THE AMBIGUITY OF SHREWDNESS IN "MY KINSMAN, MAJOR MOLINEUX"

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Nathaniel Hawthorne's tale of mid-eighteenth century Massachusetts, "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," is woven around an ambiguous use of the term "shrewd." Five sets of oppositions, or tensions, are established in the opening pages, developed throughout the narrative and contrasted in a climactic scene. Robin's shrewdness, if proven beyond reasonable doubt, resolves these tensions in his shout of laughter and brings the story to a successful conclusion. Recent criticism has stressed sub-conscious factors when explaining Robin's laugh. My analysis indicates that his motivation is primarily conscious, that his decision represents a complex historical development. As such the story assumes a new dimension, a biting commentary on a human nature too prone to choose the expedient.[1]

The Colonial reaction against Royal officials and the court party in Massachusetts prior to the American Revolution is the tale's first opposition. A boy like Robin Molineux,[2] coming into so charged a political atmosphere, must ultimately choose between the rival factions. Contrasting the country and the town, a second tension, is politically significant. The story is laid in Boston,[3] cradle of Massachusetts insurgency. Historically, leaders like Sam Adams had to overcome the loyalist sentiment of the back country before plunging the Bay State into a fight for independence.[4] A third opposition, rough clothing compared with fashionable attire, follows from Robin's country origin. His coarse coat, leather breeches, home knit stockings, cudgel and the wallet he carries on his back set him off from the townsmen. The "courteous" innkeeper sees that he is from the uncommitted back country before any words pass between them.

The theme of youth struggling against the world is quite evident in Robin's situation. His parchment three-penny is not enough to buy a meal at the inn. Robin's elder brother is to receive the family farm. The youth is seeking his affluent kinsman, Major Molineux, who has offered to aid one of his impoverished cousin's two sons. Finally, illegal personal force is pitted against socio-legal repression. When Robin grabs the skirt of the old man's coat, he is threatened with imprisonment in the stocks. The innkeeper sardonically reads descriptions of run-away bond servants and the reward for their recapture, before saying, "Better trudge, boy; better trudge." The night watchman frightens Robin's temptress, "the lady of the scarlet petticoat,"

back into her quarters and commands him to go home or face the stocks. Robin's cudgel becomes the recurring symbol for illegal, personal violence, just as the stocks represent social coercion. Robin wants to smash the old man's nose and break the innkeeper's head. He longs to wreak vengeance on the men who laugh at him. Robin considers forcing someone to direct him to the Major by brandishing his cudgel and, later, he tries to intimidate a pedestrian in that fashion. He feels "an instinctive antipathy towards the guardian of midnight order." Growing desperate from fatigue and hunger, Robin thinks of personal retribution when faced with social repression. He is more analytic when confronted with illegal, personal force--perhaps because he embodies it and familiarity has brought a measure of understanding.

The temptress nearly succeeds in luring Robin into her rooms before the appearance of the night watchman. Despite this narrow escape, Robin distrusts her at once. He doubts whether "that sweet voice spoke Gospel truth" and ultimately reads "in her eyes what he did not hear in her words." There is no question that the temptress represents an illegal force after her flight from the watchman. (Later, when law and order break down completely, she ventures into the street with impunity.) Before this encounter, Robin invariably draws the wrong conclusions each time he tries to interpret his experiences. Previous references to his shrewdness, when he mistakes the old man for a country representative and when he infers that his light purse outweighs the name of Major Molineux, seem clearly ironic. Hawthorne tells us that Robin replied "cunningly" to the temptress after she said that the Major was inside her house. Robin says, "But I prithee trouble him to step to the door; I will deliver him a message . . . and then go back to my lodgings at the inn." This reply _is_ cunning. It contains a lie, for Robin has no lodgings; but it gives him a pretext for remaining outside and provides for the contingency that the Major is within. Robin is called "shrewd" when he flees from the temptress, after the watchman disappears. And this action _is_ shrewd, since the "good youth" has already learned that he cannot resist the scarlet woman's gentle persuasion. Robin's conduct at this point is important; it foreshadows his climactic act.

In the middle of the story, between Robin's flight from the temptress and the appearance of the lynching mob, certain tensions are reinforced while others become blurred.[5] Robin's loneliness and isolation from the rest of the world grow more intense before the appearance of the kindly gentleman, an urbane, detached observer who is never directly involved in the story. The contrast between town and rural life is heightened by the comparison of the town church with a country religious observance, as Robin remembers it. The gentleman, however, speaks to Robin "in a tone of real kindness," a conspicuous departure from the townsmen's previous practice. He also holds the skirt of Robin's coat, an act which seemed boorish when Robin detained the old man in that way. Still, the tension between the town and the

country remains. When an uproar is heard in the distance, the gentleman says "You must not expect all the stillness of your native woods here in our streets." Robin predicts that the disturbers of the peace will be set in the stocks, thereby mentioning a symbol twice invoked against him. He seems, however grudgingly, to accept social repression as a necessity. The discrepancy between Robin's clothing and the townsmen's grows weak, partly because the gentleman's clothes are not described. The youth also meets individuals "in outlandish attire" and the man with the twofold complexion "muffled in a cloak." Just before the mob arrives, "Half-dressed men hurried towards the unknown commotion." An examination of the climactic scene and the denouement explains why Hawthorne made several oppositions less rigid.

The mob sweeps by and the cart carrying the Major, "in tar-and-feathery dignity," stops directly in front of Robin. "The double-faced fellow" and the Major, presumably a Royal official, have both stared at him. (These stares are significant because Robin had been able to read the truth in the eyes of his temptress and correct "what he did not hear in her words.") Gripped by a feeling which Hawthorne describes as a "mixture of pity and terror," Robin is compelled to make a crucial decision. He still represents the country vs. the town; youth vs. the world; and, at least symbolically, loyalty to England vs. rebellion. As foreshadowed in the middle of the tale, however, Robin's position is now inverted with respect to the other oppositions. He now represents socio-legal repression opposing the personal violence of the townsmen. He could be a witness at their trial, for example. Also, his clothing is now relatively fashionable compared with that of certain townsmen. Some of the mob are described as "wild figures in the Indian dress, and many fantastic shapes without a model." The innkeeper has an apron over his head, while the old man whose fashionable appearance was contrasted with Robin's crudeness at the beginning of the story, has become a caricature. The old man is:

> . . . wrapped in a wide gown, his gray periwig exchanged for a nightcap, which was thrust back from his forehead, and his silk stockings hanging about his legs. He supported himself on his polished cane in a fit of convulsive merriment, which manifested itself on his solemn old features like a funny inscription on a tombstone.

It is indisputable that Robin's immediate problems are allayed by his laugh, although his motivation is not simple. Previous scholarship has attributed his shout of laughter, "the loudest there," to many factors.[6] Robin has been under a strain and needs an emotional outlet. As he says in the middle of the story, "I have laughed very little since I left home, sir, and should be sorry to lose an opportunity." He laughs because the crowd's laughter is contagious and because the scarlet woman's touch provokes, we may guess, tingling sensations of a pleasant yet unfamiliar nature. But his laugh is also

prompted by shrewdness, expediency, the desire for self-preservation. Robin has seen many of the lynch mob at close range and is related to its victim. He must side with the mob or, at least, seem to applaud its work. Otherwise he might well be thrown into the cart and, perhaps, put to death. (Death is a reality to Robin, as revealed in his thoughts inspired by the graves around the town church.) If the element of conscious shrewdness partially explains Robin's laugh, the tensions are all resolved. Robin accepts the town, the ways of the world, and the spirit of colonial rebellion--with its illegal, personal force and the rough, outlandish clothing of its adherents.[7] He has matured, or retrogressed--depending on the viewpoint--enormously. The critic must reject Mark Van Doren's conception that Robin, at the end of the story, is "much as he had been, except that he knows he has no prospects."[8]

Two important clues suggest that expediency is one stimulus to Robin's climactic laugh. If Robin acts shrewdly when contending with the illegal force of the temptress, it is logical, in terms of his character development, that he will meet the overwhelming physical strength of the mob in the same way. Hawthorne refers back to the temptress when he plants the second clue. When Robin comments on the distant shouting, the gentleman says, "May not a man have several voices, Robin, as well as two complexions?" Then: "'Perhaps a man may; but Heaven forbid that a woman should!' responded the shrewd youth, thinking of the seductive tones of the Major's housekeeper." This exchange is apparently linked to Robin's climactic laugh through similarity of language and metaphor. (One indication is that the gentleman's question and Robin's answer are provoked by shouts, and Hawthorne twice calls Robin's laugh a shout. Another indication concerns the attitude of "Heaven" toward deception through the voice. Immediately after Robin's laugh, Hawthorne depicts the indifference of the "cloud spirits" and the "Man in the Moon." This animism reflects ironically upon an activity divorced from Christian ethics. The Heaven, which is called upon to prohibit two-voiced women, is ambivalent.) In any case, Robin's admission that a man may have two voices is pertinent when discussing the reasons for his laugh. Like the mob's shout, a laugh may be deceptive. Full recognition that the voice may deceive, plus a strong motive for siding with the mob, suggests that Robin laughed, in part, to save himself. The other emotional factors contributed to his successful shout, "the loudest there."

Oversubtle interpretation is an obvious danger here. The youth's request to be shown the way back to the country implies that his future course is not fixed; but it should be noted that he does not protest when the gentleman orders him to remain in town for a few days. Robin goes so far as to call the mob and the onlookers "my other friends." Shrewdness does not connote clairvoyance, sophistication, worldly wisdom, will power or higher spiritual values; it is a quality men share with lower animal forms. Robin's bewilderment, false inferences, gaucheries and irresolution do not prevent him

from acting shrewdly when the situation demands it. Hawthorne apparently provides sufficient clues to clarify the ambiguity surrounding the term. Formulating a final sentence which illuminates the meaning of an entire work is a recognized literary device. The last sentence of the story, in which the gentleman addresses Robin, reads:

> 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.

Earlier, when Robin said that he had a reputation for shrewdness, the kindly gentleman replied, "I doubt not that you deserve it." In context, the gentleman is taking a wait and see position. Now, he has observed Robin in the great crisis of his life. The most satisfactory dramatic reading of the last sentence demands heavy emphasis on the "are." This motivational pattern may be extended legitimately to rural Massachusetts, which finally chose a comparable solution to a dilemma like Robin's. Through him we see the back country join the drive for independence.

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Footnotes:

[1] This dimension supplements, without contradicting, two excellent readings of the tale which stress psychology and ethical allegory. See Hyatt H. Waggoner, Hawthorne: A Critical Study (Cambridge, Mass., 1955), pp. 46-52, and Seymour L. Gross, "Hawthorne's 'My Kinsman, Major Molineux': History as Moral Adventure," Nineteenth Century Fiction, XII (September 1957), 97-109.

[2] This surname is not explicitly supplied by Hawthorne, but we know that Robin's father and Major Molineux "were brothers' children."

[3] Again Hawthorne is not explicit, but internal evidence suggests that Boston is the site.

[4] A literal interpretation of Hawthorne's statement that the adventure took place "not far from a hundred years ago" would place Robin's story about 1730. However, a recent article says that "the setting and actions are clearly of the immediately pre-Revolutionary period." See R. H. Pearce, "Hawthorne and the Sense of the Past: Or, the Immortality of Major Molineux," ELH, XXI (December 1954), 329. For a good account of the schism between Boston and the back country on the issue of loyalty to Great Britain in this period, see John Chester Miller, Sam Adams: Pioneer in Propaganda (Boston, 1936), pp. 35, 42, 45-46, 122-123, 134-135, 137-139, 151, 153, 155, 158-160.

[5] Dividing the story into three parts (beginning, middle and end) seems more satisfactory than accepting Schubert's finding of a structure with two

nearly equal parts. See Leland Schubert, Hawthorne, the Artist (Chapel Hill), 1944, pp. 18, 30-31.

[6] One interpreter believes that, unconsciously, Robin does not want to find the Major, because he represents parental authority and Robin is striving for adulthood. The critic says, "The relief he feels that he can vent his hostility for his kinsman and abandon his search for him is the ultimate source of his 'riotous mirth.' It is fueled by energy which until then was being expended in repression and inner conflict." See Simon O. Lesser, "The Image of the Father," Partisan Review, XXII (Summer 1955), 380. A second explanation attributes Robin's laugh to hysteria. ". . . he is outraged, reconciled to the outrage, and hysterical (irrational in his response) all at the same time." See F. B. Newman, "'My Kinsman, Major Molineaux': [sic] An Interpretation," UKCR, XXI (March 1955), 209. Two other critics stress the contagious laughter of the crowd. Male believes that Robin laughs loudest because he is disillusioned, while Leavis finds that "he is seized with the excitement of the victors . . . and sees their triumph as his own . . . ." See Roy R. Male, Hawthorne's Tragic Vision (Austin, 1957), p. 52, and Q. D. Leavis, "Hawthorne as Poet, Part I," Sewanee Review, LIX (Spring 1951), 204-205. Robin's laughter has been called "involuntary." Mark Van Doren, Nathaniel Hawthorne (New York, 1949), p. 76.

[7] Although not developed, the contrast between the rough clothes worn by country people and the rebels' rough clothing appears when Hawthorne describes the occupants of the inn, which Robin visits in the first part of the tale. Robin sees country people in the darkest corner of the room and an ill-dressed group of men standing beside the door. The leader of this group becomes the leader of the mob.

[8] Van Doren, Hawthorne, p. 76.