

Additional Articles

Killing New England's Golden Calf:

William Bradford's Use of Moses as a Political Model

in His Description of the Merrymount Crisis

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Abstract: In 1628, a band of Calvinist zealots emerged from Plymouth Plantation to obliterate the neighboring English settlement at Merrymount. The raid pitted William Bradford—governor of the Plymouth Separatists—against the libertine Thomas Morton in a conflict that would shape New England's soul. This paper examines the themes and vocabulary utilized by Bradford in his justification -- written years later-- for the violent encounter. I argue that Bradford's explanation of the event is composed in a way that proves he utilized Exodus 32 (wherein the Hebraic idolaters are slain) as a biblical endorsement for dispersing the New English bacchanalians."

Keywords: William Bradford, Thomas Morton, Plymouth, Merrymount, Exodus 32

In 1628 New England-- that untamed and unexplored frontier of the infantile British Empire-- William Bradford, governor of Plymouth Plantation, had a problem. Bradford and his band of religious separatists had left the Old World for the American wilderness in order to create a God-centric society that strictly obeyed the tenets of Calvinism. In the

governor's vision for life on the new continent, gone would be the gaiety of Christmas celebrations and the frivolous pomp of the Anglican Church. Even the image of the cross, an integral aspect for the practice of Christianity across the world, barked too blasphemously for these separatists in their drive towards religious purity. And yet, despite his efforts, a maypole—a symbol of Britain's worst religious tendencies—stood tall in the middle of Merrymount Plantation, erected by a man named Thomas Morton in what was supposed to be God's new seat on Earth. Scribbled at the pole's apex was perhaps New England's first poem written in English, a piece inviting "lasses in beaver coats" to join the settlers for trade, inebriation, and fornication.¹ Scandalous reports reached governor Bradford of young English men and Native women dancing and drinking about the pole, "like so many fairies-- or furies rather... [in a] beastly [practice] of... mad Bacchanalians."² For a man of such strict principles as Bradford, the revelry at Merrymount was simply unacceptable. In his magnum opus text, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, Bradford concludes thusly about Morton and his consorts: "there was no way but to take him by force."³

As he describes in *Of Plymouth Plantation*, William Bradford sent his bellicose military commander Miles Standish to bring sword and musket down upon Morton's colony. A tense standoff between the Bradfordian purists and Mortonian revelers ended

¹ Thomas Morton. *New English Canaan*. Edited by John Dempsey. (Stoneham, MA: J. Dempsey, 2000), 137-138

² William Bradford. *Of Plymouth Plantation*. Edited by Harold Paget. Mineola (New York: Dover Publications, 2006), 129.

³ *Ibid*, 131.

only when both sides realized the latter were either too drunk or hung-over to even lift up their muskets, let alone mount a serious defense. With ease, the religious militia marched into Merrymount, dispersed the nauseated and headache-y revelers, and deported their ringleader Thomas Morton back to England. The only bloodshed of the battle occurred when, according to Bradford, one of the drunken defenders accidentally pricked his nose upon the point of a sword.⁴ John Endicott, a fellow separatist and leading New English figure, took an axe to Morton's maypole and destroyed the only remnants of the libertine society that had briefly prospered on the Massachusetts coast.

This was a radical move: Morton and his men were English citizens just like Bradford and operated in the New World under a patent approved by the Crown. In Morton's account, given in a 1637 text called *New English Canaan*, Bradford and his men are portrayed as little more than overzealous thugs wantonly breaking the law, attacking Anglicans in the convenient obscurity of the American continent. The question, then, is this: from where did Bradford derive justification to order his militaristic march on Merrymount? What possibly gave him the gumption to attack fellow English citizens who had never before threatened him with violence? Bradford justifies the attack with various reasons in his text, all of which I ultimately find unsatisfactory. I argue that the implicit justification behind razing Merrymount goes unstated in *Of Plymouth Plantation*. It is my

⁴ Ibid, 131.

belief that Bradford thought he was acting correctly with his order to attack Thomas Morton because he believed biblical precedent mandated he kill this Golden Calf that stood before him in 17th-Century New England.

When composing *Of Plymouth Plantation* in the years following the confrontation, Bradford utilized Moses as a political model and Exodus 32 (wherein the Hebraic idolaters are massacred by the Levites) as political justification for violently seizing and dispersing the Merrymount revelers. Pursuant of my argument I intend to use this paper as my own personal courtroom, acting the role of a lawyer in this case that is approaching its 400th anniversary. I will consult both the testimonies of Bradford and Morton, as well as excerpts from the exact translation of the Bible available in 17th-century Plymouth in my attempt to persuade you, the jury, that William Bradford carefully constructed his relation of the Merrymount crisis with Exodus 32 in mind in order to provide a biblical justification for his actions.⁵ With this methodology established, I now turn to my first piece of evidence.

I. Exhibit A: The Merrymount Crisis According to William Bradford's Testimony

Exhibit "A" comes from *Of Plymouth Plantation*, Bradford's reflections on the first twenty-five years of New English colonization. Within these pages the governor justifies his move against Merrymount with a multitude of explanations, and chronicles his personal disdain for Thomas Morton. From his first introduction in Bradford's text, Morton is negatively portrayed as a social failure, a man "little respected amongst [the other

⁵ The 1560 Geneva Bible

colonists] and even slighted by the servants.”⁶ With this first sentence, then, Morton is already a problematic figure. The libertine colonist was, after all, a highly educated elite; Morton studied in London in his youth and was a member of the same legalistic aristocracy that produced the Massachusetts governor, John Winthrop. Despite his upbringing, however, he is depicted by Bradford as a man unable to live up to his "natural place" in society.

For the English mind in the early 17th century, a divinely inspired class-hierarchy provided the foundation for ordered society. One should refer to the preamble of perhaps the best-known example of American Puritan philosophy, Winthrop's *Model of Christian Charity*, for an example.⁷ Thomas Morton's inability to govern his social inferiors, to even garner the respect of servants, struck Bradford as a sign that the mad reveler did not fit with the innate hierarchy of man. Furthermore, it seems that Morton preferred the company of the lower class to that of his supposed equals. Shortly before the maypole confrontation, Morton convinced the commoners to kick out Merrymount's interim governor Lieutenant Fitcher, who was forced to flee back to England. Morton's suspension of the accepted European order and its replacement by a New World egalitarianism presented a major thorn for the separatist's vision of structured life on the American

⁶ Bradford. *Of Plymouth Plantation*. 128

⁷ "God almighty in His most holy and wise providence, hath so disposed of the condition of mankind, as in all times some must be rich, some poor, some high and eminent in power and dignity; others mean and in submission" (Winthrop, 1).

continent, and was likewise Bradford's initial justification for the 1628 suppression of the Merrymounters in *Of Plymouth Plantation*.

With Morton in charge, the plantation at Merrymount quickly started to create woes for Plymouth's economy. William Bradford singled out a particular aspect of Merrymountian trade: Morton's willingness to sell muskets to the surrounding Native tribes. The super weapon of the era, muskets were off-limits as items of trade in Plymouth. Morton, however, with his high-opinion of Native Americans, felt no qualms trading away arms for wampum—shell beads—and profitable beaver pelts. Bradford describes the situation thusly:

Oh the horror of this villainy! How many Dutch and English have lately been killed by the Indians, thus furnished; and no remedy is provided—Nay, the evil has increased. The blood of their brothers has been sold for profit.⁸

The profit was indeed great. The Native American tribes, unidentified by Bradford but perhaps the Pokanokets or Pequots, were willing to buy muskets "at any price."⁹ Immense wealth flowed into Merrymount as powder, bullets, and guns left in Native hands.

Of Plymouth Plantation contains one final explicitly identified argument meant to justify Bradford, Standish, and Endicott in their sacking of Merrymount. The language employed by Bradford when describing the religious frivolities that took place around the maypole underscored his conviction that the Merrymounters lived in abject sin. Whereas leisure in Plymouth was highly regulated, that of Merrymount was anything but. According

⁸ Bradford. *Of Plymouth Plantation*. 130.

⁹ *Ibid*, 130.

to Bradford, drunkenness reigned and the people under Morton "fell to utter licentiousness, and led a dissolute and profane life."¹⁰ Perhaps most important in Bradford's testimony was his description of the actions that took place in the shadow of the maypole. Bradford explicitly faulted the colonists for "dancing and frisking" around it, and was horrified by the abundant animalistic sensuality. Bradford associated the revelers with paganism, stating that the scene at Merrymount was "as if they had revived the celebrated feasts of the Roman Goddess Flora, or the beastly practices of the mad Bacchanalians."¹¹ Morton, then, had created a community antithetical to Bradford's conception of proper Christianity. The perceived disregard of a theologically-sound life that Bradford associated with Morton provided the last stated justification for the militia's march on Merrymount.

Bradford's explicit arguments as to why he had to respond to the Merrymount crisis with force-- that Morton endorsed a disorderly egalitarianism, that Merrymount grew rich selling weapons to tribes who were tenuous allies at best, and that the revelers acted atheistically—all certainly ran through the governor's head either when he ordered Standish to battle or when he composed *Of Plymouth Plantation* years later. In no way do I claim the falsity of these stated justifications, merely their simplicity if they are conceived individually. As previously stated, I believe these justifications only truly make sense when understood through Exodus 32 and that Bradford penned his defense in a way meant to

¹⁰ Ibid, 129.

¹¹ Ibid, 129.

mirror Moses's crisis. Further proof for this claim, however, is still required, and so I turn to my next piece of evidence: the testimony of Thomas Morton.

II. Exhibit B: The Merrymount Crisis According to Thomas Morton's Testimony

Thomas Morton's equal parts leisure-loving and vindictive voice sometimes sings and sometimes booms in his 1637 book *New English Canaan*. Within the text Morton lauds the generous humanity of the American Natives, rails against the society upheld by the Plymouth separatists, and provides a counter narrative to Bradford's testimony regarding the Merrymount crisis.¹² Morton lambasts the Plymouth settlers from *New English Canaan's* first chapter. The libertine, back writing on the British mainland, repeatedly decries the overreach of Bradford and Endicott in New England and compares them unfavorably on multiple occasions to the region's native inhabitants. With his forced eviction from Merrymount clearly in mind, Morton promises that through his text, a reader will "easily perceive [that] uncivilized people are more just than the civilized."¹³

While defending the Merrymount celebration in his book, Morton provides two insights into Bradford's psyche that are, I believe, crucial for understanding Plymouth's attack on the Merrymounters surrounding the maypole. The first point alludes again to Merrymount's economy. Whereas Morton does not elaborate on his arms dealing as Bradford does, Morton accuses the separatist of greedily longing after Merrymount's

¹² Morton. *New English Canaan*. 113.

¹³ Morton. *New English Canaan*. 126.

wealth. Indeed, as we know from *Of Plymouth Plantation* and financial records, Morton is correct here; whereas Plymouth's economy by the late 1620s was in decline, Merrymount's was booming. The trade of beaver pelts (and presumably alcohol and muskets) with the natives, as well as easy access to the Atlantic Ocean, pulled Morton into considerable financial wealth by 1628. Morton speculated that a desire to control this kind of lucrative trade drove Bradford to "account of [Morton] as of a great monster."^{14, 15, 16}

In addition to noting the separatists' jealousy of Merrymount's wealth, Morton complains of the slander employed against himself and his community. Here, Morton provides the most important insight for understanding how Bradford comprehended the Merrymount crisis. Whereas Bradford admits in *Of Plymouth Plantation* that "others" called Merrymount "Mount Dagon" in reference to the Philistine pantheon, Morton reveals that this was but one of the allusions heaped upon the Merrymounters by the "precise" separatists. He states that upon seeing the maypole, the separatists "termed it an Idol; they called it the Calf of Horeb, and stood at defiance with the place."^{17, 18} It is precisely this line that garners the necessary key for unlocking the entire mystery. With this single allusion,

¹⁴ See David Walden's "'The Very Hydra of Our Time': Morton's New English Canaan and the Atlantic Trade" for more information on the financial competition between Plymouth and Merrymount.

¹⁵ Plymouth faced financial hardships throughout the 1620s for a multitude of reasons. Adventurers in England lost faith in the colony and pulled their investments, the struggle to survive left little time for trade, and one of the original settlers, Isaac Allerton, pushed the colony to the edge of bankruptcy with his dealings back in the Old World.

¹⁶ Morton. *New English Canaan*. 141.

¹⁷ Bradford. *Of Plymouth Plantation*. 129.

¹⁸ Morton. *New English Canaan*. 129.

Morton brings Exodus 32 into play, a story of extreme relevance and, I believe, the framework that shaped Bradford's initial motivation and later justification.

III. Exhibit C: Exodus 32

Exodus 32 tells the story of the Hebrews' great transgression against God while Moses collects the Commandments on the summit of Mount Sinai. As the difficulty of their trek from bondage in Egypt to the Promised Land become more apparent, the mass of former slaves beseech Aaron to "make us gods to go before us."¹⁹ Aaron, well acquainted with the immense pantheon of Egyptian deities, complies and gathers scraps of gold equally from every wife, son, and daughter amongst the refugees. From the heap he fashions a golden calf, stating "These be thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee out of the land of Egypt."²⁰ As the text continues, the host of ex-slaves worship this Calf of Horeb with burnt offerings and move in mass to "eat and drinke, and [rise] up to playe."²¹

It is at the height of this bacchanalia that Moses descends from the mountain and gazes over his people in horror. The text relates that "assone as he came nere unto the hoste, he sawe the calf and the dancing, so Moses wrath waxed hote, and he cast the [Commandments] out of his hands, and brake them in pieces beneath the mountaine."²² Moses saw the dancing, frisking, and giving way to sensuality before a forbidden idol by his

¹⁹ Exodus 32:1 GNV

²⁰ Exodus 32:3 GNV

²¹ Exodus 32:6 GNV

²² Exodus 32:19 GNV

people as an affront to the God with whom they had established a covenant. Moses immediately goes into action:

26. And Moses stode in the gate of the cap, and said, Who pertaineth to the Lord? Let him come to me. And all the sonnes of Levi gathered them selves unto him. 27. Then he said unto them, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Put everie man his sworde by his side: go to and fro, fro gate to gate, through the hoste, and slay everie man his brother, and everie man his companion, & everie man his neighbour. 28. So the children of Levi did as Moses had commanded: and there fel of the people the same day about thre thousand mē.²³

Here we have a biblical moment where a community's political leader violently suppresses his own people after they have committed a grave religious transgression. Doesn't this all sound a little familiar? I maintain that William Bradford consulted Exodus 32, mapped his own crisis upon the text, and, realizing the similarities, wrote his description of the Merrymount crisis in a way meant to harken back to the biblical model.

IV. Closing Argument

Finally, I have arrived at the end of my evidence and must now move to put these various pieces to academic work. While I have thus far enumerated pertinent texts one at a time, I close by bringing my exhibits alongside one another to demonstrate the copious ways Bradford's presentation of the Merrymount crisis borrows thematically and terminologically from Exodus 32. Three themes from Bradford's testimony are portrayed so similarly to the Exodus account that I am compelled to believe that Plymouth's governor

²³ Exodus 32:26-28 GNV

consulted this exact biblical text either before ordering Standish to arm the militia against Morton or before composing *Of Plymouth Plantation* years later.

First, notice how Bradford condemns Morton for promoting social egalitarianism across class and ethnic boundaries at Merrymount. The libertine's willingness to move the servants against the legitimate rule of Lieutenant Fitcher is presented in *Of Plymouth Plantation* in a way meant to mirror the Hebrews' own suspension of social norms. In the Exodus story the trouble begins when Moses, the highest political power, is absent and the second-in-command is persuaded to sin by the common masses. The Hebraic faux pas of over-equality is accentuated by the uniform gold taxation across the entire community, even from the children, in order to construct the calf.

On the topic of gold, Bradford next borrows from Exodus when he harps upon the prosperous, immoral economy at Merrymount. When he writes of the "villainous" Mortonians selling the blood of their brothers for profit, Bradford alludes to the colony's willingness to do anything, to break any moral boundary, in pursuit of wealth on the American continent.²⁴ Bradford certainly pushes this sin heavily in *Of Plymouth Plantation*, again influenced by the biblical description of the transgressing Hebrews. For, in Exodus 32, regardless of the shape into which it was fashioned, the ex-slaves are worshipping dazzling gold. Rather than praying soberly as in the days of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the

²⁴ Bradford. *Of Plymouth Plantation*. 130.

Hebrews of Exodus shield their eyes from the shimmering metal and agree with Aaron who says of the wealth "these be thy gods, o Israel."²⁵

Finally, Bradford's portrayal of the Merrymount crisis is influenced visually by the sensual description of the calf idolaters. Just as the *Of Plymouth Plantation* author laments the orgiastic sexuality at the base of the maypole, the Bible tells of the total nakedness of the Hebrews congregating around the Calf of Horeb.²⁶ Bradford further takes issue with the Merrymounter's dancing, a point no doubt emphasized in *Of Plymouth Plantation* because it is emphasized in Exodus: "he sawe the calfe and the dancing: so Moses wrath waxed hote."²⁷ In his description of the Merrymounter's sensuality, Bradford lifted the very verb—"dancing"—identified in Exodus as the cause of Moses's justified militarism.

Noticing the intense similarities between his situation and Moses', Bradford followed the Bible's prescription by utilizing Moses as a political model to respond to the New England theological crisis with force. I have argued that *Of Plymouth Plantation*, written years after the events themselves transpired, implicitly identifies Exodus 32 as the author's motivation and is constructed in a way whereby Plymouth's governor is vindicated by biblical precedent. Mosaic political philosophy motivated and justified William Bradford in 1628 when he utilized the Book of Exodus in his quest to kill New England's golden calf. With this, I rest my case.

²⁵ Exodus 32:4 GNV

²⁶ Exodus 32:25 GNV

²⁷ Exodus 32:19 GNV

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