
ARTS & LETTERS

*Black Africa's
American Heritage*

"The Impact of the New World on Modern African Literature" by Samuel O. Asein, in *Comparative Literature Studies* (Mar. 1977), University of Illinois Press, Urbana, Ill. 61801.

The fascination of some leading black American writers with their African heritage has long been acknowledged. In poet Langston Hughes' words, "If you want me you must search for me / Beneath the palms of Africa." But scholars tend to overlook the influence of America's black authors on the literature of blacks in Africa, writes Asein, a professor of English at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria.

During the 1930s and '40s, South African writers such as Peter Abrahams (*Dark Testament*, 1942) and Ezekiel Mphahlele (*Man Must Live*, 1947), beset by white supremacy in their own country, discovered both techniques and purpose for their fiction in the pan-Negro consciousness of W. E. B. DuBois, the rage of Richard Wright, and the revolutionary rhetoric of Claude McKay. "The agony [of Wright's "Big Boy Leaves Home"] told me how to use the short story—as a way of dealing with my anger and indignation," Mphahlele wrote in 1947. Mphahlele's early writing had focused on "private concerns." His later works echoed American blacks' interpretation of racial problems by taking a "wide-angle view" of South African society as the determining factor in the lives of his characters.

Today, with many South and West African writers (among them, Keorapetse Kgositsile, Joseph Okpaku, and Mphahlele) emigrating to the United States, America's influence on African literature is entering a new phase: Recent work by these Africans reveals a willingness to experiment with new settings, American fictional characters, and the "overtly combative" tradition of American black radical politics.

*The Making
of a Myth*

"Fictions of Merry Mount" by John P. McWilliams, Jr., in *American Quarterly* (Spring 1977), American Studies Association, 4025 Chestnut St., Philadelphia, Pa. 19174.

On May Day, 1627, Thomas Morton erected an 80-foot maypole and declared a day of festivity. He welcomed "all comers, red or white, to a barrel of beer, a case of spirits . . . and dancing to drums" in celebration of spring and the re-christening of his fur-trading community near what is now Quincy, Massachusetts. Morton dubbed his settlement Ma-re (pronounced "merry") Mount—a "compound title

ARTS & LETTERS

of almost unlimited suggestibility"—perhaps to aggravate his nearest competitors, the Puritans.

Shortly thereafter, Plymouth's William Bradford, disturbed by the "beastly practises of madd Bacchinalians," dispatched Miles Standish to secure Morton's arrest; Morton was charged with selling firearms to the Indians and shipped to England. In a subsequent Puritan expedition, John Endicott felled the infamous maypole.

The passing of Merry Mount has been described by so many American writers that it has become a myth, asserts McWilliams, professor of English at the University of Illinois. All have found in this brief episode a "mirror" of the values and assumptions of their own times. In his 1720 historical account, for example, Cotton Mather attacked Morton venomously, betraying his fear that a new "counterculture" might again threaten the peace.

Farther removed from the event but still in the shadow of the founding fathers, Nathaniel Hawthorne took an ambiguous approach to the Merry Mount conflict before concluding that Morton symbolized the "English past," and the Puritans the "American future." During the 1920s William Carlos Williams decried Puritanism as the source of modern America's troubles and condemned the Puritans for their "repressed sexual envy." During the 1960s, Robert Lowell's drama *The Old Glory* stressed racial hostility between Puritans and Indians.

McWilliams suggests that the "meaning of the conflict" at Merry Mount has always been ripe for reshaping "because its historical facts had been conveniently obscured" from the beginning. Only two eyewitness accounts exist of the episode, Morton's *New English Canaan* and Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation*.

The Artist as Stricken Child

"Michelangelo's Mutilation of the Florence Pietà: A Psychoanalytic Inquiry" by Robert S. Liebert, in *Art Bulletin* (Mar. 1977), 815 Schermerhorn, Columbia University, New York, N.Y. 10027.

Of Michelangelo's many unfinished works, the *Pietà* in Florence is the only one that the sculptor mutilated before abandoning it. He destroyed Christ's left leg and damaged both arms before friends persuaded him to stop. Significantly, says Liebert, the group of figures was intended to adorn Michelangelo's tomb, and the face of Nicodemus resembles Michelangelo's own features. Why did Michelangelo try to wreck this particular creation in such a way? And why did the destruction occur when it did?

Liebert, a Columbia University psychiatrist, rejects several explanations—such as that the marble was flawed or the sculptor a hopeless perfectionist—to focus on Michelangelo's own explanation: He destroyed the *Pietà* because his steward Urbino, his "beloved servant and companion," was nagging him to finish it. At the time (late 1555), Urbino lay dying. The prospect of imminent loss preoccupied Michel-