

THE LOVE OF EDGAR AND EDITH IN “THE MAYPOLE OF MERRY MOUNT”

Hisatake JIMBO

The broad framework of “The Maypole of Merry Mount” depends on the conflict between the world of Merry Mount and that of the Puritans. Between the jollity of Merry Mount revellers and the gloom of Puritans stands the love of Edgar and Edith. Thus the focus of this tale is on the fate of the Lord and Lady of the May.

The Gay World of Revellers

Merry Mount is a “gay colony” which dwells in perpetual jollity of May. It is the dreamlike world of playful sport and revelry.

But May, or her mirthful spirit, dwelt all the year round at Merry Mount, sporting with the Summer months, and revelling with Autumn, and basking in the glow of Winter’s fireside. Through a world of toil and care she flitted with a dreamlike smile, and came hither to find a home among the lightsome hearts of Merry Mount.¹

The Maypole is “the banner staff” of Merry Mount and the object of revellers’ veneration. It preserves “the slender grace of youth” and is “gayly decked.” From the top of the Maypole hangs down “a silken banner, colored like the rainbow.” And flowers are in full bloom on the Maypole.

Garden flowers, and blossoms of the wilderness, laughed gladly forth amid the verdure, so fresh and dewy that they must have grown by magic on that happy pine-tree.²

In describing the Maypole and Merry Mount, Hawthorne deliberately uses the images of light, youth and jollity. Merry Mount is thus presented as a hedonistic world.

Next Hawthorne turns to the dwellers of Merry Mount. They are "minstrels, not unknown in London streets: wandering players, whose theatres had been the halls of noblemen; mummers, rope-dancers, and mountebanks, who would long be missed at wakes, church-ales, and fairs; in a word, mirth makers of every sort, such as abounded in that age, but now began to be discountenanced by the rapid growth of Puritanism."³ The dancers at the Maypole are in perfect sympathy with Nature, and Nature with them. They can be "the crew of Comus, some already transformed to brutes, some midway between man and beast, and the others rioting in the flow of tipsy jollity that foreran the change."⁴ Indeed it is difficult to distinguish men and beasts in the Merry Mount. Every man wears animal masks.

On the shoulders of a comely youth uprose the head and branching antlers of a stag; a second, human in all other points, had the grim visage of a wolf; a third, still with the trunk and limbs of a mortal man, showed the beard and horns of a venerable he-goat.⁵

Actually the maskers are "sworn triflers of a lifetime," and "Erring Thought and perverted Wisdom" make them wear masks. Their mirth is nothing but "the counterfeit of happiness," and they are maddening themselves into "a gay despair." Here is a group of people that does not face the reality of life. They are trifling away their lives in excessively foolish mirth. The physical pleasure is the only value they cling to. Nevertheless, there exists despair under their masks. They merely do not admit this reality. Thus the revellers at the Maypole are shadowy, insubstantial, and monstrous.

The Lord and Lady of the May

It is significant that the protagonists are introduced into the tale in general terms: the hero is "a youth" and the heroine is "a fair maiden."

One was a youth in glistening apparel, with a scarf of the rainbow pattern

crosswise on his breast. His right hand held a gilded staff, the ensign of high dignity among the revellers, and his left grasped the slender fingers of a fair maiden, not less gayly decorated than himself.⁶

An English priest, "the very Comus of the crew," is the high priest of Merry Mount. He is going to join the youth and the maiden, "the Lord and Lady of the May," in holy matrimony. The marriage is most important in Merry Mount, for it means that the married couple are "really and truly to be partners for the dance of life." The couple are actually participating in a double ceremony: not only are they marrying one another, but they are also the Lord and Lady of the May. This marriage is both personal and ritual. The ritualistic element is quite obvious: the Maypole stands for the spirit of love; the youth is the Lord of the May; the maiden is the Lady of the May; and the revellers are votaries of this hedonistic cult.

The first sign of the personal dimension of the protagonists is shown just after "a prelude of pipe, cithern, and viol, touched with practiced minstrelsy, began to play from a neighbouring thicket."⁷ The May Lord is astonished to find "the almost pensive glance" in his Lady's eyes. In the following dialogues, we are informed the specific names for the Lord and Lady of the May. Edgar, the Lord of the May, asks the Lady not to be pensive-looking:

"O, Edith, this is our golden time! Tarnish it not by any pensive shadow of the mind; for it may be that nothing of futurity will be brighter than the mere remembrance of what is now passing."⁸

Edith, the Lady of the May, answers: "That was the very thought that saddened me! How came it in your mind too?"⁹ This dialogue is crucial in explicating this story. Both Edith and Edgar are aware of the mutability and transience of the world and their lives. They are facing the naked reality of human being. Edith is afraid that the revellers are visionary, and their mirth unreal, and that they are no true Lord and Lady of the May. She questions herself: "What is the mystery in my heart?"¹⁰ The answer is given in the following passage:

Just then, as if a spell had loosened them, down came a little shower of withering rose leaves from the Maypole. Alas, for the young lovers! No sooner had their hearts glowed with real passion than they were sensible of something vague and unsubstantial in their former pleasures, and felt a dreary presentiment of inevitable change. From the moment that they truly loved, they had subjected themselves to earth's doom of care and sorrow, and troubled joy, and had no more a home at Merry Mount. That was Edith's mystery.¹¹

Here is the first premonition that Edith and Edgar are, sooner or later, going to leave Merry Mount. The real love between Edgar and Edith makes them subject to "inevitable change," and to "earth's doom of care and sorrow." They are closer to reality in recognizing the mutability of the world and responsibility of men than the revellers of Merry Mount. The love which unites Edgar and Edith makes them more real, substantial, and human than the mere triflers of life.

The Dark Figures of the Puritans

Near Merry Mount there is a settlement of the Puritans. They have "sterner faith" than the revellers at the Maypole. They have a rigid adherence to moral strictness and religious pride. Indeed they are "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."¹² For the Puritans, the revellers are very "devils and ruined souls." The conflict between the revellers and the Puritans is manifest. The confrontation of these two parties is inevitable.

A party of these grim Puritans, toiling through the difficult woods, each with a horseload of iron armor to burden his footsteps, would sometimes draw near the sunny precincts of Merry Mount.¹³

The essence of Puritan power is dark. The contrast between the light and the dark is clearly revealed: "... the men of iron shook their heads and frowned so darkly that the revellers looked up, imagining that a momentary cloud had overcast the sunshine, which was to be

perpetual there.”¹⁴ When the evening gloom has surrounded Merry Mount, “some of these black shadows have rushed forth in human shape.”¹⁵ They are the dark figures of the Puritans, who now play “a characteristic part in the Maypole mummeries.” Their leader Endicott, “the Puritan of Puritans,” is so full of stern energy and grim looking that “the whole man, visage, frame, and soul, seemed wrought of iron, gifted with life and thought, yet all of one substance with his headpiece and breastplate.”¹⁶ The constant image of iron is suggestive of Puritans’ moral strictness, rigidity, hardness, and inhumanity. Endicott puts an end to “the fate of light and idle mirth makers.”

And with his keen sword Endicott assaulted the hallowed Maypole. Nor long did it resist his arm. It groaned with a dismal sound ; it showed leaves and rosebuds upon the remorseless enthusiast ; and finally, with all its green boughs and ribbons and flowers, symbolic of departed pleasures, down fell the banner staff of Merry Mount. As it sank, tradition says, the evening sky grew darker, and the woods threw forth a more sombre shadow.¹⁷

Endicott is triumphant and the revellers of the Maypole “gave one groan for their idol.” The crew of Comus are made prisoners by the Puritans. Does this mean that the Puritans have won? It seems that neither group really wins. The gay sinners at Merry Mount are punished. How about the gloomy Puritans? Surely they are not admirable creatures. Hawthorne emphasizes their iron-mindedness. They lack the capacity for love. They are almost inhuman in their moral strictness. In describing the Puritans, Hawthorne uses the images of darkness, age, and gloom. The Puritans are dedicated to the ennobling conception of a moral life, but they do not fully appreciate the spirit of love. They appear just as shadowy, insubstantial, and monstrous as the revellers of Merry Mount. Thus, both the maskers at the Maypole and the dismal Puritans are denounced in this story.

The Meaning of the Troubled Pair

The Puritans punish the revellers of Merry Mount. Edgar and

Edith are fully aware of the change of their situation.

There they stood, in the first hour of wedlock, while the idle pleasures, of which their companions were the emblems, had given place to the sternest cares of life, personified by the dark Puritans. But never had their youthful beauty seemed so pure and high as when its glow was chastened by adversity.¹⁸

There is left, for the troubled pair, nothing but "a rigorous destiny, in the shape of the Puritan leader, their only guide." Yet, however, Endicott sympathizes with the young couple: "the deepening twilight could not altogether conceal that the iron man was softened."¹⁹ He observes them in full sympathy: "The troubles of life have come hastily on this young couple."²⁰ Endicott mitigates his punishment for them: "We will see how they comport themselves under their present trials ere we burden them with greater. If, among the spoil, there be any garments of a more decent fashion, let them be put upon this May Lord and his Lady, instead of their glistening vanities."²¹ The main reason that the Puritan leader treats Edgar and Edith gently is that he finds in them some noble qualities.

There be qualities in the youth, which may make him valiant to fight, and sober to toil, and pious to pray; and in the maiden, that may fit her to become a mother in our Israel, bringing up babes in better nurture than her own hath been.²²

It is Endicott himself, "the severest Puritan of all," who crowns their marriage with "the wreath of roses from the ruin of the Maypole, and threw it, with his own gauntleted hand, over the heads of the Lord and Lady of the May."²³ No more did they return to "their home of wild mirth made desolate amid the sad forest," for "the moral gloom of the world overpowers all systematic gayety."²⁴ The solitary pair retains "the purest and best" of their past joys; and they, hand in hand, begin to walk heavenward through the world of care and sorrow. The brave new world is before them. They are the only people that are blessed in this story.

But as their flowery garland was wreathed of the brightest roses that had

grown there, so, in the tie that united them, were intertwined all the purest and best of their early joys. They went heavenward, supporting each other along the difficult path which it was their lot to tread, and never wasted one regretful thought on the vanities of Merry Mount.²⁵

Edgar and Edith assume the full responsibility which did not exist in Merry Mount revellers. At the same time, they retain their primal innocence and love which the Puritans ceased to possess. The love of Edgar and Edith did not originate in Puritan moral sense; but their love must be controlled and guided by moral sense from now on. Thus the love of Edgar and Edith stands as a balance between the two extreme groups of people. Their love makes their existence real, substantial, and human.

Notes :

1Alfred Kazin, ed., *Selected Short Stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne*. Greenwich, Conn., Fawcett Publications, 1966, p. 34.

2*Ibid.*

3*Ibid.*, p. 38.

4*Ibid.*, pp. 35-6.

5*Ibid.*, p. 35.

6*Ibid.*, p. 36.

7*Ibid.*, p. 37.

8 . 9 . 10 . 11*Ibid.*

12*Ibid.*, p. 39.

13*Ibid.*

14*Ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

15*Ibid.*, p. 40.

16*Ibid.*, pp. 40-1.

17*Ibid.*, p. 41.

18*Ibid.*, p. 42.

19*Ibid.*, p. 43.

20 . 21 . 22 . 23*Ibid.*

24*Ibid.*, pp. 43-4.

25*Ibid.*, p. 44.