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## **Hawthorne's Rome – A city of evil, political and religious corruption and violence**

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### **Abstract**

*Hawthorne's Rome is the home of dark and evil catacombs. It is a city haunted by evil spirits from the past that actively shape the romance's plot. Rome's dark gardens, endless staircases, hidden corners and vast catacombs, as well as the malodorous Jewish ghetto, affect Donatello's and Miriam's judgment, almost forcing them to get rid of the Model, Miriam's persecutor.*

*Hawthorne's narrator's shockingly violent, harsh and seemingly anti-Semitic description of the ghetto in Rome is just one among many similarly ruthless, and at times offensive, accounts of the city wherein Hawthorne situates his last completed romance, The Marble Faun.*

*Hawthorne's two-year stay in Rome in 1858-59 sets the scene for his conception of The Marble Faun. In addition to providing Hawthorne with the extensive contact with art and artists that undoubtedly affected the choice of his protagonists (Kenyon, a sculptor; Hilda and Miriam, painters), Italy exposed Hawthorne to Jewish traditions and history, as well as to the life of Jews in the Roman ghetto. Most probably it also aroused his interest in some of the political affairs in which Italian Jews were involved in the 1840s and 50s. This historical background, especially the well-publicized abduction and conversion of a Jewish child, Edgardo Mortara, in 1858 provides important political and cultural background for Hawthorne's portrayal of Miriam in The Marble Faun.*

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There sat the very Jew of Jews; the distilled essence of all the Jews that have been born since Jacob's time; he was Judas Iscariot; he was the Wandering Jew; he was the worst, and at the same time, the truest of his race, and contained within himself, I have no doubt, every old prophet and every old clothesman that ever the tribes produced; and he must have been circumcised as much [as] ten times over. I never beheld anything so ugly and disagreeable, and preposterous, and laughable, as the outline of

his profile; it was so hideously Jewish, and so cruel, and so keen; and he had such an immense beard that you could see no trace of a mouth, until he opened it to speak, or to eat his dinner – and then, you were aware of a cave... (*The English Notebooks* 321)

*The Marble Faun* has been often categorized (and at times scrutinized) as a travel guide. As such, Hawthorne's project was consistent with popular 19th-century ethnographic literature in which the "enlightened" observer condescendingly portrays the "observed barbarian". Such popular literature treated the "observed" neither as individuals, nor as groups of people distinct for their cultural or linguistic divergence (as did the corresponding 17th- or 18th-century travel literature); rather, race-classification became one of the major means to characterize people.<sup>1</sup>

In the context of newly spread and extremely popular racial theories (mentioned in more detail in Chapter II), setting *The Marble Faun* in Rome and intertwining romantic and travelogue genres enabled Hawthorne to achieve several goals. First, by depicting the simpleton Donatello as a primitive faun-like creature, and thus juxtaposing him with the well-civilized New Englander, Kenyon, Hawthorne could explore the concept of the "savage's education", his "moral growth" and "religious growth" from the primordial stage to the developed/Christian one, a theme that certainly preoccupied Hawthorne and was very much in vogue. Second, the Roman setting allowed Hawthorne to employ racial stereotypes while portraying the Jewish Miriam, thus creating a contrast between the Jewish temptress and the Protestant dove-like Hilda. Moreover, as I have already mentioned, such a setting allowed Hawthorne to craft a neat colonialist juxtaposition, although often an ambivalent one, between degraded Italy and prosperous America. Finally, the glorious cultural and artistic past of Italy provided material from which Hawthorne could devise a plot which meticulously embraced his own deliberations about art in general, and the place of the artist in particular – themes that often recur in his three previous romances, but that are much more focal in *The Marble Faun*.

Miriam's figure, however, is not inspired by an Italian Jewish woman, (although one of the speculations about Miriam is that she might have sprung from a South Italian lineage), but on a British Jewish woman. As discussed previously, Miriam's physical portrayal in *The Marble*

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<sup>1</sup> Scientists such as Linnaeus and Cuvier and anthropologists such as E.B. Taylor suggested that people are arranged according to a certain "hierarchy of otherness". Such a hierarchy grouped peoples on a scale – from dark to light, from the primitive to the most developed nations. The grouping started with the savage, proceeded with the Australian, the Tahitian, the Aztec, the Chinese and the Italian, till it reached the acme of the "white" European race (Horseman 60, 71; Taylor 20).

*Faun* markedly reiterates Hawthorne's description of a young Jewish lady he met while dining at the Lord Mayor of London's table in 1856, recorded in his *English Notebooks* on 13 April of the same year. The Lord Mayor of London, Sir David Salomons, (1797-1873), was a leading figure in the 19th-century struggle for Jewish emancipation in the United Kingdom. He was the first Jewish Sheriff of the City of London, Lord Mayor of London, and one of the first two Jewish politicians to serve in the British House of Commons.

Before analysing in detail the Jewish female guest's peculiar depiction, it is important to examine Hawthorne's general view of the "Jewish race", which follows his detailed description of the beautiful "Jewess" and her hideous Jewish male counterpart. After describing in detail the disgusting, ugly Jewish male, Hawthorne summarizes the entry by saying that he "rejoiced exceedingly in this Shylock, this Iscariot; for the sight of him *justified* me in the *repugnance* I have always felt towards *his race*" (EN 321; *italics mine*). This anti-Semitic pronouncement is even more shocking if we take into account that it does not reflect Hawthorne's revulsion against the specific Jew, the Lord Mayor's brother, but, as Hawthorne asserts, his perennially prejudiced feelings "towards his race". It seems that Hawthorne eagerly accepted the Jewish host's invitation, enjoyed himself and was even honoured by the Lord Mayor who asked the writer "to respond to a toast which he [the Lord Mayor] meant to give" (EN 320). Hawthorne's racially biased (as we have seen in the passage from *The English Notebooks* describing the Jews) or probably religiously rooted view of the Jewish people is thus especially ironic since it follows Hawthorne's willingness to participate in the Lord Mayor's dinner.

In the same entry, Hawthorne makes another negative comment about a Jewish figure, this time a woman. While entering the Lord Mayor's house, Hawthorne is welcomed by the hostess, whom he describes as "a short ugly old Jewess", adding cynically that he is not ashamed to "to be bold" in his language, as "she will never hear what I think of her" (EN 320). Hawthorne's racially discriminatory stance towards Jews in general, and towards his hostess and her brother-in-law, is quite surprising. Moreover, his use of centuries-old stereotypical epithets to describe the Lord Mayor's brother, such as "Shylock", "Judas Iscariot", "old clothesman", "The Wandering Jew", "circumcised as much [as] ten times", etc. (EN 320) clashes with Hawthorne's campaign for an open-minded and liberal worldview, intense support of human rights, harsh criticism of the narrow-minded and bigoted Puritan society in *The Scarlet Letter*, and fight against prejudice of any kind in *The House of Seven Gables* and in *The Blithedale Romance*.

Hawthorne's ambivalence toward his Jewish protagonist becomes even more perplexing if we take into account the fact that before being invited to the Lord Mayor's house Hawthorne was unlikely to have had any personal contacts with Jews. No record about any such contacts exists in his English, American or Italian *Notebooks*, and the possibility of Hawthorne's associating with Jews in America is also doubtful, as there was no Jewish community in the first half of the 19th-century in either Salem or Concord, where Hawthorne lived prior to his journey to England. Also, the relatively favourable treatment of Jews in England during Hawthorne's five-year sojourn in Liverpool should not have inspired anti-Jewish sentiments. Why, then, does Hawthorne exhibit such an anti-Semitic attitude towards his Jewish hosts? Some other important questions are: why is the Mayor's brother's wife granted a much more flattering treatment than her husband? Is it because of her beauty or because of the writer's infatuation with her? Finally, if Hawthorne feels such distaste towards the Jewish race, why did he choose Miriam, a Jewish woman, as one of *The Marble Faun's* chief protagonists?

Although we may only speculate about the source of such a dichotomy in the depiction of the male and female Jews, there are some cultural and socio-economic considerations (discussed in detail in Chapter III) at play which might partially elucidate Hawthorne's relative favouritism towards the Jewish woman. Moreover, we should not neglect the obvious erotic ambivalence in his descriptions. Real and fictional sensual and extravagant Jewish women, the "belle Juives," captivated the imagination of several generations of artists and writers following their appearance on the literary and theatrical stage at the beginning of the 19th century. Hawthorne is no exception; while he himself marries a dove-like Sophia who closely resembles the fictional Hilda, he seems to be passionately fascinated with the sensuous "dark" Jewish woman.<sup>2</sup>

It should be noted that although Miriam is the only Jewish woman in Hawthorne's fiction, male Jews appeared in two of Hawthorne's earlier short stories, "A Virtuoso's Collection" (1842) and "Ethan Brand" (1850), in both portraying the stereotypical Wandering Jew. The male Jewish characters in the two short tales are also indisputably associated with the Devil.

In "A Virtuoso's Collection", the guide in the museum shows the visitor various artefacts and likenesses of objects and people of past eras, mythology, literature and history. The visitor, presented as the counter-character to the Jew, immediately realizes that the guide is the Wandering Jew. Earlier, the guide offers the guest the elixir of life, but the latter refuses to

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Mitchell rightly suggests that "Hilda resembles the Sophia of the love letters that Hawthorne transformed into the Dove of his redemption" (243) more explicitly than either Phoebe in *The House of Seven Gables* or Priscilla in *The Blithedale Romance*.

drink it, saying that for him: “Death is the very friend, whom, in his due season, even the happiest mortal should be willing to embrace” (489). The visitor, unlike the Jew, is portrayed as the embodiment of reason and morality, and though the Jew ceaselessly tempts him to take just a few drops of the elixir, the visitor remains aware of the consequences of such an act. The Jew, on the other hand, wants only “what I can see and touch, and understand, and I ask no more” (496). Hawthorne’s narrator employs here the centuries-old Christian stereotypical discourse in which the Jew is portrayed as materialistic, vulgar and spiritually dead; the narrator, in fact, concludes that the Wandering Jew’s “soul is dead within him” (496).

Hawthorne provides the reader with an even less favourable account of the Wandering Jew in another short story, “Ethan Brand”. In this tale the Jew again represents the death of the soul. Ethan Brand, the protagonist of the story, seeks the “Unpardonable Sin” and finds it finally in his own heart. The Jew of Nuremberg, who comes to town as a peddler, or a “showman”, exhibiting scenes of the European past, is evidently an old acquaintance of Brand’s. The pictures of scenes and events from the past are seen through the diorama which the Jewish peddler carries on his back. Together with the old Jew’s commentaries this narrative suggests that the man is a stereotypical Wandering Jew – a universal witness to the past. As he explains the meanings of the pictures, his hand appears in the diorama as a “gigantic, brown, hairy hand - which might have been mistaken for the Hand of Destiny” (95). When Ethan Brand looks into the diorama, he withdraws in shock at what he sees there, “I remember you now,” he mutters. The Jew replies “with a dark smile... ‘I find it to be heavy matter in my show-box, this Unpardonable Sin’” (96). “The Faustian Ethan Brand must have his Mephistopheles,” says Louis Harap, “and here Hawthorne introduces the Wandering Jew as the satanic agent” (112). Hawthorne uses the deep-rooted Christian conviction that Jews are closely associated with the Unpardonable Sin: Jews are Christ-killers. It becomes clear then that the Mephistophelean Jew has directed Ethan Brand towards that deforming pride of intellect that destroys “the heart” – the human feelings – at the price of his soul. Elissa Greenwald suggests that the Wandering Jew in “Ethan Brand” is “foreshadowing Miriam’s role in *The Marble Faun* as a central character and as an artist” (131-2). Miriam paints the murderous Jewish women, while the Wandering Jew frightens his audience by showing “a series of the most outrageous scratchings and daubings” (95).

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