

**The Maypole at Merry Mount:
An Example of the Historical
Potential.**

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"...each generation must define the past in its own terms" (1).

There are certain seemingly trivial episodes in the history and legends of a country which the uncanny instinct of the creative artist singles out for their dramatic potential while the less imaginative reader is apt to pass over them hastily in his search for more spectacular events.

One such incident in American history is found embedded in the annals of the first years of the Plymouth Colony written by William Bradford. It records an account of Merry Mount, the short-lived colony that had been settled by an English "Adventurer", member of the Church of England, close to the Puritan Plantation of Plymouth and of the famous or infamous Maypole erected there which precipitated its downfall.

Bradford's annals are the usual authority for the study of the early settlement of New England and excerpts from it are included as a matter of course in Handbooks of Literature and of History. But this particular incident had never caught my attention. It was not until going over material with another purpose in mind that a reference to Merry Mount, in different context, aroused my curiosity.

(1) *Literary History of the United States*, ed. Robert E. Spiller, Macmillan Publishing Co., New York, 1975, Preface p. vii.

The first work was laid aside. To my surprise, I found that the incident had been reintroduced almost periodically to the reading public, at times in well known works, at other times in works that are now forgotten and required to be tracked down.

As we read the history today, after some 350 years, this short account, though undoubtedly amusing, hardly seems to offer the necessary raw material to warrant its long and diversified literary life. But, strange as it may appear, the tale of the Maypole has inspired such otherwise different writers as William Bradford, Thomas Morton, Nathaniel Hawthorne, John Lothrop Motley, William Carlos Williams, Hart Crane and the composer Howard Hanson and has entered the main stream of American literature in the guise of indignant moralizing, mock-heroic apologia, allegory, romance, critical essay, poetry and finally opera.

What exactly is it in the tale of the Maypole that has attracted so many writers? Why did this particular incident inspire so many emotional responses? These questions can never be answered absolutely, Literary creation in the final instance must remain a mystery (2). But the fact that the incident does attract is evident and is, in the term of Henry James, the "donnée" of our study.

What seems to admit more profitable speculation is why each writer, when responding to the same general stimuli, should produce works that reflect such different moral, ethical, historical and social judgments. In a word, that the "truth" should be so many sided.

Although we find analyses and criticisms of some of the individual works based upon the Maypole, no syste-

(2) See María Jesús Pérez Martín, *Hacia Una Integración En Las Disciplinas de Lengua y Literatura Inglesas*, Aguilar, Madrid, 1978, pp. 111-114.

matic literary history of the Maypole at Merry Mount had been attempted. Yet it is a study of the later versions of the Maypole when compared with the original account that permits us to isolate the selective and interpretative processes that were active in each new creation and to appreciate to what extent these were conditioned by the particular historical moment of the writer.

Before attempting to analyse later tales of the Maypole, it would be well to look briefly at the original account.

Of Plymouth Plantation (3)

"O, the horribleness of this villainy" (4).

The Maypole makes its first literary appearance in the historical manuscript *Of Plymouth Plantation*, written by William Bradford (1590-1657), one of the leaders of the small band of Puritans who aboard the Mayflower landed at Plymouth Bay, Massachusetts in 1620. *Of Plymouth Plantation* is divided into two parts: Book 1 (1630) deals with the history of the Puritans from the time of their flight from England up to their arrival in America; the "Second Book", written over a period of years, continues the history of the colony from the time of its implantation in the New World up to the year 1647. Though the work remained in manuscript form for over two hundred years it was, nevertheless, the undisputed authority for the early historians of New England.

(3) William Bradford, "Of Plymouth Plantation" in *O Brave New World*, ed. Leslie A. Fiedler, Del Publishing Co., New York, 1968.

(4) *Ibid.*, p. 454.

The episode of the Maypole was recorded by William Bradford in an entry dated 1628. According to this authority, Thomas Morton (1590?-1647), an English "Adventurer", had arrived in Massachusetts a few years earlier in the Company of Captain Wollaston. This group of "worldly" Anglicans had founded the colony, Mount Wollaston, later renamed Merry Mount, close to the Puritan colony and immediately became a thorn in the side of that righteous community.

Bradford describes Morton desparagingly as one who "...having more craft than honesty (who had been a kind of pettifogger of Furnival's Inn)..." (5), took advantage of the absence of Captain Wollaston and by means of "...strong drink and other junkets..." (6), turned the indentured servants against their rightful master while he, Morton, assumed control of the plantation.

The Puritan's description of life at Merry Mount and his list of specific complaints against that colony are presented "...in a plain style, with singular regard unto the simple truth..." (7).

"After this they fell to great licentiousness and led a dissolute life, pouring out themselves into all profaneness. And Morton became Lord of Misrule and maintained (as it were) a School of Atheism. And after they had got some goods into their hands, and got much by trading with the Indians, they spent it as vainly in quaffing and drinking, both wine and strong waters in great excess (and, as some reported) ten pounds worth in a morning. They also set up a

(5) *Ibid.*, p. 451.

(6) *Ibid.*

(7) William Bradford in *Landmarks of American Writing*, ed. by Henning Cohen, Voice of America Forum Lectures, 1970, p. 7.

maypole, drinking and dancing about it many days together, inviting the Indian women for their consorts, dancing and frisking together like so many fairies, or furies, rather; and worse practices... They changed also the name of their place, and instead of calling it Mount Wollaston they call it Merry-mount, as if this jollity would have lasted ever (8).

These offenses were more than enough to provoke the Puritans, but Morton was accused of a more grievous crime: in order to defray the expense of this continual revelry, he had begun to sell weapons and gun powder to the Indians.

In the eyes of Bradford, Morton had deliberately transgressed against the Puritan way of life - scandalous festivities, drinking, singing and dancing around a Maypole, consorting with Indian women but, the last charge, the sale of arms and ammunition to the Indians endangered their very life. Bradford enlarges upon the villainy of arming the natives by enumerating many instances of colonists who had been killed by Indians but does not mention the repercussions this may have caused in the Puritan's fur trade. It seems likely that with guns at the other end of a barter with Morton, few Indians would be interested in trading their pelts for the trinkets offered by the Puritans.

The pleasure makers at Merry Mount did not have to wait long for the Puritan reaction to their disgraceful conduct. When Morton did not attend their warnings, Captain Miles Standish (1584-1656), commanding a group of armed volunteers, was despatched to Merry Mount to uproot the Maypole and abolish this pagan gaiety.

(8) William Bradford, *op. cit.*, p. 452.

This was easily accomplished, assures Bradford, without injury to anyone, since they found the revelers "...over armed with drink..." (9). Morton was duly arrested and transported to England. There, to Bradford's chagrin, Morton was "...not so much as rebuked..." (10), for his deplorable behavior. Bradford ends his account without further comment; he has been "too long about so unworthy a person, and bad a cause" (11).

This then, is in substance the original account of the Merry Mount Plantation and its "idle or idol" Maypole, as it was interpreted and recorded through the Puritan consciousness of William Bradford.

Of Plymouth Plantation was intended as a history of the Puritan experience in the New World and the Merry Mount episode was included as a contributing factor. But at the same time, Bradford undoubtedly wanted to put the Puritan side on record and justify their armed invasion of the colony. The latter he based solely on religious and moral grounds; neither territorial ambition nor economic gain enter into his account.

It is interesting to compare subsequent versions of the episode for the insight they cast upon the creative process. The work of each author was based on the same material yet once this had been subjected to his imagination and filtered by his historical experience, his selection of theme, his focus and moral implications have varied. What we have in each case is an original work which bears only the vaguest resemblance to the others and to their common source.

(9) *Ibid.*, p. 455.

(10) *Ibid.*, p. 456.

(11) *Ibid.*

The New English Canaan (12)

"Drink and be merry, merry, merry boyes" (13).

The first work to be inspired by Bradford's history of the Maypole was a counterattack written by the same Thomas Morton. Soon after his arrival in England, Morton set about writing *The New English Canaan* (1637). The volume is divided into three books, the first dealing with the "origin of the natives", the second with the "natural endowments of the country", and the third with "what people are planting there". This last section is a scathing criticism of the Plymouth Colony. In his devastating attack on the Puritans, Morton includes his version of the Maypole at Merry Mount.

Morton's account of the incident is written in a lively mock-heroic style. Needless to say, it varies enormously from Bradford's indignant moral denunciation. Morton's apologia is twofold; first, he thoroughly ridicules the dour Puritans as narrow minded Separatists then, against this background, he portrays the inhabitants of Merry Mount as a youthful, joyous group, anxious only to retain their ties with the Mother Country by keeping alive the customs and folklore of England in the New World. Morton justifies the life led in the colony not only by emphasizing the religious separation of the Puritan Church from the Anglican but by implying a would-be political separation from England on their part as well.

(12) Thomas Morton, "The New English Canaan" in *O Brave New World*, ed. Leslie A. Fiedler, Del Publishing Co., New York, 1968.

(13) *Ibid.*, p. 458.

"The inhabitants of Pasonagessit (having translated the name of their habitation from that ancient savage name to Merrymount, and being resolved to have the new name confirmed for a memorial to after ages) did devise among themselves to have it performed in a solemn manner, with revels and merriment after the old English custom; they prepared to set up a Maypole upon the festival day of Philip and Jacob and therefore brewed a barrel of excellent beer and provided a case of bottles, to be spent, with other good cheer, for all comers of that day. And because they would have it in a complete form, they had prepared a song fitting to the time and present occasion" (14).

The Maypole, he continues, was "a goodly pine tree eighty feet in height. "And upon May day they brought the Maypole to the place appointed, with drums, gunnes, pistols and other fitting instruments, for the purpose; and there erected it with the help of Salvages, that came thither to see the manner of our Revels..." (15), and join in the song

"Lasses in beaver coats come away
Ye shall be welcome to us night and day" (16).

Unfortunately, the Maypole and the barrel of beer at its base disgusted the Puritans "who trouble their brains about things that are indifferent" (17). Morton also adds that the men of Plymouth were envious of the prosperity of Merry Mount and for that reason decided to take over his settlement. In Bradford's version the economic situation of the colony is not stressed. The trade with the Indians was only what was needed to pay for the revelries.

(14) *Ibid.*, p. 456-57.

(15) *Ibid.*, p. 457.

(16) *Ibid.*, p. 459.

(17) *Ibid.*

In a boisterous mock-heroic satire Morton describes how Captain Miles Standish, the Captain Shrimp of the tale and his volunteers, the "nine worthies", invade the joyous festival. Morton completely ignores Bradford's accusation of drunkenness, stating that he surrendered with dignity in order to avoid bloodshed. The "nine worthies" sentence Morton to deportation. He is then taken to an island, the "Enchanted Castle", where he lives for a month among Indians while waiting for passage to England. Here, on the island, Morton learns that "the savage can be much more kindly than the Christian" (18).

The New English Canaan enjoyed a small success in England but, for obvious reasons, it was never permitted to circulate in the New England colonies. When Morton returned to New England in 1643 he was again arrested and brought to trial for libel against the colonies. However, no copy of his book could be found to be used as evidence against him.

The motive that prompted *The New English Canaan* offers little difficulty: Morton felt the need to vindicate his reputation in England. His motive would preclude any selection when answering Bradford's charges.

His rollicking tone, in direct contrast to Bradford's solemn righteousness, not only reflects his own boisterous disposition but is an additional means of making the Puritans appear ridiculous before the more wordly English. Once this has been achieved, he continues in a more serious vein to justify his colony by linking it to the traditions of Old England. He then accuses the Puritans of envy and greed and finally, the maximum reproach - to be wanting in Christian charity.

(18) *Ibid.*, p. 465.

The Maypole of Merry Mount (19)

"...these shapes of our jovial friends are visionary and their mirth unreal" (20).

William Bradford's history of the renegade colony in New England next inspired one of Nathaniel Hawthorne's (1804-1864) most interesting short stories, "The Maypole of Merry Mount" (1836).

With the Revolutionary War the American colonies had achieved their political independence. The need was then felt for a cultural independence as well. From that time to the mid-nineteenth century, American literary efforts were directed to this end. It is not surprising then, that Hawthorne, who began to write at the height of this movement, should turn to the early annals of New England in search of American material.

Hawthorne's response to the original account was that "...the facts, recorded on the grave pages of our New England Annalists, have wrought themselves, almost spontaneously, into a sort of allegory (21). From Bradford, Hawthorne took the general situation and an outline of the climax but his peculiar psychology restricted his interest to the central issue of the Maypole. After two hundred years the moral implications are by no means those of the offended Puritan colony nor are they those of the riotous Anglicans.

In the new "Maypole" Thomas Morton, as such, does not appear and the bright inconsequential revelry of his

(19) Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Maypole of Merry Mount" in *The Celestial Railroad and Other Stories*, A Signet Classic, New York, 1963.

(20) *Ibid.*, p. 118.

(21) *Ibid.*, p. 115.

colony takes on a darker hue. We are told that here in Merry Mount "Jollity and gloom were contending for an empire" (22). Although Hawthorne evokes a dreamlike atmosphere when describing Merry Mount this does not constitute an unqualified approval of an ideal. Rather it is his way of creating a mood of evasion, as we see in the prophetic censure: "O, people of the Golden age, the chief of your husbandry was to raise flowers" (23).

The tale opens on Midsummer Eve with a description of the festivities around the "gaily decked" Maypole. The revelers, English colonists and native Indians, united in gaiety, appear to be in perfect harmony with each other, nature and their environment. As further proof, the masked dancers about the Maypole are joined by a real bear from the surrounding wilderness:

"And here again, almost as wondrous, stood a real bear of the dark forest, lending each of his forepaws to the grasp of a human hand, and as ready for the dance as any in that circle. His inferior nature rose halfway to meet his companions as they stooped" (24).

This perfect fusion of Old and New World is further developed in the garland which is to crown the Lord and Lady of the May. Some of its roses "...had been gathered in the sunniest spot of the forest, and others, of still richer blush, were those which the colonists had reared from English seed" (25).

As the story progresses, what at first had appeared to be a painting of perfect harmony is gradually revealed to be only a forced collage of heterogeneous elements.

(22) *Ibid.*

(23) *Ibid.*, p. 116.

(24) *Ibid.*

(25) *Ibid.*

The result can never be perfection or harmony since it requires concealment or distortion of the natural or basic property of its elements. The dancers about the Maypole have forfeited their identity by disguising themselves as animals. The bear from the forest, in order to join in the games must adopt an unnatural position, while the human dancers are forced to stoop to his level.

Nor are all the roses in the floral wreath of equal beauty; the forest's loveliest roses are outshone by those nurtured from Old World seeds. The New World has much to offer but this fact should not blind its subjects to the values of the past. An apparently Edenic world which presupposes the sacrifice or masking of man's true nature where man has lost his ability to distinguish and maintain that which is worth while, whether this be from the Old World or the New, can only be a sham. What degrades man's nature or blunts his moral judgment can never be ideal.

By now even the laughter and gaiety of the colonists have taken on a hollow tone:

"...whatever might be the quality of their mirth, old and young were gay at Merry Mount. 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, because at least her garments glittered brightest. Sworn triflers of a lifetime, they would not venture among the sober truths of life not even to be truly blest" (26)

Only one thing at Merry Mount was as it seemed to be. The Lord and Lady of the May were to be really married under the Maypole: this wedding "...was more serious than most affairs of Merry Mount" (27). The ceremony

(26) *Ibid.*, p. 119-20.

(27) *Ibid.*, p. 118.

mony was performed by an English priest. Here Hawthorne once again draws our attention to the revelers' attempt to unite disparate elements. The priest was "...canonically dressed, yet decked with flowers, in heathen fashion, and wearing a chaplet of the native vine leaves" (28). The effect we are told was that of a "monster", "the very Comus of the crew." If an echo of the original Thomas Morton enters the tale it is here in the person of the Anglican priest.

Reality and retribution, in the form of a group of armed Puritans, erupt upon the gaiety, destroy the Maypole and castigate the revelers. Hawthorne has taken the liberty of placing this avenging band under the leadership of John Endicott (1589?-1665), governor of the Colony, rather than the military leader Miles Standish who had, according to Bradford, led the attack. This substitution by the highest authority sharpens the allegory of an avenging God and eliminates any civil or economic connotations which might otherwise diffuse Hawthorne's exclusive center of interest.

The revelers are first whipped at the scene of their crimes and then removed to the Puritan colony for further penalties. But the chastisement of the English minister

"...must be for the Great and General Court to determine, whether stripes and long imprisonment, and other grievous penalty, may atone for his transgressions... For such as violate our civil order, it may be permitted us to show mercy. But woe to the wretch that troubleth our religion!" (29).

Only the Lord and Lady of the May, Edgar and Edith, the sole colonists capable of a true sentiment, were pardoned by Governor Endicott. However, "From the

(28) *Ibid.*, p. 117.

(29) *Ibid.*, pp. 123-24.

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." ³⁰ Like Adam and Eve, they set out upon "the difficult path which it was their lot to tread..." ³¹

Although Hawthorne has followed Bradford's historical account in pitting the Puritans against the colony at Merry Mount this in no way implies his sympathy towards them. The "grim Puritans" are first introduced as

"...most dismal wretches, who said their prayers before daylight, and then wrought in the forest or the cornfield till evening made it prayer time again. Their weapons were always at hand to shoot down the straggling savage. When they met in conclave, it was never to keep up the old English mirth, but to hear sermons three hours long, or to proclaim bounties on the heads of wolves and the scalps of Indians" (32).

The Maypole revelers had betrayed their human dignity in an attempt at harmony with nature and their surroundings. The Puritan reaction to these same surroundings was more violent, they destroyed it — Indians and wolves and forest. When they saw the bear among the dancers "the energetic Puritan" ordered his men to "shoot him through the head. I suspect witchcraft in the beast."³³

Hawthorne's allegory is complex and should not be over simplified. Nevertheless, his divided sympathy when describing the two opposing ways of life seems to point to an ideal human state which would be neither "a continuous carnival" which masks man's innate dignity nor the

(30) *Ibid.*, p. 119.

(31) *Ibid.*, p. 126.

(32) *Ibid.*, p. 120.

(33) *Ibid.*, p. 124.

repressive, dour existence of the Puritan which deforms man's dignity. A fusion of the strength and determination of the Plymouth Colonists with genuine love and joy would assure a moral equilibrium which would permit man to live in harmony with his surroundings and accept both the happiness and limitations of his human condition.

MERRY-MOUNT; A ROMANCE OF THE MASSACHUSETTS COLONY ³⁴

"The chimeras which were rampant in that century have been destroyed. Each age, like Saturn, devours its own children" (35).

The next literary appearance of the Maypole is found in the novel *Merry-Mount; A Romance of the Massachusetts Colony* (1849), by John Lothrop Motley, published only sixteen years after Hawthorne's version. Motley knew of the earlier work but did not read it so as not to be influenced in his own rendering of the tale. He need not have worried on this point; the two works are worlds apart, not only figuratively, in regard to the respective literary merit of each, but literally; the theme, focus and moral implications have radically changed in this short period of time.

Merry-Mount is a long, tedious novel divided into two books. It is not surprising that it was out of print as early as 1886 when the literary historian Charles F. Richardson

(34) John Lothrop Motley, *Merry-Mount; A Romance of the Massachusetts Colony*, Boston and Cambridge, James Munroe and Company, 1849.

(35) *Ibid.*, p. 11.

referred to it as a "forgotten novel" that "...perhaps hardly deserves reprinting."³⁶

However, for a study of the influence of the historical moment on a work of literature, it is the most interesting version of the Maypole. Motley has included every conceivable attitude of mid-nineteenth century America, enlarging upon those that reflect his personal prejudices.

Motley based his account of the Maypole on Bradford's annals but expanded the story of the Anglican colony Merry Mount beyond what is recorded in the original annals and the moral conclusions reflect nineteenth century criteria rather than that of the sixteenth century Puritan.

In the opinion of Robert E. Spiller, the story "stumbled under the burden of bad plots."³⁷ Actually there are three different plots which are only loosely connected. The story of the Maypole forms the center of the novel, not in dramatic importance but because the Merry Mount colony is the pivotal point which links the other two plots.

One of the plots is a love story which holds little interest for our study. The young lover, Henry Maudsley, an Anglican, is a typical hero of romantic fiction. For very complicated though honorable reasons, he happens to live in the Merry Mount Colony. He provides the standard by which we will judge the colony. Only after much coaxing on the part of Morton does Maudsley finally agree to attend the May Day celebration. But he stipulates that he is only "a looker-on, and not an actor"³⁸. Even so, he is soon disgusted with the "grotesque buffoonery"³⁹. Esther Ludlow, the Puritan heroine, is finally, after the

(36) Charles F. Richardson, *American Literature*, Vol. 1, Haskell House Publishers Ltd., New York, 1970, p. 99.

(37) *Literary History of the United States*, ed. Robert E. Spiller, Macmillan Publishing Co., New York, 1975, p. 533.

(38) John Lothrop Motley, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

(39) *Ibid.*, p. 187.

usual misunderstandings, reunited with Maudsley. This proves dramatically that two religions, if practised with moderation, can live together peacefully. That is, as long as one of them is not the Catholic.

Here we come to one of Motley's strongest prejudices — his anti-Catholicism. Spiller remarks that Motley hated both the Spanish and Catholicism and there is ample proof of it in *Merry Mount* as we shall see shortly.

The third plot concerns the charters and land titles for the plantation and ownership of land in the New World. While Motley has followed Bradford's version of the moral and religious friction between the Puritans and the Anglicans for surface details, at root, he focuses the problem on more important factors — economic ventures on a large scale. In this he reflects the most vital phenomenon of his historical moment: the great territorial expansion under way during the first half of the nineteenth century.

The activity generated by discoveries and exploration, by road and canal building which permitted the constant emigration westward kept the question before the public and politic life of the country.

"A person could now go from Baltimore to Whelling in three, instead of eight, days. Property along the route rose in value, and villages multiplied in number and population" (40).

With much mystery and suspense, Motley discloses the "true" source of contention between the Anglicans and the Puritans. It seems that Sir Ferdinando Gorges, a historical figure, the Governor of forts and islands of Plymouth, England, had received land grants from the King for the Plymouth Colony in 1606. After two unsuc-

(40) Harry J. Carman, *A History of the American People*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1960, Vol. 1, p. 459.

cessful attempts at colonization he received a new grant for New England in 1620. Sir Ferdinando had failed in his previous attempts for want of settlers. Now he hopes to outwit the industrious Puritans so that they settle on his land and convert it into a thriving community, producing enormous benefits for himself.

To forward his plan he has sent over Sir Christopher Gardiner who divides his time between the Puritan colony where he masquerades as a believer to gain their confidence and Merry Mount where he has enlisted the aid of Thomas Morton.

Sir Christopher had warned Morton not to provoke the Puritans; that they are dangerous. But Morton, who is portrayed as a humorous, pompas, adventurer, fond of quoting Horace, goes ahead with his May day celebration "according to the good old custom of merry England"⁴¹. The Maypole is duly cut and set up by the savages. Here, of course, the Puritans attack and put an end to the revels and deport Morton to England.

Sir Christopher and Morton refuse to accept defeat and return to Merry Mount in 1630 to renew their attempt to establish a colony. Morton the "Master of Misrule" is again taken Prisoner and returned to England. The mysterious Sir Christopher, the true villain of the novel, is finally unmasked. He is no other than the notorious Fulk de Gorges, kin of Sir Ferdinando. In the person of the villain, Motley gives full rein to both his personal prejudices: anti-Spanish and anti-Catholicism. These in turn reflect what to a greater or lesser degree was in the American consciousness of the period.

The first of these prejudices, Motley's anti-Spanish attitude, is a result of the territorial disputes with Spain

(41) John Lothrop Motly, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

that had surfaced regularly during the century. In 1819 Spain had ceded the Floridas to the United States. But mistrust continued. According to the Historian Harry J. Carman

"there were repeated reports that the powers would soon dispatch an expeditionary force to Spanish America to reconquer Spain's lost provinces" (42).

Unease was such, continues Carman, that

"The second section of the Monroe Doctrine, dealing with the possibility of European intervention in established American governments, grew out of the United States' fear that the nations of the Old World were planning to restore to Spain her former American colonies... The return of Catholic and autocratic Spain to the Western hemisphere was viewed as a threat to American democracy and to the territorial integrity of the United States" (43).

Sir Fulk de Gorges is described as a middle-aged, handsome man though "his complexion is more swarthy than most of his race"⁴⁴. When it is added that he first came into contact with Sir Ferdinando in Madrid the implication seems obvious.

The second of Motley's foibles, his anti-Catholicism, is repeated throughout the novel. The pro-Catholic atmosphere of England under King Charles is said to be the cause of further Puritan emigration to the colonies. Another character, William Blaxton, the hermit, had already emigrated for this reason. With marked Emersonian accents he says that he prefers a solitary altar on a mountain-top where he "...can commune, eye to eye, with the Creator of the universe"⁴⁵.

(42) Harry J. Carman, *op. cit.*, p. 390.

(43) *Ibid.*, pp. 389-90.

(44) John Lothrop Motley, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

(45) *Ibid.*, p. 200.

But it is in the long and infamous career of the evil Sir Fulk that Motley's hatred reaches its climax. Not satisfied with making the villain a mere Catholic, he had been a Monk, then a Cardinal and lastly, had missed the Papacy by only one vote. Here Motley is following the example set by the once flourishing Gothic novel which had proved so successful in England. However, time and the genre's manipulation by inferior writers to satisfy a reading public in demand of ever increasing horrors had rested whatever literary merits these novels had originally claimed. But, however melodramatic they may have been these "...typical trappings of Romanticism, the stock plots of Victorian novels are profoundly significant of tendencies characteristic of the United States" ⁴⁶.

Not content with the above depravity, Motley's Sir Fulk had also ruined three women (at least). With his first wife still alive, he had married Maudsley's sister. She conveniently died of a fever within a few weeks but it is not clear whether this was brought on by having married a bigamist or a monk. Lastly, he had brought another young woman with him to America.

Certainly Motley has allowed his personal prejudices to dominate. But when we turn again to our historical source we see that his aversion sprang from a particular social basis. According to Carman, there existed in America a "long standing but latent anti-Catholicism" which flared up during the middle decades of the nineteenth century.

He further explains that

(46) Edmund Wilson, *The Bit Between My Teeth*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1967, p. 553.

"The growing strength of Roman Catholicism in the United States came from the great waves of immigrants that reached American shores from Europe after 1830... In 1834, anti-Catholics burned the Ursuline convent in Charlestown, Massachusetts; the next year S. F. B. Morse's *Foreign Conspiracy* attacked the Catholic Irish in America; and in every large city there were occasional anti-Catholic demonstrations" (47).

Motley, the aristocratic New Englander, has given expression, though clumsily and overstated, to what was felt to be a real threat to the "benefits of American life."

It becomes obvious with each successive work inspired by the Maypole that as the historic and moral standards of the country evolve, the stories also change. There has been a gradual distancing from the Puritan consciousness and way of life which results in a growing affinity with the Revelers. At the same time the center of interest for each author has varied. Hawthorne's story, though complex, centers on the Maypole and is based upon traditional moral values. In Motley the distancing is evident, the opposition is between "grim Puritans" and "jovial Anglicans" and though the life of the Merry Mount colony and the Maypole festivities are described they are little more than local color. His interest reflects nineteenth century experiences.

But it is in the twentieth century that the changes will be more marked.

(47) Harry J. Carman, *op. cit.*, p. 511.

THE MAY-POLE AT MERRY MOUNT ⁴⁸

"Trustless of humane experience, not knowing what to think, they went mad, lost all direction" (49).

The incident of the Maypole was projected into the twentieth century by the poet William Carlos Williams in his study "The May-pole at Merry Mount" in *In the American Grain* (1925). Williams's analysis is based upon an edition of Thomas Morton's *The New English Canaan* with a preface by A. C. Adams.

"During the 1920s the general feeling against Puritanism slipped into high gear and ran beyond control" ⁵⁰. We can appreciate the extent to which Puritan ethics had lost their hold on the American imagination in that this is the first work to be told from Morton's point of view.

Although Williams agrees with Adams's opinion that the book is of "slight importance" he argues that "Thomas Morton was unique in our history" and "in history, to preserve things of little importance may be more valuable—as it is more difficult and more the business of a writer— than to champion a winner" ⁵¹.

Williams has taken over Morton's defense and in his justification he employs the same strategy that Morton himself had used earlier in his apologia. He first discredits the Puritans generally and then offers legalistic arguments to nullify the moral transgressions that they

(48) William Carlos Williams, "The May-Pole at Merry Mount" in *In the American Grain*, Penguin Books, England, 1971.

(49) *Ibid.*, p. 95.

(50) *Ibid.* Introduction by Horace Gregory, p. 17.

(51) *Ibid.*, p. 90.

had objected to, thus discrediting them in the particular events at Merry Mount also.

Adams in his introduction stressed Morton's relations with the Puritans, their final conflict and his subsequent arrest and deportation. Such a comparison automatically places Morton at a disadvantage.

Williams argues that if we first analyse Morton in isolation, without reference or comparison to the Puritans and above all without the prejudice of the time, we will see that his essential character is one of "lightness" which then

"discloses the Puritans as maimed... Comment upon him and his book should be laid mainly elsewhere, upon the more general scene of the New World, in his relationship with its natives — to which the Puritans so violently objected" (52).

Once Williams has vindicated to a certain extent Morton's character at the expense of the Puritans, he proceeds to an examination of his actions.

It is Williams's theory that the Puritans attacked Morton for two reasons. First, because he was guilty of selling liquor and firearms to the savages, which was not permitted in the colonies. But Williams asks, "...since the whites were armed with guns and had liquor, was it in the eyes of history *wrong* for Morton to use them for his trade?"⁵³ The Puritan objection to this trade, according to Williams, was not due to fear of an armed Indian but to fear that it would be the end of their own fur trade with the Indians.

(52) *Ibid.*, p. 91.

(53) *Ibid.*

However, more important even than these mercantile interests was the moral one of Morton and his company consorting with Indian girls. This, Williams claims, was the real reason for the Puritan attack on Merry Mount. In order to undermine this as a valid justification for the Puritan attack, Williams quotes several early historical sources to prove the laxity of Indian customs and concludes that the Indian woman in this followed her natural inclination which in turn would be governed by common sense rather than by a rigid law imposed by the tribe as, he implies, was the case of the Puritan woman.

Having removed by these arguments any taint of scandal or coercion from the question, Williams agrees entirely with Morton that "...this harmless mirth by younge men (that lived in hope to have wives brought over to them, that would save them a laboure to make a vayage to fetch any over)..."⁵⁴ was not only the most expedient, but also the most natural way for the young men of the colony to spend the interval. While the Puritans, victims of their own "perversions" which progressively corroded their judgment, look to ever increasing violence which ended in the witchcraft trials at Salem.

At last, in the twentieth century, Thomas Morton and his Maypole had found an unqualified champion in the poet William Carlos Williams.

In his introduction to this collection of Williams' essays, Horace Gregory states that "...as it fell slowly out of print, its reputation grew"⁵⁵.

A proof of the influence of these studies upon the imagination of other writers is found in the work of Hart Crane. This poet, expressing his own vision but also the

(54) *Ibid.*, p. 94.

(55) *Ibid.*, p. 12.

tenor of post World War I, chose a quotation from Williams' *The May-Pole at Merry Mount* for the epigraph of his poem "Powhatan's Daughter" in *The Bridge*.

The quotation is the description of "...a well-featured but wanton yong girle..."⁵⁶ that Williams had included as one of his arguments to minimise the guilt of the Merry Mount colonist. Crane converts the Indian princess into "...the mythological nature-symbol chosen to represent the physical body of the continent, or the soil"⁵⁷.

Certainly, after this, the Revelers need never justify their festivities or their choice of partners again; the "dusky" Lady of the May, as described by Motley, has become an earth goddess, symbol of the vitality and fertility of America.

MERRY MOUNT⁵⁸

"Death to the Witch" (59).

The last appearance that we have been able to trace provides a splendid finale for the homely settlement of the Massachusetts and its 'wonderful' Maypole.

Merry Mount, an opera in three acts of six scenes, with music by Howard Hanson and libretto by Richard L. Stokes, was produced at the Metropolitan Opera House of New York on February 10, 1934.

(56) *Ibid.*, p. 53.

(57) *The Complete Poems and Selected Letters and Prose of Hart Crane*, ed. by Brom Weber, Anchor Books, Doubleday & Company, Inc., New York, 1966, p. 248.

(58) *Merry Mount*, Opera in Three Acts of Six Scenes, Libretto by Richard L. Stokes, Music by Howard Hanson, Harms Inc., New York, 1933.

(59) *Ibid.*, Act. III, Sc. 2.

The selection of the particular material from Bradford's historical annals would, of course, be conditioned to a great extent by the dramatic genre used in its retelling. But this by no means accounts for the radical changes that we find in this version. The story of the opera *Merry Mount* is very much a product of its historical moment. Several tendencies noted earlier have developed further and merge here to create a new reality.

First is the still prevalent emphasis of working with American material.

The second is the effort to achieve cultural independence and autonomy. With regard to literature this goal had been reached during the second half of the nineteenth century. But America still depended largely upon Europe for its classical music. Following World War 1,

"...more Americans than ever before became interested in concert and operatic music, but at first it was Europe's classics rather than contemporary American pieces that attracted the largest audiences. Although the radio and the Federal Arts Project gave millions of Americans their first opportunity to listen to serious music, the works they heard were more often than not foreign rather than native compositions" (60).

The third tendency and perhaps the one that best highlights the changes that have taken place in the American consciousness is the portrayal of the Puritan moral code, most especially in the person of William Bradford. Throughout this study we have witnessed a gradual withdrawal of sympathy from the dogmatic righteousness of the Puritans to a more or less halfway position between them and the frivolities of Morton's *New Canaan*. Then in William Carlos Williams's version the Puritans begin to emerge

(60) Harry J. Carman, *Op. Cit.*, Vol. 11, p. 830.

as a people "gone mad" who "had lost all direction". In the opera *Merry Mount* the word Puritan has taken on its modern connotations of hypocrisy, deceit and inhibition.

In the earlier tales William Bradford had never been given an active role in the story. Now, in the musical adaptation, which is a modern version of the Faust theme, he is converted into the principle character. The man who it has been said "wrote for the glory of God" has now sold his soul to the devil.

The opera opens upon Bradford conducting a religious service and sternly condemning an adulteress and other sinners to public penance. But as soon as he is alone we see him as a man tormented by nightly temptations in the form of beautiful women. His friend urges him to marry but he prefers to follow "our Virgin Lord", though he finally consents.

Meanwhile, a ship had arrived from England the previous day with a Company of gentlemen, among whom is Thomas Morton, the Master of Merry Disports. The cavaliers have proceeded to set up a Maypole to the outrage of the Puritans who order their return to England. But Bradford, enraptured by the beautiful Marigold, who had arrived on the ship with the Cavaliers, wants to help them with their settlement. After much argument a truce is made until the following day.

That afternoon there is general rejoicing about the Maypole, with Indians bringing gifts to Sir Gower Lackland and Marigold, the Lord and Lady of the May. Just as they are to be married, Bradford and a band of armed Puritans erupt upon the festivities, destroying everything in their path.

In the forest where Bradford has dragged Marigold,

he pleads with her to "heal his heart" (61). When the Lord of the May comes to her rescue, he is killed and Marigold swears vengeance.

In a dream, Bradford appears before Lucifer who he recognizes as Gower. Lucifer promises him that "If thou wilt curse thy God, Then will I crown thee Prince of New England." (62) Bradford withstands this temptation but when Marigold appears he is drawn irresistibly and agrees that if "...with me this Queen tonight shall couch..." (63), he will then sign the Devil's book.

Upon awakening, all about him is in flames and Bradford remembers that he has cursed New England with flame and bloodshed. Marigold enters and is greeted with the Puritan cry: "Death to the witch" (64). When they take up stones to pelt her, Bradford swears that he will go with her and the one that has the fiercer devil will have her. He tears off his velvet cap uncovering a crimson band glowing on his forehead: the mark of the devil.

Bradford takes Marigold in his arms and strides into the fire exclaiming:

"With my own flesh I'll shield thee from the fire, then lie betwixt thee and the flames of hell" (65).

The Maypole at Thomas Morton's Colony of Merry Mount has enjoyed a long and varied life. From its humble beginnings in the annals of William Bradford's history it has, with each retelling, been adapted through the particular artist's creative power to reflect the historical consciousness of a given people at a given time.

(61) Stokes and Hanson, *Op. Cic.*, Act. II, Sc. 2.

(62) *Ibid.*, Act. II, Sc. 3.

(63) *Ibid.*, Act. II, Sc. 3.

(64) *Ibid.*, Act. III, Sc. 2.

(65) *Ibid.*, Act. III, Sc. 2.

The first literary appearance, in the annals of William Bradford, told a tale of depravity and pagan ritual around a Maypole to which the seventeenth century Puritan mind reacted with force against "...the horribleness of this villainy" (66).

This historical document by Bradford first motivated Thomas Morton's amusing apologia. Morton describes the Puritan colony as a potential threat to the Mother Country, and its inhabitants as "too serious", whereas Merry Mount with its Maypole is an extension of English gayety and traditions transplanted to the New World, so "Drink and be merry, merry, merry boyes" (67).

In the course of two hundred years the historical consciousness comes to judge the 'facts' in a different light. As interpreted by Nathaniel Hawthorne, neither protagonist of the original Maypole represented the 'truth'. The Puritans were "dismal wretches" while at Merry Mount "these shapes of our jovial friends are visionary, and their mirth unreal" (68).

In the few years that lapse before the next retelling the Maypole has been converted into a Romance. The important religious issues which prompted the first narrative have become irrelevant and the way of life of both antagonists is only exaggeration. However, it is all past now. "The chimeras which were rampant in that century have been destroyed. Each age, like Saturn, devours its own children" (69).

The twentieth century and the scientific mind of William Carlos Williams transfers the issue of the Maypole from moral to ethical grounds. Here, it is true, the Angli-

(66) William Bradford, *op. cit.*, p. 454.

(67) Thomas Morton, *op. cit.*, p. 458.

(68) Nathaniel Hawthorne, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

(69) John Lothrop Motley, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

can is found to be "light" but his practices are judged to be expedient. Whereas the repressed Puritans "Trustless of humane experience, not knowing what to think, they went mad, lost all direction" (70).

Our last study of the Maypole at Merry Mount reflects a total reversal of the traditional roles. Enlarging upon the conclusion of William Carlos Williams, the Puritans are seen as a repressed and inhibited people. The narrator of the original annals, the Pilgrim William Bradford, forfeits his soul for the love of a beautiful woman, amid the Puritan screams of "Death to the Witch" (71).

The Maypole has completed a cycle. What was vice passed to indifference and then, if not to virtue, at least to expedience. Meanwhile, what was virtue turned into mere exaggeration and finally to vice and derangement. Each generation has indeed defined the past in its own terms" 72).

While doing so history has slowly been converted into myth.

(70) William Carlos Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

(71) Richard L. Stokes, *op. cit.*, Act. III, Sc. 2.

(72) Robert E. Spiller, *op. cit.*, Preface p. vii.