

New Troy, New Canaan:

Thomas Morton and 17th-Century Transatlantic Antiracist Classical Rhetoric

Thomas Morton (c.1580-1647) was an English lawyer, entrepreneur, and settler who arrived in New England in 1625 and proceeded to become a contentious and remarkable figure in the early colonial history of the area. In his *New English Canaan* (1637), Morton offers his account of the geography, anthropology, and recent history of the Massachusetts Colony. Throughout the text, Morton uses classical allusion, mythology, and conceptions of race to promote the humanity of the Algonquin people.

At the time that he wrote his account, Morton was in exile in England while facing accusations of paganism and charged with selling firearms to the Indigenous people. The text starts with a description of the location and climate of New England heavily laced with quotations from Latin poets. He notes that it falls at the same latitude as the Mediterranean. With the contemporary environmental theory of race, this environmental determinism argument implies that Algonquin peoples are of the same quality as figures from the classical world. He also erroneously theorizes that Algonquin words have Latin or Greek cognates (e.g., “-pan” in “Mattapan” represents the god Pan). From this he concludes that the natives there were either descendants of Brutus and his friends fleeing Italy, or some Trojans who wandered further than Aeneas.

By alluding to classical connections, he implies that the Indigenous people of New England are not at all “savages”, although he paradoxically uses that term to describe them, and that their dehumanization is unjust. This paper will present the text, examine its classical rhetoric, and critique the ways in which it engages in harmful arguments while attempting to

support a group of people. The goal of this presentation is to present the audience with an example of an understudied, reception-laden text that will inspire others to dive deeper into the complex historic role of classical rhetoric in antiracist activism. I also hope to show that many of the prejudices of early English settlers in New England were a choice, an act with agency and not the only contemporary way of thinking about the indigenous people they encountered.

Bibliography

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