

The Pagan Pilgrim: Thomas Morton of Merry Mount

Intellectual “heathen” remains an inspiration

by Steve Rasmussen

Part 1

“The inhabitants of Merrymount ... did devise amongst themselves to have ... Revels, and merriment after the old English custom ... & therefore brewed a barrell of excellent beer, & provided a case of bottles to be spent, with other good cheer, for all comers of that day. And upon Mayday they brought the Maypole to the place appointed, with drums, guns, pistols, and other fitting instruments, for that purpose; and there erected it with the help of Savages, that came thither of purpose to see the manner of our Revels. A goodly pine tree of 80 foot long, was reared up, with a pair of buckshorns nailed on, somewhat near unto the top of it; where it stood as a fair sea mark for directions, how to find out the way to mine Host of Ma-re Mount.”

— Thomas Morton, *New English Canaan*

Those dour Puritans who knelt in thanksgiving at Plymouth Rock before marching forth to conquer the wilderness and its native inhabitants with Bibles and guns weren't the only pilgrims to seek spiritual freedom on the New World's shores. Just a few leagues up the Massachusetts coast from Plymouth's fortress of fundamentalist conformity, a poet and lawyer named Thomas Morton founded a colony that, had it survived Puritan persecution, might have spawned a far more Earth-friendly and egalitarian history of America than the one that's come down to us.

Morton, a senior partner in a Crown-sponsored trading venture, sailed to New England in 1624 with a Captain Wollaston and 30 indentured young men. They settled and began trading for furs on a spit of land given them by the native Algonquin tribes, whose culture the classically educated, broad-minded Morton

soon came to admire as far more civilized and humanitarian than that of his intolerant, brutal European neighbors. When Wollaston began seeking more profits by selling off the indentured servants to hard labor on the Virginia tobacco plantations, Morton persuaded the remaining servants (it wasn't hard) to reject their harsh master and throw in with this visionary as free members of a colony that would trade and live in harmony with the local tribes.

It didn't take long for the free-thinking Morton to draw the ire of the nearby Puritans. His prosperous, easygoing colony attracted escapees from the harsh, hunger-ridden regime of the Plymouth plantation. Morton had no compunctions about trading guns to his Indian friends, whom the Puritans viewed as hostile savages. They resented Morton's intellectual scorn for their fundamentalist pieties, which he thought simply masked their stupidity and greed. (Morton made up mocking names for the Puritan leaders — the diminutive soldier Miles Standish he called "Captain Shrimpe," and the pompous John Endicott he dismissed as "that great swelling fellow, Captain Littleworth.") The Puritans condemned Morton as an impious, drunken libertine who — worst sin of all — consorted with the native women and encouraged his men to do so, too.

The final straw for the Puritans came when Morton erected his great Maypole, renamed his colony (from Mt. Wollaston to "Merry Mount" — or "Ma-re Mount," punning on the Latin word for "sea"), and threw a merrie olde pagan May Day party to help woo Indian wives for his young bachelors. Morton penned a courtly poem for the occasion full of references to Greek mythology and gods and goddesses "which although it were made according to the occurrents [fashions] of the time," he later wrote, "puzzled the Separatists [as the Puritans were then called] most pitifully to expound it.

"The setting up of this Maypole was a lamentable spectacle to the precise Separatists that lived at new Plymouth. They termed it an Idoll; yea they called it the Calf of Horeb: and stood at defiance with the place, naming it Mount Dagon; threatening to make it a woefull mount and not a merry mount."

Or, as the Puritan Gov. William Bradford wrote with horror in his *History of Plymouth Plantation*: “They ... set up a May-pole, 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 & celebrated the feasts of ye Roman Goddess Flora, or ye beastly practices of ye mad Bacchanalians.”

The Puritans made good on their “woefull” threat — motivated, later historians suggest, as much by Merrymount’s challenge to their fur monopoly as by its defiant heathenism. Miles Standish and his troops invaded Merrymount, seized Morton without a shot fired in defense — to avoid bloodshed, according to Morton; because the inhabitants were too drunk to lift their weapons, according to Bradford — and hauled him in chains before the governor to be tried for his supposed crimes.

Bradford didn’t dare execute Morton, who was well-connected in London, so he marooned him on a desert isle till an English ship could carry him back to England. John Endicott chopped down the proud Maypole, scattered Merrymount’s inhabitants and destroyed its houses.

Morton spent the next decade in London fighting the Puritans with his pen and legal skills. He published [*New English Canaan*](#) in 1637, describing America’s bounty and defending the wisdom and decency of her native inhabitants, while wittily excoriating the Puritan settlers. He was instrumental in having the royal charter of their Massachusetts Bay Colony revoked.

But times were rapidly changing in England, too. The newly rising Puritan Roundheads, struggling with the old-guard Royalist Cavaliers, would soon win the Civil War that not only decapitated the English Crown (laying the groundwork for the American Revolution) but also persecuted and destroyed the remaining vestiges of Merrie Olde England’s pagan past.

An aging, disheartened Morton set sail one last time for the fertile wilderness he loved, only to find his Indian friends decimated by the white man’s guns and diseases and the Puritans’ hold on New England stronger than ever. They welcomed their old nemesis back by throwing him into a dank dungeon all winter

long. His health broken, Mine Host of Merrymount finally died in 1647 in Maine, as far away from the “precise Separatists” as he could get.

Two centuries later, another rebel against rule-bound conformity, Nathaniel Hawthorne, immortalized the seminal struggle among New England’s first settlers between pagan freedom and fundamentalist rigidity in a still-popular tale, “The May-Pole of Merry Mount.” Today, as Earth-based spirituality is being practiced more and more openly, modern Pagans and Wiccans point for evidence of America’s deep-rooted religious diversity to the true story of Merrymount — that could-have-been earthly paradise Thomas Morton called “Glory Here.”

Part 2:

Puritan William Bradford’s vs. Pagan Thomas Morton’s accounts;

Morton’s poem and song

The Maypole of Merry Mount

Many may be familiar with Nathaniel Hawthorne’s (1804-1864) well-known short story “The May-Pole of Merry Mount.” This story has its basis in actual events. In seventeenth-century Massachusetts, the English settler Thomas Morton scandalized his Puritan contemporaries with the erection of a maypole and the celebration of May Day festivities. In 1625, a settlement had been established by a Captain Wollaston around what is now the city of Quincy, Massachusetts. Thomas Morton (c1579-1647) assumed leadership of this colony after Wollaston’s departure. “Mount Wollaston” was renamed “Merry Mount,” or more accurately, “Ma-re Mount,” as Morton spelled it, intending both “merry” and a pun on the Latin word for the sea, this being a coastal settlement (Beston 1925). Morton, who took to calling himself “mine Hoste of Ma-re Mount,” was fond of merriment, drinking alcohol, and fraternizing & trading with the local Native Americans—all of which were looked down upon by the neighboring Plymouth colony. Plymouth did not agree with the way Morton ran his colony, or his political & religious

sentiments—though Morton’s book *New English Canaan* is filled with expressions of Christian faith, Morton was not a Puritan “Seperatist.” His maypole of 1627 was the last straw, and Morton was arrested and deported.

William Bradford (1588-1657), governor of Plymouth colony, includes an account of Merry Mount in the *History of Plimoth Plantation, 1620-1647*:

After this they fell to great licenciousnes, and led a dissolute life, powering out them selves into all profanenes. And Morton became lord of misrule, and maintained (as it were) a schoole of Athisme [Atheism]. And after they had gott some good 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 exsess, and, as some reported, £10 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 together, (like so many fairies, or furies rather,) and worse practices. As if they had anew revived & celebrated the feasts of ye Roman Goddes Flora, or ye beasly practieses of ye madd Bacchinalians. Morton likewise (to shew his poetrie) composed sundry rimes & verses, some tending to lasciviousnes, and others to ye detraction & scandall of some persons, which he affixed to this idle or idoll May-polle. They chainged also the name of their place, and in stead of calling it Mounte Wollaston, they call it Merie-mounte, as if this joylity 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 Indecott, who brought over a patent under ye broad seall, for ye govermente of ye Massachusets, who visiting those parts caused yt May-polle to be cutt downe, and rebuked them for their profannes, and admonishe them to looke ther should be better walking; so they now, or others, changed ye name of their place againe, and called it Mounte-Dagon.

Thomas Morton’s own account can be found in his book *New English Canaan* (1637), in Book III, Chapter XIV, “Of the Revells of New Canaan:”

The Inhabitants of Pasonagessit, (having translated the name of their habitation from that ancient Salvage name to Ma-re Mount, and being resolved to have the new name confirmed for a memorial to after ages,) did devise amongst themselves to have it performed in a solemne manner, with Revels and merriment after the old English custome; [they] prepared to sett up a Maypole upon the festivall day of Philip and Iacob, and therefore brewed a barreill of excellent beere and provided a case of bottles, to be spent, with other good cheare, for all commers of that day. And because they would have it in a compleat forme, they had prepared a song fitting to the time and present occasion. And upon Mayday they brought the Maypole to the place appointed, with drumes, gunnes, pistols and other fitting instruments, for that purpose; and there erved it with the help of Salvages, that came thether of purpose to see the manner of our Revels. A goodly pine tree of 80. foote longe was reared up, with a peare of buckshorns nayle one somewhat neare unto the top of it: where it stood, as a faire sea marke for directions how to finde out the way to mine Hoste of Ma-re Mount.

And because it should more fully appeare to what end it was placed there, they had a poem in readines made, which was fixed to the Maypole, to shew the new name confirmed upon that plantation; which, although it were made according to occurrents of the time, it, being Enigmatically composed, pusselled the Seperatists most pittifully to expound it, which, (for the better information of the reader,) I have here inserted.

THE POEM.

Rise, Oedipus, and, if thou canst, unfould
What meanes Caribdis underneath the mould,
When Scilla sollitary on the ground
(Sitting in forme of Niobe,) was found,
Till Amphitrites Darling did acquaint
Grim Neptune with the Tenor of her plaint,
And causd him send forth Triton with the sound
Of Trumpet lowd, at which the Seas were found
So full of Protean formes that the bold shore

Presented Scilla a new paramour
So strong as Sampson and so patient
As Job himselfe, directed thus, by fate,
To comfort Scilla so unfortunate.
I doe professe, by Cupids beautiful mother,
Heres Scogans choice for Scilla, and none other;
Though Scilla's sick with griefe, because so signe
Can there be found of vertue masculine.
Esculapius come; I know right well
His labour's lost when you may ring her Knell.
The fatal sisters doome none can withstand,
Nor Cithareas powre, who poynts to land
With proclamation that the first of May
At Ma-re Mount shall be kept hollyday.

The setting up of this Maypole was a lamentable spectacle to the precise separatists, that lived at new Plimmouth. They termed it an Idoll; yea, they called it the Calfe of Horeb, and stood at defiance with the place, naming it Mount Dagon; threatening to make it a woefull mount and not a merry mount.

The Riddle, for want of Oedipus, they could not expound; onely they made some explication of part of it, and sayd it was meant by Sampson Iob, the carpenter of the shipp that brought over a woman to her husband, that had bin there longe before and thrive so well that hee sent for her and her children to come to him; where shortly after hee died: having no reason, but because of the sound of those two words; when as, (the truth is,) the man they applyed it to was altogether unknowne to the Author.

There was likewise a merry song made, which, (to make their Revells more fashionable,) was sung with a Corus, every man bearing his part; which they performed in a daunce, hand in hand about the Maypole, whiles one of the Company sung and filled out the good liquor, like gammedes and Iupiter.

THE SONGE.

Drinke and be merry, merry, merry boyes;
Let all your delight be in the Hymens ioyes;
Jô to Hymen, now the day is come,
About the merry Maypole take a Roome.
Make greene garlons, bring bottles out
And fill sweet Nectar freely about.
Vncover thy head and feare no harme,
For hers good liquor to keepe it warme.
Then drinke and be merry, &c.
lô to Hymen, &c.
Nectar is a thing assign'd
By the Deities owne minde
To cure the hart opprest with greife,
And of good liquors is the cheife.
Then drinke, &c.
lô to Hymen, &c.
Give to the Mellancolly man
A cup or two of 't now and than;
This physick will soone revive his bloud,
And make him be of a merrier moode.
Then drinke, &c.
lô to Hymen, &c.
Give to the Nyphe thats free from scorne
No Irish stuff nor Scotch over worne.
Lasses in beaver coats come away,
Yee shall be welcome to us night and day.
To drinke and be merry &c.
lô to Hymen, &c.

This harmless mirth made by younge men, (that lived in hope to have wives brought over to them, that would save them a labour to make a voyage to fetch any over,) was much distated to the prcise Seperatists, that keepe much a doe about the tyth of Muit and Cummin, troubling their braines more then reason would require about things that are indifferent: and from that time sought

occasion against my honest Host of Ma-re Mount, to overthrow his undertakings and to destroy his plantation quite and cleane. But because they presumed with their imaginary gifts, (which they have out of Phaos box,) they could expound hidden misteries, to convince them of blindnes, as well in this as in other matters of more consequence, I will illustrate the poem, according to the true intent of the authors of these Revells, so much distasted by those Moles.

Oedipus is generally receaved for the absolute reader of riddles, who is invoaked: Silla and Caribdis are two dangerous places for seamen to incounter, neere unto Vennice; and have bin by poets formerly resembled to man and wife. The licence the author challenged for a paire of his nomination, the one lamenting for the loffe of the other as Niobe for her children. Amphitrite is an arme of the Sea, by which the newes was carried up and downe of a rich widow, now to be tane up or laid downe. By Triton is the fame spread that caused the Suters to muster, (as it had bin to Penellope of Greece;) and, the Coast lying circular, all our passage to and froe is made more convenient by Sea then Land. Many aimed at this marke; but hee that played Proteus best and could comply with her humor must be the man that would carry her; and hee had need have Sampsons strenght to deale with a Dallila, and as much patience as Iob that should come there, for a thing that I did observe in the life-time of the former.

But marriage and hanging, (they say,) comes by desteny and Scogans choise tis better [than] none at all. Hee that playd Proteus, (with the helpe of Priapus,) put their noses out of joynt, as the Proverbe is.

And this the whole company of the Revellers at Ma-re Mount knew to be the true sence and exposition of the riddle that was fixed to the Maypole, which the Seperatists wer at defiance with. Some of them affirmed that the first institution thereof was in memory of a whore; not knowing that it was a Trophe erected at first in honor of Maja, the Lady of learning which they despise, vilifying the two universities with uncivile termes, accounting what is there obtained by studdy is but unnecessary learning; not considering that learninge does inable mens mindes to converse with eliments of a higher nature then is to be found within the habitation of the Mole.

SOURCES:

Beston, Henry. *The Book of Gallant Vagabonds*. (1925) Contains a section on Morton.

Bradford, William. *History of Plimoth Plantation, 1620-1647*.

Morton, Thomas. *New English Canaan*.