

# **THE GOSPEL OF THE RED-HOT STARS**

# THE GOSPEL OF THE RED-HOT STARS

A Chamber Opera in One Act by Tom Baker (1999)

Libretto compiled and adapted by Tom Baker based on the following texts:

- *Half-Hanged Mary* by Margaret Atwood (1995)
- Sermons and Letters of Cotton Mather (1650-1690)
- *The Book of Psalms* by Henry Ainsworth (1612)

## CAST

Mary Webster (Soprano)  
Cotton Mather (Baritone)  
The Puritans (Chorus SATB, 12-16)

## ORCHESTRA

Clarinet, Percussion (one player), Piano, Violin, Viola and Cello

## SYNOPSIS

Mary Webster was accused of witchcraft in the 1680's in Massachusetts. According to several surviving accounts, she was hung from a tree and left all night to die. It is known that when she was cut down in the morning she was still alive, as she lived for another 14 years.

*The Gospel of the Red-Hot Stars* tells the story of Mary Webster's spiritual journey as she confronts death and comes face to face with the prejudice and bigotry of her fellow townspeople. Cotton Mather, a Puritan minister with the zeal of the establishment, seeks to purge New England of the influence of the devil. His sermons play on the fears and insecurities of the people as they face the hardships of a difficult, rural life.

As the opera opens, Mary Webster hangs from a tree. The Puritan congregation is seated in the pews of the church, where Cotton Mather is about to deliver the Sermon of the Virtuous Woman. Over the course of the night on the hanging tree, Mary experiences hallucinations, contemplates her mortality, talks with God, and finally sinks into profound despair. She refuses to accept death however, overcoming her fear and pain to survive the ordeal.

As dawn breaks, the Puritans cut Mary down from the tree, assuming that she has died in the night. Mary gasps for air and slowly struggles to her feet. As the townspeople realize that she is still alive, they retreat from her in fear. Mary slowly makes her way to the church, looking into the window and seeing Cotton Mather at the pulpit. Their eyes meet, and he recognizes in her glance both compassion and loathing. She leaves the stage as he is left alone in silence.

---

The poem "Half-Hanged Mary" is from the poetry collection *Morning in the Burned House* by Margaret Atwood © 1995  
Margaret Atwood, published in the U.S. by Houghton Mifflin. Reproduced with permission of the author.

*The Gospel of the Red-Hot Stars* Libretto © 2001 All Rights Reserved

## I. PRELUDE

*(As the lights come up slowly during the prelude, the audience sees only Mary Webster hanging from an enormous oak tree. Near the end of the prelude, Mary opens her eyes and begins to struggle against the noose.)*

## II. THE VIRTUOUS WOMAN

*(The lights come up on the church pulpit, where Cotton Mather is about to deliver the sermon of The Virtuous Woman. The Puritans are sitting in the pews, holding their bibles, awaiting Cotton's sermon, while Mary struggles helplessly.)*

**Cotton Mather:** The virtuous woman counts the best female favor to be deceitful, the best female beauty to be vain. By favor is meant a comely presence, a handsome carriage, a decent gesture, a ready wit agreeably expressing itself with all other graceful motions, and what so ever procures favor for a woman among her neighbors. The virtuous woman is willing to have this favor so far as is consistent with virtue; she counts it a favor of God for one to be graced with, but still she looks upon it as a deceitful thing. She is careful that she does not hereby deceive herself or be contemptuous towards others. Careful she likewise is, lest hereby she deceive unwary men into those amours which bewitching looks and smiles so often betray the children of men.

The fear of God is that which the heart of a virtuous woman is under the power of. The female sex is naturally the fearful sex; but the fear of God is that which exceeds (and sometimes extinguishes) other fears in the virtuous woman. It may then be said of a virtuous woman that she is a religious woman; that she has bound herself to that God, whom she has by the sin and the fall of her first mother, Eve, departed from; she has a love which does not cast out the fear that is no fault, but confirms and settles her in that fear of God; that all Righteousness and Godliness are visible to her in her whole Behavior; and that she does Justice, loves Mercy, and walks Humbly with her God.

## III. 7:00 PM – RUMOR

**Mary Webster:**

Rumor was loose in the air,  
hunting for some neck to land on.  
I was milking the cow,  
the barn door open to the sunset.  
I didn't feel the aimed word hit  
and go in like a soft bullet.  
I didn't feel the smashed flesh  
closing over it like water  
over a thrown stone.

I was hanged for living alone,  
for having blue eyes and a sunburned skin,  
tattered skirts, few buttons,  
a weedy farm in my own name,  
and a surefire cure for warts;

Oh yes, and breasts,  
and a sweet pear hidden in my body.  
Whenever there's talk of demons  
these come in handy.

#### IV. PSALM NO. 3

*(The chorus leaves the church and forms a semi-circle around Mary while they sing Psalm No. 3.)*

**Chorus:** I layed me down and slept; I waking rose;  
For me Jehovah firmly up did bear.  
For thousands ten of folk I will not fear,  
Which me besetting round about inclose.

#### V. 8:00 PM – THE ROPE

*(The women of the chorus return to the pews, while the men re-enact the hanging during "The Rope.")*

**Mary:** The rope was an improvisation.  
With time they'd have thought of axes.  
Up I go like a windfall in reverse,  
a blackened apple stuck back onto the tree.  
Trussed hands, rag in my mouth,  
a flag raised to salute the moon,  
old bone-faced goddess, old original  
who once took blood in return for food.  
The men of the town stalk homeward,  
excited by their show of hate,  
their own evil turned inside out like a glove,  
and me wearing it.

## VI. A VERY DAMNABLE WITCHCRAFT

*(More agitated than before, Cotton begins the Sermon: A Very Damnable Witchcraft, while the men of the chorus are mocking Mary.)*

**Cotton Mather:** Wherefore the Devil is now making one attempt more upon us; an attempt more difficult, more surprising, more snarled with unintelligible circumstances than any that we have hitherto encountered; an attempt so critical, that if we get well through, we shall soon have the vultures of Hell trodden under our feet.

We have been advised by some credible Christians, that a malefactor, accused of witchcraft as well as murder, and executed in this place more than forty years ago, did then give notice of a horrible plot of witchcraft, which if it were not seasonably discovered, would probably blow up, and pull down all the churches in the country. And we have now with horror seen the discovery of such a witchcraft! An army of devils is horribly broke in upon this place, and the houses of good people there are filled with the doleful shrieks of their children and servants, tormented by invisible hands, with tortures altogether preternatural.

These our poor afflicted neighbors, quickly after they become infected and infested with these demons, arrive to a capacity of discerning those which they conceive the shapes of their troubles. And many of the persons thus represented have been convicted of a very damnable witchcraft: yea, more than one. Twenty have confessed that they have signed unto a book, which the devil showed them, and engaged in his hellish design of bewitching and ruining our land. The devil has made a dreadful knot of witches in the country, and by the help of witches has dreadfully increased that knot.

*(The men stalk back to the church.)*

If the Devil now can strike the minds of men with any poisons of so fine a composition and operation that scores of innocent people shall unite in confession of a crime which we see actually committed, it is a thing prodigious beyond the wonders of the former ages, and it threatens no less than a sort of a dissolution upon the world.

## VII. 9:00 PM –THE BONNETS

*(The women of the chorus slowly walk to the hanging tree, and surround Mary.)*

**Mary:** The bonnets come to stare,  
the dark skirts also,  
the upturned faces in between,  
mouths closed so tight they're lip-less.

I can see down into their eyeholes  
and nostrils. I can see their fear.

You were my friend, you too.  
I cured your baby, Mrs.,  
and flushed yours out of you,  
Non-wife, to save your life.

Help me down? You don't dare.  
I might rub off on you,  
like soot or gossip. Birds  
of a feather burn together,  
though as a rule ravens are singular.

In a gathering like this one  
the safe place is the background,  
pretending you can't dance,  
the safe stance pointing a finger.

*(The women begin to walk back to the church.)*

I understand. You can't spare  
anything, a hand, a piece of bread, a shawl  
against the cold,  
a good word. Lord  
knows there isn't much  
to go around. You need it all.

## VIII. PSALM NO. 34

**Chorus:**

Who is the man that life doth will,  
That loveth days, good for to see?  
Refraining keep thy tongue from ill,  
Thy lips from speaking fallacy.  
Do good and evil quite eschew,  
Seek peace and after it pursue.

## IX. 10:00 PM - GRACE

**Mary:**

Well, God, now that I'm up here  
with maybe some time to kill  
away from the daily  
fingerwork, legwork, work  
at the hen level,  
we can continue our quarrel,

the one about free will.

Is it my choice that I'm dangling  
like a turkey's wattles from this  
more than indifferent tree?  
If Nature is Your alphabet, what letter is this rope?

Does my twisting body spell out Grace?  
*I hurt, therefore I am.*  
Faith, Charity, and Hope  
are three dead angels  
falling like meteors or  
burning owls across  
the profound blank sky of Your face.

## X. PSALM NO. 42

**Chorus:** Like as the hind for water-streams  
Doth bray desirously,  
Ev'n so desirously doth bray  
My soul, O God, to Thee.  
For God, ev'n for the living God,  
My soul it thirsteth sore;  
O when shall I come and appear  
The face of God before.

## XI. 12:00 AM – PRAYER AND PSALM NO. 51

*(Mary walks to the church and sits among the chorus. Cotton and chorus begin reciting Psalm 51 quietly, as if praying, while Mary begins singing. She moves among them while singing, but they do not acknowledge her.)*

**Cotton Mather:** Have Mercy upon us, Oh God  
**Chorus:** According to your loving kindness.  
**Cotton Mather:** According to the multitude of your tender mercies,  
**Chorus:** Blot out our transgressions.  
**Cotton Mather:** Wash us thoroughly from our iniquity,  
**Chorus:** Cleanse us from our sin.

**Mary:** Out of my mouth is coming, at some  
distance from me, a thin gnawing sound  
which you could confuse with prayer except that  
praying is not constrained.

Or is it, Lord?  
Maybe it's more like being strangled  
than I once thought. Maybe it's  
a gasp for air, prayer.  
Did those men at Pentecost  
want flames to shoot out of their heads?  
Did they ask to be tossed  
on the ground, gabbling like holy poultry,  
eyeballs bulging?

As mine are, as mine are.  
There is only one prayer; it is not  
the knees in the clean nightgown  
on the hooked rug,  
*I want this, I want that.*  
Oh far beyond.  
Call it *Please*. Call it *Mercy*.  
Call it *Not yet, not yet*,  
as Heaven threatens to explode  
inwards in fire and shredded flesh, the angels caw.

## XII. 2:00 AM – DESPAIR

*(Mary walks back to the tree.)*

**Mary:**

My throat is taut against the rope  
choking off words and air;  
I'm reduced to knotted muscle.  
Blood bulges in my skull,  
my clenched teeth hold it in;  
I bite down on despair.

Death sits on my shoulder like a crow  
waiting for my squeezed beet  
of a heart to burst  
so he can eat my eyes

or like a judge  
muttering about sluts and punishment  
and licking his lips

or like a dark angel  
insidious in his glossy feathers  
whispering to me to be easy  
on myself. To breathe out finally.  
*Trust me*, he says, caressing me.  
*Why suffer?*

A temptation, to sink down  
into these definitions.  
To become a martyr in reverse,  
or food, or trash.

To give up my own words for myself,  
my own refusals.  
To give up knowing.  
To give up pain.

To let go.

### XIII. THE DEATH OF EVERY SIN

**Cotton Mather:** What must you do to be saved? That is the question. You must feel the burden of your sin, lying on you, and you cry out, Oh! 'Tis a heavy burden, too heavy for me! You must see God angry with you, sin binding of you, Hell gaping for you; and utterly despair of helping yourselves out of the confusion that is come upon you.

What must you do to be saved? That is the question. You must be filled with sorrow for what you have done; with horror at what you are exposed unto. You must be no stranger to such soliloquies as these; I have sinned; I have sinned, and, woe is unto me, that I have sinned. Lust enchants me, enslaves me; Satan tyrannizes over me. I am in hourly hazard of an eternal banishment from God, into outer darkness, into the place of dragons. Oh! wretched man that I am, I can do nothing to deliver myself. I perish.

What must you do to be saved? That is the question. First, this must be done: you must heartily and bitterly bewail all your sins. Your original sin, your actual sin, the monstrous aggravation of your sin, you must be convinced of it. You must mourn for your sin, and mourn for the offense given to God by your sin, as well as for the mischief done to yourselves: mourn, mourn, and never count that you have mourned enough.

What must you do to be saved? That is the question. First, this must be done: every way of sin must be abhorred, must be avoided, must be forsaken. And, this must be done: you must lively pursue the death of every sin. This must be done. You must lively pursue the death of every sin.

## XIV. 3:00 AM – NIGHTBIRDS

**Mary:**

wind seethes in the leaves around  
me the trees exude night  
birds night birds yell inside  
my ears like stabbed hearts my heart  
stutters in my fluttering cloth  
body I dangle with strength  
going out of me the wind seethes  
in my body tattering  
the words I clench my fists hold No  
talisman or silver disc my lungs  
flail as if drowning I call  
on you as witness I did  
no crime I was born I have borne I  
bear I will be born this is  
a crime I will not  
acknowledge leaves and wind  
hold on to me I will not give in

## XV. PSALM NO. 136

**Chorus:**

Confess Jehovah thankfully,  
For he is good, for His mercy  
Continueth for ever.  
To God of gods confess do ye,  
Because His bountiful mercy  
Continueth for ever.  
Unto the Lord of lords confess  
Because His merciful kindness  
Continueth for ever.  
To Him that doth Himself only  
Things wondrous great, for His mercy  
Continueth for ever.

## XVI. 6:00 AM – THE GOSPEL

*(As dawn breaks, Mary is exhausted, barely alive. She closes her eyes as the Puritans approach. They cut her down from the tree, and quickly step back as they realize she is still alive. They retreat off-stage. Mary gasps for air and sings The Gospel.)*

**Mary:**

Sun comes up, huge and blaring,

no longer a simile for God.

Time is relative, let me tell you  
I have lived a millennium  
drifting in space,  
listening to the gospel of the red-hot stars.  
Pinpoints of infinity riddle my brain,  
a revelation of deafness.

The words boil out of me, coil after coil  
of sinuous possibility.  
The cosmos unravels from my mouth.  
All fullness, all vacancey.

## **XVII. POSTLUDE**

*(During the postlude, the chorus is heard from off-stage. Mary slowly regains her strength and walks to the church and looks in the window. She stares at Cotton, who stares back. He drops his face into his hands, and Mary walks off-stage, leaving Cotton as the lights slowly dim.)*