



"The Man with the Cloaks" or the Moral Rewriting of "Peter Rugg"

Alain Geoffroy

► To cite this version:

Alain Geoffroy. "The Man with the Cloaks" or the Moral Rewriting of "Peter Rugg". *Alizés : Revue angliciste de La Réunion*, 1998, A Critical Edition of William Austin's The Man with the cloaks and others stories, the Original Text, 15, pp.123-134. hal-02348371

HAL Id: hal-02348371

<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02348371>

Submitted on 5 Nov 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

"The Man with the Cloaks" or the Moral Rewriting of "Peter Rugg"

"Peter Rugg, the Missing Man" has always attracted more literary comment than any other work by William Austin. Even if it never attained much more than the ambiguous status of a "minor masterpiece" (Zimbalatti x), it has been the pretext of many rewritings by various authors, among which Hawthorne's noticeable piece "A Virtuoso's Collection" (1842). But before all of his sometimes illustrious successors,¹ Austin himself felt like reshaping some of the major themes of his first work of fiction into a tale published in the January 1836 issue of *The American Monthly Magazine*, and enigmatically entitled: "The Man with the Cloaks." Although the narrative apparently strays a long way away from Peter Rugg's peregrinations, the parallel between the two stories can be easily established after the extraverted dimension of Rugg's wanderings is seen as the negative counterpart of Grindall's confinement in his own home.

Indeed, in both stories, equally staged in New England, the main protagonists undergo a specific ordeal after they have challenged, each in his own way, the natural and moral order of the world. Peter Rugg utters his "faithful oath" (Rugg 27), both defying the elements and reason despite the wise advice of his friend Mr. Cutter:

"Why, Mr. Rugg, . . . the storm is overwhelming you; the night is extremely dark; your little daughter will perish; you are in an open chair and the tempest is increasing." "*Let the storm increase,*" said Rugg, with a fearful oath, "*I will see home to-night, in spite of the last tempest ! or may I never see home!*" (Rugg 27)

¹ Zimbalatti mentions among others "Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Donald Mitchell, Edmund Clarence Stedman, Louise Imogen Guiney, Amy Lowell, Stephen Vincent Benet, and the English author Rudyard Kipling" (xxxviii).

Similarly, Grindall neglects the innkeeper’s wise advice to yield an old coat he no longer has the use of to a poor traveler who badly needs it because of an inordinately increasing cold:

“How easy,” said Grindall, “is it for one man to be liberal of the property of another ? My neighbor is one of the most generous men in the world ; for the simple reason that he has nothing to give.” (66)²

Bitterly disappointed by this blunt refusal, the visitor replies ominously:

“Farewell, then. You may want more than two cloaks to keep you warm if I perish with the cold” (66).

In both cases, defying the elements — unusually unleashed — implies a moral breach nourished by selfishness and a lack of consideration of the vital needs of the other: Rugg refuses to take account of his daughter’s life and Grindall turns a deaf ear to the perils threatening his unfortunate visitor. The consequences of their respective acts of egoism are of the very same nature: they bring a curse onto the two blasphemers, whose manifestations pertain to the supernatural. Consequently, both of them appear as supernatural creatures to those who happen to meet them. Austin depicts those apparitions in uncannily similar terms borrowed from the meteorological register. Rugg is depicted in the midst of a variety of colors and lights:

The divers tints of the rainbow, the most brilliant dyes that the sun lays on the lap of spring, added to the whole family of gems, could not display a more beautiful, radiant and dazzling spectacle than accompanied the black horse. You would have thought all the stars of heaven had met in merriment on the turnpike. In the midst of this luminous configuration sat a man, distinctly to be seen, in a miserable looking chair drawn by a black horse. (*Rugg* 40)

As for Grindall, his appearance evokes similarly some mysterious meteorological phenomenon:

² All further references are to this edition.

While sitting in the sun, he would appear to be enveloped in a warm vapour, such as you sometimes see in a morning, rising over a meadow ; and when the sun played upon this vapour, Grindall would appear to be surrounded with beautiful rainbows. (76)

Moreover, both men suffer from some inordinately salient flaw of character. Peter Rugg was well-known for his extraordinary fits of temper:

... unhappily, his temper, at times, was altogether ungovernable, and then, his language was terrible. In these fits of passion, if a door stood in his way, he would never do less than kick a pannel through. . . . Once, Rugg was seen to bite a ten-penny nail in halves. In those days, every body, both men and boys, wore wigs; and Peter, at these moments of violent passion, would become so profane that his wig would rise up from his head. Some said, it was on account of his terrible language. Others accounted for it in a more philosophical way, and said it was caused by the expansion of his scalp; as violent passion, we know, will swell the veins and expand the head. While these fits were on him, Rugg had no respect for heaven or earth. (*Rugg* 27)

As for Grindall, he "was something more than a strict economist, one whom the present extravagant age would pronounce a miser. To give and to lose had with him the same meaning ; so, to get and to keep." (65) These remarkable temperaments, characterized by their very excess, are eventually confronted with another kind of excess whose universal nature largely surpasses their individual distinctiveness: that of the elements. Rugg met "a violent storm" (*Rugg* 27) on his way back to Boston, whereas Grindall was preparing for "a memorable cold winter" (65). For both of them, the ordeal begins with their singular determination conflicting with some universal, if not supernatural, angered will. The outcome of their respective selfish insubordination is in both tales much the same: Rugg and Grindall become equally alien to the earthly world:

[Rugg] will have no hold on this world (*Rugg* 26). [He appears] to be a man not of this world; and [those he met] appeared to Rugg a strange generation of men (42). [Rugg and his daughter] do not look . . . as though they belonged to this world. (22)

"O wretched Grindall ! I am an outcast from human nature. There is no human being to sympathise with me. All forsake me. I am alone in the world ; at home, without a home ; in the world, but not of it. More than an outcast." (70)

Similarly, their sudden alienness makes them appear as madmen. Rugg behaves as if he were persecuted and had lost all his bearings,³ whereas the doctors supposedly assisting Grindall foretell, after his symbolic fall down the hill, that "if the man should be produced alive, he will be deranged ; for as his descent may have been oblique, his brains have fallen on one side" (56).

Under those inordinate circumstances, their respective ordeals present supernatural features which are not devoid of devilish traits. Rugg is under the control of a formidable "majestic black horse of unusual size" (*Rugg* 34) whose "cloven feet" (*Rugg* 35) clearly indicate his belonging to the realm of Satan.⁴ As for Grindall, he appears to be under the spell of the many cloaks in which he is confined, their diabolical nature being revealed only when he eventually manages to be able to get rid of them:

Immediately preceding the divesting of a cloak, the cloak would appear to be animated with life. It would first tremble, then crinkle, and then dance all around the body of Grindall. It would seem joyful, almost intelligent, and inclined to speak. It did not shrivel, or show any sign of distress. Not a few asserted all this was accompanied by a noise not unlike the rumbling of distant thunder. But the moment the cloak was put off, it was as quiet as lamb's wool. No wonder it began to be noised abroad that there was an evil spirit in each cloak. (78)

However, in both cases, the narrator cleverly denies the marvelous character of these mysterious manifestations — which he attributes to the prejudiced credulity of the local witnesses — by providing some rational explanations of his own. According to him, the disquieting movements of Grindall's cloaks are only the result of quite natural causes:

³ See Alain Geoffroy "What Drove Peter Rugg Raving Mad."

⁴ See Bernard Terramorsi "'Peter Rugg, the Missing Man' or the Eclipsing Revolution" (69).

this simple circumstance, even in the present enlightened times, would immediately grow into the marvellous. All these strange appearances might arise from the bounding heart of Grindall. Every cloak that he gave away expanded his heart ; it beat high with the joyful assurance that, when all his cloaks had left him, he should become a proper man. Hence the agitation of his heart caused him and his whole establishment to tremble ; and the supposed thunder was only the throbbing of his heart. Greater mistakes than this have been made down east, near Boston, where the good people of a certain town on the sea coast lived a whole century, after the settlement of the country, on shags, mistaking them for wild geese. (78)

Dunwell, the narrator of “Peter Rugg,” is struck by the bewildering testimony of the Scotch toll-gatherer — significantly called McDoubt — who mistook Rugg’s appearance for a marvellous manifestation:

“Well, sir, just after I had closed the gate for the night, down the turnpike, as far as my eye could reach, I beheld, what at first appeared to me, two armies engaged. The report of the musketry, and the flashes of their firelocks were incessant and continuous. As this strange spectacle approached me with the fury of a tornado, the noise increased, and the appearance rolled on in one compact body over the surface of the ground. The most splendid fireworks rose out of the earth, and encircled this moving spectacle. The divers tints of the rainbow, the most brilliant dyes that the sun lays on the lap of spring, added to the whole family of gems, could not display a more beautiful, radiant and dazzling spectacle than accompanied the black horse. You would have thought all the stars of heaven had met in merriment on the turnpike. In the midst of this luminous configuration sat a man, distinctly to be seen, in a miserable looking chair drawn by a black horse. The turnpike gate, ought, by the laws of nature, and the laws of the state, to have made a wreck of the whole, and have dissolved the enchantment; but no, the horse without an effort passed over the gate, and drew the man and chair horizontally after him without touching the bar. This was what I call enchantment.” (*Rugg* 40-41)

However, this astounding narrative does not convince Dunwell of its supernatural origin, and he soon reinterprets the facts as perfectly natural phenomena:

“I do not believe in witchcraft or enchantment,” said I, “and if you will relate circumstantially what happened, last night, I will endeavour to account for it by natural means.”

.....
 “My friend,” said I, “you have grossly magnified a natural occurrence. The man was Peter Rugg on his way to Boston. It is true, his horse travelled with unequalled speed, but as he reared high his fore feet, he could not help displacing the thousand small stones on which he trod, which flying in all directions struck each other, and resounded and scintillated. The top bar of your gate is not more than two feet from the ground, and Rugg’s horse at every vault could easily lift the carriage over that gate.” (*Rugg* 40; 41)

One may wonder why the author lets these two enlightened men — Dunwell and the narrator of “The Man with the Cloaks” — subvert part of the marvelous nature of his supernatural tales, even though, inexplicably, the unexpected presence of these rationales does not weaken *in fine* the mysteries involved. In fact, by seriously diminishing the irrationality of some elements of his stories, Austin, by contrast, moves the stress onto other no less puzzling manifestations of far greater scope as regards the development and, paradoxically, the plausibility of both his narratives. For the supernatural does not so much lay in the way people see what they cannot explain, but in the general subversion of the laws of nature induced by Rugg’s and Grindall’s subversive behaviors. Rugg defies the thunderstorm and neglects his paternal duty — and his daughter’s life — whereas Grindall wants to ignore the harshness of the winter and evades the moral duty of assistance to someone he deliberately sends to his death.⁵ This is precisely what triggers off the raging of the elements as well as a series of *natural* phenomena of *supernatural* extent disrupting the ordinary course of life. Rugg is followed by his thundercloud, bringing rain and wind everywhere he goes, literally sowing storms on his way — he is recurrently referred to as the “storm-breeder” (*Rugg* 20) — and appearing to the rest of the world “on every dark and stormy night” (*Rugg* 27), or “through rain, thunder and lightning” (20). As to Grindall, not only did his attitude become associated with “a memorable cold winter” (65), but his curse is also unquestionably connected with

⁵ For the moral dimension of Austin’s writings, see Zimbalatti (lxxvi-clxxii).

the divine wrath, expressed in a meteorological parable: "Not a few asserted all this was accompanied by a noise not unlike the rumbling of distant thunder" (78). Moreover, his condition imposes quite inordinate consequences on the running of the natural world:

One day, toward the end of August, while Grindall from his door-stone was watching the descending sun and earnestly expecting the approach of a traveller to relieve him from his outside cloak, it is said he suddenly made an unnatural and hideous outcry, which echoed and re-echoed through the mountains, and over the lake even to Memphremagog. This ebullition of Grindall must have been terrific. For the wild beasts, then so numerous on the Green Mountains, all left their lurking-places. The bears, catamounts, and foxes, with one consent took to the trees. The wolves alone stood their ground, and answered to the supposed challenge. It was feared, at first, that the howling of the wolves would be everlasting. For as the nature of the wolf is gregarious, all within hearing assembled at the first call, and soon an army of wolves collected around the habitation of Grindall ; and as their howling, like the outcry of Grindall, echoed and re-echoed among the mountains, the wolves mistook each individual howl of their own for a new challenge ; and thus a continuous howl, through the remainder of the day and following night, agitated the Green Mountains, even to Montpelier, east, and to the borders of Canada, north. But at sunrise all was quiet. The howling, from pure exhaustion, gradually died away, so that no echo was returned ; and then all was as still as when Adam was a lone man.

One good sprung out of this incident. It was remarked for several years afterward, that in the vicinity of Ferrisburg the wild beasts had become extinct. Hence, deer, sheep, and poultry, safe from their enemies, increased in geometrical progression, to the utter subversion of the theory afterward promulgated by Mr. Malthus. The fact was, the wild beasts had retired, affrighted, to other forests. (76)

These *natural* phenomena caused by *moral* violations indicate clearly that in Austin's mind, they are equivalents of breaches of the natural laws, corroborating Zimbalatti's interpretation of Austin's tales in a Unitarian perspective (cxxxix-clxxii). Unquestionably, what is at stake after these similarly selfish attitudes is not so much the individual curse induced, but the very order of the world, which reveals the essence of Austin's use of the supernatural genre.

Another coincidence in the two short stories is the recurrent series of often critical hints at both the historical and social contexts prevailing in New England at the time. In “Peter Rugg”, the revolutionary context is omnipresent, though rarely clearly alluded to. In actual fact, the American Revolution which Peter Rugg literally *misses*, reappears under the form of multiple metaphors and parables hinting in particular at the Bostonian revolutionary hero Paul Revere who is the real “missing man” in the story — actually embodied by Peter Rugg himself and consequently never explicitly mentioned.⁶

The Revolution is also present in “The Man with the Cloaks,” through recurrent allusions to historical names or toponyms. The author of the Declaration of Independence is made present through one of his famous maxims: “In a few minutes he began to treat it as the magnanimous Jefferson once treated an injury, ‘like one of those things that never happened.’” (73). Likewise, General Burgoyne and his role in the War of Independence⁷ are twice mentioned:

“What could have kept those men warm, half naked as they were, who captured Burgoyne on the other side of the lake ! They must have had very warm hearts. Yes, it must be true, as the stranger told me, the heart keeps the body warm. I see it clearly, the country is safe, it never can be conquered. Burgoyne spoke the truth when he said it is impossible to conquer a people who fight till their small clothes drop off in rags.” (77)

Some of the places referred to are also closely connected with the War of Independence. The burning of Charlestown calls to mind the famous battles of Bunker Hill and Breed’s Hill⁸ and the ruined town

⁶ For further details, see Alain Geoffroy’s “From Peter Rugg to Paul Revere: An Account of some Bostonian Revolutionary Rides” *Alizés* n° 11. On the missing Revolution, see Bernard Terramorsi’s “‘Peter Rugg, the Missing Man’ or The Eclipsing Revolution: an Essay on the Supernatural” (*ibid*).

⁷ In 1777, British General Burgoyne captured Fort Ticonderoga on July 5, but as he approached Albany was defeated by American forces of Generals Gates and Arnold. On Oct. 17, he was forced to surrender at Saratoga.

⁸ The British troops were repelled by the patriotic forces that had dug in on Breed’s Hill. The American forces were eventually defeated, leaving Charlestown a smoldering ruin.

echoes the blaze which destroyed Peter Rugg's house in North End during the Revolution. The Green Mountains (76; 79) are reminiscent of the famous Green Mountain Boys, a patriot militia in the War of Independence. Lake Champlain, the theatre of fierce naval battles both during the Revolution and the war of 1812 (also known as the Second War of Independence) is evoked repeatedly:

The gallant little rooster on board M'Donough's ship, who, previous to the battle on Lake Champlain, perched on the fore-yard and crowed thrice, cock-a-hoop, was of this same breed. (76)⁹

Many social issues are also included in Austin's "Peter Rugg," among which the power of money (Terramorsi; Dupuit) and the illegitimacy of tolls, both themes being more fully developed later in "Martha Gardner" (1837). In this perspective, Grindall's refusal to divert from a strict policy of investment is the key to his malediction:

"... sir, you make a good purchase when you relieve the necessitous."
"My receipts, all of them, are for very different purposes." (66)

Grindall's selfish dedication to money makes him a man under the spell of a malediction — "they believed Grindall to be what the Scotch call a doomed man" (70) — not unlike Peter Rugg: "I have heard it asserted that heaven sometimes sets a mark on a man, either for a judgement or a trial. Under which Peter Rugg now labours, I cannot say" (Rugg 22). The similarity of their respective ordeals corroborates Zimbalatti's interpretation of Austin's heroes as representatives of a religious community — that of Presbyterianism — whose rules of life appeared to him *doomed* to disappear to be replaced by more humane values: in that sense, Rugg and Grindall¹⁰ embody Calvinism from a

⁹ The American and British fleets' first encounter at the Battle of Valcour Island, (Oct. 11, 1776). During the War of 1812 another naval battle (Sept. 11, 1814) resulted in the victory of the American fleet under Cmd. Thomas Macdonough.

¹⁰ The name may be borrowed from England's history: Archbishop Edmund Grindal, (1519?-1583) expressed Puritan sympathies which brought him into serious conflict with Queen Elizabeth I. In that case, he is representative of the Puritan spirit condemned by the Bostonian Unitarians.

Unitarian point of view, a critical vision not uncommon in Boston in Austin's days:

Austin's Unitarian view of the Calvinist God is strangely similar to the Puritan view of the Devil, and perhaps this is the very idea that Austin wished to convey through his complex system of symbols. (Zimbalatti cxxii)

All these common elements are convincing evidence that the two stories deal with the same set of issues and symbolic elements, rearranged in a slightly different pattern. However, the form taken by the malediction differs markedly in each tale: as Rugg is condemned to miss his goal eternally and to wander throughout the world without being able to find a place to rest *nor find his home again*, Grindall, on the contrary, is doomed *to stay at home*, deprived of the ability to ever get out of it for “[h]is circumference was soon so great that he could not pass out of his door” (67) so that he was eventually “confined to his house more than three months” (68). The curse is here simply inverted in its practical consequences, the common result being that both of them are no longer free of their movements: Rugg is forced to wander randomly around Boston, and Grindall can no longer move wherever he wants. One situation is replaced by its exact counterpart. Moreover, the symbolic equivalence of Rugg's and Grindall's maledictions is confirmed by one singular event occurring during the latter's tribulations:

...having been housed more than three months, the glory of the sun, the purity of the air, and the sublimity of the lake, which reflected at midday ten thousand diamonds, seemed for a moment to warm his heart. He became exhilarated, and not having the usual command of his legs, and being ill-balanced, owing to the hasty putting on of the seventy cloaks, he faltered, reeled, and gently fell on the snow ; in a moment, owing to the sharp declivity and the moistened surface of the snow, he became a huge snowball. The snow, as usual, had coveted the tops of the walls and fences, and there was no impediment in the descent to Lake Champlain. Accordingly, in a moment, Grindall became apparently a huge rotund snowball, and acquired at every rebound additional velocity : and when this man-mountain arrived at the margin of the lake, he passed its whole diameter like a schoolboy's slide. (68)

As soon as he eventually manages to get out of his house, Grindall has no longer the "usual command of his legs," he is carried away by the slope and turned into a snowball wildly tumbling down the hill. This echoes Rugg's own peregrinations over which he has no mastery either: as Rugg revolves around his home town, Grindall spins around his own axis. The movement is the same, and the absence of control over it is only displaced: the exteriority of Rugg's wanderings is here replaced by Grindall's interiorization of the cornerstone of his doom.

Unquestionably, this parallel analysis of Austin's two supernatural tales reveals that the author had the same concerns in mind when he wrote them. In both cases, the individual breach of moral laws challenges the natural order of the world, though in Rugg's case, the fault is never totally redeemed. If Grindall becomes a proverb — "'As good as old Grindall,'" is still current west of the Green Mountains" (79) —, Rugg never recovers from the consequences of his fatal oath: "You were cut off from the last age, and you can never be fitted to the present. Your home is gone, and you can never have another home in this world" (*Rugg* 52). The happy ending of Grindall's story may thus account for Austin's wish to rewrite "Peter Rugg" nine years later, as he may have wished to introduce redemption as the ultimate issue of his dramatized parable. "The Man with the Cloaks" appears then as the outcome of an afterthought providing a more generous ending to his tale, no doubt corresponding to Austin's evolution in his own vision of, and his deeper commitment to Unitarian philosophy.

Alain Geoffroy¹¹

¹¹ Université de La Réunion, Faculté des Lettres & Sciences Humaines, 15 rue René Cassin, B.P. 7151 - 97715 SAINT DENIS cedex 9 (FRANCE).

REFERENCES

- Austin, William.** “Peter Rugg, the Missing Man,” the complete text, ed. Alain Geoffroy, *Alizés* n° 11, Université de La Réunion, June 1996.
- Geoffroy, Alain.** “From Peter Rugg to Paul Revere: An Account of some Bostonian Revolutionary Rides” *Alizés* n° 11, Université de La Réunion, June 1996, 107-26.
- Terramorsi, Bernard.** “‘Peter Rugg, the Missing Man’ or The Eclipsing Revolution: an Essay on the Supernatural” *Alizés* n° 11, Université de La Réunion, June 1996, 57-103.
- Zimbalatti, Joseph.** “Anti-Calvinist Allegory: A Critical Edition of William Austin’s ‘Peter Rugg, the Missing Man’ (1924-1827) Ph.D., Fordham University (1992).
-