

# Ó Mai! This is Mai: A Masque of a Sort

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## Prologue

*Matavai, Tabiti, 21 June 1767*

From the hill with one tree, the 'Floating Island' looked small and distant. Here at least they felt safe from the smoke and thunder of what was being thrown at them from the 'Canoe without Outriggers'—they did not yet have a name for the Strangers' ship. Mai's wounds of yesterday were still open and sore, despite the salves his master, Tupaia the Priest, applied.

Yesterday had been all death and mystery. They could not count those killed by the Strangers—as many as a flock of birds, a shoal of fish', they said. The Strangers' violence, they knew, was not requited by tokens of human sacrifice—plantain branches—thrown into the sea.

Yesterday they watched as the Strangers danced in front of a pole with a red wrap flying from it. They heard speech as unintelligible as their own priest's chants. Only Tupaia seemed to know what it meant. During the night he had taken the red wrap down, planning to take it to his temple, Taputapuatea, 'Sacrifices from Abroad'. This morning Mai and Tupaia's people marched in procession towards the beach and the canoes to do so. But the Strangers started their thunder from afar again and killed more processionists. Then they destroyed all 80 canoes on

the beach. The procession, now in disarray, stampeded to the top of Tahaara and its lone tree. Perhaps they would be too far away for the Strangers to kill them. No sooner were they there than there was a cloud of smoke from the 'Floating Island', followed by thunder. A round black object splattered at their feet. Then another bounced through their ranks.

That day Mai knew his world had changed, and the Strangers had changed it. Already he, along with Tupaia, was a refugee to Tahiti. They had both been driven from the sacred island of Raiatea by the Pora Poran god-chief, Puri [Puni]. Now Mai knew that there was a power in their islands greater even than Puri's.

## Scene I

*Fare, Huahine, 7 September 1773*

Mai is a dead man walking, a human sacrifice not yet sacrificed, in the pool of victims to be offered to the god-chief when the occasion arises. Mai had cursed Puri, the Pora Pora god-chief who had taken Mai's and Tupaia's land. Tupaia was gone these six years. 'Toote' (James Cook) had taken him. Now Toote is back again with the news that Tupaia is dead.

Mai is a refugee now at Huahine. Toote's assistant vessel, the *Adventure*, visits Fare, its principal harbour.

Tobias Furneaux is the *Adventure's* Captain. It was Furneaux who had raised the English flag and danced in front of it with his soldiers at Matavai in the days when Mai was wounded. Mai can tell him how Tupaia had taken that flag and sewn it into the symbol of sovereignty in all Tahiti, a red feather *maro*, or loin-wrap.

Mai asks Furneaux if he can be taken to see King George, as Tupaia, too, had wanted. Furneaux agrees, even if Toote is not so enthusiastic. In token of his new status, Mai gets a new name. He appears on the *Adventure's* rolls as 'Tetuby Homey Huahine, Society Islands, 22, AB'.

The rest of the able seamen, whose AB rating has

been more vigorously earned, are inclined to give 'Tetuby Homey Huahine AB' a hard time. The only possessions Mai has are some *tapa* cloth and his wooden headrest (*iri*), a symbol, in his eyes at least, of his social status. Mai sleeps with his headrest on the floor of the Captain's cabin.

In the *Adventure's* small Great Cabin, Mai makes friends with James Burney, son of Charles Burney, the music master, brother of Fanny Burney, the writer. James tries to exchange languages, English/Tahitian, and to have him unlearn some of the naughtier language that the other ABs try to teach him.



G.T. Boulton, *View of the House or Shed, Called Tupaow [i.e. Tupaupau] in Otaheite, under Which the Dead Are Deposited ...* 1789  
sepia wash drawing; 27.8 x 36.5 cm

The *Adventure's* visit to New Zealand at Totara-nui in Queen Charlotte's Sound is a disaster. Ten of her crew are killed and, the English believe, eaten by the Maori. Mai is no great help in the crisis. The Maori cry out for Tupaia. Tupaia is famous all over New Zealand from Tooté's visit there in the *Endeavour*. They even have a mourning chant for him, which James Burney transcribes. 'Ahee matte away Tupaya!' (*Aki mate aue Tupaia!*—Departed, dead, alas Tupaia!).

The Maori are a little snobbish about Mai's social status and middle-ranked nobility. They ignore him. In return, Mai is a little more than snobbish about Maori savagery. As a potential human sacrifice,

Mai knows from earlier that he would be 'eaten' ritually and with propriety. He has no time for Maori eating victims without etiquette.

## Scene II

*Scarborough, Yorkshire, August 1775*

Each day, each week, each month has been a triumph. The English in their mansions, in their salons and at their tables have looked at him differently compared to the English in their Great Cabins or on the beaches of his island. Now their admiring, rather than domineering, gaze gives him confidence. Mai has a



John Webber (1752–1793), *View in Queen Charlotte's Sound, New Zealand*  
London: J. Webber, 1 October 1790, hand-coloured soft-ground etching; plate mark 32.6 x 45cm

keen, sharp eye, too. He catches the functions of gestures and the manners in a look.

Mai is a great mimic, a cultural thespian. Good enough, anyway, to stop the superior sort of laughter that arises when he is not quite getting things right. He is mirror to his English hosts' civilities—courtesy, simplicity, carefulness. If he cannot read words on a page, he can read meanings in postures, status in things, gender and social relations in the spacings of a group.

The English are not greatly interested in Mai's own native skills. But away from London and in the company of 'Opano' (Joseph Banks), he is happy to 'do' 'native' things, like cooking. Here is Opano writing about it: 'Omai dressed three dishes for dinner yesterday [in a dug-out earthen oven] and so well was his cooking liked that he is desired to cook again today not out of curiosity but for the real desire of eating meat so dress'd: he succeeds most prodigiously: so much natural politeness I never saw in any man: wherever he goes he makes friends and has not I believe as yet a foe.'

For Mai, the happiest trip of all is one made with Opano, in the summer of 1775, to a place near Tooté's birthplace, Whitby, and Scarborough. They make their way north of York in Opano's huge broad-wheeled wagon, which carries all Opano's storage for his botanical research. Mai's companions are two boys. One is George Colman, son of the Reverend Sir John Colman, an antiquarian with whom Mai has dined ten times at the Royal Philosopher's Club. Mai calls all Georges, including King George III, 'Tosh'. The English are amused by it. The trip north is slow. Nothing botanically unusual is passed—not even a thistle, someone complains—without someone jumping out of the wagon to collect it. Mai participates in an archaeological dig, makes a disastrous attempt to mount

a horse by way of the tail, goes grouse shooting. Well, bird-shooting. Mai's definition of grouse includes 'dunghill cocks, barn-door geese and ducks in the pond'.

At Scarborough Mai has his greatest English triumph. He goes swimming. Swimming, for the English, at this time at least, is a calculated quiet immersion. Devotees keep frogs in basins by their ponds so that they can imitate the frogs' peaceful leg and arm movements. The noise, splash, exuberance and out-of-water arm movements of the South Sea Islander are a matter of wonder and apprehension.

There are many horse-drawn bathing wagons on the beach at Scarborough. Mai ignores them and enters the sea freely as if it is his own. He invites young Tosh to ride his back and for nearly an hour takes him far out into the North Sea. Tosh's description of this experience is a gentle, sweet memory:

I was upon the point of making my maiden plunge, from a bathing-machine, into the briny flood, when Omai appear'd wading before me. The coast of Scarborough having an eastern aspect, the early sunbeams shot their lustre upon the tawny Priest, and heighten'd the cutaneous gloss which he had recently received from the water; he look'd like a specimen of pale moving mahogany, highly varnish'd; not only varnish', indeed, but curiously veneer'd; for, from his hips, and the small of his back, downwards, he was tallow'd with striped arches, broad and black, by means of a sharp shell, or a fish's tooth, imbued with an indelible die, according to the fashion of his country. He hail'd me with the salutation of Tosh, which was his pronunciation of George, and utter'd certain sounds approaching the articulation of—'back'—'swim'—'I'—'me'—'carry'—'you', and he constantly cried 'Tosh not fraid'; but Tosh *was* fraid—and plaguily frighten'd indeed, that's the plain truth.

### Scene III

*Fare, Huahine, 13 October 1777*

There he is: Mai in full body armour on the front of his double-canoe, *Royal George*. The *Royal Tosh*, as he no doubt would have called it, is aflutter with flags and pennants, some a little tangled because the canoe nearly overturned in the passage through the reef into Fare Harbour on Huahine. Captain Mai is in charge. Tooté in the *Resolution* follows him to anchor.

Tooté is on a fatal last voyage that will end with his death in Hawai'i. He has not had a happy voyage. Whatever sufferance and patience he earlier had with crews and Islanders has long gone across ten years of Pacific

voyaging. He was savagely violent beyond prudence (and morality, his officers thought) at every island they visited—flogging, taking hostages, cutting off ears, killing, destroying property. Having to deliver Mai home safely to his island hasn't lessened his tensions. But he is doing so by personal instructions of King Tosh himself.

Mai's two-year sojourn in 'Bretannee' has come to an end with the possibility that Tooté, on his third voyage to discover a Northwest Passage, can take him home. Mai was not sad to go. We don't know whether his sharp ear had caught the mockery in the laughter that his antics were beginning to arouse. We do know that he had a mission—to return home and, with his wealth and knowledge, to drive off the Pora Poran invaders of



Samuel Middiman, engraver (1750–1831), after John Webber (1752–1793), *An Offering before Capt. Cook in the Sandwich Islands* London: 1784, hand-coloured engraving; plate mark 26 x 41 cm

his land. He still has to learn what every returning migrant learns: how much a stranger his beach crossing has made him.

Mai's wealth is extravagant and absurd. The *Resolution* is stuffed with it—drums, a hand-organ, a jack-in-the-box, an 'electrifying machine', regiments of lead soldiers, dolls, globes and maps, dishes, swords, muskets, pistols, ball-gowns, livery, flags. And a white stallion. And a monkey (who would come to the unlikely end of falling out of a coconut tree).

However, Mai also has an eye for the relative value of his wealth. He traded much of it in Tonga for red feathers. That gave him a bankroll of red feathers for political trading in Tahiti. He spent the last leg of his voyage home sewing a red feather *maro*. Maybe his delusions of grandeur were more deluded than we know. Maybe he was sewing a new symbol of sovereignty in Tahiti, just as his master Tupaia had done.

King Tosh promised Mai that he would have a Bretannee house built for him on his island; a two-storey house, Mai thought. Tooté had the ship's carpenters build the house—from engravings of it, it looks to have an attic at least!—on the foreshore at Fare.

Mai gives Tooté a lesson in the proprieties of landing in a foreign place. Tupaia had given Tooté the same lesson at his first landing at Raiatea. Gifts have to be made to the priests and sacrifices to the gods. Proper gestures have to be made in sacred places. Tooté has these lessons in mind as he sails on from Huahine to Hawai'i, after leaving Mai to his fate. In Hawai'i, Tooté is prepared to enter into the spirit of native sacredness in ways he has never done before. It is an irony that scandalised his own men, missionaries and some later historians.

## Epilogue

*Huahine, May 1780*

Mai returns home. He finds that other Tahitians have also been abroad and returned. The Spaniards had taken several to South America. The gloss on his own travels is tarnished. Mai also finds that his stories of King Tosh's greatness only offend the sense of greatness of those at home. He finds that nothing he brings from Bretannee serves to raise him in social status in any way. He finds that politics and power are a home-grown thing.

Mai's passion to get back his own lands remains. For two years he fights insignificant battles on Huahine. He has his muskets and, of course, his white stallion. He is dead before he is 30. Not in battle. A fever that swells and closes his throat kills him. *Hotate* the Tahitians call it.

Then it was, that his old enemies stole all that he had brought back. His Bretannee house survived a bit better. A native house was built over and around it. Perhaps, Mai would have been pleased that something of his had thus been raised to museum status.

## Postscript

There is one relic of Mai still to be seen. It is the headrest that he took to England. It was acquired for the Tahiti Museum in recent years from the Furneaux family, for £80 000.