. Although Cotton Mather takes several of his narratives in *Magnalia* directly from his father’s text, he makes substantive stylistic changes in the narrative. He regularly inserts an adjective where there had been none, and where there is one adjective, Cotton Mather adds yet another. The drama of tricolon and exclamatory phrasings inject life into Cotton Mather’s tales, as do the active voice constructions, the extended dialogue, and the directive voice of the narrator, these features being new to Cotton Mather’s version. These rhetorical flourishes invite the reader’s emotional involvement with the text, they continually return the reader to the argument of the text, and they invest the argument with urgency.

Austin Warren was one of the earliest scholars to identify Cotton Mather as a literary stylist, and exclaims that “the gust—the taste—of the *Magnalia* runs the range of the Puritan Baroque.” Likewise, Larzer Ziff identifies Mather’s “lavish allusion, tireless unreeling of convoluted syntax, and insistent display of polylingualism” as elements of his pyrotechnical literary style. At the same time, Ziff connects this feature of Mather’s historical narrative to Mather’s ethos as a historian and a teller of tales:

> . . . *Magnalia Christi Americana* starts with the epic convention of the writer as an oral transmitter of all known history, from the moment when the divinity created the natural world through the election of a special people with a special history; and throughout his book Mather relies heavily on anecdote, folklore, and hearsay to inform his work. He does not use evidence to construct a rationale for New England; rather, that rationale is a given, and he goes to the record of writings and the oral tradition to demonstrate that the given has been fulfilled. (303)

Ziff suggests that Mather’s use of literary devices is not limited to his prose style. He situates his work within the tradition of fiction by drawing on earlier fictional material, as is a convention of imaginative letters. Likewise, his authorial ethos is consonant with that of epic literature.

Consistent with Hayden White’s theory of historical narrative, Cotton Mather’s use of literary devices allows him to make history of his father’s chronicles. White observes that the historian employs prose techniques

that are traditionally considered literary—characterization, varied strategies of description, figurative language, repetition of motifs, dialogue, and so forth—because the process of creating historical narrative is so closely related to the strategies to create literary narrative. Beginning with features such as point of view and emplotment, which are characteristic of the development of fully realized history, Hayden White argues the “essentially literary nature of historical classics” (Tropics, 89). The literary features of the historical text serve the rhetorical goals of the historian by foregrounding a complex set of symbols by which the reader understands how and why events unfold. As White puts it, the historical narrative

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describe[s] \text{ events in the historical record in such a way as to inform the reader what to take as an icon of the events so as to render them ‘familiar’ to him. The historical narrative thus mediates between the events reported in it on the one side and the pregeneric plot structures conventionally used in our culture to endow unfamiliar events and situations with meanings on the other. (Tropics, 88)}
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According to White, that this is the goal of both the fiction and the nonfiction writer does not compromise the authority or integrity of the nonfiction writer; it simply explains the function and the tools of the historian.

An important structural element of Mather's artistic narrative is his foregrounding the context of his tales, without which they might appear to be a mere omnium gatherum of curiosities. The opening paragraph of “Christus Super Aquas,” the first chapter of the sixth book, which is a collection of remarkable sea deliverances, provides an example of the importance of Mather’s emphasis on contextualizing his work for the reader.

They “that go down into the sea in ships, these do see the works of the Lord, and his wonders in the deep.” And what if our collection of remarkable providences do begin with a relation of the wonderful works which have been done for them that “go down into the sea in ships,” by that great Lord “whose is the sea, for he made it?” I will carry my reader upon the huge Atlantick, and, without so much as the danger of being made seasick, he shall see “wonders in the deep.” (2:343)

Mather first offers his reader an assertion that in his time was a theological commonplace: God made the sea; thus they who observe the sea are
privy to the wonderful works of God. He thus puts the reader on notice that the subsequent tales will serve as testimony to this theological statement. Secondly, the author addresses the reader directly, and predicts that through these tales, the reader will be metaphorically transported “upon the huge Atlantick,” such will be the emotional impact of the experience of reading. Finally, through his use of the metaphorical expression, “I will carry my reader,” Mather suggests an intimacy and a trusting relationship between author and reader, each device employed in the interest of securing his theological claim on his historical material.

In other passages, Mather’s language reveals that the author is aware of his artistry and even relishes his writerly flourishes. Whereas he fashions the native Americans in stereotypical metonymical terms as “tawnies,” and as allegorical “black Satans” and “devils in flesh,” he also uses more inventive, metaphorical expressions, such as “perfidious caitiffs,” “Scythian wolves of our wilderness,” “dragons,” and “adders in the path.” Attracted to clever phrasings, Mather appears to sneer at native Americans who were struggling to cross a muddy river bed, “if mud could add blackness to such miscreants.” Similarly, he concludes an anecdote about a profligate, yet intriguingly unidentified, young man by appealing, “God make this young man our warner; his name was WARNER.” Mather also attempts humor, as in his assertion that Quakers preach “Quackerism” (2:565, 665, 666, 637, 617, 396, 646). The author who makes a claim for the “simplicity” of his prose nonetheless makes ample use of linguistic and literary devices to motivate and secure the case for orthodox Calvinism.

Many critics have underscored Mather’s frequent claims that he wishes to entertain as well as edify the reader of Magnalia. The selection of his material and the artistry of his narratives suggest that his goal is even more radical. Cotton Mather sought to popularize religious history, and the savvy author was acutely aware of the interests and tastes of his readership. As Michael T. Gilmore concludes, “Mather’s entire career can be seen as an effort to breathe fresh life into the religion he inherited from his ancestors” (35). Extravagant and bizarre tales written in a witty and dramatic style would attract and retain an audience whose ear was dulled to Puritan sermonizers. Moreover, by the late seventeenth century, religious tracts that announce and explicate wonder-workings of God had heavy competition from secular, sensational publications on the same topic, works that Mather descried as “wretched books” (1:205). The author’s abiding reputation as an “old pedant” has somewhat obscured

22. See David D. Hall, 55 and 112–14.
current critical recognition that Cotton Mather knew his audience and his competition for that audience, and was more than willing to appeal to the contemporary taste by shaping his texts for his readers. Daniel Cohen has identified Mather’s genius for capturing the attention of his readership by sensationalism in the design and language of the title pages of his broadsides, in addition to the elaborate and extravagant literary devices of his providence tales. In the language of Daniel Cohen, “one man’s providence is another’s sensation” (10).

Cotton Mather’s account in *Magnalia* of Mary Martin’s infanticide illustrates how Mather uses artistry in the service of a fully articulated history. This tale also exhibits how the historian cum minister manipulates historical elements to construct a narrative of this event toward the larger goal of illustrating a religious principle. Mather writes,

> It hath been thought, that the *dying speeches* of such as have been executed among us, might be of singular use to correct and reform the crimes wherein too many do live: and it has been wish’d that at least some fragments of those dying speeches might be preserv’d and publish’d. Upon this advice from some good persons, I have stollen an hour or two, wherein I have collected some accounts of several ill persons, which have been cut off by the *sword of civil justice* in this land; and this collection I suffer to go abroad, in hopes that, among many other essays to suppress *growing vice*, it may signifie something with the blessing of Heaven thereupon, to let the vicious understand what have been the cries of our miserables when passing into another world. Behold, an history of criminals, whom the terrible judgments of God has *thunder-strook* into *pillars of salt*.

About the year 1646, here was one Mary Martin, whose father going from hence to England, left her in the house of a marry’d man, who yet became so enamour’d on her that he attempted her chastity.

Such was her weakness and folly, that she yielded unto the temptations of that miserable man; but yet with such horrible regret of mind, that begging of God for deliverance from her temptations, her plea was, “That if ever she were overtaken again, she would leave herself unto his justice, to be made a publick example.”

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24. Mather first used the story of this crime as an embedded narrative in a sermon and then published his account in his 1697 *Terribilia Dei* (44–45) before reprinting this material in *Magnalia*. 
Heaven will convince the sinful children of men, that the vows which they make, relying on the stability and resolution of their own hearts, are of no significance. A chain of hell was upon her, and the forfeited grace of Heaven was with-held from her; she fell a third time into the sin against which her vows had been utter’d.

Afterwards going to service in Boston, she found herself to have conceiv’d; but she lived with a favourable mistress, who would admit and allow no suspicion of her dishonesty.

A question (like that convincing one of our Saviour’s unto the woman of Samaria) was once oddly put unto her: “Mary, where is thy husband?” And one said also, “Did I not think thou wert an honest and sincere creature, I should verily think thou wert with child!” These passages, which were warnings from God unto her guilty soul, did serve only to strike her with amazement—not with any true repentance.

She conceal’d her crime till the time of her delivery; and then being deliver’d alone by her self in a dark room, she murdered the harmless and helpless infant; hiding it in a chest from the eyes of all but the jealous GOD.

The blood of the child cried, when the cry of the child it self was thus cruelly stifled. Some circumstance quickly occurr’d which oblig’d her friends to charge her with an unlawful birth. She deny’d it impudently. A further search confuted her denial. She then said, the child was dead born, and she had burn’d it to ashes. With an hypocritical tear, she added, “Oh that it were true, that the poor babe were any where to be seen!” At last it was found in her chest; and when she touch’d the face of it before the jury, the blood came fresh unto it. So she confessed the whole truth concerning it.

Great endeavours were used that she might be brought unto a true faith in the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ for the pardon of her blood-guiltiness; and, it may be, none endeavour’d it more than that reverend man, old Mr. Wilson, who wrote several sheets of pathetical instructions to her while she was in prison. That renown’d man, old Mr. Cotton also, did his part in endeavouring that she might be renew’d by repentance; and preach’d a sermon on Ezek. xvi. 20, 21: “Is this of thy whoredoms a small matter, that thou hast slain my children?” Whereof great notice was taken. It was hoped that these endeavours were not lost: her carriage in her imprisonment and at her execution was very penitent. But there was this remarkable at her execution: she acknowledged her twice essaying to kill her child before she could make an end of it: and now, through the unskill-
fulness of the executioner, she was turned off the ladder twice before she died. (2:404–5)

Mather’s account of Mary Martin’s crime is thick with pathos and high moralizing, and, as such, it strikes a different tenor from that of John Winthrop, who also recounts these same events in his *Journal*:

There fell out at this time a very sad occasion. A merchant of Plymouth in England, (whose father had been mayor there,) called [blank] Martin, being fallen into decay, came to Casco Bay, and after some time, having occasion to return into England, he left behind him two daughters, (very proper maidens and of modest behavior,) but took not that course for their safe bestowing in his absence, as the care and wisdom of a father should have done, so as the eldest of them, called Mary, twenty-two years of age, being in [the] house with one Mr. Mitton, a married man of Casco, within one quarter of a year, he was taken with her, and soliciting her chastity, obtained his desire, and having divers times committed sin with her, in the space of three months, she then removed to Boston, and put herself in service to Mrs. Bourne; and finding herself to be with child, and not able to bear the shame of it, she concealed it, and though divers did suspect it, and some told her mistress their fears, yet her behavior was so modest, and so faithful she was in her service, as her mistress would not give ear to any such report, but blamed such as told her of it. But, her time being come, she was delivered of a woman child in the back room by herself upon the 13 (10) (December 13) in the night, and the child was born alive, but she kneeled upon the head of it, till she thought it had been dead, and having laid it by, the child, being strong, recovered, and cried again. Then she took it again, and used violence to it till it was quite dead. Then she put it into her chest, and having cleansed the room, she went to bed, and arose again the next day about noon, and went about her business, and so continued till the nineteenth day, that her master and mistress went on shipboard to go for England. They being gone, and she removed to another house, a midwife in the town, having formerly suspected her, and now coming to her again, found she had been delivered of a child, which, upon examination, she confessed, but said it was still-born, and so she put it into the fire. But, search being made, it was found in her chest, and when she was brought before the jury, they caused her to touch the face of it, whereupon the blood came fresh into it. Whereupon she confessed the whole truth, and a surgeon, being called to search the body of the child,
found a fracture in the skull. Before she was condemned, she confessed, that she had prostituted her body to another also, one Sears. She behaved herself very penitently while she was in prison, and at her death, 18 (1, March 18) complaining much of the hardness of her heart. She confessed, that the first and second time she committed fornication, she prayed for pardon, and promised to commit it no more; and the third time she prayed God, that if she did fall into it again, he would make her an example, and therein she justified God, as she did in the rest. Yet all the comfort God would afford her, was only trust (as she said) in his mercy through Christ. After she was turned off and had hung a space, she spake, and asked what they did mean to do. Then some stepped up, and turned the knot of the rope backward, and then she soon died.  

It would be foolish to suggest that Mather’s and Winthrop’s accounts could or should be identical. Yet, because the authors had access to approximately the same information concerning Mary Martin’s infanticide, it is nonetheless instructive to note the differing selection and presentation of the events in the two narratives. First, Winthrop introduces this event as a “very sad occasion”—not an example of “growing vice,” as Mather’s didactic account would have it—and in this way, sets the tone and creates a context for a divergent narrative. While Winthrop calls on the reader’s quiet reflection on a random occurrence that “fell out” in the community, Mather immediately enjoins the reader to recognize his or her own sinfulness and “correct and reform” personal wrongdoing.

Although more abbreviated than Mather’s account, Winthrop’s tale delivers more detailed information concerning Mary Martin’s situation and her eventual crime; one might argue that the additional information serves to soften our stance regarding Mary Martin as murderess. For example, we learn from Winthrop that her grandfather was an English mayor and her father a merchant, which suggests that she comes from solid stock, a point that would have carried weight for the seventeenth-century reader. Further, she and her sister were both “very proper maidens and of modest behavior.” Thus, in Winthrop’s version, the ethos of the young woman is initially above reproach. Furthermore, when her father was obliged to return to England, “he took not that course for their safe bestowing in his absence, as the care and wisdom of a father should have done” (my emphasis). The married man, too, is an active agent in her ruin because Winthrop writes that he was “taken with her,” “solicit[ed] her chastity,” “obtained his

31

"We have seen Strange things to Day"

desire,” and “committed sin with her” “divers times.” Writing the events large and valuing these details, John Winthrop demonstrates to the reader the shared responsibility for Mary Martin’s virtue.

Yet, Mather suppresses those elements because they are inconsistent with his desire to present Mary Martin as a “pillar of salt,” an “ill person” as opposed to a good person. Consequently, he does not give us the context of her situation and the context of her fall, and asks her to shoulder all responsibility for her misdeed. Mather’s reader is led to believe that her father placed her wisely in a good home. The unnamed married man was merely “enamour’d on her,” although she alone was weak and foolish. When she “falls” once, twice, and a third time, there is no longer mention of the man who simply disappears from the narrative because it is a history of the woman’s sin. Mather omits other details that Winthrop includes because they would compromise the coherence of his history: the fact that she had a female child, that she cleaned the room after the delivery—details that many readers could easily invest with significance—and that the executioner needed to adjust the knot of the noose so that the slack end would pull tight.

Cotton Mather makes much of the fact that Mary Martin did not die immediately at the gallows; he tips his hat to physics by stating that “through the unskillfulness of the executioner, she was turned off the ladder twice before she died.” However, he values providence over physics because he then insists that she suffered a double execution because she had attempted twice to murder her own child, symbolic retribution being a remarkable sign of God’s hand.

Hayden White finds that “the demand for closure in a historical story is a demand . . . for moral meaning, a demand that sequences of real events be assessed as to their significance as elements of a moral drama” (Content, 21). For Mather, an awareness of divine providence, symbolic retribution, and terribilia Dei are the narrative mortar to the bricks of his history of Mary Martin, and consequently are evoked in summation. However, Winthrop’s account has no real closure other than the end to the chronological events: “She soon died.” Likewise, it has little coherence other than the sequencing of historical detail. Mather’s account, on the other hand, achieves its unity—or what we might now call overemplotment—by what Hayden White describes as “a tailoring of the ‘facts’ to the requirements of the story form” (Tropics, 91). According to the information that is currently available, Mather does not falsify his facts; he merely tailors them to his argument and, in this way, creates a coherent history.26

26. Bernd Engler offers an excellent analysis of the implications of narrative coherence in
Because John Winthrop's chronicle is not attached to a given argument, he is free to provide a full range of historical information surrounding the infanticide. Indeed, Winthrop offers the reader difficult and graphic detail that might prejudice the reader against Mary Martin, if the author were burdened by this rhetorical claim on the material. Winthrop reveals that Mary knelt on her child's head to kill her, then “used violence to it.” Given the range of available options, she chose a somewhat vicious method of murder; that is, she employed no tool to separate herself from the child in the act of murder, and chose instead to use her body to kill her baby's body. Likewise, the reader is told of Mary's subsequent sexual relationship with another man, which the seventeenth-century Puritan would understand as damning evidence of the woman's corruption. Indeed, the reader might be confused by Winthrop's seemingly conflicted stance toward Mary Martin. While he appears to implicate others in her crime, and thus mitigate our harsh response to the woman, he offers further evidence of her questionable character and ill deeds. One could perhaps account for Winthrop's broad and seemingly unprejudiced interest in the case of Mary Martin by citing his training as a lawyer and his position as a civic leader. Detailed description of the crime and the crime scene would be important to Winthrop, as would the motivation of the criminal before the act, the defendant's prior and subsequent criminal offenses, and signs of remorse following the act. Responsible for governing the community, Winthrop might well be concerned about the social context of this crime, and thus might focus on those details that concern the familial and communal situation that would foster or otherwise contribute to criminal activity.

Likewise, Mather's pointed interest in the case is related to his training and position as a minister of the Church of Christ. In eighteenth-century New England, the good Puritan fully expected depravity from one's fellow man, and indeed from one's self. Such is the legacy of Adam's fall. However unworthy in the eyes of God, the Puritan lived and worshiped in hope of free grace of God that would ensure salvation in the afterlife. As a minister, Cotton Mather understood that his congregants faced their creator as individuals, not as a community, and thus spoke


27. I am grateful for a conversation with Reiner Smolinski that led me to consider the divergent education and profession of John Winthrop and Cotton Mather in chronicling the story of Mary Martin’s infanticide.
to individuals in terms of saving souls one by one. In his casting the tale of Mary Martin as an illustration of the sinful woman, Mather’s history describes an individual who alone is accountable to God for the murder of her child.

The subjects of most providence tales in book six are the common men and women who either show themselves as visible saints or pillars of salt as they respond in exceptional ways to extreme situations. Dramatic narratives of the seafarer compelled early New English readers because theirs was a seafaring culture. Not surprisingly, then, tales of remarkable sea deliverances became a staple of wonderbooks. James Janeway, Increase Mather, and Cotton Mather all published many such stories, and all three authored an account of the events surrounding Philip Hungare’s shipwreck and rescue at sea. As in the varying accounts of Mary Martin’s infanticide, the differences in their narratives are telling. The basic plot of their accounts—typical of many of the remarkable sea deliverances—is similar. A group of sailors is forced into a lifeboat when their ship is in danger. They manage to stow a few provisions in the craft, but when they find themselves without food, flying fish jump into the boat for their consumption. Then they catch a shark, and drink his blood to quench their thirst. Ultimately, they see land, come ashore in the West Indies, and live to tell of their miraculous deliverance.

Janeway’s version of this tale is a brief account of less than three hundred words, but rich in detail, descriptive elements, and authorial observations. Five times in the narrative, Janeway interjects into the narrative a statement about the providential nature of the developing plot, noting, for example, that when the fish flies into the boat, “God’s Providence now prov[es] the Caterer.”28 With a full complement of interjections such as “alas” and “at last,” he embellishes his account with emotional descriptions, such as the raw fish providing nourishment “more acceptable than the greatest rarities and dainties at another time” (17). Nonetheless, the author also emerges as a careful historian in that he offers precision in the exact size of the original vessel, the number of seamen who gain a seat in the lifeboat, the number of leagues they sail, and the number of weeks they are adrift. His attention to factual accuracy extends to his dénouement, although the close of his narrative introduces ambiguity. Janeway recounts that God’s gifts of food and drink gave the sailors hope of rescue, but then reveals that “alas, they were so weak, that when they came ashore, one or

28. Mr. James Janeway’s Legacy to his Friends: Containing Twenty Seven Famous Instances of Gods Providences in and about Sea-Dangers and Deliverances (London, 1674), 17.
two of them dyed.” Finally, although “most of them lived to declare the works of the Lord,” others among them were since lost at sea, including his informant (17). If Janeway’s purpose in writing the story of Philip Hungare were to extol God’s miracles on behalf of his faithful, he compromises his argument repeatedly in the process of chronicling the tale. In particular, the tragic close of his narrative casts a shadow on the otherwise felicitous plot that he works toward constructing.

Increase Mather reprinted this material in abbreviated form in *Illustrious Providences*, his version excising most of the figurative or emphatic language of Janeway’s account. In this fashion, Increase Mather’s narrative may initially appear more objective or authoritative than his source material. Increase Mather’s close to his tale, like that of Janeway’s account, provides little conclusion to the events; rather they merely offer the final element in the chronology: “Some of them were so weak as that they soon died; but most of them lived to declare the works of the Lord.”²⁹ For lack of resolution, his account shies away from definitive argument, and refuses final authority over the material.

Modern readers do not know the actual details of this Philip Hungare’s shipwreck; we rely on the earliest extant account, that of Janeway. But because we know that James Janeway’s and Increase Mather’s accounts provide the source material for Cotton Mather’s version, Mather’s departure from his sources reveals the goals of his text. In *Magnalia Christi Americana*, Mather clearly shapes his history as a statement regarding God’s judgment of the sailors. To this end, he omits details of the earlier chronicles that do not contribute evidence of his thesis, and would otherwise blur the objective of his history. He also returns to the emotional appeal of the Janeway version, injecting figurative language in his prose and drama in his plot. As in the earlier tales, God first sends fish to the sailors for food, then sends a larger fish whose blood quenches their thirst. Although both early tales indicate that these gifts are providential, Janeway and Increase Mather treat the fish merely as food and drink, sustenance for the physical body in anticipation of their safe return to shore. Janeway notes that the fish gave the sailors “hopes to release them out of this insupportable misery,” but the narrative does not suggest that the “misery” is other than physical. However, Cotton Mather describes the first providential offering of flying fish as a “strange relief,” inviting the reader to contemplate in what sense the gift of food is “strange” in its ability to sustain man. He later resolves

We have seen Strange things to Day

this tension in his account when he metaphorically describes the blood that quenches the thirst of the sailors as “cool waters to their thirsty souls” (1:347). Mather’s figurative language from Proverbs 25:25—not found in the earlier versions—conflates physical sustenance with spiritual salvation. The argument of Cotton Mather’s history, which is less prominent if indeed existent in Janeway’s or Increase Mather’s tales, is that Philip Hungare’s rescue at sea bespeaks his salvation. When God offers these sailors food to sustain them throughout their trials, he reveals his gift of free grace to these men.

Consonant with his thesis, Mather concludes his narrative with their safe arrival in the West Indies. His historical account suppresses the death of several among them, because to include such material would compromise his singular, definitive religious statement regarding divine providence. Mather would not want his reader to query why God would save a man simply to dispose of him immediately thereafter with no clear explication of the meaning of this death for the people of New England. Thus, Mather tailors his narrative as befits the rhetorically self-conscious historian.

Tales of remarkable sea deliverances were compelling to the people of New England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries because they depended so strongly on the sea and were acutely aware of its dangers. More importantly, though, readers of such tales would apprehend the symbolic value of this genre. All of God’s creatures are metaphorically at sea in this insecure world, so fraught with spiritual hazard. Yet, when God offers man food to eat and blood to drink, motifs that suggest the sacrament of communion, he is extending a gift of free grace, man’s only true security. Hayden White observes that a certain form of historical representation consists of nothing but plot; its story elements exist only as manifestations, epiphenomena of the plot structure, in the service of which its discourse is disposed. Here reality wears a face of such regularity, order, and coherence that it leaves no room for human agency, presenting an aspect of such wholeness and completeness that it intimidates rather than invites imaginative identification. (Content, 21)

Indeed, Cotton Mather asserts a universe which “leaves no room for human agency” and, to the contrary, insists that faith in an omniscient and omnipotent God as creator of the world and judge of man implies belief that, in the words of his father, Increase Mather, “the providence of
Chapter 2

God is extended to the least and most inconsiderable things that happen in the world.30 The resolution of the plot of each tale—whether the tale recounts a rescue at sea, a Satanic possession, an extraordinary conversion, an Indian captivity, a medical cure, or a death—serves to make only one statement: God illustrates his power over man and his judgment of man in the events of the world. Terribilia dei with their tragic plots are instructive of the tragic condition of one man’s soul, while the comic plots of magnalia dei are indicative of the felicitous state of another man’s soul. Virtue is rewarded, and vice punished. Cotton Mather’s remarkables are, then, somewhat ironic in that the goal of his compendia of exceptional events is the argument that there is, finally, nothing truly exceptional in this world; all is subject to divine “regularity, order, and coherence.” Even disorder is part of the divine scheme.

The sole truly dramatic element in the tales of remarkable occurrences is the specific and often symbolic character of God’s reward or punishment toward his saints and sinners. It remains only for the minister to explicate—in a definitive and moralistic conclusion—the significance of divine judgment. Mrs. William Dyer, who was notorious for holding “about thirty monstrous opinions” on theological matters, delivered of “about thirty monstrous births at once” (2:519). Drunken men perish by tumbling into the fire in advance of their falling into the eternal flames (2:395). Those who issue false oaths often suffer from their rash statements, such as Wollery who was blinded when he swore that if he were guilty of a certain crime, then the devil might put out his eyes (2:393). Likewise, when one of God’s faithful servants is mindful to pray—however briefly—in a moment of trial, God answers his prayer. When the “honest carpenter” lost control of his lumber, which was positioned immediately over the heads of his eight children, he asked God to redirect its fall, a feat that, according to Mather, God performed in recognition of the carpenter’s righteousness (2:356). Throughout Magnalia Christi Americana, when God speaks to man through symbolic events, Cotton Mather argues that he is privileged to discern the voice of God because of his clerical wisdom. As such, the sixth book of Magnalia codifies the social history of seventeenth-century New England according to the divine order and will that Mather perceives in their world, and does so in an imaginative way that enlightens and engages its readership.

30. A doctrine of divine providence open and applied (Boston, 1684), 11.