

Exteriority, Laughter and Comic Sacrifice in Hawthorne's "My Kinsman, Major Molineux"

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Abstract

In the final night-carnival scene of Hawthorne's "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" (1832), an entire town humiliates the major by laughing at him as he sits tarred-and-feathered in a cart; even his nephew Robin finally joins uncontrollably in the contagious sea of derisive laughter. Here I interpret this as a ritual of "comic sacrifice" by comparing its dynamics with those of the traditional ("tragic") sacrifice. I look at the dialectical relation between the mindless exteriority of laughing spectators and the intense self-consciousness of the sacrificial victim as a variation on the Girardian middle-distance between spectators and victim, and as another form of the relation between the inquiring Robin's ignorance and the secret knowledge of the townspeople in a rumor- and potentially laughter-filled town. I also take the grotesque figure of the victim as a variation on the tragic-sacrifice victim, who is traditionally seen as a sacred object or "gift": here the tarred-and-feathered major becomes a once-angelic but now fallen bird-man, and the sacrificial smoke of roasting victims that rises toward the gods becomes the "offering" of contagious laughter rising at the end of the story to the Man in the Moon. Finally, the wasteful excessiveness of this laughter is further discussed in the context of the themes of exteriority, duplicity, falseness and tragic-comic ambiguity in Hawthorne's two other early night-festival tales, "The Maypole of Merry Mount" and "Young Goodman Brown."

Keywords

Hawthorne, "Major Molineux," comic, sacrifice, laughter, exteriority, duplicity
contagion, rumor, noise, self-consciousness, René Girard

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's early story "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" (1832), the young protagonist Robin has been sent by his father to Boston to meet his uncle, Major Molineux. Robin's father, a simple farmer, believes that the major, appointed by the British as a colonial governor in the eighteenth-century, pre-revolutionary American colony, can give the young man a more promising future. After arriving on the ferry at nine in the evening, Robin asks various townspeople the way to his uncle's house but, much to his dismay, no one will tell him though everyone seems to know. Then finally, sitting late at night near an old church in the moonlight, the young man is shocked to see his uncle, sitting tarred-and-feathered in a cart, paraded through the city streets in a nocturnal festival, a carnival of public scorning, public humiliation. Hearing all the spectators laughing in derision at their now-dethroned colonial governor, Robin cannot help but join in the expanding sea of laughter: "The contagion was spreading among the multitude, when all at once, it seized upon Robin, and he sent forth a shout of laughter that echoed through the street,—every man shook his sides, every man emptied his lungs, but Robin's shout was the loudest there. The cloud-spirits peeped from their silvery islands, as the congregated mirth went roaring up the sky! The Man in the Moon heard the far bellow. 'Oho,' quoth he, 'the old earth is frolicsome to-night!'" (Hawthorne 529).

In this final scene of the story we witness the enactment of a public scorning, one which may seem to be a variation on a revolutionary execution—for example, the beheading of Charles I in London in 1649, witnessed by a large crowd of onlookers, more than a few joyous Puritans among them—or on a primitive ritual sacrifice with a human or non-human victim. Greek drama arose out of primitive religious rituals, tragic drama more specifically out of ritual sacrifice, and the above night-carnival scene looks very much like a dramatic scene. Yet here the primary punishment of the victim, who has also been tarred-and-feathered and thus, in addition to being in physical pain, has taken on a grotesque appearance, is that of public humiliation: he is being laughed at by all the townspeople present at a ceremony which is in a sense his own unwilling "performance." Here I want to suggest a reading of the ending of "Major Molineux" which takes this ritual of public humiliation via scorn-laughter as a "comic sacrifice."¹

¹ Though I have not seen this term explicitly used before, the idea of a comic sacrifice has no doubt been implied or presupposed in various ways in earlier discussions of tragedy, comedy and ritual sacrifice, including those of Bakhtin in "The History of Laughter" (*Rabelais and His World*). Jacques Attali in *Noise* claims that 16th-century Flemish painter Pieter Brueghel's *Carnival's Quarrel with Lent* is a battle between two fundamental political strategies, two antagonistic

To do this, I will explore the parallels and differences between this comic sacrifice, where the primary weapon used to attack the victim is not a knife but laughter, and “tragic” sacrifices, that is, ritual sacrifices in the traditional sense which are also watched by spectators but end with the death of the victim. In a traditional sacrifice, we have the suffering inflicted on the victim by the drawn-out process of killing him, which includes the victim’s inevitable anticipation, that is, his dread of the moment of death. But we could also speak of the tragic victim’s status in the eyes of the onlookers, at least in ancient times, as a “sacred object” (hence the word “sacrifice”) who might have a special spiritual meaning for the people, perhaps as a “gift to the gods” who might convince them to grant some much-desired benefit to the king and his people, such as rain or victory in a battle.

Therefore I will first pursue an interpretation of the “process” of the comic sacrifice of Major Molineux. In a traditional sacrifice the whole attention of the spectators, each of whom will likely feel thankful that he is not the one who must die, is focused on the victim who is waiting to die and who, especially if human, will be very conscious of this fact. Here it seems the victim’s self-consciousness, as the center of attention, must be combined with the dread of death, whereas in a comic sacrifice there would be no dread of death but just that intense and painful self-consciousness which is really the meaning of “humiliation.” In a tragic sacrifice or public execution the victim may also be eerily aware that not a few of the onlookers will take a certain pleasure in watching his death; in a comic sacrifice this pleasure of the spectators, expressed overtly in their laughter, is precisely the weapon being used, the instrument of humiliation.

Here I will focus on the dialectical relation between the purely external, selfless or mindless “social noise” of the onlookers’ laughter and the intense self-consciousness, interiority or selfhood of the victim. I will have recourse to René Girard’s scapegoat theory of sacrifice, as well as to theories of the comic which tie laughter closely to the proto-human need to reinforce social bonds by violently scorning and/or attacking the outsider or enemy. Girard’s tragic-sacrifice theory sees the victim as a scapegoat whose death will enable the release of the pent-up social violence of the group (tribe, community), thus promoting social harmony.

cultural and ideological organizations: “Festival, whose aim is to make everyone’s misfortune tolerable through the derisory designation of a god to sacrifice; Austerity, whose aim is to make the alienation of everyday life bearable through the promise of eternity—the Scapegoat and Penitence. Noise and Silence” (21-22). Over against the increasing hegemony of Lent thanks to the power of the Roman Catholic church, “Brueghel made audible six centuries of struggle to silence Festival in Ritual, Carnival in Sacrifice” (22).

Girard also emphasizes the need, in order for the sacrifice to “work” (to dissipate social violence) for a “proper distance” between spectators and victim—the former must not identify too closely with the latter yet also not be too “distant” from him—and I will show how we may see the dialectic, in a comic sacrifice, of self-conscious victim vs. non-self-conscious spectators as a variation on Girard’s “middle distance” between spectator and victim. Moreover, I will suggest that in “Major Molineux” we get a variation on the crowd-victim interaction in the relationship between the inquiring Robin’s relative ignorance and the secret knowledge of the townspeople, in a *rumor*- and potentially laughter-filled town.

Then I will look at the sense in which the victim of the comic sacrifice becomes a “sacred object.” Obviously, in this case, the tarred-and-feathered major in his cage cannot be taken seriously as something “sacred.” Rather, we have a mere parody, inversion or (Bakhtin) carnivalization of the sacred here: the major has become an object of scorn-laughter precisely because he looks ridiculous, being no longer a distinguished-looking, politically powerful figure but a subhuman, partly birdlike one. For in a comic sacrifice the victim is humiliated by being made to look ludicrous and placed *on display*—whether tarred-and-feathered in a cage, or made to stand on the scaffold like Hester Prynne and Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter*. Here then I will compare the transformed Molineux to the ludicrous Hoopoe bird in Aristophanes’ 5th-century-B.C. comic drama *The Birds*. But in a tragic sacrifice the “gift offered to the gods” may also be the fragrant smoke rising up to the sky (to the gods) from the non-human victim’s roasting body or body-parts (a crucial point in *The Birds*); in “Major Molineux,” I will suggest, the real divine gift or “offering” could be seen as the uproarious, noisy laughter of all the townspeople, rising as it does past the clouds and up to the godlike Man in the Moon.

Finally I will compare the comic-sacrifice scene in “Major Molineux” with key scenes in Hawthorne’s two other early night-carnival tales, “The Maypole of Merry Mount” and “Young Goodman Brown,” looking at the correlation between the outer, evil, and non-serious on the one hand, and the inner, good, and serious on the other. I will be particularly interested in the forms of tragic-comic, good-evil and serious-non-serious ambiguity and *inversion* in all three “moral” tales, and will suggest that particularly in “Major Molineux” the (possibility of the) tragic turns out to have been the hollow or false interior of the comic, and thus to finally collapse or disappear. To further elucidate this notion of the “comic” as absolute exteriority, of which the “force” of a hollow, non-self-conscious or mindless yet still duplicitous scorn-laughter may be one manifestation, I will turn to Rabelais’ figure of the Silenus (medicine box) in his Preface to *Gargantua and Pantagruel*.

The Night Carnival Scene in “Major Molineux”

Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown” (1835) and “The Maypole of Merry Mount” (1836), also early night-festival tales concerned with the inversion of good-evil, take place in small, 17th-century Puritan villages surrounded by the infinitely dark and “evil” wilderness, with most of the action of “Goodman Brown” set in the woods. They also both begin at sunset, with “Goodman Brown” ending back in the village the next morning. However, “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” (1832) takes place in the pre-revolutionary 18th century in the big, sophisticated, corrupted city of Boston. Near the beginning, the young Robin arrives at night by ferry, and the story ends just a few hours later in the middle of the night.²

It was near nine o’clock of a moonlight evening, when a boat crossed the ferry with a single passenger, who had obtained his conveyance at that unusual hour by the promise of an extra fare. While he stood on the landing-place, searching in either pocket for the means of fulfilling his agreement, the ferryman lifted a lantern, by the aid of which, and the newly risen moon, he took a very accurate survey of the stranger’s figure.³ He was a youth of barely eighteen years, evidently country-bred, and now, as it should seem, upon his first visit to town. (Hawthorne 518)

In *The Art of Authorial Presence: Hawthorne’s Provincial Tales*, G. R. Thompson uses a quotation from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* as the title of the chapter in which he presents his reading of “Major Molineux”: “The Story of the Night Told Over.”⁴ For even more completely than “Merry Mount” and “Young

² Robin is also the name of Puck in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and the bird known as a “robin” was traditionally taken as a symbol of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross due to the blood-red color of its breast.

³ The ferryman’s action is echoed later in the story by the night watchman’s: “A heavy yawn preceded the appearance of a man, who, like the Moonshine of Pyramus and Thisbe, carried a lantern, needlessly aiding his sister luminary in the heavens.” In Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Moonshine joins in the performance, on a moonlit night, of the tragic story of the Babylonian youth Pyramus who dies for love of Thisbe, killing himself because he thinks she is dead as in *Romeo and Juliet*. Nietzsche’s Diogenes figure in the “Madman” passage of *Gay Science* holds a lantern aloft to look for God even in the daylight, since now the earth has flown away from the sun into empty space and into a state of metaphysical darkness (Kaufmann 95).

⁴ This title also echoes that of Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales*, and Thompson points out various

Goodman Brown,” “Major Molineux” is a night-time story, even if one which *might* (like “Young Goodman Brown”) be the narrator’s dream, and one illumined by a lantern-like moon whose role as detached “witness” at the story’s end was noted earlier: “The Man in the Moon heard the far bellow. ‘Oho,’ quoth he, ‘the old earth is frolicsome to-night!’” (Hawthorne 529)

Throughout the first half of the story Robin asks some townspeople, one after the other, where his uncle lives but he never receives a direct answer. His question is often heard by two or more people, and the knowing grins and winks they share among themselves, indeed their barely-suppressed derisive laughter, pointedly exclude him from this “secret knowledge.” Their secretive behavior might be seen as a more subdued form of the town’s buzz of *rumor* (which literally means “noise”), a potential force—the other side of the inquirer’s ignorance, confusion and paranoia—that will erupt in the contagion of laughter at the end. Finally, as Robin sits in a state of despair on the steps of an old church, pondering the graves all around it and thinking of his hometown and aging father, he sees a man in the distance and calls to him. This seemingly “good” citizen comes over and sits and talks with Robin, telling him that the major would soon pass by this very spot.

Then shortly Robin hears and sees an approaching parade, a nocturnal procession that might be compared to the opening procession (*comus*) of early Greek comic drama. All at once we are presented with the tale’s central event, a dramatic scene that still shocks us in spite of being heavily allegorized and perhaps even, like the whole story, Robin’s and/or the author’s dream, a “vision” that has “broken forth from some feverish brain” and come to life:

Then a redder light disturbed the moonbeams, and a dense multitude of torches shone along the street, concealing, by their glare, whatever object they illuminated. The single horseman, clad in a military dress,

sorts of ambiguity and duplicity in the story. For example, there are at least two historical Molineux’s that Hawthorne could be referring to: a “good” (pro-independence) one from the anti-British colonists point of view, and also a “bad” (pro-British) one (142-43), though in the story it seems clear that Molineux is a pro-British loyalist. Michael Colacurcio also points out, in “The Matter of America: ‘My Kinsman, Major Molineux,’” various historical ambiguities including that of the intended Molineux-figure, Hawthorne’s own political stance, and even the fact that the story could be about Boston in the 1730’s—the decade which Hawthorne seems to allude to in his first paragraph by introducing these “adventures, which chanced upon a summer night, not far from a hundred years ago” (Hawthorne 37)—or in the pre-revolutionary “1760s or 1770s” (Bloom 200).

and bearing a drawn sword, rode onward as the leader, and, by his fierce and variegated countenance, appeared like war personified; the red of one cheek was an emblem of fire and sword; the blackness of the other betokened the mourning that attends them. In his train were wild figures in the Indian dress, and many fantastic shapes without a model, giving the whole march a visionary air, as if a dream had broken forth from some feverish brain, and were sweeping visibly through the midnight streets. A mass of people, inactive, except as applauding spectators, hemmed the procession in; and several women ran along the sidewalk, piercing the confusion of heavier sounds with their shrill voices of mirth or terror. “The double-faced fellow has his eye upon me,” muttered Robin. . . . The leader turned himself in the saddle, and fixed his glance full upon the country youth, as the steed went slowly by. (Hawthorne 528)

The use of the “wild” and pagan (non-Christian) Indians—represented (played) by white men in “Indian dress”—and red-and-black lighting effects in the dark night will be echoed in various ways by the witch-meeting scene in the last part of “Young Goodman Brown,” whose final ritual performance has Goodman Brown and Faith standing side-by-side before the inverted figure of the devil-minister and just about to take their infernal wedding vows when Brown “wakes up.” The “double-faced” fellow—the red and black sides of his face symbolizing violence (“fire and sword”) and death (“mourning”)—is himself clearly the leader of the “revolution” that has overthrown the colonial governor Molineux, and this ambiguity or inversion of good-evil, this cynical, corrupt duplicity, this secretiveness hypocrisy and (as in “Goodman Brown”) is a central theme of the whole story. And then suddenly Robin sees his uncle:

Right before Robin’s eyes was an uncovered cart. There the torches blazed the brightest, there the moon shone out like day, and there, in tar-and-feathery dignity, sat his kinsman, Major Molineux! He was an elderly man, of large and majestic person, and strong, square features, betokening a steady soul; but steady as it was, his enemies had found means to shake it. His face was pale as death, and far more ghastly; the broad forehead was contracted in his agony, so that his eyebrows formed one grizzled line; his eyes were red and wild, and the foam hung white upon his quivering lip. His whole frame was agitated by a

quick and continual tremor, which his pride strove to quell, even in those circumstances of overwhelming humiliation. But perhaps the bitterest pang of all was when his eyes met those of Robin; for he evidently knew him on the instant, as the youth stood witnessing the foul disgrace of a head grown gray in honor. They stared at each other in silence, and Robin's knees shook, and his hair bristled, with a mixture of pity and terror.⁵ (Hawthorne 528-29)

The downfallen major's feeling of disgrace and humiliation is of course intensified now that he sees that his own nephew sees him in this state: shame is an intense form of self-consciousness that depends on being seen and blamed or looked down upon by others, particularly those closest to us. Finally we have the climactic contagion of laughter which "infects" even the young, once-innocent Robin; ironically—duplicitous, two-faced in spite of himself—he laughs louder than anyone else. Yet before he loses control or "loses his mind" in this way, we hear this gradually growing and expanding, tumultuous sea of noise always from Robin's (and/or the author's, or dreamer's) own subjective, self-conscious point of view, always as a force of pure exteriority:

At that moment a voice of sluggish merriment saluted Robin's ears; he turned instinctively, and just behind the corner of the church stood the lantern-bearer. . . . Then he heard a peal of laughter like the ringing of silvery bells; a woman twitched his arm . . . [Hearing a] sharp, dry cachinnation [he stood] on tiptoe in the crowd, with his white apron over his head, [and] beheld the courteous little innkeeper. And lastly, there sailed over the heads of the multitude a great, broad laugh, broken in the midst by two sepulchral hems; thus, "Haw, haw, haw,—hem, hem,—haw, haw, haw, haw!" The sound proceeded from the balcony of the opposite edifice, and thither Robin turned his eyes. In front of the Gothic window stood the old citizen . . . in a fit of convulsive merriment. . . . Then Robin seemed to hear the voices of the barbers, of the guests of the inn, and of all who had made sport of

⁵ In Aristotle's theory of tragedy (*Poetics*), the spectator feels a mixture of pity and terror when he beholds the downfall of the tragic hero. He needs to feel *close enough* to the suffering (and usually dying) hero to pity him in order to also be shocked (a kind of *distancing*) by him, or by his situation. In this way the spectator can undergo a *katharsis*, purgation or purification.

him that night. The contagion was spreading among the multitude, when all at once, it seized upon Robin, and he sent forth a shout of laughter that echoed through the street,—every man shook his sides, every man emptied his lungs, but Robin’s shout was the loudest there. (Hawthorne 529)

The various ways in which Hawthorne describes here the sounds of laughter emphasize our sense that this is really a “mindless” noise, one made by our body, proceeding outward from the lungs and through the throat, larynx and mouth—as do our exhaled breath and, long before we reach the rational, self-conscious level of spoken words, other non-verbal communicative sounds such as sobbing or making “sepulchral hems” (“ahems” as in clearing our throat)—in a kind of corporeal inversion or *extroversion*. Thus we have a series of sounds or noises—“voice of merriment,” “peal of bells,” “dry cachinnation,” “sepulchral hems,” “fit of convulsive merriment”—all of which are in some way sub-human, trans-human, non-human and/or (with the bells) even mechanical.

Exteriority, Laughter, and the Comic Sacrifice

We won’t normally associate ritual sacrifice with the comic; rather, we associate it with death and perhaps with heroism or some notion of the sacred. In theories which give sacrifice an essentially onto-theological function in very ancient cultures, the ritual sacrificing of a living creature to the gods or to heaven is thought to have been a means of celebrating or glorifying the mysterious *sacredness* of what Bataille calls the life-death interface, and of offering this sacred victim to the gods as a gift in the hope of getting some benefit from them in return.⁶ Yet even in these onto-theological theories sacrifice is thought to have also been the political act of a powerful ruler (e.g. the shaman-king), through which he showed his power over the whole society (perhaps as a metonymic extension of his power over the victim) and kept in order this “society of spectators.” And more rational-empirical theories see these rituals as having had *primarily* this socio-political function of keeping the

⁶ Influenced by Nietzsche (e.g. *Beyond Good and Evil*) more than Freud (e.g. *Moses and Monotheism, Totem and Taboo*) and predicting important themes in Kristeva and also Girard, Bataille sees community as “founded in the act of killing, in the rupturing of separate existence. But the rules and taboos that are established as a result reactivate the excessive impulse of evil to break all constraints. . . .” (“On Nietzsche: The Will to Chance” 338).

society in order, such that each member (each spectator) knows his proper rank or place, as it were, “in the stands.” That is, the mystical-sacred sense of the ritual ceremony may have been secondary, and yet still present insofar as the king’s (ritual performer’s) “power over life” was still crucial.⁷ One way to look, then, at a ritual of public scorning as a comic sacrifice would be to see it purely as just such a socio-political ritual, one which does not even need anyone to die (or perhaps to be physically harmed at all) in order to achieve its sole function of socio-political reordering. However, in the case of “Major Molineux” this is not simply the Bakhtinian “carnival” which lets king and peasant change places in a temporary, playful reordering, but rather a revolutionary and permanent getting rid of (overthrowing of) a despised ruler.

Girard in *Violence and the Sacred* claims that since the original purpose of ritual (violent) sacrifices, including human sacrifices, has to a large degree been forgotten, we must try to trace this meaning indirectly from the nature of Greek tragic drama, which like comic drama seems to focus on some sort of festival. Girard thinks that early societies tended to decline from a state of unanimous “desire” (violence)—one tribe together directed all its violent energy or violent desire against another tribe, its enemy—to one of “mimetic desire” or “mimetic violence” in which members of a given tribe desired what one another had, and thus turned upon one another in a potential “war of all against all” or what Girard calls a “sacrificial crisis.” This is, he speculates, precisely the point at which early “religious festivals” emerged, for these festivals were often based on the presence of a “sacred” god, animal or person now (perhaps arbitrarily) deemed “sacred” and thus sacrificed—an act which indirectly or vicariously released the excessive violent energy of the community in a “therapeutic” way, as a kind of (tragic) *katharsis*, so that the members of the tribe would not start killing one another (1).⁸

⁷ Here we may think of the interpretation of the role of the sovereign and state in terms of “biopower,” in some respects a new focus on a very old idea, in the work of Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben. See the following note.

⁸ At the beginning of his book Girard notes the circular logic in this notion of the “sacred victim,” also discussed by Hubert and Mauss in *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function*: “Because the victim is sacred, it is criminal to kill him—but the victim is sacred only because he is to be killed” (1). One might want to compare and contrast the paradoxical circularity of this logic with that of Agamben’s dictum in *Homo Sacer* that the *homo sacer*, the (non-)members of a society who represent “bare life” (prisoners in a concentration camp being one example, as they are already by definition victims of the state), may be “killed but not sacrificed” because they are (again paradoxically) *included* in the state only by virtue of their *exclusion* from it. Girard points out another essential ambivalence at the heart of ritual sacrifice: “In many rituals the sacrificial act

Up to a point at least, it seems such an analysis might also apply to the comic sacrifice. In the first place laughter is clearly based on some sort of early-human and indeed proto-human evolutionary mechanism in the body and brain, and anthropologists who study the “laughter” of apes and monkeys note that this seems mainly to be used to reinforce social bonds as if by reassuring the others (apes or humans) that the one who laughs is part of their group, or accepts the others as part of his group, and thereby setting the context for harmonious social communication.⁹ This can obviously explain the sort of derisive laughter discussed in superiority theories of laughter: one laughs at another to whom one feels superior in order to “reject” him, but especially two or more people laugh at a stranger or outsider—who may seem strange and comical simply because he is somehow different—in order to reject him from, or keep him outside of, their group, thereby reinforcing its (their) solidarity. However, it is also possible to take the aggressive, scornful snarl or laugh of the warrior, as he faces his opponent in battle, as being the original evolutionary spring or source of laughter, and then see as derivative from this laughter’s function as a force for mutual reinforcement within the group, for social solidarity.¹⁰ Our natural tendency to laugh at absurd or incongruous things/ideas *may* be seen as a development out of the primary drive to laugh violently (scornfully) at our opponent in a fight, and thus more generally at the uncouth stranger or outsider, since he/she is in the first place also something incongruous, unexpected, different.

In the comic sacrifice of Major Molineux, we also clearly have the release of the pent-up violent energy of a group, a violent energy which could be explained by Girard’s theory of mimetic desire where the latter is closely tied to the natural human communal feelings of greed, envy, jealousy and competitiveness. However, whereas with violent or tragic sacrifice the spectators are to a degree detached (but not too detached) from the victim, since only one person actually kills the victim—the performer of the sacrifice, presumably the sage-king or ruler in ancient times—

assumes two opposing aspects, appearing at times as a sacred obligation to be neglected at grave peril, at other times as a sort of criminal activity entailing perils of equal gravity” (1). Moreover, “If sacrifice resembles criminal violence, we may say that there is, inversely, hardly any form of violence that cannot be described in terms of sacrifice—as Greek tragedy clearly reveals” (1).

⁹ Numerous researchers have agreed on this point; see for example Robert Provine in *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation*, e.g. Chapter 4 (“Cracking the Laugh Code”) and Chapter 5 (“Chimpanzee Laughter”).

¹⁰ Thus some anthropologists speculate that the modern human smile derives from the proto-human grimace or snarl, like that of an angry dog gritting his teeth, himself threatened and/or wishing to threaten the other. See for example Apte, *Humor and Laughter* 245.

with comic sacrifice we have the whole group laughing at the victim: now it is the violent energy of the whole group, expressed or released as an explosion of derisive scorn-laughter, that “kills” (humiliates) the victim, while this same violent energy is simultaneously being released in a way that may benefit this group of spectators by helping to maintain or restore social order. Thus with comic sacrifice—and not only in the special case where it is the former “leader” (e.g. Molineux) that is being “cast out”—there need be no single “performer” of the sacrificial ritual, for it is being performed by the whole crowd of spectators. (The two-faced man on his horse may lead and “orchestrate” the procession but he still laughs along with everyone else.) But in fact the victim of the tragic sacrifice, and more obviously of the comic sacrifice, is also the “performer” in/of the ritual; perhaps the more “active” role of the victim in the comic sacrifice balances, or is needed to replace, the lack of an active leader-performer-killer like the priest or king at a tragic sacrifice.

In Girard’s view, before the state of sacrificial crisis is reached this collective and pent-up *social violence* of early societies must be released—as in the letting off of steam in a steam engine or pressure cooker—through a “substitute” method, namely, the sacrificing of a (human or animal) “scapegoat.” And again, the earliest festivals may have arisen from just such a need to maintain socio-political equilibrium via a ritual sacrifice. Girard claims, moreover, that for this sacrifice to be effective, the spectators could be neither too “close to” nor too “distant from” the victim in terms of their feelings:

As we have seen, the proper functioning of the sacrificial process requires not only the complete separation of the sacrificed victim from those beings for whom the victim is a substitute but also a similarity between the two parties. This dual requirement can be fulfilled only through a delicately balanced mechanism of associations. . . . Whether the slippage in the mechanism is due to “too little” or “too much” contact between the victim and those whom the victim represents, the results are the same. The elimination of violence is no longer effected; on the contrary, conflicts within the community multiply, and the menace of chain reactions looms ever larger. . . . If the gap between the victim and the community is allowed to grow too wide, all similarity will be destroyed. The victim will no longer be capable of attracting the violent impulses to itself; the sacrifice will cease to serve as a “good conductor,” in the sense that metal is a good conductor of electricity. On the other hand, if there is too much continuity the

violence will overflow its channels. “Impure” violence will mingle with the “sacred” violence of the rites, turning the latter into a scandalous accomplice in the process of pollution, even a kind of catalyst in the propagation of further impurity. (41-42)

For the sacrificial act to be a “good conductor”—a term which suggests the metonymic interconnectedness or network of a group’s collective “mimetic desire”—there must be the right balance-point between the spectators’ sense of difference (distance) from the victim and their sense of closeness to it/him/her. If there is too much or too little distance between spectators and victim, the spectators release their violent energies upon one another, because in one case they did not experience the energy-releasing effect of the sacrificial murder and in the other they got too caught up in the polluting or contagious energy or force of the sacrificial murder itself, blindly swept up in a frenzy of violence.

However, inasmuch as all the spectators perform the comic sacrifice through their contagious sea of derisive laughter, so that they are apparently all more or less *equidistant* from the victim, it may not make sense to analyze this via Girard’s model of the necessary middle-distance (neither “too close” nor “too far”) between spectators and victim. In what may be a variation on this, the operative dialectic in *this* social economy or system rather seems to be that between the intense self-consciousness of the sacrificial victim and the total unselfconsciousness (relative degree of “mindlessness”) of the mass of wildly laughing spectators, that is, between ego and non-ego or “I” and “not-I.” If the total amount of “ego” allowable within the system remains constant, then perhaps the intensification of ego within the victim is balanced by the reduction of it throughout the crowd of spectators. Thus in “Major Molineux” the contagious (from the Latin *contingere*) laughter of the spectators, passing as it does mainly *between and among* (rather than *into*) the laughs as if it were a purely *contingent*, external, meaningless (pre-verbal, non-rational) sea of noise, is also a *selfless* contagion that spreads or “comes over” them: each is joyfully thinking or feeling, in effect, “*Thank God it is not I but rather him! Not I but him!*” But if the laughs in their pure “exteriority” are totally non-self-conscious, the victim (sitting there broken and humbled in his cart) must be extremely self-conscious, for a public scorning actually *works* by making a person painfully self-conscious, this is how we humiliate him. It is as if the victim were sitting there feeling totally self-absorbed, oppressed but also *compressed* into himself through the tremendous pressure of the sea of scorn-laughter; perhaps if the sacrifice is now “working properly” and the victim is a “good conductor of the

electricity”—to use Girard’s figure (41)—or is now receiving into himself the totality of the “electric charge.”

In fact there may be two degrees of non-self-consciousness for the scorn-laughers. First, each one loses “himself” to the “other selves” that are next to or contingent to him in the contagion of laughter; but since each of the others also loses himself, in the pure expansive exteriority of laughter, to the others, finally it is the victim who becomes as it were the “magnet,” attracting the full force of the laughter into his own interiority. The same exteriority in the sense of non-self-consciousness, after all, may be implied by the “placating” or “reassuring” laughter at a party, which also promotes group solidarity; but here there is *no victim* who must become fully “self-conscious” and so the exterior force of laughter is always deflected only to the other adjacent (contingent) laughers. Perhaps then in this case the laughers, to keep the balance within the system, are now somewhat more self-conscious than are the scorn-laughers in a comic sacrifice, which actually makes sense when we try to compare the two situations. It is not clear whether, in evolutionary terms, this sort of “positive” group-reinforcing laughter is prior to the “negative” sort that operates through scorning and rejecting the other, or whether, as seems perhaps more likely, purely “violent” laughter takes priority.

Robin, of course, the protagonist of the story and the “consciousness” whose point of view we share throughout it, is also indirectly a victim, being the nephew of the sacrificial victim and thus having a very special connection to him. Psychoanalytic approaches to the story have discussed the idea that we might see his uncle as Robin’s “second father”—his “first” father being a farmer that we get glimpses of in the story via Robin’s memory and/or dream—in which case at the end perhaps the town (society) itself will become his “third.” The story ends like this:

On swept the tumult, and left a silent street behind. “Well, Robin, are you dreaming?” inquired the gentleman, laying his hand on the youth’s shoulder. Robin started, and withdrew his arm from the stone post to which he had instinctively clung, as the living stream rolled by him. His cheek was somewhat pale, and his eye not quite as lively as in the earlier part of the evening. “Will you be kind enough to show me the way to the ferry?” said he, after a moment’s pause. “You have, then, adopted a new subject of inquiry?” observed his companion, with a smile. “Why, yes, sir,” replied Robin, rather dryly. “Thanks to you, and to my other friends, I have at last met my kinsman, and he will

scarce desire to see my face again. I begin to grow weary of a town life, sir. Will you show me the way to the ferry?" "No, my good friend Robin,— not to-night, at least," said the gentleman. "Some few days hence, if you wish it, I will speed you on your journey. Or, if you prefer to remain with us, perhaps, as you are a shrewd youth, you may rise in the world without the help of your kinsman, Major Molineux." (Hawthorne 529-30)

"Rising in the world" is ironic on various levels, including that of the moon which, having risen far above the horizon, listens at the end to the "far bellow" of the humans down below—suggesting perhaps a balloon-like comic expansion that can just as suddenly be deflated and collapsed. Robin's "old subject of inquiry" has been of course the whereabouts of his uncle, about which he has been asking in the streets and bars of Boston after since arriving on the ferry at nine in the evening, only to be ignored—although several of those he asked would look at one another with a smile and a knowing wink, as if they were part of a secret conspiracy to deprive Robin of this knowledge.

For Robin is also a victim inasmuch as he, like and unlike his uncle, is an "outcast": he is a stranger in town, an outsider, and he often sees the townspeople looking at him with curiosity. It also seems the rumor that he is the nephew of the major—whom the whole community is planning to publically humiliate in a parade that very evening—has spread quickly through town, for we begin to sense that the citizens whom he asks "Where is my uncle?" already know who Robin is and what he will ask them, and are amused by the situation. Perhaps this rumor echoes the earlier rumors (whose existence we may assume)—that is, the earlier *secrets* (with their *hidden interiority*) which were spread as rumors—that Molineux is an evil governor who must be "deposed," that Molineux will be (secretly) arrested or otherwise overpowered at such and such a time, that Molineux will be bound, tarred and feathered and put in a cart at such and such a time and place, and so forth. Just as his uncle was *the only one who did not know* what was going on, so Robin has been this evening the only one who did not even know where his uncle lived, let alone any of these other secrets.

In some respects the pattern or *system* of rumor seems parallel to that of derisive laughter: *rumor* (a word which originally meant "noise") also passes quickly among many people as a purely "exterior" noisy force; with rumor there is also a sense that all of the self-consciousness within the system must somehow be ascribed to the target (victim, "subject") of the rumor, whereas those spreading the

rumor can remain uninvolved, not needing to really care or invest much of their consciousness (or conscience) in the substance of the rumor, even if they still conceal the secret from most people as a sort of potentially *false interiority* within themselves. While with derisive laughter there is “full knowledge” on the part of everyone laughing and also on the part of the victim, with rumor only those “in on the secret” have knowledge of it while the victim, though he knows the actual case regarding his own affairs, may be able to guess to varying degrees but cannot really know what the gossipers know or think they know. In this special case Robin begins to know or guess that the townspeople know but do not want to tell him this seemingly innocent fact, until the end when he realizes it is not so “innocent.”

It seems then that in this case the “victim” remains ignorant whereas the gossipers know, so that the dialectic of self-conscious sacrificial victim vs. non-self-conscious laughers is now working in a rather different way. And yet again it is Robin who has been, throughout the story, the self-conscious inquirer whom no one will answer, and insofar as the townspeople are clearly laughing at him “behind his back” he is also a variation on his uncle as victim of a comic sacrifice—the difference being that the night-carnival crowd is hardly laughing in secret at Major Molineux. Just as Robin seems to be both the major’s parallel and (“rising” at the end) an inverted form of him, so the noise of rumor seems to be both a parallel form and an inverted form of the noise of laughter.¹¹

Fallen Bird and Comic Offering

The idea that the victim of a traditional (tragic) sacrifice is a “sacred object” and “gift to the gods” has been much discussed, not just by anthropological thinkers like Girard but also by Bataille, Kristeva and Derrida, among others. In part they were all influenced by Mauss’ theory of the potlatch or “excessive feast” in

¹¹ Attali tells us in *Noise* that it is “not by coincidence that Russolo wrote his *Arte Dei Rumori* (‘The Art of Noise’) in 1913; that noise entered music and industry entered painting just before the outbursts and wars of the twentieth century, before the rise of social noise. Or again, . . . it is not by coincidence that . . . with the disappearance of taboos there arose a music industry that takes the channelization of desire into commodities to such an extreme that it becomes a caricature . . .” (10). Attali says “Russolo was talking about ‘the crashing down of metal shop blinds, slamming doors, the hubbub of crowds, the variety of din, from stations, railways, iron foundries, spinning mills, printing works, electric power stations and underground railways and the absolutely new noises of modern war. He invented an orchestra of vibrators, screechers, whistles” (136). (Attali’s note here cites Apollonio, *Futurist Manifestos* 85).

primitive societies, that is, by the idea, also found in Cixous, that “excessive giving” (associated by French feminists with woman, with the mother) breaks beyond the economy of rational (masculine, capitalist) exchange.¹² We also get the idea of sacrifice as a kind of excessive (or absolute, infinite) gift to God in the *Old Testament*, where God asks Abraham to sacrifice his own son Isaac in order to prove (by virtue of obeying this divine command) his love for God; when Isaac is about to kill his son with a knife, God tells him he does not need to do it—it was a test. Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling* says Abraham here had entered the domain of the “teleological suspension of the ethical,” the level of the “knight of faith” which transcends the levels of the aesthetic and even the ethical; Derrida in *The Gift of Death* goes back to this Biblical “scene,” and the postmodern ethics of Derrida and Levinas, which emphasizes an infinite openness to the “other” rather than moral commands or absolutes, has certain connections with it.

However, in a comic sacrifice we have no victim in the same sense—one that could be a “divine offering” to the gods, perhaps in return for benefits the gods will bestow upon the community making the sacrifice to them. How then could the tarred-and-feathered Major Molineux, a figure of utter humiliation, be seen as a sacred object and potential gift to the gods? Here we must keep in mind that as a “fallen potentate” the major is in some respects like a downfallen tragic hero, a variation on Aeschylus’ Agamemnon (“sacrificed” by his wife) or Sophocles’ Oedipus (who blinds himself), one who also might suggest a fallen angel, a Satan now surrounded by fiends: “When there was a momentary calm in that tempestuous sea of sound, the leader gave the sign, the procession resumed its march. On they went, like fiends that throng in mockery around some dead potentate, mighty no more, but majestic still in his agony. On they went, in counterfeited pomp, in senseless uproar, in frenzied merriment, trampling all on an old man’s heart. On swept the tumult, and left a silent street behind” (529).

In *The Birds*, widely considered his best play, the late 5th-century-B.C. Greek comic playwright Aristophanes imagines a utopia, Νεφέλοκοκκυγία (*Cloudcuckooland*), established up in the sky by birds. It is the middle-aged

¹² For Bataille, ritual sacrifice is itself a form of excessive expenditure or “wasting”; as such it is crucial to an understanding of all societies in terms not just of “production” but of excessive “wastefulness.” Sacrifice is a (non-moral, non-productive, free and spontaneous) killing of the victim and thus a function of the *sacredness* of the victim, that is, of the victim’s marking of what Bataille calls the life-death interface. The meaning of the sacrificial victim as “sacred gift” may be closely related, in primitive thinking, to this sense of the (divine) excessiveness of death, or of the life-death betweenness.

Athenian Pisthetaerus who persuades the birds to create this utopian world by emphasizing that such a domain would occupy a strategic middle-position between the humans down on the earth's surface and the Olympian gods higher up in the sky. Not only could the birds be free of the strife so common among both gods and mortals, but even more significantly, Pisthetaerus points out, the birds could control the *communication* between mortals and immortals. This communication was traditionally thought to have proceeded via man's sacrifice (accompanied by prayer or some form of invocation of the gods) of an animal down on earth—a kind of gift or offering to the gods who, it was hoped, would give some benefit to man in return—and the gods' "response" which might be interpreted through the *ritual augury* performed by mortals. More precisely, Pisthetaerus notes, the fragrant, nourishing "smoke" of the roasting sacrificial victims, rising up to the gods above, would now be intercepted or *interrupted* by the birds who, rather than consume it themselves, could force the gods to pay tribute for these "goods" which had now passed through (passed into) "Cloudcuckooland"; this would enable the birds, from whom the Olympian gods (in the myth given here) were thought to have originally descended, to regain power over Zeus and the gods, and of course over humans down on earth as well.

Thus near the beginning of the play Pisthetaerus—who will be miraculously transformed into a bird-like figure and, with the help of his friends the birds, will soon replace Zeus as the pre-eminent power in the cosmos—says to Hoopoe, a bird who was once the human King Tereus¹³:

But since the universe is polarized / From there [Mt. Olympus, locus
of the gods], its name at present is the pole. / However, once it is
settled and *policed*, / The pole will then become your *metropole!* /
Mankind you'll master like a midget-swarm . . . / Blockade the gods
like hungry Melians. / . . . / Is not the air 'twixt earth and sky? / Well,
just as we, when bound for Delphi's shrine, / Request safe passage
through Boetia's plain, / Just so, when men burn offerings to Heaven, /

¹³ Pisthetaerus is also aided in replacing Zeus by the advice of Prometheus, the Titan who stole the fire of the sun—the question of "polarization" again—from the gods and gave it to mortals. According to a well-known myth, one reason Zeus became angry at Prometheus was because he gave Zeus a kind of "fake" sacrificial offering (more bones than meat), saving the good meat for humans; Zeus' response was to punish mortals by sending them Pandora and giving her the box filled with "evils."

You'll not allow the savory smoke to pass, / Unless the gods pay
tribute to your realm. (Hadas 236; Aristophanes' italics)

The power-based spatial mapping or “territorialization” of the sky may seem a bit ambiguous here, but the absolute power of the gods, as expressed by their highest level or ranking (as/at the extreme “pole” which is then able to “polarize the universe”), will clearly be called into question by the emergence of the birds in the “middle kingdom”—perhaps because the heaven-earth polarity will now be disrupted, interrupted, mediated and transformed by the emergence of a third, in-between level. And Aristophanes here might be giving more emphasis to the *metro* in “metropolis” (“mother-city”) as *mother* than we would tend to give it—to the womblike quality of this middle-world.

Now, there are two points here that I find very interesting in relation to Hawthorne's “Major Molineux,” though I will make no attempt to look at specific “political” parallels which may or may not exist, or to claim (though it is possible) that Hawthorne had *The Birds* in mind when he wrote the story. These are the fact that Pisthetaerus himself is transformed into a birdlike figure in order to rule Cloudcuckooland and guide its rise to power, and the “figure” of the rising smoke of a sacrificial offering that gets intercepted by the birds in their middle-kingdom utopia. Birds with their superhuman power of flight were of course seen in ancient times as messengers between men and gods—which fits the idea of a bird-utopia in the middle-position between gods and men where it has control of human-divine “communication”—and diviners (practitioners of ritual augury) “read” the patterns of bird-flight as well as the entrails of dead (sacrificed) birds and other animals in order to “hear the gods' response.”

As for the bird-man theme, the tarred-and-feathered Major Molineux may seem to have become a sort of “fallen bird” and thus a trans-human figure. Of course, the cruel punishment of tar-and-feathering humans is clearly designed to inflict physical pain as a form of torture—might the *heat* of the hot tar poured onto the victim's naked body suggest the *roasting* of a sacrificial victim, where in this case it is as if he were being roasted alive?—as well as to humiliate the victim, make him the laughing-stock of the community, the object of scorn-laughter. Placing hot tar on a person's bare skin is the painful part (and removing the tar later can be very painful), after which birds' feathers are stuck in the tar merely to make the victim look more ridiculous, more laughable, perhaps as a bird that cannot fly. Indeed perhaps here there is an intentional (if ironic) association of the human victim with birds, as if to say, “This is a bird that should be (or that was) flying high

and has now fallen back to earth, fallen very low.”¹⁴

The idea of human-bird transformation, so common in the myths of many ancient cultures, does seem likely to have somehow lain behind the initial notion of tarring-and-feathering a person as a form of punishment and public humiliation. This “large black bird covered with white feathers” must have looked suitably grotesque, and yet we feel there must also be a deeper “transformation” theme here. A closer prototype for Major Molineux in *The Birds* than Pisthetaerus-as-bird might be the Hoopoe bird that was once King Tereus. With the Hoopoe we have more of a sense of comical “fallenness” near the opening of the play. Hoopoe’s servant tells Pisthetaerus and the others that his master is “sleeping off / A mess of gnats and myrtle berries now” and then the giant, aged Hoopoe wakes up, saying “Open my leafy gates, I go without,” and emerges from his large, crude “nest.” Euelpides says, “Lord save us, what a freak! . . . A bird is it? No feathers, and a crest as big as three!” and Hoopoe replies, “Ye mock my plumage? Nay, my good friends, for I was once a man.” Euelpides rejoins, “It isn’t you we’re laughing at [but rather your] beak . . . so funny-looking, don’t you know.” And when asked “Where are your feathers, then?” Hoopoe replies, “They’ve molted all away” (Hadas 233-34).¹⁵ This picture of a bird that has lost his feathers, thus perhaps looking more like the human that he originally was, may seem the inverse of one who has, like Major Molineux, undergone a tarring-and-feathering which makes him look *more* like a bird; or perhaps the two would present similar images of a grotesque human-bird betweenness.

The other “figure” from the play which interests me here is that of the rising smoke from roasting sacrificial victims which will now be intercepted, before it can reach the gods for whom it was originally intended, by the birds in

¹⁴ Google reveals virtually no information on the possible *symbolic* meanings of tar-and-feathering or of the “bird” here, but we do learn from Wikipedia that the victims were generally local political authorities who were being humiliated by a mob and often run out of town on a rail (or in a cart), and that the first known cases were in medieval England. We also learn that the practice became relatively common in 18th-century colonial America—where the victims were usually local officials in cities like Boston, especially customs officers and tax collectors who may have been (like Major Molineux) appointed by England—and that it was also common in the American South of the 19th and early 20th centuries, where members of the Ku Klux Klan and other white racists sometimes inflicted this terrible punishment on blacks.

¹⁵ Reptiles molt (from *mutare*, “to mutate”) but shedding their skin and birds by shedding their feathers; young birds molt when first growing their feathers and generally, as Hoopoe says, “In winter every winged creature molts, / And then renews his feathered coat in spring” (Hadas 234). But the idea of “regeneration” does not seem to fit those who are tarred-and-feathered?

Cloudecuckooland. Now I am wondering if we might not look at the “comic laughter” (“sacrificial laughter”) near the end of “Major Molineux”—which rises up past the clouds (at their middle-level) to reach the Man in the Moon—as a sort of “comic offering”: “The cloud-spirits peeped from their silvery islands, as the congregated mirth went roaring up the sky! The Man in the Moon heard the far bellow. ‘Oho,’ quoth he, ‘the old earth is frolicsome to-night!’” (529) I shall not attempt to pursue this thought beyond making the observation that if the smoke rising from sacrificial (usually non-human) victims—as they are being roasted in or over a fire—is, along with the victims themselves, intended as an offering to the gods in Heaven above, then so might we see the rising noise of the whole town’s laughter as an offering, one now being made to the sky, clouds or (more particularly) the Man in the Moon.¹⁶ For we note that just as smoke is a *waste product* of fire (along with what is being roasted in/by the fire), so can human laughter be seen as a waste product of the human body. After all (at least according to “comic release” theories including Freud’s), laughter too is a form of excess energy that is *released* from the body, exploding forth uncontrollably from the lungs and throat as a sort of purely “exterior” or trans-human noise, one that sounds not much more human than the howls of animals (a pack of howling wolves, for instance) or the chirps of birds.¹⁷

Comic/Tragic Ambiguity in Two Later Night-Carnival Tales

“Never had the Maypole been so gayly decked as at sunset on midsummer eve. . . . [But] with the setting sun, the last day of mirth had passed from Merry Mount” (Hawthorne 40-44). At the opening of Hawthorne’s relatively early provincial tale “The Maypole of Merry Mount” (1836), we find a group of young New England villagers dancing around the maypole in their traditional May Day celebration. A youthful marriage is about to be enacted, just as it might at the end of

¹⁶ Here we would be taking the Man in the Moon as a sort of pagan “god” or a parody of such a god, perhaps a duplicitous or “false” god. To “roast” a person is to satirize him/her excessively, in a violently comic way, as in the roasts of one celebrity (the victim, usually an actor or comedian) by a group of his/her “friends” (other comedians) on U.S. TV’s Comedy Central channel.

¹⁷ Freud in *Jokes and the Unconscious* says that we release as laughter the (excess) energy we “save” by not having to think rationally, not having to be controlled by the rational mind or *consciousness* in this case—that is, when confronted with the absurdity or incongruity (or contingency) of word-play, etc. The non-human, nonsensical and thus comical sounds of bird-language are much emphasized in Aristophanes’ play, in the long speeches of various characters including the Hoopoe and especially in the several passages featuring the Bird Chorus.

a Shakespearean pastoral comedy, when the “serious” puritans arrive in town with their leader Endicott.¹⁸ The latter blame the young villagers for their amorality, making some of them continue to dance around the maypole—but *now in order to whip them*, a more direct act of physical violence and punishment than we get in “Major Molineux” and one that inverts, carnivalizes, parodies the meaning of the dance—before bringing them back to a properly Puritan village.¹⁹

Hawthorne at first associates the maypole, covered with roses and other spring flowers in bloom, with romance, with a playful and excessive *jouissance* and indirectly with the phallus as source of life and regeneration. And his description of the masked and costumed “characters” who are dancing around it at the story’s opening makes them seem figures from an ancient Greek or Roman mythic-comic, pastoral tradition, now modified by the European Gothic tradition. Their Gothic, grotesque monstrousness comes in part from the wild, primitive, pagan, animalistic or sub-human origins of the northeastern American “wilderness” —which perhaps really means its Native American origins as these are interpreted by the white Christian colonists:

But what was the wild throng that stood hand in hand about the Maypole? It could not be that the fauns and nymphs, when driven from their classic groves and homes of ancient fable, had sought refuge, as all the persecuted did, in the fresh woods of the West. These were Gothic monsters, though perhaps of Grecian ancestry. 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. *There was the likeness of a bear erect, brute in all but his hind legs, which were adorned with pink*

¹⁸ Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is directly alluded to in “Major Molineux”; see notes 2 and 3.

¹⁹ Daniel Hoffman in “‘The Maypole of Merry Mount’ and the Folklore of Love” points out the contrast between the various levels of ambiguity in the story, partly tied to its dreamlike, self-consciously allegorical quality and its clear historical setting: “‘The Maypole’ takes place during the final hours of the dissident colony at Mr. Wollaston, Massachusetts, where in historic fact one Thomas Morton, an anti-Puritan High-Churchman and Royalist, had established a trading-post with the Indians” (Bloom 41); Hoffman also notes that Hawthorne may have exaggerated somewhat by “making Morton’s dissolute band into a hedonistic cult whose object of worship is the Maypole” (Bloom 41).

silk stockings. And here again, almost as wondrous, stood a real bear of the dark forest, lending each of his fore paws to the grasp of a human hand, and as ready for the dance as any in that circle. . . . Here might be seen the Savage Man, well known in heraldry, hairy as a baboon, and girdled with green leaves. By his side a noble figure, but *still a counterfeit*, appeared an Indian hunter, with feathery crest and wampum belt. . . . *Had a wanderer, bewildered in the melancholy forest, heard their mirth, and stolen a half-affrighted glance, he might have fancied them 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.*²⁰ (Hawthorne 40-41, emphasis added)

The “mortal man” with “the beard and horns of a venerable he-goat” is of course a satyr, a seemingly comic figure in its characteristic lustfulness and yet one that is crucial to the sacrificial origins of Greek tragedy: sheep and goats were commonly sacrificed and *tragedy* means “goat-song.” The extremely complex figure of the “likeness of a bear erect, brute in all but his hind legs, which were adorned with pink silk stockings” presents the theme of animal-human transformation comically; the only “human” parts of the male bear are his now-feminized hind legs with their hint of sexuality, of the Bakhtinian “lower bodily stratum.” This frivolous absurdity and duplicity of what might almost seem postmodernist self-parody was already explicit in Aristophanes’ grotesque, violent playfulness, one of whose forms was the all-male procession or *komos* at the opening of a play: several actors had huge fake phalluses strapped around their waists. This suggests once again the close association since ancient times, at least in the West, of the “comic” with an uninhibited, expansive, uncontrollable and potentially violent life-force.

However, the story quickly takes a dark, even a tragic turn. The young Lord and Lady of May, who are really about to be married, suddenly become aware of the seriousness of life, its finitude and essential sadness, and in the next moment Endicott and the orthodox Puritans arrive on the scene, punish some of the dancers by whipping them, and preach essentially the same message: the youthful revelers

²⁰ “Comedy” is from the Greek *komos* (revelry) plus *aeidein* (to sing); the *komos* was the comic “procession” at the opening of a Greek comic drama, and *komos* (often seen in the Latin form Comus) was a traditional god of comic revelry.

have been trying in vain to escape from the stern reality of life, from its deeply moral and spiritual meaning which is closely tied to the fact of human finitude and death. Thus we may think that the “tragic” finally encompasses the “comic” in this romance, this moral tale or fable, whereas in “Major Molineux” the opposite is true: the proud and serious “potentate” has fallen at the end, and the wild “demons” are laughing at him in a festival of “frenzied merriment.”

Or perhaps we could also say that in “Merry Mount” the two dynamics (the priority to comic and/or tragic) are equally balanced, or even that the distinction between them is dissolved. The “band of Puritans” have after all “watched the scene [and], invisible themselves, compared the masques to those devils and ruined souls with whom their superstition peopled the black wilderness” (Hawthorne 41). But have they been secretly watching this “comic play” because they have no choice, since they too are imprisoned by this same (tragicomic) wilderness and are themselves very much at risk of becoming “ruined souls” within it? Moreover, Hawthorne mentions the “awful depth” of the Maypole dancers’ smiling mouths: “Other faces wore the similitude of man or woman, but distorted or extravagant, with red noses pendulous before their mouths, which seemed of awful depth, and stretched from ear to ear in an eternal *fit of laughter*” (41).

Might it be that the Puritans’ stern “love of death” is actually the eternally frozen state of the comic smile itself? For if the comic has here become “frozen” into something that is, inevitably, no longer amusing, just as once-innocent souls inevitably become ruined over time, then ironically the “tragic view” of the Puritans could also be taken as embodying the final manifestation of the frozen and ruined “comic.”²¹ In “Major Molineux” we get comic-serious (evil-good) ambiguity or duplicity inasmuch as the violence and chaos of the encompassing comic is also

²¹ Such an eternally-frozen smile suggests that of a smiling skull, a death’s-head of Renaissance painting or Yorick’s skull in *Hamlet*; it could also remind us of Heath Ledger’s and (more “comically”) Jack Nicholson’s Jokers, with their grotesquely over-large painted-on smiles, in the *Batman* movies. And in fact the dead Nicholson-Joker’s laugh (in the Tim Burton film) lives on after him in the form of his chattering, mechanical “false teeth.” Perhaps the Joker is the other side or “face” of *Batman* (that serious, moralistic “caped crusader”) while another character, Tommy Two-face, represents the dialectical opposition, interplay or equivalence. The purely external, hollow, mechanical nature of laughter is also clear in John Barth’s robotic fortune-telling lady Fat May in “Lost in the Funhouse,” who laughs when someone puts a coin in her mouth; we get a variation on the eternally frozen smile (smiling but not laughing) in the song of Poe’s Roderick Usher (“The Fall of the House of Usher,” 1839), at the end of which “evil things, in robes of sorrow”—a variation on the mimicking Echoes—in “A hideous throng rush out forever, / And laugh—but smile no more” (*Complete Tales* 239).

deadly serious, while in “Merry Mount” we likely tend to give more weight to the good/serious/tragic, yet here too there is a certain ambiguity insofar as this tragic might be seen as the final, most rigid and death-like state of the evil/playful/comic.

Hawthorne’s “wanderer,” at the opening of “Merry Mount,” who “bewildered in the melancholy forest, heard their mirth, and [stole] a half-affrighted glance” (Hawthorne 41), easily reminds us of the middle and later sections of “Young Goodman Brown” (1835), where the self-conflicted young Puritan is lured by the evil nighttime witch-meeting deep in the heart of the woods. If the wild and pagan (uncivilized, subhuman, aboriginal) wilderness may be implicitly “evil” in “Merry Mount” and as such might infect the Puritans as much as it does the anti-Puritan free-thinkers of Merry Mount, in “Goodman Brown” *nature itself* “laughs Goodman Brown to scorn” and thus might be correlated with the mob of laughing spectators at the end of “Major Molineux”: “The whole forest was peopled with frightful sounds—the creaking of the trees, the howling of wild beasts, and the yell of Indians; while sometimes the wind tolled like a distant church bell, and sometimes gave a broad roar around the traveller, as if all Nature were laughing him to scorn” (Hawthorne 252). Brown has in fact himself been laughing uncontrollably, perhaps “at Nature,” but now (as if echoing him) Nature laughs back at him.

This suggests not just the unison of his own voice/cry/laughter with that of the “desert” but the notion of Nature (*contra* Emerson, perhaps parodying him) as an all-encompassing, complicit, duplicitous force of comic-evil. The sense that “Nature” actively inverts or carnivalizes “Puritan morality” is clearer in the following scene, as Brown secretly draws near to the witch-meeting and hears “singing”: “He knew the tune; it was a familiar one in the choir of the village meeting-house. The verse died heavily away, and was lengthened by a chorus, not of human voices, but of all the sounds of the benighted wilderness pealing in awful harmony together. Goodman Brown cried out, and his cry was lost to his own ear by its unison with the cry of the desert” (Hawthorne 252). Perhaps it may also be possible to think of the crowd’s contagious laughter in “Major Molineux” as a kind of echoing of “the Laugh” from each laughter to the next, whereas the suffering victim and the contemplative Moon above both remain silent.

In “Goodman Brown,” a story that may seem closer to “Major Molineux,” we get a clear ambiguity of good/serious/tragic (the tragic side is clear in the sternly Puritanical aging-toward-death of Brown at the end) and evil/playful/comic. The dynamic of inversion is most obvious in this tale: the same townspeople are “good” by day (in the village) and “evil” at night (at the witch meeting). We can of course say the same of the townspeople in “Major Molineux” though now this must be

qualified: even if we assume (for the whole story takes place at night) that all of them are secretive, scheming gossipers (from Robin's perspective) by day, the carnival of public scorning at night is clearly not an everyday occurrence; we are not so sure in the case of the witch meeting. Moreover, the metaphysical and ethical inversion in the allegorical "Goodman Brown"—God is turned upside-down to become Satan, and "Faith" it/herself has come to the meeting of devil-worshippers, where she is about to lose her purity in the Satanic wedding scene when Brown "wakes up"—carries a heavier weight, is more "totalized" than in the other two tales. Thus if we interpret "Merry Mount" as suggested above, then in all three stories we do have human moral ambiguity or two-facedness as a central theme. Of course, such ambivalence could imply that the difference between the good/serious/tragic face and the evil/playful/comic one finally dissolves or disappears.²²

Bakhtin's Ph.D. thesis and early book *Rabelais and His World* are devoted to the 16th-century French author's "grotesque body" and robust, carnivalizing humor. Rabelais begins his own Prologue to *Gargantua and Pantagruel* by reminding us that Plato in the *Symposium* has Alcibiades compare his teacher Socrates to a Silenus or medicine box: Socrates, like a Silenus, has a comic exterior which conceals its/his serious, deeply philosophical interior.²³ Rabelais will go on to suggest here that his novel may seem frivolous if you judge it only from its title, but that in fact, like the Silenus/Socrates, it conceals deep and serious meanings within:

A Silenus: those used to be little boxes, the kind you see, today, in drugstores, painted all around with light and happy figures, like harpies, satyrs, bridled geese, hares with horns, saddled ducks, flying goats, stags in harness, and all sorts of such images, invented in good fun, just to make the world laugh (just as Silenus used to do, honest

²² We have the ambiguous "dialectic" of angels' and devils' laughter in Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*: "The first time an angel heard the devil's laughter, he was dumbfounded. That happened at a feast in a crowded room, where the devil's laughter, which is terribly contagious, spread from one person to another. The angel clearly understood that such laughter is directed against God and against the dignity of his works. He knew that he must react swiftly somehow [and so] he aped his adversary. Opening his mouth, he emitted broken, spasmodic sounds . . . but giving them an opposite meaning . . ." (86-87).

²³ Silenus, a woodland deity, was the foster father and companion of Dionysus (Bacchus); he had a horse's ears and tail. Dionysus was the androgynous god of wine, intoxication and the arts, in particular of tragic drama, for he was himself torn apart (often by the Maenads) and regenerated in a pattern of recurring sacrifice and transformation.

Bacchus' master). But what they used to keep inside these boxes were rare medicines like balsam and ambergris . . . gemstones, and all kinds of precious stuff. And that was what Socrates was like, Alcibiades said, because just looking at him . . . you wouldn't give a bite of onion for him. . . . But just open that box and you'd find heavenly, priceless medicines: an understanding more than human, miraculous virtue. . . .

(7)

However, the duplicitous Rabelais' point will be that the "serious interior" of the Silenus is finally also not-serious, just like the exterior, and that the comic "exteriors" (titles) of his novels do *not* after all hide deep and serious interiors, that even *within* his books there are no "Pythagorean symbols" and other forms of "secret learning," but rather only entertaining nonsense that will make the readers laugh: "all you'll find is laughter: . . . / Seeing how sorrow eats you, defeats you, / I'd rather write about laughing than crying, / For laughter makes men human . . ." (Rabelais, "To My Readers" 4).²⁴

Rabelais' initial figure of the "comic" as a frivolous exterior surface which conceals something serious (perhaps tragic) invites comparison with the opening of "Merry Mount," whose masked comic revelers are playing the roles of these same satyrs and other grotesque (hybrid) mythic creatures. While we at first assume the serious Puritans, whose Christianity has now replaced Rabelais' Platonism, are the force of negation of the comic maypole dancers, above I suggested that perhaps the duality is finally dissolved here since the inasmuch as the comic smile of the revelers can be eternally frozen into the smile of a death's-head, i.e. as a "Puritanical smile." "Goodman Brown" has arguably a more complete ambiguity or "equation" of the two sides of the duality. But the Rabelaisian erasure of the "false" serious-interior, making the comic all-pervasive (as something that inhabits both inside and the outside), seems to come closer to the reading of "Major Molineux" offered above. For at the end of the story the expansive "comic" seems to have become all-encompassing. No matter how violent and bitter this comic is, its

²⁴ This sudden "deflation" of "serious" expectations is a classic explanation of the comic effect, that is, of laughter. Kant says in his *Critique of Judgment* that "In everything that is to excite a lively convulsive laugh there must be something absurd (in which the Understanding, therefore, can find no satisfaction). *Laughter is the affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing*" (Kant 1.54: 223; Kant's emphasis). Kierkegaard in *The Concept of Irony, With Continual Reference to Socrates* (1841) (see Hong) basically develops this same idea, though he is closer to Hegel than to Kant.

expansive and duplicitous force has managed to empty out all of that potentially tragic interior—but apparently in a quite different way from that of Rabelais, whose praxis is just to make us laugh—innocently, like the Maypole dancers—in a world where “sorrow eats you, defeats you . . . / For laughter makes men human.” One might argue that the possibility of such a “humanistic” view of the comic is absent in Hawthorne.

Conclusion

The ancient Babylonian epic *Gilgamesh*, whose origins may reach back into the third millennium B.C. and which is considered by far the world’s oldest known extended work of literature, clearly also influenced both the Flood and Tower of Babel stories of the much later *Book of Genesis*, probably written in the 6th century BC during the Hebrews’ Babylonian captivity: “In those days . . . the people multiplied, the world bellowed like a wild bull, and the great god was aroused by the clamour. Enlil . . . said to the gods in council, ‘The uproar of mankind is intolerable and sleep is no longer possible by reason of the babel.’ So the gods agreed to exterminate mankind” (Lawall 41). But how could we interpret this human noise that prevented the gods from sleeping? Was it just the constant everyday “chatter” of mortals—in different languages, or even in one language which would still sound like “babel” from far enough away, even if we assume the gods above understood this language? But perhaps the humans were calling out to the gods above them (clamor originally meant “to call”), or gossiping about the gods (“rumor” originally meant noise) . . . or just laughing at them?

Laughter is simply noise which begins from within our bodies and is exploded out from them like a powerful physical force into the air, where it can expand into something like an all-encompassing background noise. In information theory such background noise can flow between signals or words to separate them and give them sense but also (in its excessiveness) can drown out all the words and meanings. Again we arrive back at the essential connection of the various possible springs of human laughter to the emotional, the violent, the non-rational. In the night-carnival scene of “Major Molineux,” the exteriority of contagious laughter is already implied by the fact that any “contagion” proceeds via the *contingere* or contingency of pure external “touching,” that is, of one object’s touching another, as in the case of microorganisms touching human bodies; in the latter case the germs also enter the body in order to make it “sick,” just as the sound of laughter also “enters us” and “infects us” (we can also say “infectious laughter”) in some sense. But again, in

the case of the contagious scorn-laughter of a comic sacrifice the noisy force of laughter itself seems to remain something largely external to each of the laughers, it merely bounces “off the surface” of each one in its turbulent circulation, it is only the sacrificial victim who is “infected.”

One theory of the comic also sees laughter as a means of “disarming” a “false alarm”: when those we are with begin to be alarmed by a sound, etc. they perceive coming “from outside” yet we know (or think) this is not a serious threat, we may laugh to show we don’t take it seriously, thus reinforcing group harmony. This might also suggest the sense of “counterfeited pomp,” of falseness, hollowness, duplicity in Hawthorne’s three night-carnival stories, the “non-seriousness” of a “false interior” we had (as with Rabelais’ Silenus) initially taken seriously. The ambiguity of the serious-comic or serious/non-serious “difference” is their potential to become inverted and equated in such a way that the non-serious becomes all-pervasive, its surface expanding indefinitely outward like that of a giant balloon or like the explosive and ultimately meaningless force of laughter.

This notion of excessiveness, perhaps of excessive expenditure or waste or garbage, also fits that of the comic falseness, hollowness, duplicity of a pure *exteriority*, a two-facedness where (as with the moon itself) we can never see the other side or face.²⁵ For to suggest that contagious scorn-laughter, as a mighty sea of nonsensical noise rising up into the sky, may be a form of “comic offering” need not mean that there are any gods above to hear it, let alone to understand it (for how can laughter be “understood?”). While it still has its meaning as a human offering, a human act of “giving,” as noise it is already quickly becoming trans-human, moving beyond all human sense. Although we might think the vast emptiness of an infinitely expansive, inanimate, “comic” universe is filled with such a reverberation, for the night-carnival crowd in the streets of Boston there is only the meaning of their ecstatic moment of laughing—and perhaps too that of the merely-human figure of the Man in the Moon from whose surface, the only face of it they could ever see, their laughter is echoed back at them.

²⁵ In the “Laughter” chapter of *Inner Experience* Bataille says: “In laughter, in particular, there is a knowledge given of a common object. . . . This object is always known, but normally from the outside.” (59-60). For Bataille, sacrifice is closely tied to laughter as well as art, eroticism and other forms of human excessiveness, to the move beyond being toward an expansive nothingness. Bataille thus sees laughter as both “the sign of aversion, of horror” and as “a form of castigation, of obloquy,” for it is “the identity between being and non-being, between the living and the death-stricken being . . . our laughter here is absolute . . .” (Preface to *Madame Edwarda* 1-2).

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