RE-NARRATIVIZATION OF THE MAYPOLE INCIDENT: HAWTHORNE AND HIS NEW ENGLAND ANNALISTS

Etsuko Taketani

Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The May-Pole of Merry Mount” (1836) is a tale based on a “maypole” incident that took place in early American history. The historical incident, as far as it is recoverable at present, happened in 1627 when Thomas Morton, who settled in 1625 in the Wollaston community (a part of present-day Braintree, Massachusetts, a few miles south of Boston), observed the first official May Day, an Anglican custom, in New England by setting up a maypole at Merry Mount. Morton was arrested by the Plymouth Colony in June 1628 on the charge of providing Indians with firearms, and in September, the Puritan John Endicott went to reform the leaderless Merry Mount after Morton had been sent back to England.

The maypole incident was a confrontation scene between Anglicans and Puritans. Hawthorne’s tale drastically re-textualizes the original incident in two ways. First, it is not Morton, but an Anglican priest, Blackstone, who presides over the May festival. Morton does not appear in Hawthorne’s story at all. Secondly, Hawthorne’s May festival centers on the fictional marriage of Edgar and Edith, the Lord and Lady of the May at the maypole, which Endicott cuts down.

In the prefatory note to this tale, Hawthorne explains briefly the relationship between the historical maypole incident and his literary fiction: 1) this “philosophic romance” is based on “the curious history of the early settlement of Mount Wollaston, or Merry Mount”; 2) the history was originally “recorded on the grave pages of our New

In preparing this paper, I am especially indebted to the Rare Book Division and the Microform Division of the Library of Congress in the United States.
England annalists”; and 3) the “facts” recorded by these annalists are to be transformed into an “allegory” in this tale.1

Hawthorne makes a “Twice-Told Tale,” or more correctly, “Several-Times-Told Tale,” out of the histories of the maypole incident written by New England annalists. The literary context of “The May-Pole of Merry Mount” is not, as Hawthorne himself points out, the “actual” incident at Merry Mount in 1627 but a series of New England historians’ texts. With these narratives as his point of departure, Hawthorne re-textualizes the history as an allegory.

What I wish to discuss here is the relation between Hawthorne’s story and American historiography, and I would like to proceed by answering three questions: firstly, what kind of narratives did American historiography resort to when interpreting the showdown between Anglicans and Puritans; secondly, what ideological conditions caused Hawthorne to re-textualize the history of the maypole incident in 1836; and, finally, how does Hawthorne’s narrative function in relation to history?

First of all we need to identify the “New England annalists” and their works which Hawthorne says he has re-textualized in “The May-Pole of Merry Mount.” The original inscriptions of the incident were made by the ringleader who was responsible for setting up the maypole, Thomas Morton, a self-proclaimed Royalist and supporter of the Church of England, and by William Bradford, a Separatist Puritan and Governor of the Plymouth Plantation, who later sent Captain Myles Standish to arrest Morton. Thomas Morton’s New English Canaan was published in Amsterdam in 1637, but in America it did not appear publicly until it came out as part of Peter Force’s Tracts in 1838, two years after the publication of “The May-Pole of Merry Mount.” As J. Gary Williams says, there must have existed not fewer than two copies of Morton’s book in America before 1838 and Hawthorne himself could have read New English Canaan.2 However, my focus here is not on whether Hawthorne actually read it, but on the fact that Morton’s Anglican version of the maypole incident was not yet adopted by

---

1 Nathaniel Hawthorne, “The May-Pole of Merry Mount,” Twice-Told Tales (Columbus: Ohio State UP, 1974), p. 54. Subsequent parenthetical page references to this work will correspond to this edition.

American historiography at the point of Hawthorne’s writing. In fact, we have to wait until 1883 when Charles Francis Adams’ *New English Canaan of Thomas Morton* was published for Morton’s version to appear. Until this time, William Bradford’s *Of Plymouth Plantation* (1630–1657) served as the ur-text of American historiography’s treatment of the maypole incident. Since it existed only in manuscript until 1856, many historians after Bradford’s time relied on Nathaniel Morton, Bradford’s nephew. Morton almost literally repeated Bradford’s journal in his *New England’s Memorial* (1669), the fifth edition (Boston, 1826) of which Hawthorne checked out of the Salem Athenaeum on April 26, 1828. According to Williams’ list of history books dealing with the maypole incident Hawthorne had access to, six histories besides Bradford’s and/or Nathaniel Morton’s can be identified as the works of Hawthorne’s “New England annalists”: Jeremy Belknap’s *American Biography*, Joseph B. Felt’s *Annals of Salem*, William Hubbard’s *A General History of New England*, Thomas Hutchinson’s *The History of the Colony of Massachusetts’s Bay*, Daniel Neal’s *The History of New-England*, and James Thacher’s *History of the Town of Plymouth.*

In order to see how the maypole incident was first narrated in the ur-text of Bradford and then re-textualized before Hawthorne wrote “The May-Pole of Merry Mount,” let us put the “New England annalists” in chronological order. The original inscription, from Bradford’s *Of Plymouth Plantation* (1630–57), reads as follows:

They also set up a 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. As if they had anew revived and celebrated the feasts of the Roman goddess Flora, or the beastly practices of the mad Bacchanalians. Morton likewise, to show his poetry composed sundry rhymes and verses, some tend-

---


2 Kesselring, p. 57.

3 Williams, p. 174.
ing to lasciviousness, and others to the detraction and scandal of some persons, which he affixed to this idle or idol maypole. 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. But this continued not long, for after Morton was sent for England (as follows to be declared) shortly after came over that worthy gentleman Mr. John Endecott, who brought over a patent under the broad seal for the government of the Massachusetts. Who, visiting those parts, caused that maypole to be cut down and rebuked them for their profaneness and admonished them to look there should be better walking. So they or others now changed the name of their place again and called it Mount Dagon.¹

Nathaniel Morton's *New England's Memorial* (1669) repeated almost word for word what Bradford said, but Morton deliberately made one significant, erroneous change, which was to be repeated by later historians, until J. B. Felt set the record straight in *Annals of Salem* (1827). By omitting the sentence, "after Morton was sent for England," Nathaniel Morton ignored the time sequence, allowing Endicott to confront Thomas Morton at the scene of the maypole incident and to cut the maypole down on the spot.² In fact, Morton was arrested in June 1628, and Endicott did not arrive at New England until September. Why did Nathaniel Morton make this deliberate change in his history?

The key to understanding this lies perhaps in the Puritans' relationship with the Anglicans, in a conflict which took a "maypole" as its focal symbol. The *North American Review* in 1831 briefly described the history of their maypole in England:

The Puritans denounced this celebration, not merely because they considered it a relic of idolatry, but because it was tolerated on the Sabbath day... the luckless May-pole alternately sunk and rose like the banner of Lord Marmion at Flodden. King James I. and his successor, probably in defiance of the Puritans, ordained that the people should be at liberty to set them up and dance round them on the Sabbath, as well as to pursue all other recreations, not expressly prohibited by law; but the Long Parliament levelled a serious blow at 'alle and singular May-poles,' by inflicting


Re-Narrativization of the Maypole Incident

a penalty upon civil officers, proportioned to the length of time they should suffer them to stand. Not long after this, royal Government and the Maypoles were restored together; and the prodigious May-pole which Pope mentions as having 'once o'erlooked the Strand,' was raised with great ceremony under the royal auspices. It is recorded 'that it highly pleased his majesty, and the illustrious Prince Duke of York; little children did much rejoice, and antient [sic] people did clap their hands, saying, golden days began to appear.'

Needless to say, in England the maypole was a very controversial issue between Puritans and Royalists or supporters of the Church of England.

Puritans had good reasons to hate the maypole religiously, morally, and politically. Rooted in paganism and absorbed into popish practice, May Day was, from the Puritan perspective, a profanity against God. Besides, according to the Puritans the Sabbath is a holy Lord's day for the worship of God, not for indulging in dancing and drinking. Thomas Hall, a Puritan minister, in his Funebria Florae, The Downfall of May-Games (1660) says that it is perilous to tolerate profane May-Games which lead people away from God to the idolatry of Florialia and Saturnalia. In 1818, Hall's pamphlet was introduced to American audiences in the Port Folio as a "singular pamphlet" that attests to Puritans' intolerance of the maypole: "In those days of fanaticism and confusion, innocent pastimes were decried as wicked, and poor old May-day came in for her share of censure."

Quite often, interestingly enough, the sexual connotation of the maypole was the target of the Puritans' moral attack. As Phillip Stubbes wrote in Anatomie of Abuses (1595) (a slightly paraphrased passage of which was quoted in Joseph Strutt's The Sports and Pastimes of the People of England which Hawthorne acknowledged in the prefatory note as his source, so that Hawthorne was familiar with the issue):

Against May... all the yung men and maides, olde men and wives, run gadding over night to the woods, groves, hils, and mountains, where they spend all the night in plesant pastimes; and in the morning they return...

---

1 North American Review 33 (July 1831), 203. Hereafter NAR.
3 Port Folio 5 (1818), 215.
the chiefest jewel they bring from thence is their May-pole, which they bring home with great veneration... this May-pole (this stinkyng ydol, rather)...[they] set up... And then fall they to daunce about it, like as the heathen people did at the dedication of the Idols... I have heard it credibly reported (and that *viva voce*) by men of great gravitie and reputation, that of fortie, threescore, or a hundred maides going to the wood over night, there have scarely the third part of them returned home againe undefined.¹

May Day allegedly produced many children outside Christian marriage bonds, although the validity of this information is not easy to prove.²

The most important connotation that the maypole had in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was, however, a political one. In England, setting up and cutting down a maypole were political gestures. Repeatedly, Royalists/Anglicans tried to erect a maypole and Puritans forced it to be taken down. Christopher Hill gives us a picture of how these political actions were often seen in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in England. For example, in 1584-5, in Lincoln, when the Puritan fathers established a strict regime of Sabbath observance prohibiting ungodly recreations, their opponents encouraged people to set up maypoles and play May games. In 1588, in Shrewsbury, the Puritan authorities forbade erecting a maypole, and several members of the Shearmen’s Guild who tried to defend it were sent to jail.³ In 1618, as if to make the situation worse, James I issued the King’s Declaration of Sports (which is commonly called *Book of Sports*) stating that “as for Our good people’s lawfull Recreation, Our pleasure likewise is, That, after the end of Divine Service, Our good people be not disturbed, letted, or discouraged from any lawfull recreation...nor from having of May Games...and the setting up


² Puritans repeat this claim, but say only that: “I have heard it from a credible authority,” as, for example, Christopher Fetherston says in *A Dialogue against light, lewe, and lascivious dauncing* (1582), “I have hearde of tenne maidens whiche went to set May, and nine of them came home with childe” (Quoted by Malcolmson, p. 10).

of Maypoles.”¹ To the Puritans, the Book of Sports was a wicked book because it licensed profanity against the Sabbath. They rejected reading James’s Declaration in church and preached against it. The next year, in Stratford-on-Avon, the Puritan rulers were attacked and maypoles were called for, according to the royal proclamation. In Guildford, a maypole was still pulled down by Puritans, even though the King’s arms were attached to it.²

The maypole incident in New England happened in this period of aggravated tensions between Puritans and Royalists/Anglicans.³ In 1633, Charles I, the son of James I, reissued the Book of Sports. Finally, in 1642, during the period of the civil war, a maypole was set up as a political symbol for Royalists/Anglicans in Ludlow.⁴ When the civil war ended in victory for the Puritan side, the Long Parliament in April 1644 ordained that all maypoles that had been or would be set up in any parish should be taken down and destroyed as “a heathenish vanity.”⁵ Then, with the Restoration in 1660, a maypole was set up in Oxford on May Day, and although the Vice-Chancellor and his beadles tried to pull it down, it was protected by Royalists. On May 31, a dozen maypoles were erected, against which the Puritans could not do anything.⁶ The victory of the Anglicans brought back abundant maypoles to England. In 1661, on May Day, people planted the tallest (134 feet) maypole in the Strand.

From this point of view, we can see why Nathaniel Morton re-wrote Bradford’s ur-text in New England’s Memorial in 1669, ignoring deliberately the time sequence so that the Puritan Endicott and the Anglican Thomas Morton confront each other at the maypole incident as if it

² Hill, p. 185.
³ When Thomas Morton was arrested by the Puritans, however, the charge was not for setting up a maypole, because it was “lawfull” according to James’s Declaration and the New England Puritans were not politically against the King. Morton was arrested because he violated the King’s proclamation of 1622 against providing Indians with firearms. He was deported to England where he was to be brought to trial. However, by telling the Governor of the Council for New England, Sir Ferdinando Gorges, an Anglican, that his only crime was reading the Anglican Book of Common Prayer, that is, by recasting tactfully his “crime,” he was freed from trial and came back to New England in 1629.
⁴ Hill, pp. 185–6.
⁵ Strutt, p. 280.
⁶ Hill, p. 186.
were a showdown. By making Endicott cut down the maypole, Nathaniel Morton inscribed the symbolic victory of the Puritans over the Anglicans in his history of America, the New World, endeavoring to turn what was in fact defeat in England into triumph in America.

In *A General History of New England*, which was written in the 1670s by William Hubbard, a Puritan minister, the maypole incident is interpreted according to the Puritan ideology that Puritans are the "reformers" of a world corrupted by the Roman Catholics and Anglicans, and that American history is the fulfillment of God's design written in the Bible:

In fine, they improved what goods they had, by trading with the Indians awhile, and spent it as merrily about a May-pole; and, as if they had found a mine, or spring of plenty, called the place Merry Mount. "Thus stolen waters are sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant;" till it be found, that "the dead are there, and her guests in the depths of hell."

News of this school of profaneness, opened at Merry Mount, being brought to Mr. Endicott, the deputed Governor of the Massachusetts, soon after his arrival, in the year 1628, he went to visit it, and made such reformation as his wisdom and zeal led him unto.¹

Through the eighteenth century, the Puritan version wins out in American historiography over the Anglican version of the maypole incident. Although the descriptions made by the eighteenth-century "New England annalists" do not have an overtly Puritan bias and seem to be confined to the "facts," the notable emphasis on "dissipation" and "extravagance" which the maypole incident was said to represent reminds us of the morality of Ben Franklin. Daniel Neal's *The History of New-England* (1700) says this: "they set up a May-pole, and danced about it, and drunk strong Liquors to such an Excess, that they consumed ten Pounds worth in a Morning."² Thomas Hutchinson's *The History of the Colony of Massachusetts's Bay* (1764) has this to say: "[Morton] changed the name of Mount Wollaston to Merry Mount, set all the servants free, erected a may-pole, and lived a life of dissipation,

until all the stock, intended for trade, was consumed.”

Jeremy Belknap’s *American Biography* (1794–98) likewise notes: “Captain Endicott from Naumkeag made them a visit, and gave them a small check, by cutting down a May-pole, which they had erected as a central point of dissipation and extravagance.”

In the early nineteenth century, with the United States’ growing interest in history, the maypole captured new attention. In 1816, the *Port Folio* collected poems on May Day by writers who had celebrated it, such as Herrick, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Browne, and Thomas Hall, a Puritan writer who condemned it. In 1818, the journal introduced Thomas Hall’s *The downfall of May-games.* In the same year, the *North American Review* unearthed Nathaniel Morton’s *New-England’s Memorial* (Boston: Nicholas Boone, 1721) and printed an extract concerning “the account of the conduct of Thomas Morton” at the maypole. In 1821, the periodical suggested that Thomas “Morton, the author of New English Canaan,” was good material for a historical tale of America. In 1827, in reviewing the new fifth edition of Nathaniel Morton’s *New England’s Memorial* (Boston: Crocker & Brewster, 1826), the *North American Review* referred to what it considered the trifling fight over the maypole between Puritans and Merry Mounters:

> If we smile, it is not with contempt, at the simplehearted jealousy for their dearly bought possessions, which brought, for instance, the mysterious Gardiner into suspicion with them of having an understanding with the Pope, and subjected the rantipole Thomas Morton, and his ‘Merry Mount,’ to be qualified by some of the worst designations in the heathen mythology, besides a domiciliary visit and rebeke from ‘that worthy gentleman, Mr John Endicot,’ and rougher dealing at the more practised hands of Captain Standish.

---


3 *Port Folio* 1 (1816): 392–6.


5 *NAR* 3 (July 1816), 147–8.

6 *NAR* 12 (Apr. 1821), 483.

7 *NAR* 25 (July 1827), 217–8.
The maypole incident, divested of its political undertone, had finally become what Hawthorne called "a poet's tale" (p. 60).

As a matter of fact, the maypole was associated more with Merry England than with Merry Mount in America. As Roy Judge discusses in The Jack-in-the-Green: A May Day Custom, the maypole was resurrected in nineteenth-century England as a sentimental trope for lost Arcadia, or Merry England.¹ In 1831, the North American Review printed a lengthy review of Joseph Strutt's The Sports and Pastimes of the People of England (London, 1830) and described in detail the traditional customs of England including May Day.² American writers, such as Washington Irving and Herman Melville, also associated the maypole with good old England.³

Nineteenth-century American historiography did not find the maypole incident a significant incident in American history. Joseph B. Felt's Annals of Salem (1827) set straight the record which Nathaniel Morton had altered, and the maypole incident finally lost the dramatic confrontation it once had: "[Endicott] had felt it his duty as superintendent of the Province, to visit Mount Wollaston, where such infractions, as he complained of, were frequently committed. He went thither in the purifying spirit of just authority. He found that Morton had not yet returned from England. He cut down a May pole, to which this person had been in the habit of affixing pieces of satirical composition against those, who opposed his wishes and practices. He, also, rebuked the inhabitants there, and 'admonished them to look to it that they walked better.'"⁴ James Thacher's History of the Town of Plymouth (1832) refrained from including the maypole incident in the history of Plymouth. The Anglican/Catholic maypole did not occupy a place in the history of Puritan Plymouth. Thacher suggests that if anybody is interested particularly in the maypole incident, he or she can read Nathaniel Morton: "This year [1628] commenced the troubles occasioned by the eccentric Thomas Morton, of famous

³ See Washington Irving's "May-Day Customs" in Bracebridge Hall (1822) and Herman Melville's Redburn (1849), Chapter 28.
Re-Narrativization of the Maypole Incident

'Merry Mount' and 'May Pole' memory; but as this 'Lord of Misrule' was not an inhabitant of Plymouth, and as his affairs were transacted chiefly at Mount Wollaston, (Brantree,) the reader is referred to the New England Memorial for particulars."¹ When George Bancroft's History of the United States came out in 1834, the maypole incident was totally neglected.

When Hawthorne took up the maypole incident, his story "The May-Pole of Merry Mount" (1836) was in response to recent American historiography. As noted earlier, Hawthorne's version includes two significant changes. Not only does he omit the actual ringleader, Thomas Morton, introducing an Anglican priest, Blackstone, in his place, but he features the marriage of the Lord and Lady of the May as the central ceremony of the maypole incident. As for the omission of Morton, his extreme unpopularity at the time of Hawthorne's writing made it difficult to portray him as a hero.² In Lydia Maria Child's Hobomok (1824), for instance, he is called "the thoughtless and dissipated Morton," who provided Indians with guns "[p]artly from avarice, and partly from revenge of Governor Endicott's spirited proceedings against his company at Merry Mount."³ In Catharine Maria Sedgwick's Hope Leslie (1827), Morton is reduced to the miserable level of an insane man in jail where "[h]e raves, betimes, as if all the fiends possessed him; and then again, he sings and dances, as if he were at his revels on the merry mount; and betimes he cries—the poor old man—like a baby, for the twenty-four hours round."⁴ Even as late as 1863, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was still castigating the man in "The Landlord's Tale: The Rhyme of Sir Christopher" in Tales of a Wayside Inn, referring to the unpopular man as "roystering Morton of Merry Mount, / That pettifogger from Furnival's Inn, / Lord of misrule and riot and sin, / Who looked on the wine when it was red."⁵ But the infamy of Morton does not explain why Haw-

¹ James Thacher, History of the Town of Plymouth (Boston: Marsh, Capen & Lyon, 1832), p. 84.
³ Lydia Maria Child, Hobomok and Other Writings on Indians (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1986), p. 29.
thorne chose Blackstone, an Anglican priest, as the key figure of the maypole incident in his fiction.

If Blackstone was selected because he was an Anglican priest, Hawthorne’s version of the story assumes a political nuance. Hawthorne makes Blackstone, the Anglican priest, and Endicott, “the severest Puritan of all” (p. 66), confront each other at the maypole incident, as Nathaniel Morton confronted Thomas Morton and Endicott in his own account. Of course, Hawthorne knows that his re-textualization goes against historical fact, and so treats the confrontation as a mistake made by his character Endicott. He wrote in a footnote to the tale, “Did Governor Endicott speak less positively, we should suspect a mistake here. The Rev. Mr. Blackstone, though an eccentric, is not known to have been an immoral man. We rather doubt his identity with the priest of Merry Mount” (p. 63n). Hawthorne thus technically avoids violating the conventions of nineteenth-century historical tales which require an author to be faithful to facts.

The confrontation between Puritan and Anglican politics reflects the ideological conflict over national identity in the American public discourse. In the 1830s, the national sense of identity based on the Puritan/Protestant consensus faced a crisis when the number of immigrants, especially Irish immigrants, increased dramatically, a development which led to the rapid growth of Roman Catholicism in America. The number of Catholics in the United States ballooned from 600,000 in 1820 to 3,500,000 in 1850.1 In addition, the Irish mainly settled in New England. The growing strength of Catholicism was a threat to the native Protestants. It was no mere coincidence that in the 1830s religion became an important force in the publishing industry. The Protestant religious press, exemplified by the New York Observer (founded in 1823), were growing rapidly. But in the mean time, Catholic papers like John England’s United States Catholic Miscellany (1822), the Irish-American New York Truth-Teller (1825), and Bishop Benedict Fenwick’s Jesuit (Boston 1829) were getting underway. A Catholic tract society and a newspaper, the Catholic Herald, was started in 1833 in Philadelphia,2 for instance.

---

2 James Hennesey, American Catholics (New York: Oxford UP, 1981), p. 120.
Re-Narrativization of the Maypole Incident

But the emergence of the Catholic press only stirred intense defiance on the part of native Protestants. In 1834, Samuel F. B. Morse attacked the Irish Catholics in America by writing *Foreign Conspiracy against the Liberties of the United States*, and anti-Catholics went so far as to burn the Ursuline convent in Charlestown, Massachusetts.

Bancroft’s *History of the United States* (1834), which came out in the thick of the dissension between Protestants and Catholics, forcefully promoted the Puritan/Protestant ideology as the informing principle of American history, but he could do so only by omitting the maypole incident, an event that did not conform to the imagined hegemony of Protestants but reminded them of conflict, hostilities, and rivalry. American historiography thus strengthened the belief in Protestant hegemony, along with the impression that the past, present, and future of the Puritan revolution were, and would always be, unproblematic. Hawthorne’s “The May-Pole of Merry Mount,” however, paints a different picture.

Hawthorne dramatically re-enacts the original political conflict between Puritans and Anglicans by featuring Blackstone as a key figure in the tale, who confronts the Puritans. In the showdown scene, the stern leader of the Puritans, who came to reform Merry Mount, walks into the center of the scene. “It was the Puritan of Puritans; it was Endicott himself!” (p. 63). Endicott faces the ruler of the maypole party and commands, “Stand off, priest of Baal!... I know thee, Blackstone!” (p. 63). The austerity of Endicott’s rebuke reminds us of the Reverend Lyman Beecher’s severe warning against Catholicism in 1834, repeated in several churches in Boston: “[The Catholic Church] holds now in darkness and bondage nearly half the civilized world.... It is the most skillful, powerful, dreadful system of corruption to those who wield it, and of debasement and slavery to those who live under it.”¹

When Hawthorne chose Blackstone the pagan over an Anglican priest, he had a special aim in mind. In American history, Blackstone is a half-mythological figure, reputedly the first white settler in New England, who was already there when the Puritans, the Pilgrim Fathers, arrived. In this sense, the Anglican priest would have been the

Father of Americans or the ur-American.

According to legend, Blackstone joined with the Indians and rode on a pagan bull, wearing the Anglican surplice and planting roses in the New World. In Hawthorne’s tale, he is portrayed as having an Anglican and pagan background, and is described as “an English priest, canonically dressed . . . in heathen fashion.” The Anglican Father, who might have become the ur-American, embodies “the old mirth of Merry England, and the wilder glee of this fresh forest” of America (p. 57). And the maypole set up by this Anglican ur-American is rooted “in the fresh woods of the West” (p. 55), America. The tale insinuates that America possessed a submerged Anglicanism and a hidden paganism from the very beginning of its history.

Hawthorne’s narrative takes the Puritan/Protestant sense of identity, which was held as the national ideal, and introduces into it a foreign element. Hawthorne’s tale suggests one path the United States should take at this critical moment, when the political conflict between Protestants and Catholics threatened the sanctioned idea of national identity. If in 1627, the Puritans created American-ness by rejecting the maypole and its pagan connotations, perhaps it was time to re-evaluate the values of paganism and find a place for them in American history, not as something alien but as original and definitive.1

Hawthorne would thus move American thought toward a new consensus on what constitutes American-ness. A symbolic action comes at the climax of the tale, in the form of what Hawthorne terms “a deed of prophecy” (p. 66). Endicott takes the roses, supposedly planted in the wilderness of America by Blackstone, and gives them to the wedded couple, Edgar and Edith:

Endicott, the severest Puritan of all who laid the rock-foundation of New England, lifted the wreath of roses from the ruin of the May-Pole, and threw it, with his own gauntleted hand, over the heads of the Lord and Lady of the May. It was a deed of prophecy (p. 66).

---

1 Robert S. Levine reads Endicott’s acceptance in a different way. He says, “Endicott . . . endeavors to reenact the drama of the Reformation and tighten the bonds of his Puritan community by purging it of the contaminating presence of Anglo-Catholicism. . . . And it is a limited conquest: Choosing to accept the Lord and Lady of the May into the Puritan community, Endicott places on their heads a wreath of roses ‘reared from English seed’ . . . a trace of the ‘Catholic’ past lives on in the midst of ‘purified’ Massachusetts” (Conspiracy and Romance [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989], p. 125).
The Puritan did not accept Blackstone or the maypole. Endicott accepted only the roses and the newly-wedded couple, both of which were Hawthorne's fictitious inventions.

The gift of roses made to the newly-wedded couple, it would seem, obviously comments on the idea of sexuality. In Protestant public discourse, sexuality functions as a politically encodable form of human desire. Puritans condemned May Day, the Anglican custom deriving from Roman Catholicism and paganism, for producing illegitimate children. Anti-Catholic literary works in nineteenth-century America abundantly produced pornographic exposés. As David S. Reynolds observes, "The popular anti-Catholic literature that arose during the 1830s gave the figure of the reverend rake unprecedented prominence." Rebecca Reed's Six Months in a Convent (1835), Maria Monk's Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery at Montreal (1836), and Rosamund Culbertson's Rosamund (1836) were written as anti-Catholic exposés. In fact, sexual reform was one of the big socio-political issues at that time. As Louis J. Kern observes, "With the exception of slavery, no area of nineteenth-century life commanded as much attention and consumed as much reform energy as questions of sex, marriage, and the family." Sylvester Graham emerged in the late 1820's as "the first writer to formulate a coherent physiological analysis of the various new anxieties about the human body that had emerged by the 1830's" and "had a direct and significant impact on . . . sexual reform." Later, the social question of sexuality took the form of free love. According to Taylor Stoehr, "All in all free love had perhaps thirty leaders active between the publication of Marx Edgeworth Lazarus's Love vs. Marriage in 1832 and the breakup of the Oneida Community in

---

1 It is especially likely that the roses and the newly-wedded couple have sexual undertones, given that Hawthorne will use a "rose-bush" later in The Scarlet Letter (1850) in association with Hester the adulteress (on one side of the prison door from where Hester was to appear, a wild rose-bush was blooming).


1879, the heyday of the movement.”¹

Apparently one thing Hawthorne’s tale tries to accomplish is to de-politicize sexuality, turning it into something “natural.” In his tale, it is Blackstone who presides over the wedding of the Lord and Lady of the May as a priest at “their altar” (p. 60), at the maypole with “an abundant wreath of roses” (p. 55). It is a marriage held in the forest outside the law. In Puritan society, as Edmund S. Morgan observes,

no couple could join themselves in marriage before publishing their intention to do so by an announcement made at three successive public meetings, or by a written notice attached to the meetinghouse door for fourteen days. The wedding itself took place under supervision of the state. Although marriage retained a solemn religious significance, all ecclesiastical ceremonies connected with it were abandoned; and the minister was replaced by a civil magistrate.²

Marriage, in other words, was a civil ceremony. From a Puritan point of view, then, the marriage at Merry Mount is illicit. But to Merry Mounters it is a sacred union whose justification is solely based on love, a natural love which is later to unite Hester and Dimmesdale in The Scarlet Letter. The union may be illegitimate, but the young couple, Edgar and Edith, could say, as Hester and Dimmesdale do, “What we did had a consecration of its own.”³ Indeed Hawthorne’s tale suggests that wedlock based solely on love could be regarded as a “holy matrimony” (p. 57), like the first marriage of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

Love outside the law, however, could easily transform itself into passion, as is the case in Hester’s “lawless passion” in a later story. Edith, the precursor of Hester, somehow knows this. She feels that she and Edgar are not true Lord and Lady of the May who love each other with innocent love. “What is the mystery in my heart?” she asks.

Just then, as if a spell had loosened them, down came a little shower of withering rose leaves from the May-Pole. Alas, for the young lovers! No sooner had their hearts glowed with real passion, then they were sensible of something vague and unsubstantial in their former pleasures, and felt a dreary presentiment of inevitable change (p. 58).

When natural love changes into a lawless passion, however, the roses symbolically wither. This change of love to physical passion is also indicated by the transformation of Hawthorne’s metaphor: once a “people of the Golden Age” (p. 55), they have now turned into “the crew of Comus” (p. 56), here associated with John Milton’s masque Comus (1641) praising chastity. The people dancing around the maypole suddenly look like animals, having “the head and branching antlers of a stag” or “the grim visage of a wolf,” “the beard and horns of a venerable he-goat” or “the likeness of a bear erect” (p. 55). Hawthorne says that “some [of the crew of Comus are] already transformed to brutes, some midway between man and beast, and the others rioting in the flow of tipsy jollity that foreran the change” (p. 56). According to Keith Thomas, lust in the seventeenth century was “synonymous with the animal condition, for the sexual connotations of such terms as ‘brute,’ ‘bestial’ and ‘beastly’ were much stronger than they are today.” 1 If so, these animal figures at the maypole are the embodiments of anti-civil sexuality. Even if we do not accept Thomas’s assertion, we know that Hawthorne somehow associated outlaw sexuality with animality. 2

Sexuality and animality had to be reconciled. At the closure of “The May-Pole of Merry Mount,” Hawthorne domesticates sexuality by turning free love into motherhood, so that it functions as a social foundation. After cutting down the phallic maypole, Endicott accepts the Lord and Lady of the May into Puritan society as ur-parents of the posterity of the United States. Edith will “become a mother in our Israel, bringing up babes in better nurture than her own hath been” (p. 66). This domestication at the closure of his story is a discursive manipulation of Puritan ideology, where sexuality outside

---

2 In The Scarlet Letter Chillingworth probes into the soul of Dimmesdale who committed the sin of adultery and says, “This man... pure as they deem him,—all spiritual as he seems,—hath inherited a strong animal nature from his father or his mother” (p. 130).
legal marriage was nothing but anti-cultural conduct. Hawthorne tries to socialize sexuality by using a family discourse. He thus re-politicizes sexuality, and transforms the issue of the relation between man and woman more safely into that of mother and child.

Endicott did not reject the couple, Edgar and Edith, though he "suspect[ed] witchcraft" (p. 64) in the nuptial festival at the maypole as if it were a witches' Sabbath. Instead, the Puritan, who "laid the rock-foundation of New England" in Salem, accepted Edith as "a mother in our Israel." The children whom Edith will give birth to in the Massachusetts Bay Colony are, then, not branded as illegitimate, but become legitimate Americans. Indeed they will be so only by becoming "Puritans." Hawthorne did not intend to overthrow the Puritan stance on sexuality, which had been established by the consensus of his forefathers, but encoded a new cultural meaning in it. In an on-going process of constructing a national identity, Hawthorne tried to legitimize an Anglican/Catholic affiliation, sanctioning sexuality as a vital cultural agency of America.

The interdependence of history and romance in early nineteenth-century American literature provided multiple opportunities for Hawthorne to re-write the American past, since the American past was often nothing more than a narrative itself constantly open to re-interpretation. The primary enterprise American historiography undertook was to invent a Puritan/Protestant hegemony as a national identity. For Hawthorne, however, the Puritan/Protestant image of American history was hardly as transparent as American historiography laid it out to be. Instead, it was inevitably the product of historical invention.

Hawthorne is more "meta-historical" than historical, in that his work played off of American historiography which was still in the process of establishing the history of the United States. This is especially true given the fact that there was no official history. "The May-Pole of Merry Mount," it can be argued, is a product of Hawthorne's efforts to resist, exploit and re-interpret the scope and limits of history as narrative text.

It is understandably difficult for those who participate in the ongoing construction of American identity to stand outside the inherited ideology. It takes the revisionary insight of a Hawthorne to put into perspective the unavoidably constructed nature of any national identity. It is just such a revisionist perspective that supports the works of
Hawthorne, seeking to re-interpret the scope and nature of American history as self-conscious enterprise. The power of Hawthorne's fiction derives from his ingenious manipulation of the dynamics of American historiography.