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American Fiction and White Male Myths

Henri Petter

A pragmatic definition of myth and two seventeenth-century American examples will lead on to three observations. I shall then discuss fictions of the Early Republic (1780 – 1830), most of them written by women, that made use of the theme of Indian-White relations. This is a report on studies in an area of research pioneered by Roy Harvey Pearce and further investigated by, among others, Richard Slotkin, William J. Scheick, Richard Drinnon, Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., and John Demos. After 1980, vigorous stimulation was provided by women and feminist critics, e.g., Nina Baym, Cathy Davidson, Anne Kolodny, and Jane Tompkins. Nina Baym's spirited contribution to the *New Essays on The Last of the Mohicans* makes it possible for me not to consider the issue of Cooper's relation to the Indian romances by women. (Furthermore, any discussion of Cooper would necessitate some account of a new myth, that of the frontiersman, of Natty Bumppo.)

As will appear, I am rather less confident than Baym and others that these fictions could adopt a clear and effective stance concerning racial (and also gender) issues, chiefly owing to the staying power of clichéd plots and characterization.

1

I consider a myth to be a story, a piece of history, which has come to be widely believed (in). Such a story is shared by some narrators with a community of cooperative listeners and readers. It is most likely to have at its centre a memorable figure or event.

To exemplify: According to this concept, it is immaterial whether the Pocahontas-Smith encounter took place or did not take place as the English adventurer's personalized history renders it. What matters is what generally accepted reading(s) the circumstances of its being told made available. Thus, the Indian girl's bold intervention to save the white captive's life could be seen as a miracle or, in down-to-earth political terms, as a promise of peace.

The New England experience, to offer another example, also quickly produced its mythical accounts, some of them naturally reflecting the interaction between Natives and Whites.

Now, Smith's "history" of the Pocahontas affair is a White myth. There is no balancing contemporary Indian representation of the occurrence, nor is there one of the facts that followed from it: Pocahontas married John Rolfe, became a Christian Rebecca, had one son, and died in 1617.

The New England reports have no Indian counterpart either. But here, we have two accounts emerging side by side, the official view in the chronicles of Bradford, Winthrop and others, and a dissenting perspective, manifest for instance at Merry Mount and in the writings of Thomas Morton. The Separatist and Puritan attitude towards the Indians, we know, was ambivalent. The necessity of establishing amicable relations was obvious, and trading with the Natives a practical course. However, the Indians were clearly different in their cultural ways from the newcomers. And that difference operated as one legitimation of the colonial project, if difference implied a relative inferiority. In dogmatic terms, the Indians *were* inferior because ignorant of the Christian truth.

But then, not all of the English read the Biblical texts in the same way. There were both saints and sinners at Plymouth and Boston, and there were such stubborn subverters of the official creed as Thomas Morton.¹

2

The White myths of Virginia and New England relate to the (as yet not current) notions of the "noble" and the "ignoble" savage. This polemical classification contrasts an uncorrupted being willing to learn from a more advanced civilization and, on the other hand, one unredeemable, adopting only the vices of that civilization. You can get along with the former, but his war-like counterpart is presumably to be pacified only by being destroyed.

If we move on to a time when the term "noble savage" had been assimilated, we meet in Brockden Brown's *Edgar Huntly* (1799) the image of its merciless opposite. The eponymous hero may be too high-strung to be quite reliable, but he appears to speak for his frontier community in viewing the Indians as blood-thirsty creatures that must be exterminated.

¹ Hawthorne's colourful tale "The Maypole of Merry-Mount" (1832) reflects truthfully enough, if not the exact nature of the controversy, then the large gap separating the antagonists.

In other writings, Brown proves liberal-minded enough, in particular on the question of women's rights, in *Alcuin* (1798) and in his representation of Constantia, in *Ormond* (1799). Now, Smith, Bradford, Morton – all of them colonial White myth-makers – had promoted male-centred stories, myths still current when the British colonies became the United States; and while the new Republic was trying to articulate its identity, gender was becoming an arguable issue.

Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) was a celebrated, or notorious, synthesis of ideas that had been circulated for some time, in England since the Restoration. Abigail Adams, in the year of the Declaration of Independence, advised her husband to "remember the ladies" in the country's new laws, for otherwise they might rebel against his "naturally tyrannical" sex (Rodgers 162). Judith Sargent Murray, in 1779, wrote "the first systematic feminist manifesto in American literature," "On the Equality of the Sexes" (Rodgers 188ff).

In 1794, Susanna Haswell Rowson brought out the first American edition of her famous *Charlotte (Temple)*, and in her musical comedy *Slaves in Algiers* she voiced playful statements on women's social role. Having had a male character assert that men "came into the world for no other purpose than to see, admire, love, and protect" women (Kritzer 86), Rowson was on stage herself to speak her epilogue: if ladies did expect "Men to adore, be silent and obey," they were themselves made to care and to soothe, "to pity and forgive," and thereby enabled to "hold in silken chains the lordly tyrant man" (Kritzer 96).²

3

The White male myths of the early English settlements in America were still remembered as the historical experience of Indian-White relations was translated into the discourse opposing the noble and the ignoble savage, at a time, too, when another polarity was acquiring a fresh urgency, that of the sexes. My main focus from here on will be on several fictions written by women in the half-century following American independence. These fictions touch upon the racial issue and may raise the gender issue as well. Both is-

² Kritzer's collection also includes Charlotte Barnes' *The Forest Princess* (1844), one of the several stage-versions of the Pocahontas story and other early Indian-White encounters that were produced after 1800 (beginning with James Nelson Barker's *The Indian Princess*, 1808).

sues are liable to reveal prejudices endowed with a myth-like authority and encouraging notions of a relative superiority and inferiority.³

The roles that Indian figures play in such narratives vary in importance and surface appeal. The twins of the title of Rowson's novel *Reuben and Rachel* (1798) are actors only in its second half, i.e., in the early eighteenth century. Up to that point, Rowson has served up a hectic chronicle beginning with Columbus. Indeed, Reuben and Rachel are descended from Columbus' son and a Peruvian princess, a Rolfe-Pocahontas-like match. The twins are also the grandchildren of a William Dudley who married interracially, the daughter of a friendly Native American chief. And it will be our Reuben's lot to be captured by Indians and then asked to tutor Eumea, a half-blood. Though not part of the syllabus, love is what the girl learns, and suicide the consequence: for Reuben honourably remembers that he is engaged to an English girl and in so doing practises a noteworthy reticence; elsewhere in Rowson's novel White-Indian sexual interaction often involves seduction and rape, as among Columbus' mutinous officers.

Rowson's concoction also mentions Native servants faithful in exile to their masters and to their own country, as well as, by contrast, sternly pitiless Red avengers. But her Indians, like all her cast, are no more than parts in a convention-ridden fictional mechanism. They could not implement a rationale of Native-White relations.

The predetermined gender-specific roles played by the twins are quite as functional. While Rachel, impoverished and unprotected, is exposed to attempted seduction, false friends and slanders, Reuben is resolutely active, seeking to recover the family property.

However, it is also important to note that Rowson's Indians are neither better nor worse than the Whites. Violence is everywhere on display, among the competing colonial and religious powers just as in personal rivalries.

Fictional Indians equally serve plot complications rather than their own self-definition in many another contemporary narrative, from Gilbert Imlay's *The Emigrants* (1793) to Cooper's *Wyandotté* (1843). They come in the predictable varieties, either dangerously bad or admirably good.

For the ignoble savage that, while providing for fictional thrills, stands for the deservedly doomed Indian, we may turn in the 1830s to Bird's *Nick of the Woods* and trace him back to *Edgar Huntly* and to that early instance, *The History of Maria Kittle* (1779, published posthumously in 1793), by Ann Eliza Bleecker. A captivity-narrative in novel-form and reminiscent of

³ "Racial issue" in the present context applies to the Indian question. Implications relevant to the slavery issue in Antebellum America cannot be pursued here.

popular accounts like Mary Rowlandson's, *Maria Kittle* contradicts the notion of woman's instinctive capacity for tolerance and forgiveness, when the heroine curses the merciless savages and is ill-treated by the squaws. (On the other hand, she learns to give up her prejudices against the French of Montreal.)

At the other end of the scale of savagery, the Indian Yamoyden nobly dies trying to save the life of Fitzgerald, the man who never accepted his daughter Nora's marriage to Yamoyden (on whose body she will drop dead). What is unusual in this verse narrative is the match of a Native male with a willing white girl. The lovers seemed more likely to be a white man and an Indian woman, as instanced in *The Christian Indian*. Its hero bends over backwards so as to be fair to everyone: to his beloved Ona, now in love with an Englishman, as well as to this white rival, whom he is pledged to shield from threatened tribal violence.⁴

In two essays of 1814, Washington Irving warmly espoused the Natives' cause.⁵ They had their own standards and code of honour, he wrote, and could hardly have done otherwise than to resist White encroachments. Such was also the opinion of Mary Jemison (1824), who had lived, twice-married, in a Seneca community for seventy years.

4

"Vanishing Indians" like Yamoyden and Ouâbi prove their savage nobility by sacrifice and renunciation, and so does the Native protagonist in Lydia Maria Child's *Hobomok* (1824), a love-story with a happy ending. The Anglican Charles Brown falls in love with, and is loved by, Mary Conant, a Puritan's daughter, in 1629 Salem. Banished from the place, he is reported dead at sea, but returns after three years and marries Mary. This simple story sounds slightly different if we adopt the girl's position: she is the one left

⁴ Another noble brave is Ouâbi, who allows his wife Azakia to leave him for her white lover Celario (in Sarah Wentworth Morton's *Ouâbi* [1790], a verse-tale based upon an anonymous story, "Azakia" [1787]). Ouâbi's sacrifice matches the lovers' previous struggles not to betray him. Rivalling Ouâbi in abnegation is Kiashuta, an Indian who kills himself after having failed to prevent the murder of Jenny McCrea. This murder, a real event, was fictionalized in French by Hilliard d'Auberteuil (1784) and was the subject of John Vanderlyn's well-known painting (1804).

⁵ The essays "Traits of Indian Character" and "Philip of Pokanoket" were included in Irving's *Sketch-Book* (1819-20). They anticipated Natty Bumppo's far more elaborate representation of the Indians in the *Leatherstocking Tales* (1823-1841). In 1836, King Philip was eulogized by William Apess, "a Pequot".

behind. Affected by further losses, she marries a long-time admirer; they have a son and live happily enough, but not ever after.

Let us now place the husband at the centre of a third retelling of the love-story. The Wampanoag Hobomok, having secretly adored Mary all along, welcomes her unhesitatingly when she turns to him for assistance. They marry in proper Indian fashion. But spontaneously, too, Hobomok gives up Mary and their son as soon as Brown is back. Aware that she has never ceased loving the Englishman, he formally divorces her and leaves for the West. It would seem that mutual love and individual abnegation are equally matched here; but what counts is that the white couple wins and the Indian loses.

And there is more to this, for the dispossession of Hobomok sanctioned by love parallels the dispossession of the Natives officially justified by the colonists' sense of superiority. However, Child characterizes the Salem Puritans as willfully blind to the vision of the Gospel. Their community is poisoned by a pervasive distrust: of backsliders, unredeemed Christians and all Indians. (Hence the reminders of the nefarious presence of Thomas Morton, "thoughtless and dissipated," who "had sold them rifles" so that now "they could speak thunder and spit fire as well as the white man" [Hobomok 29].) Mrs. Conant dies depressed by her husband's sombre bigotry, and after her death and other griefs, on top of Brown's exile and supposed death, Mary feels entirely abandoned. She is perhaps rendered more insecure yet by remembering how she once conjured up Hobomok's appearance when (in an innocently superstitious ritual) she was seeking confirmation of Brown's love.

At any rate, in a state of mind held by some to be close to madness – she will in retrospect say, "my reason was obscured" (148) – Mary asks Hobomok to marry her. This shocked some reviewers of Child's novel: a white girl offering herself to a savage! Those critics failed to appreciate several things. Hobomok is "Whiter" than many settlers, more of a Christian and thus truly a noble savage. His renunciation turns him into a redeemer, as Mary sees it: "I only have sinned; and yet all the punishment has fallen upon his head" (147). Moreover, the Hobomok marriage only briefly delays the manifest destiny of an all-white union and an all-white supremacy enforcing the Natives' withdrawal from the East.

Child's show of tolerance for the Puritans' intolerance, on the grounds of their sacrifices and hardships, may seem too complacent.⁶ On the other hand,

⁶ She speaks of "the poor, unlettered Indians" and of their ineffectual resistance as "a wonderful exemplification of the superiority of intellect over mere brutal force" (29).

she also justifies the Natives' savagery as self-defence or retaliation. We should, in addition, consider that when she wrote, the "otherness" of the Indians and of the Puritans no longer seemed a threatening element in New England. (It is important to remember, though, that Child was to protest vigorously against the then current removal policy.)

The plea for tolerance and the rendering of the confusions of a colonial enterprise in *Hobomok* to some extent demythicize Puritans and Indians. Yet as regards the latter Child weakened her case by focussing upon an over-idealized hero – whom Mary yet can accept as a partner only in extremis. *Hobomok* no more credibly represents the Natives than does his personal foe, Corbitant, who, Nina Baym tells us, "stalks around the margins of the novel threatening but never achieving violence" (Peck 70).

5

Violence is achieved in *Hope Leslie* (1827), a novel by Catharine Maria Sedgwick that has much in common with *Hobomok*; but it is a considerably more challenging statement. A love-story with a happy ending, too, it likewise critiques the settlers' internal rivalries and the extremist Puritans' self-righteousness. It also exposes the racial prejudices (or pretexts) governing White policies. Around 1840, Thomas Morton still worries the Boston leaders, though a madman and in gaol; but there is one newly arrived who calls him his "old friend and patron" (198).⁷

Sedgwick was more explicit than Child in stressing the need for a fair-minded assessment of both the Indians and the English. She tried, for one, to account in general terms for the harsh effects of the Puritans' belief in the justice of their project and Christian mission, and at the same time eloquently to represent the Native impatience with an obviously precarious co-existence with the Whites. Sedgwick therefore lets the Pequod girl Magawisca confront her White companion Everell Fletcher with the Indian view of the recent massacre of her tribe (1636), a view of course quite different from the settlers' reports. (This tale of Magawisca's significantly immediately precedes the narrative of the murderous Indian attack on the Fletcher home.)

⁷ This is Sir Philip Gardiner, who poses as a respectable Puritan; he is an unfortunately transparent villain, the requisite mischief-maker and seducer of innocence rather than a character who could give body to ideological conflict.

In addition Sedgwick, in a novel twice as long as *Hobomok*, differentiates more closely than Child between prejudices at large and the considered opinions of individuals. Governor Winthrop, perhaps surprisingly, thus stands for an attempt at balancing theocratic authority and tolerating some personal deviations from the Boston laws. This attitude profits Hope Leslie above all, the eponymous heroine.

The trial of Magawisca (who is the true heroine) sharply opposes John Eliot's enlightened view of racial identity to the fundamentalist refusal to consider the Indians as equals. On the Native side, Mononotto, the father of Magawisca and surviving Pequod chief, exemplifies the dilemma of those who have experienced the benefits of the White presence but, as well, the ruthless deprivation and accompanying violence of the settlers' advance. To Magawisca, his rekindled resistance is beside the point: Neither party should claim superiority; but equality, she holds, necessitates separation. And so the Native heroine, too, relinquishes with her companions their eastern lands to vanish into some indefinite West.

The orphaned Hope Leslie has for fathers a guardian, Everell Fletcher's father (who had loved her mother) and the patriarchal establishment of Boston. No wonder that, for all her adventurous waywardness, she is not quite free from the prevailing prepossessions. In the matter of interracial unions, she finds that the ideal of tolerance cannot stand the test of a personal experience. Her younger sister Faith was kidnapped when a child and married Magawisca's brother. When they meet again, Hope is appalled at seeing Faith turned into a docile squaw, inarticulate in English and indifferent if not hostile to civilized white dress and jewelry.

Hope, a lively and resourceful growth of English society, contrasts appealingly with the dreary Puritans, but she cannot invalidate the prejudices of her colonial environment.⁸ Neither can Everell, who has had eyes only for Hope ever since they met, soon after Magawisca (who loves him) had, Pocahontas-like, saved his life. He and Hope have learnt to respect the Pequod heroine, as an exceptional individual, though, and not as exemplifying Native qualities commanding respect. They are a conventional couple of fictional lovers, the girl slow to recognize her feelings for Everell, and both quick to misread words and situations, to feel jealous or to despair, until they are rather perfunctorily joined as the novel closes.

⁸ She wishes that Magawisca, with "a mind so disposed to religious impressions and affections, might enjoy the brighter light of Christian revelation – a revelation so much higher, nobler, and fuller, than that which proceeds from the voice of nature ..." (*Hope Leslie* 332).

To touch upon another aspect: Both the titular heroine and the more remarkable Native protagonist of *Hope Leslie* are women capable of unorthodox commitments, and as such they personify a possible female self-determination in confidently male-centred societies. But neither is more than an isolated and apparently ephemeral champion of women's rights. Even before moving westwards, Magawisca remains the Other, subject to a code alien to the White cast and White readers. As for Hope, she is trapped in genteel expectations, a favourite with the men who have a say in her affairs as well as with an audience appreciative of one more sprightly and inventive than so many of the average heroines of romance.

6

"Our" myths, then lingered in diluted form in the women's fiction here presented. Writers still wrote stories giving shape to polarities which had arisen two centuries earlier. Child and Sedgwick did remind their readers that things had changed in New England, but they failed to consider and to express why and how those tensions had lost their explosiveness (a matter of attrition rather than higher wisdom).⁹

But then, could the average fiction seriously challenge narrative patterns embodying White male myths, when readers expected the familiar rather than the new and uncommon, in other words: the same old story all over again?

And yet, if in conclusion we look ahead, things were about to change. Along with the old story, another was beginning to be told. In advance of the realism of late nineteenth-century novelists, the non-fictional prose of controversial writings and debates started contributing to the shaping of new readers. And some of this prose was written by women like Child and Sedgwick, capable of responding to the current moral or ideological issues by developing innovative representational strategies.

⁹ My discussion of *Hobomok* and *Hope Leslie* does not do justice to the novels, since its focus on racial and gender issues blocks out other features. Baym's essay in Peck's volume offers a suggestive complementation.

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