ANALYSIS

"The Maypole of Merry Mount" (1836)

Nathaniel Hawthorne

(1804-1864)

"The Maypole of Merry Mount" is an allegory of maturation, personal and national. Of all Hawthorne's tales, this one is the most comprehensive expression of his vision. Based on New England history like nearly all his fiction, this story is first in historical and mythic time, depicting the Fall of the American Adam and Eve.

In 1628, the time of the story, Puritans and Cavaliers were adversaries in England and contending for dominion in the New World. Hawthorne opens by explaining that facts in the history of the early settlement at Mount Wollaston, Massachusetts--called Merry Mount—"wrought themselves, almost spontaneously, into a sort of allegory." This was consistently his mythic method (a characteristic of later Modernism)--to allegorize events of New England history as figuratively representing universal truths. The Cavalier Thomas Morton set up a plantation at Merry Mount, trading with the Indians and competing against the first Puritans in New England, who were trying to establish themselves nearby. Governor William Bradford gave his version of events in *Of Plymouth Plantation* (1628):

> And Morton became lord of misrule, and maintained (as it were) a schoole of Athisme. And after they had gott some goods into their hands, and gott much by trading with ye Indeans, they spent it as vainly, in quaffing & drinking both wine & strong waters in great excess, and as some reported, 10 pounds worth in a morning. They allso set up a May-pole, drinking and dancing aboute it many days togeather, inviting the Indean women, for their consorts, dancing and frisking togither, (like so many fairies, or furies rather,) and worse practices. As if they had anew revived and celebrated the feasts of ye Roman Goddes Flora, or ye beastly practices of ye madd Bacchinalians. Morton likewise (to shew his poetrie) composed sundry rimes & verses, some tending to lasciviousness, and others to ye detraction and scandall of some persons [including Bradford], which he affixed to this idle or idoll May-polle. They also chainged the name of their place, and in stead of calling it Mounte Wollaston, they called it Merie-mounte, as if this joylity would have lasted ever. But this continued not long, for [then] Morton was sent for England [exiled], (as follows to be declared,) shortly after came over that worthy gentlman, Mr. John Indecott, who brought over a patent under ye broad seall, for ye governmente of ye Massachusets, who visiting those parts caused ye May-polle to be cutt downe, and rebuked them for their profannes.

This episode had such resonance that in addition to Hawthorne's story, the raid on Merry Mount was the subject of a novel by the historian John Lothrop Motley; of the opera *Merry Mount* by Howard Hanson and Richard Stokes; and of a play called *Endecott and the Red Cross* by the poet Robert Lowell. Thomas Morton was probably a London lawyer. He invested in the plantation at Mount Wollaston, was arrested there and was deported in 1627, hence he is not present during Hawthorne's story. Morton returned to New England and was again deported in 1630. He returned again in 1643, was jailed for months, then found refuge in Maine and died there in 1646. He gave his version of events in *New English Canaan* (1637):

> The Separatists, envying the prosperity and hope of the Plantation at Ma-re Mount, (which they perceived...to be in a good way for gaine in the Beaver trade,) conspired together against [me]...as of a great Monster... Theire grande leader, Captaine Shrimp [Captain Miles Standish, the short military leader of Plymouth Colony] tooke on most furiously and tore his clothes for anger, to see the empty nest, and their bird gone... The rest were eager to have torne theire haire from theire heads; but it was so short that it would give them no hold. [But later] they fell upon [me] as if they would have eaten [me]... Captain Shrimp, and the rest of the nine worthies, made themselves, (by this outragious riot,) Masters of [me]...and disposed of what [I] had.

Merry Mount is appealing compared to the Puritans. Hawthorne opens by evoking the jollity and "lightsome hearts" of that "gay colony." Then he concludes his second paragraph with denunciations: "0, people of the Golden Age...wild throng...Gothic monsters...of Grecian ancestry...the Savage Man..." They resemble "the crew of Comus [in a masque by John Milton], some already transformed to brutes, some midway between man and beast, and the others rioting in the flow of tipsy jollity that foreran the change." At Merry Mount "the Lord of Misrule bore potent sway." Wild revelry and riot, "jest and delusion, trick and fantasy, kept up a continual carnival." The phallic maypole is "their religion, or their altar; but always, it was the banner staff of Merry Mount." The high priest of Merry Mount is a corrupt Anglican associated with the English aristocracy and with the Cavaliers led by Thomas Morton, "canonically dressed, yet decked with flowers, in heathen fashion... By the riot of his rolling eye, and the pagan decorations of his holy garb, he seemed the wildest monster there, and the very Comus of the crew."

Merry Mount was the first Woodstock. Like Blithedale, it is a false Utopia. And unlike the Blithedalers, the Maypolers have no idealistic motives, they are merely self-indulgent--cavalier indeed. Sometimes "they made a game of their own stupidity, and began a yawning match." They are expatriate English who prefer an infantile hedonism in the wilderness, "a wild philosophy of pleasure," to their cultural and religious heritage. "Their leaders were men who had sported so long with life, that when Thought and Wisdom came, even these unwelcome guests were led astray by the crowd of vanities which they should have put to flight. Erring Thought and perverted Wisdom were made to put on masques, and play the fool.... The young deemed themselves happy. The elder spirits, if they knew that mirth was but the counterfeit of happiness, yet followed the false shadow willfully... Sworn triflers of a lifetime, they would not venture among the sober truths of life not even to be truly blest."

Edith and Edgar, the young couple in the story, *do* "venture among the sober truths of life" and are truly blest. Their love and marriage set them apart from the other maypolers, as do their titles, Lord and Lady of the May--an ironic honor, since they are the only Maypolers who develop, through true love, beyond cavalier paganism: "From the moment that they truly loved, they had subjected themselves to earth's doom of care and sorrow, and troubled joy, and had no more a home at Merry Mount." They had to grow up. Falling truly in love is a Fall into knowledge, serious caring and a sense of responsibility. Edith and Edgar individuate through love in a universal allegory of maturation, requiring the end of Merry Mount in the wilderness, the end of behaving only with the instinct of an animal and thinking like a wild bear--symbolized by ending the pagan festival, cutting down the maypole and shooting the wild bear through the head, suggesting that it is thinking like a wild bear that must end. Edith and Edgar accept Endicott as their "only guide," becoming Christians: "They went heavenward, supporting each other along the difficult path which it was their lot to tread, and never wasted one regretful thought on the vanities of Merry Mount."

The two cultures are opposite extremes: the puritan *head* suppressing the wild *heart*, consciousness overcoming the unconscious--symbolized by killing the wild beast. The Maypolers are identified with dreams and the Puritans with "waking thoughts" and harsh reality. Merry Mount lacks common sense,

Puritan culture lacks heart. The Maypolers try to sustain the mood of May throughout the year, while the Puritans maintain the mood of Winter. The sunlight at Merry Mount is like the sunlight in the forest of *The Scarlet Letter* falling on Hester and Dimmesdale in the context of their sin--natural, but Nature wild and heathen: "never subjugated by human law, nor illumined by higher truth." For their part, the Puritans are deficient in joyful qualities of the heart, as represented by the sunlight that Kenyon observes from Donatello's tower in *The Marble Faun*: sunlight radiating "the broad, sunny smile of God."

As a protestant and a democrat, Hawthorne affirms the historical victory of the Puritans over the Cavaliers, despite seeing the Puritans as "grizzly saints," epitomized in Endicott: "So stern was the energy of his aspect, that the whole man, visage, frame, and soul, seemed wrought of iron, gifted with life and thought, yet all of one substance with his headpiece and breastplate." Their rigid, heavy, encumbering theology is called an "iron cage" in "Main Street" and symbolized as a suit of armor in *The Scarlet Letter*. Calvinism makes them hard, brutal and gloomy. The Maypolers worship heathen Nature instead of God, whereas the Puritans tend to worship theocratic law. The whipping post "might be termed the Puritan Maypole." Nevertheless, inside their armor the Puritans are "valiant to fight, and sober to toil, and pious to pray." They made a democratic America possible and "laid the rock foundation of New England." It is within their Christian tradition rather than that of the Maypolers that one may advance in the world and be "truly blest": "There they stood, in the first hour of wedlock, while the idle pleasures of which their companions were the emblems, had given place to the sternest cares of life, personified by the dark puritans." The fate of the Maypolers is inevitable, representing "the inevitable blight of early hopes.... As the moral gloom of the world overpowers all systematic gayety, even so was their home of wild mirth made desolate amid the sad forest." Endicott is wise, knowing that they are not happiest, "even in our lifetime of a moment, who misspend it dancing round a Maypole."

Compared to the Maypolers, Endicott is a model of individuation, since he has both a heart and a head, expressing sympathy for Edith and Edgar: "The iron man was softened; he smiled at the fair spectacle of early love." When he garlands them with roses from the Merry Mount they outgrew, he prefigures the flowering of true democracy through a union of the best from each culture, virtues of both the heart and the head. The Maypoler thesis is rebutted by the Puritan antithesis, enabling Edith and Edgar to attain an ideal synthesis. They are "chastened by adversity," and yet are able to enjoy "all the purest and best of their early joys." Spiritual equality is implied by names beginning with the same letter and prefigures the ideal Victorian marriage, exemplified by the Hawthornes, transcending the limitations of the Puritans.

After living for awhile among Maypoler types in a commune at Brook Farm, Hawthorne satirized romantic utopianism in *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), including a scene of dancing in the woods that echoes "The Maypole of Mary Mount." In "The Celestial Railroad" (1843) he satirizes the liberals who hoped for an easy ride to salvation on the Unitarian railroad and ignored the wisdom in puritan John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. He retold the myth of the Fall in *The Marble Faun* (1860).

Michael Hollister (2015)