

Hester's Ungathered Hair: Hawthorne and 19th century Women's Fiction

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Abstract

Hester Prynne's defiant adultery, the outrageously artistic and sensuous embroidery of her scarlet letter A, and the scandal of her daughter's illegitimacy dramatize tensions between authority and female autonomy in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. The book focuses on issues such as female art, female creativity and female sexuality and presents them as transgressions of proper gender conduct, given the socially sanctioned definitions of what constituted natural womanhood in Victorian America. Hester's artistic individuality and illicit sexuality pose a challenge; therefore her "lawlessness" has to be reappropriated by convention and her radical potential neutralized. Hence the domestication of Hester's passion and the eventual reduction of her multiple roles (as artist, lover, mother) to one alone (mother).

Περίληψη

Η μοιχεία της Hester Prynne, το προκλητικά αισθησιακό κέντημα του άλικοι γράμματος Α, καθώς και η νόθος καταγωγή της κόρης της Pearl, φέρουν στην επιφάνεια την αντίδραση της εξουσίας ενάντια στην γυναικεία αυτονομία στο μυθιστόρημα του Nathaniel Hawthorne *The Scarlet Letter*. Η γυναικεία τέχνη και δημιουργία σαν παραβιάσεις/παραβάσεις θεσμοθετημένης φυλικής συμπεριφοράς τοποθετούνται μέσα στο πλαίσιο κοινωνικά αποδεκτών προσδιορισμών σχετικά με το τι αποτελεί γυναικεία φύση στην Βικτωριανή Αμερική. Επι πλέον η ανεξάρτητη συμπεριφορά της Hester και η παράνομη σεξουαλικότητα της δημιουργούν μια πρόκληση: η "παρανομία" της πρέπει να περιορισθεί από την παράδοση και το ριζοσπαστικό δυναμικό αυτής της "παρανομίας" να εξουδετερωθεί. Η "εξημέρωση" του πάθους της Hester και ο συνακόλουθος περιορισμός των πολλαπλών ρόλων της (καλλιτεχνής, ερωμένη, μητέρα) σε μόνο ένα (μητέρα) εστιάζει την προσοχή του αναγνώστη στα ιδεολογήματα που επιβάλλουν την σιωπή στην επιθυμία η οποία προσπαθεί να εκφραστεί χωριστά ή ενάντια από την πατριαρχία.

With mythic figures like the enigmatic Hester Prynne of Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, or the Indian princess Pocahontas whose marriage to a white man implied renunciation of her Indian self, the female character in the American cultural imagination takes on meanings specific to the culture's gender and ethnic dichotomies. In laying down her head over John Smith's, and thus preventing her father's people from slaying him, Pocahontas remains popular for her brave giving of life in a moment of defiance. Her subsequent marriage to John Rolfe, and her conversion to Christianity, became further metaphors of how this sensual Indian, as she has been described in accounts by John Smith,¹ affirmed conventions of female self-sacrifice and identification which made her tale the fairy tale it remains.

Quite differently, Hester Prynne haunts the American cultural text for the fact that her sexuality, unlike Pocahontas', is initially defiant of the terms of convention which seek to contain it. Adulteress and mother, Hester embodies contradictions which make her both an object of fascination and a threat to the Puritan social order which marks her. Hester's scarlet letter, public evidence of her punishment, reflects the stern circumstances of her social fall, but also, more importantly, it symbolizes the incongruity between her crime and her person. Gathered in front of the prison house, the community is expected to "behold her dimmed and obscured by a disastrous cloud," but are startled to perceive "how her beauty shone out ...," to see how extravagantly she had decorated the letter pinned to her bosom: "it express[ed]...the desperate recklessness of her mood, by its wild and picturesque peculiarity" (Hawthorne 61).

Hester's creativity, seen in the lavish embroidery of her scarlet letter and in the fact of her child Pearl, is from the first "intimately associated with her illicit sexuality" (Lang 169) and its expression. Despite the public shame Hester forever symbolizes, this creativity becomes one of the major problems the novel must resolve. Unlike Pocahontas, whose marriage to John Rolfe serves to contain her sexual and ethnic autonomy, Hester's singularity has not, at the novel's outset, been entirely subsumed by her letter A.

Contemporary criticism, viewing Hester from a feminist perspective, has focused on the containment of Hester's individuality as the source of the novel's conflicted tensions between authority and female autonomy. Earlier critics of the 1950s, such as Darrel Abel,² were dismissive of Hester's marginal position, finding in her flawed passion a metaphor

for flawed womanhood. As Nina Baym has shown in a study of plot in *The Scarlet Letter*, given the “strong sense of appropriate male/female roles” within the social ideology of New Criticism scholarship, Hester was considered an inadequate heroine for the fact that in the course of the novel she “defeminizes herself, and ceases to be a woman in some conventional sociobiological definition of the term” (Baym 52). In the recent scholarship of critics such as Nina Baym, Amy S. Lang, or David Leverenz, the feminist argument redefines Hester’s marginal position in the community as the drama of her integrity.

Amy S. Lang eloquently articulates the connection between Hester’s artistry, all expressions of her singularity, and the issue of lawlessness.³ The illicit character of Hester’s art, her embroidery, is its association with her crime. The needlework Hester offers the community is “gorgeously beautiful...a mode of expressing and therefore soothing the passion of her life.” In spite of this, “like all other joys she rejected it as a sin” (Hawthorne 87). Her sewing, for all its popularity, is “never called in aide to embroider the white veil which was to cover the pure blushes of a bride.” In defining the terms of art and the role requirements of 19th-century America, Lang shows how gender definitions of the time restricted female artistic expression. Female art involved “a transgression into masculine territory,” making it “as criminal as adultery” (Lang 171).

Pearl too, the living embodiment of Hester’s letter, is characterized in language which echoes that of Hester’s embroidery. She is a being “whose elements were perhaps beautiful and brilliant but all in disorder, or with an order peculiar to themselves” (Hawthorne 93). The key word here is “disorder,” and the question it begs is what, given Pearl’s illegitimacy, will order her and ultimately Hester’s place in society, what process of conversion will legitimate both mother and daughter and neutralize the danger of their singularity.

While Hawthorne located Hester’s story in Puritan New England, he was nevertheless writing it when Victorian ideas of womanhood were prevalent and being debated. Caroll Smith-Rosenberg notes that 19th-century Victorian thinking found in female sexuality a metaphor for social order or disorder. It therefore comes as little surprise that the bourgeois discourse of the period formulated what was known as the “Cult of True Womanhood” which prescribed behavior

“overlaid with piety and purity and crowned with subservience” (Smith-Rosenberg 13).

As criticism of female expression which trespassed or transcended an exclusively domestic sphere became increasingly outspoken, the woman writers themselves were trying to find ways to empower that exclusivity. In *Woman's Fiction* Nina Baym demonstrates that though women writers of 19th-century America worked within the fixed social expectations of gender conduct, they nevertheless tried to transform the social limitation of their roles into strengths. These “sentimental novelists” believed that through the virtues of their “domestic calling,” they could positively influence the cruder world of male commercial interests. It is interesting to note that though these women were extremely careful not to overstep their conventional roles, they nevertheless came under prolonged attack by their male counterparts of whom Hawthorne was one of the more outspoken.

In a letter to his wife Sofia, Hawthorne strikingly links female authorship or creative self expression to sexuality. “It does seem to me,” he writes, “to deprive women of all delicacy; it has pretty much the same effect as it would to walk abroad through the streets physically stark naked.” (letter of March 18, 1856)⁴ Though Hawthorne found “indecent” in the efforts of female authorship, he is said, despite himself, to have enjoyed several of their works. The depth of complexity concerning Hawthorne’s feelings toward the issue of women writers is perhaps most apparent in his complicated reaction to Margaret Fuller’s life and work. An admirer of Fuller’s literary efforts and exceptional intellect, Hawthorne seemed only too ready, on a visit to Italy after her death, to listen to slanderous accounts of her life by the Italian sculptor, Joseph Mozier. Bound for America with her newborn son and Italian husband, Fuller drowned in a shipwreck that left no survivors. Fuller’s abrupt, tragic end left several questions about her personal life unanswered. She had married, in her late thirties, a man some seven years younger than herself who was also a foreigner. For Hawthorne these facts became an all-encompassing metaphor, an indication of Fuller’s “fall”. When Mozier alluded to accounts of apparent difficulties Fuller had had writing, Hawthorne readily connected Fuller’s problems to the idea that she had given in to the baser instincts of the body, that there was a direct link between her art and marriage, “seeing the apparent fatuity of the latter as an index of the fatuity of the former”.⁵

Hawthorne's reduction of Fuller's creative accomplishments to the "fatuity" of her personal/sexual life disturbingly recalls the rhetoric used in the Anne Hutchinson trial where a similar connection is made between Hutchinson's intellectual strength and her "unnatural" womanhood. Quoting Thomas Welde's preface to John Winthrop's *A Short Story of the Rise, Reign and Ruine of the Antinomians*, Lang makes clear how the issue of the woman's "braine" was connected to her womb. Rumored to have had several stillbirths and miscarriages, and to have apparently influenced those of a female follower, Hutchinson was held directly responsible by the authorities: "The hand of God was clear both in the extreme malformation of these births and in their striking coincidence with the controversy." Lang quotes, "'Out of their wombs, as...out of their braines,'" explains Welde, came "'such monstrous births as no Chronicle...hardly ever recorded the like' (AC, 214)" (Lang 56).

If Hawthorne, among others, found "in some unspecific way" immorality in the work of the domestic novelists, they themselves were at pains to avoid the subject of female sexuality altogether. It was not, as Baym demonstrates, that they were prudish by nature, or even conservative in their opinions of sexuality, but that they "felt themselves greatly disadvantaged in the realm of sexual matters" (Baym 162). Heroines such as Susan Warner's Ellen Montgomery in *The Wide, Wide World* are rewarded not because they break out of their conventional roles but because they come to terms with them. So the question remains, why, given the fact that the domestic novelists affirmed the conventional female virtues, did male writers such as Hawthorne feel such a need to criticize them? Considering the fact that the main readers of sentimental fiction were women, Cathy Davidson in *Revolution and the Word* points out that critics of the time blamed "female depravity" on novel reading,⁶ which negatively influenced women in the arts of romance and seduction. Hawthorne finds problematic the very fact that these novels have even been *written*, believing these women have demonstrated "[a] false liberality, which mistake[s] the strong division lines of Nature for arbitrary distinctions".⁷

Hawthorne's "strong division lines" speak of different currents in the culture which have often been relegated to binary, gendered opposites. In discussing the antinomian crisis, Cotton Mather formulated it as "a confrontation between the forces of reason and those of enthusiasm" (Lang 112). Ralph Waldo Emerson believed man alone was strong

by “will” and woman “strong by sentiment”. From the early Puritans there existed an articulated need to find in woman all that was “not reason,” despite examples which proved the exception to the rule. Emerson dismisses the Hutchinson case as that of the “ ‘female fanatic [who]...possessed an unquiet, bold and turbulent spirit, and was full of enthusiasm’ ” (Lang 113). This famous, or infamous definition of “enthusiasm” comes up again in Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter* where it is again associated with gendered emotion. We are told that “in the education of her child [Hester’s] enthusiasm of thought had something to wreck itself upon” (Hawthorne 159). Given the history of the term and its use here, the implication seems to be that the usually reasoned work of thinking has lost its rationality, has, with the verb “wreck”, become irrational. One recalls Hawthorne’s reaction to Margaret Fuller and his implied sense that she, a woman, finally had no business setting herself up as an example of intellectual brilliance when she proved herself unable to overcome the body: “a very woman, after all...[who] fell as the weakest of her sisters might” (Wallace 214).

Informing Hawthorne’s ambiguity of feeling toward a woman like Fuller, or Hutchinson before her, is a sense that any self expression apart from that sanctioned by the conventions of womanhood, is deeply suspect. It is significant that the domestic novelists were extremely sensitive to this issue. Harriette Beecher Stowe insisted that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was “penned by God”, and shared with others the belief that she was “not autonomous in [her] authorship”. Affirming the convention that woman is medium, but never actor, these writers were careful not to betray their heroines by “seeming to choose art over womanhood” (Lang 194).

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’ “The Angel Over the Right Shoulder” (1852) is a prime example of the conflict between art and womanhood and the effort to affirm conventional standards of female behavior. Mrs. James is a writer, or at least a woman who feels the need to write. She is torn between her household and maternal duties and her own desire to create. It is finally her husband who suggests she keep herself on a schedule of two hours of writing a day. In particularly painful scenes of continued interruption, Mrs. James never manages to have those two uninterrupted hours. In a dream “imagining herself...a character in a divine text, Mrs. James gives over to God the powers of authorship ...” and, as Judith Fetterly analyses the problem, “gives up the effort to become author of her own life” (Fetterly 206). She is

desperate, in the dream, to find an answer to her own frustrations so she might better guide her daughter. Seeing a stranger she feels will provide her with that answer, she runs to catch up with her only to find, when the stranger turns, that it is herself she is running after, and wakes in tears. The story does not end here, where Mrs. James' sense of entrapment expresses the inadequacy of a society that "had no place for the woman artist" (Fetterly 203). Instead we get a rather hollow sounding note of affirmation when Mrs. James announces that the "good angel" in her dream helped her see that "no great deeds" were in fact required of her, only

faithfulness and patience to the end of the race which was set for her it was important to meet and perform faithfully all the little household cares and duties on which the comfort and virtue of her family depended. (Fetterly 215)

Mrs. James' initial effort to "author her life," was Margaret Fuller's lifelong project, something which Hawthorne and Emerson, both contemporaries and admirers, ultimately dismissed as a failed project. Both Emerson and Hawthorne, confronting the issue of female autonomy, found in established definitions of proper gender conduct characteristics they saw as natural to woman. At the Woman's Rights Convention in Boston, in 1855, Ralph Waldo Emerson addressed the problem of woman's position in society. For Emerson, the answers to society's ills lay in Nature, where one found a "radical correspondence" between all things, none of which existed independently. Self-reliance meant obedience to one's innermost nature which in turn yielded social membership rather than antinomianism. If "Each part [of nature] contains and completes the other," Emerson "enlarges the masculine to include the feminine which comes then to exist only as an ideal version of what men might be" (Lang 135). The woman who is not finally located within this structure is simply not, Emerson insists, woman.

We return then to the problem of Hester's sin and the emotional singularity it expresses. The problem, symbolized at the novel's outset by the antithetical potential of the rosebush and prison house is one of containment. Side by side, the rose expresses Hester's passionate, creative nature and the prison house, the grim darkness of institutional law, a law which has not managed to contain or even subdue Hester's individualism. Though the townspeople see in

Hester's charitable services the signs of a reformed nature, Hester in fact, ostracized by convention, has found freedom: "her intellect and heart had their home, as it were, in desert places, where she roamed as freely as the wild Indian in his woods" (Hawthorne 190). The rhetoric used to describe Hester's inner state reveals how far from the conventional order she has strayed. Even her needlework, a service she offers the community, is described as having "in its nature a rich, voluptuous, *Oriental* characteristic" (Hawthorne 87, emphasis added). With the use of adjectives such as "Indian," and "Oriental", we are made to understand that Hester's individualism has led to further singularity rather than social membership.

For Emerson a major concern seems to have been the stripping away of any real female autonomy, finding "inevitable and natural" the fact that her "purity" is a product of her "sequestration from affairs" (Lang 137). She can never, in any true sense, act. In his discussion of women's rights at the 1855 Boston convention, Emerson essentially refuses her the most vital tool for self affirmation, the word. "Her wisdom", he notes, "does not reveal itself in the reasoned statement or the logical discourse of men but in the 'inconsiderate word'" (Lang 138). That is, "woman...does not know that she knows—" and this "not knowing that she knows" silences her within the given patriarchal structure.

Little Eva and Uncle Tom, the Mrs. Shelbys, Birds, and Ellen Montgomerys of domestic fiction, perhaps "do not know that they know," but their authors obviously do "know" something, as the fact of their written books prove. While writers like Stowe endorse Emerson's notion that female grace lies in its distance from the public domain, they nevertheless sidestep the issue of its total containment within the patriarchal home structure by substituting man with God. When Emerson speaks of the necessity of woman's "deference", he speaks of humility to all the larger symbols of power, which for woman begins with man. When Stowe speaks of "piety" to a higher law, she is speaking directly to God and God's Heaven.⁸ Woman's uniqueness and strength of virtue is a product, for Stowe, of God's work rather than man's. The French linguist Julia Kristeva writes:

[monotheism] requires that women be excluded from the single true and legislating principle, namely the Word, as well as from the (always paternal) element that gives

procreation a social value: they are excluded from knowledge and power. (Kristeva 143)

The fact that these novels serve as a locus for demonstrating the destructive consequences of patriarchal power, without necessarily questioning its basis, partly explains Hawthorne's unease; though these women writers create heroines whose "sequestration" from public affairs assures their femininity, they are not mute.

If woman, in Kristeva's terminology, has "no access to the word", she represents a corporal knowledge of desire, "a *desire* that pervades the community...that is at once stirring and threatening ..." that "appears as the pure desire to seize [the word]" (Kristeva 142). Given the distinction within monotheism between desire which is overwhelmed by woman's procreative, maternal function and that which remains apart from and therefore threatening to social law, Kristeva's insight underscores Lang's connection of Hester's art to lawlessness. Art in any gender or form remains potentially subversive to established social order, but "loosened in *fecund* woman, this danger is multiplied" (Lang 167, emphasis added). In other words, desire which expresses itself apart from, or despite patriarchy, endangers it. We are back to the rose and prison house and their potential antithesis. Hester's seven long years of solitude and social shame have in fact strengthened her individualism rather than convinced her of society's justice.

In "the dim wood" apart from society and its conventions, Hester and Dimmesdale finally manage to speak to each other for the first time in seven years: "it was like the first encounter in the world beyond the grave, of two spirits who had been intimately connected in their former life ..." (Hawthorne 181). The terrain is, at first, untrodden, what seems to offer the open possibility for self-expression. Here Dimmesdale bemoans his seven years of public deception and tells Hester of his envy of her open punishment, and here, away from the community's restraints, Hester finds it in herself to unburden the identity of Roger Chillingworth, her estranged husband. Initially appalled by the knowledge that Hester has withheld Chillingworth's identity, Dimmesdale eventually forgives her, saying they "are not the worst sinners in the world". Speaking of Chillingworth's destructive company, Dimmesdale exclaims:

there is one worse than even the polluted priest! That old man's revenge has been blacker than my sin. He has violated in cold blood the sanctity of a human heart. Thou and I, Hester, never did so! (Hawthorne 186)

The fragile equilibrium of Hester and Dimmesdale's brief peace is quickly broken when Dimmesdale recalls himself to the fact that Chillingworth is aware of Hester's aim to reveal his identity. Suddenly concerned about whether or not Chillingworth will keep their secret, Dimmesdale allows his fear of public exposure to destroy the forest sanctuary. At this crucial point, Hester makes her impassioned plea. The years of solitary thought and suffering become articulated in her vision of a future where they might both walk away from the community which has so long tortured them, and create a new life.

As if to underline the heresy in Hester's eloquent speech, the briefly "free atmosphere" of the forest setting becomes suddenly "an unredeemed, unchristianized, lawless region" (Hawthorne 191). Though the decision to escape creates a chimera of "strange enjoyment", the rhetoric of convention has intruded on what was, till now, seemingly neutral ground. The language which judges the forest's freedom as lawless coincides with Dimmesdale's sudden anxiety in regard to the repercussions of public opinion, and underlies his inability to separate himself from the community's standard of judgement.

When the decision is made that they will indeed leave together, Hester, in contrast to Dimmesdale, rids herself of all the community has imposed on her. Taking off the scarlet letter, she exclaims, "I undo it all, and make it as if it had never been!" Overwhelmed by the relief she feels, Hester "took off the formal cap that confined her hair; and down it fell upon her shoulders, dark and rich with at once a shadow and light in its abundance ..." She is restored to full womanhood: "There played around her mouth and beamed out of her eyes a radiant and tender smile that seemed gushing from the very heart of womanhood" (Hawthorne 192).

With Hester's selfhood having seemingly regained its lost wholeness, Dimmesdale comes the closest he ever does to sharing in what appears to be an exchange of equal partnership. For once the magic circle which has enveloped Hester in her sorrow and isolated her includes them both in a semblance of harmony:

Her sex, her youth, and the whole richness of her beauty, came back from what men call the irrevocable past, and clustered themselves, with her maiden hope and a happiness before unknown, within the magic circle of this hour. (Hawthorne 192)

At this point, when it seems Hester and Dimmesdale may indeed transcend their sin, Hester calls Pearl, product and symbol of their crime, to complete “the magic circle”. Here, where Hester might succeed in breaking through the constraints of convention and redefine her womanhood in terms uncontained by the Puritan order, Hawthorne invokes motherhood, that most traditional of woman’s roles.

When Hester calls Pearl to join her and Dimmesdale, Pearl is suddenly reluctant to cross the brook where she is playing, and breaks into a screaming fit which terrifies Dimmesdale. Dimmesdale, so much in need of stability, pleads with Hester to pacify Pearl. Appealing to Hester in her maternal capacity, he places the entire burden of responsibility for Pearl on her. So Hawthorne calls Hester’s development to a halt by invoking a role which subsumes it. Pearl is only finally appeased when Hester replaces the scarlet letter on her bosom; in the act of pinning it back onto her dress the spell of the letter robs her once again of her womanliness:

[Hester] gathered up the heavy tresses of her hair and confined them beneath her cap. As if there were a withering spell in the sad letter, her beauty, the warmth and richness of her womanhood departed, like fading sunshine; and a gray shadow seemed to fall across her. (Hawthorne 200)

Now Pearl obediently comes to her mother’s side. Hester’s maternal role becomes then a way of evading the issue of autonomy. More specifically, maternity finally contains her sexuality. Hester’s ungathered hair, symbol of her uncontained, singular womanhood, is again contained beneath the austere Puritan cap which hides it.

From this point on in the novel, Hester’s role becomes increasingly symbolic. As Hawthorne would have it, her choice of motherhood, since she does in fact chose to replace the letter on her bosom to pacify Pearl, is not only correct but natural. Hester’s gesture, an example for Hawthorne of “feminine feeling”,⁹ recalls Pocahontas’ expression of self sacrifice in her attempt to save John Smith’s life; both women

act out of their feminine heart, which for Hester has, paradigmatically, won over strains of rebellion for the domestic, communal whole. Given the gender definitions of Victorian America, Hawthorne, with Hester, joins himself to prevalent ideas regarding the division of the sexes. As Lang notes, "the danger of a Hester Prynne ... can be contained by returning to the gender conventions of domestic fiction because that fiction empowers Emerson's sequestered lady, not Hawthorne's artist" (Lang 195).

Though Hawthorne uses age old definitions of maternity to solve the issue of Hester's individuality, that paradigm only constitutes part of Hester's person; she continues to hope, despite Pearl and despite Dimmesdale's ultimate rejection of her plan for escape, for some otherworldly reunion with her lover. Great pains seem to be taken to convince us that Hester ultimately finds fulfilment in her maternal role, the only role left her at the novel's end. But the solution of maternity begs a closer look into the question of intimacy between Hester and Dimmesdale.

The adulterous act which, as far as we are told, was one of mutual responsibility, becomes oddly centralized in Hester alone. Wariness or outright fear of female sexuality was, as has been noted, prevalent in Victorian America and colors the rhetoric of androcentric writers and critics through to the present. Leslie Fiedler, whose *Love and Death in the American Novel* remains a classic and who, like Hawthorne, expresses sympathy for Hester's plight, nevertheless puts the burden of the blame for the adultery on her. Fiedler's language is revealing; "Hester," he says, "a polluted and still terrible goddess, must finally accept loneliness and self-restraint...Passion has opened up for her no new possibilities, only closed off older ones" (Fiedler 236). Chillingworth who, in Dimmesdale's own words, has committed the greater sin of violating the "sanctity of a human heart", is the one who, according to Fiedler, leads Dimmesdale towards "confession and penance". The "eternal feminine", continues Fiedler, "does not draw us toward grace [but] ... promises only madness and damnation" (Fiedler).

There is not much made here of Dimmesdale's weakness except to allude to the fact that it is apparently aggravated by Hester's strength, insinuating that even Dimmesdale's character failings are somehow part of Hester's influence. We are told that Dimmesdale's "fall from potency" is a result of his "return to the maternal embrace before death" (Fiedler 237). What is overlooked is Dimmesdale's demand

that Hester assume her maternal role, and his and Hawthorne's requirement that it overwhelm her autonomous self. Fiedler completely dismisses Hester's achieved strengths of endurance and patient understanding, what Baym locates in the heroines of 19th-century woman's fiction, the ability to live "under drastically restricted conditions" (Baym 25). Rather, Fiedler joins Hawthorne in relegating to woman what threatens the social order when her person, unappropriated by the patriarchal text, remains Other.

Maternity then neutralizes Hester's radical potential, and her increasingly symbolic status sets her up as an example to womanhood. Her creative, sexual potential, absorbed by her more conventional calling, is no longer the heart of impassioned feeling, but the domesticated heart of sentimental fiction, placed as it is at the center of patriarchy and contained by it.

Dimmesdale, having confessed his sin, turns his eyes to heaven, and Hester makes a last plea: Shall we not meet again? Shall we not spend our immortal life together? Surely, surely we have ransomed one another with all this woe! Thou lookest far into eternity with those bright, dying eyes! Then tell me what thou seest? (Hawthorne 239)

What Dimmesdale sees is the possibility of his redemption according to the Biblical doctrine of inner trial and conversion. "God knows", he answers, "He hath proved his mercy ... By bringing me hither to die this death of triumphant ignominy ... Praised be His name! His Will be done! Farewell!" (Hawthorne 259). Dimmesdale dies, not with Hester's name on his lips, but God's. As David Leverenz has noted, Dimmesdale has set "his bright, dying eyes" on "higher spiritual possibilities for himself", revealing "an ascendant selfishness", as he, like Chillingworth, who first abandoned Hester, maintains his "intellectual and spiritual self-control by rejecting intimacy" (Leverenz 206).

Having revealed his true self, Dimmesdale, according to Emerson's doctrine of correspondence, affirms his legitimate place in both the public's esteem and God's heaven. Hester, on the other hand, remains divided, or at least compromised, her passion for Dimmesdale sacrificed, as Leverenz puts it, "to his purity" (Leverenz 206). Nina Baym has argued that Hester manages at least partial self-fulfilment at the novel's end when she returns to Salem and takes up her letter A;

Baym explains Hester's choice as a sincere concern "with society and human relations" (Baym 58). Yet while Hester's concern with human relations redeems her in the eyes of the community, particularly her role as counselor to women troubled by the "wounded, wasted, wronged, misplaced or erring" (Hawthorne 245) passions of the heart, it is a role which only partially constitutes the demonstrated multiplicity of Hester's self.

That part of Hester which insists on her singularly "unrepentant desire" (Leverenz 200) for Dimmesdale, that part which speaks for a passion that defies conventional gender conduct, is what must be contained in order for Hester to become "lovable" to the Puritan community. Commenting on Baym's insight, David Leverenz notes that Hester's "partial self-fulfilment", is true "only in terms that the town can recognize." Thus the subsequent silencing of Hester's "tenacious desire and fierce mind" (Leverenz 206) calls attention to those spaces in the culture which lack the rhetoric for the expression of her multiplicity.

To return to Hester's A and its symbolism of convention's language of social order, it becomes important to focus on what remains unnamed, that Hester's A represents the absence of discourse as much as it represents society's mark of adultery. Hester's "I know not!" to Dimmesdale's "Is this not better ... than what we dreamed of in the forest?" (Hawthorne 236) at his scene of public confession, leaves open the question of what Hester does know. The absence in the community's cultural text of a language for the expression of Hester's passion is quickly filled by convention's discourse on motherhood. Once Dimmesdale dies the issue of Hester's maternity is no longer complicated, or compromised, by her adulterous passion, the singularity of which is finally domesticated. Yet there remains in Michel Foucault's words, "a cleavage" in "the social appropriation of [Hester's] discourse"¹⁰ a cleavage which speaks for the fact that Hester's "transformation back to lovability" (Leverenz 209) costs her her voice.

The *privacy* of Hester's vision, as it is expressed in the forest scene, is what is its danger. As Lang notes, Hester's assertion "that the adultery is consecrated supplants divine providence with private revelation" (Lang 184). As a "living sermon against sin," Hester's articulation of her own vision of relationship presumes, like Hutchinson before her, to overstep the authority of communal order. Thus like Hutchinson,

whose inner voice challenged the established clerical order, her speech becomes heresy.

Hester's "motherly survival" is therefore mute. That part of herself which led her to deviance, to overstep her role in crime, is buried with Dimmesdale. What exists of all her multiple selves is Hester as mother whose errant daughter has finally been acknowledged by the dying minister, further legitimizing Hester's position as the child's mother. No longer the single parent of a child whose secret parentage underlines Hester's crime, Hester, once Pearl is publicly embraced by her father, becomes more purely a symbol, and her discourse more completely appropriated by the Biblical paradigm which demands in the mother's position the singular function of procreation and familial nurture.

Significantly, it is at a scene of grief that Pearl's wild nature is tamed. Once Dimmesdale has publicly confessed his part in the adultery, he calls Pearl over to his side, saying "dear little Pearl, wilt thou kiss me now?" Pearl dutifully kisses her father's lips, and

[at this] great scene of grief in which the wild infant bore a part and as her tears fell upon her father's cheek, they were the pledge that she would grow up amid human joy and sorrow, nor forever do battle with the world, but be a woman in it. (Hawthorne 238)

I find it informative to refer here to Kristeva's insights on what she calls the "semiotics of non-speech". In her discussion on the influence of the Virgin on Western conceptions of womanhood, she considers the elements of milk and tears:

milk and tears are metaphors of non-speech, of a 'semiotics' that linguistic communication does not account for. The Mother and her attributes, evoking sorrowful humanity become representatives of a 'return to the repressed' in monotheism. They re-establish what is nonverbal and show up as the receptacle of a signifying position what is closer to so-called primary sources. (Kristeva 173)

Read from Kristeva's point of view, Pearl's tears affirm her initiation into woman's role as it insures the repression of her singularity (and sexuality) within the dominant male order. Hester's A, embodied in Pearl, reaffirms the absence of a

discourse which does not belong to the symbolic order, or interrogates the spaces in that order.

It is interesting to think of Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* being written at a time when the issue of womanhood was under such passionate scrutiny. While the influence of American Victorianism was clearly the basis of the women novelists' view of the self "as a social product, firmly and irrevocably embedded in a social construct", that "shaped, constrained", and ultimately "fulfilled it", (Baym 36) writers like Fuller, and to a lesser extent Stowe, made the conscious effort to define what exactly constituted principles of the female self in order to empower those principles on their own terms. Hawthorne ultimately joins Emerson in his final treatment of Hester. With Dimmesdale's death, maternity alone confers on Hester what power she has and therefore disempowers her once radical potential. She fulfils Emerson's definition of "affection and sentiment", uncomplicated by any independence of thought. Unlike Stowe's Little Eva or Uncle Tom, there is nothing transcendent in Hester's position at the novel's end. In fact, comparing the last word on Hester with the last word on Dimmesdale, or even Chillingworth, one is tempted to side with David Leverenz who refers to the novel's treatment of Hester, the final "humbling of her strength", (Leverenz 210) as sadistic.

While assured of Hester's quite sexless survival in the Salem community, left as she is to her motherly duties and marginal status, Dimmesdale, though destroyed by his confession, dies with the hope of redemption, of achieving some transcendent union with God in a heaven which quite definitely does not include Hester. Though the novel argues for the containment of sexuality in the name of preserving a necessary social order, there is an uneven note in the narrative voice which insists on the subversive potential of the sexuality located in woman while expressing an open eroticism in the Chillingworth-Dimmesdale relationship, a relationship which, we are told, could find its "earthly stock of hatred and antipathy transmuted into golden love" (Hawthorne 242).

Judging from the two central relationships of Dimmesdale and Chilingworth and Dimmesdale and Hester, as the potential for the sexuality of love is diminished, the sexuality of violation is increasingly affirmed.¹¹ The qualities of combativeness and strength, which mark Hester's integrity, are what, from the novel's point of view are problematic. Yet these same qualities are the focus of the Chillingworth-Dimmesdale relationship. Violence becomes a spiritual given,

and forgiven, when its pain assures spiritual purification and affirms a fixed social order. Yet given the Puritan hierarchy of human sins which renders Chillingworth's violation more serious than Hester's adultery, there remains a contradictory note in the rhetoric of redemption which strangely offers the possibility of transcendence to Chillingworth while denying it to Hester. After Dimmesdale's death, we are told that both hatred and love, passions which demand a "high degree of heart knowledge", are "essentially the same, except that one happens to be seen in a celestial radiance and the other in a dusky and lurid glow". Therefore, concludes Hawthorne's narrator:

In the spiritual world, the old physician and the minister—mutual victims as they have been—may, unawares, have found their earthly stock of hatred transformed into golden love. (Hawthorne 242)

The question remains, why, given Dimmesdale's judgement of Chillingworth in the forest, is there the possibility of transforming his hatred into love while Hester's passion, having nothing to do with vengeance, is eternally punished? Why also, given the declared hierarchy of sins, is Chillingworth's worse "violation of the sanctity of a human heart", suddenly forgiven, when Hester's individuality is entirely subsumed by the symbol of her crime for the remainder of her life *and* for all her afterlife? An undercurrent of violence done to Hester, masked by social constructs of womanhood we are made to understand as natural to her character, becomes increasingly apparent. Moving away from "combativeness", Hester becomes "sentiment". Hester, who sought in the forest to ignore town values which demanded her punishment for disrupting her gendered role, is made at the novel's end to embody, in idealized form, the very elements she struggled with.

While Dimmesdale moves beyond Hester, beyond woman, toward the hope of redemption in an all-male heaven where "we are asked to imagine him united in a heaven not just with God but with Chillingworth as well", (Leverenz 212) Hester remains tied to her child and her solitude. The cost of stripping Hester of her singularity risks invoking reader sympathy for her which could potentially override judgement of her crime. So having Hester apparently embrace the conventions of womanhood solves the problem of alienating reader sympathy and provides Hester with a mode

of affirmation which also affirms dominant cultural values. Hester comes finally to fulfil Emerson's definition of woman, that she be "better but not other", (Lang 161) the social example, never the actor. Hester not only embraces patriarchy's requirement of female dependence on male authority, but her final stand on the issue of proper gender conduct symbolizes its most archetypal demands. Hester is no longer a divided self; she in fact relinquishes all sense of self. She "[having] no selfish ends, nor [living] in any measure for her own profit and enjoyment", (Hawthorne 244) Hester becomes the archetypal female counselor, Stowe's ideal of the selfless matriarch who preaches from her purely domestic sphere.

The potential for antithesis in the presentation of the red of the rosebush and the blackness of the prison gate at the novel's beginning, is finally resolved by the (re)placement of Hester's passionate nature, symbolized in the rose and her scarlet letter, within the confines of the larger black background of her tombstone. Yet, given the demonstrated potential for antithesis in Hester's nature, Hester's A, though finally contained in the larger black of social law, continues to speak for the absence of a language ultimately subsumed by the doctrine of True Womanhood. "Doctrine", in Foucault's words, "necessarily links individuals to certain types of utterance while consequently barring them from all others" (Foucault 226).

Notes

¹ The first accounts of Pocahontas, writes Mary Dearborn, were left by John Smith, the man who "discovered her" when she saved his life. Dearborn's point is that from her beginning "[Pocahontas] was fabricated" having left no authentic record of herself. Thus her story—that she married John Rolfe, converted to Christianity, was renamed Lady Rebecca, and went to England—has "so well served mainstream notions of ethnic appropriation". Pocahontas' Indian selfhood, beginning with Smith's account, was to be consistently eroticized; Smith describes Pocahontas as one of several "Nymphes" tormenting him by "crowding, pressing and hanging about [me]" as this 12 year old Princess bravely

protected his life at the cost of her “integrity as ethnic other” (*Pocahontas’ Daughters*, 9, 97).

² In “Plot in Hawthorne’s Romances”, Nina Baym takes issue with Darrel Abel’s “wish to diminish the significance of Hester” in his article “Hawthorne’s Hester”, noting, “I have asked myself over and over” why it is that critics of the 1950s were almost unanimously concerned to deny Hester her place as protagonist of *The Scarlet Letter* (50-1).

³ Amy S. Lang discusses Hester’s multiple selves in “American Jezebel”. *Prophetic Woman*, 7: 161-92.

⁴ Hawthorne to his wife Sofia, letter of 18 March, 1856, quoted by James D. Wallace in “Hawthorne and the Scribbling Women Reconsidered.” In an earlier letter he refers to the “ink-stained women” writers as “detestable,” letter of Jan. 1854. Yet, as Wallace quotes Louise DeSalvo “Oddly enough...Hawthorne himself liked Fanny Fern’s *Ruth Hall*.” (210, 205).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶ Cathy Davidson speaks of the social investment in female sexuality in *Revolution and the Word*, (45-6).

⁷ Hawthorne in his sketch “Mrs. Hutchinson” notes that the women writers “have done their best to add a girlish feebleness to the tottering infancy of our literature” (18).

⁸ Amy Lang in *Prophetic Woman* writes: “Stowe rewrites Anne Hutchinson’s defiance not as lawlessness but as piety” (214).

⁹ Maternity “recalls Hester from masculine thought to feminine feeling”. The term “feminine feeling”, has most often been used in opposition to the act of reasoning (*Ibid.*, 173).

¹⁰ Michel Foucault writes: “we have to recognize the great cleavages in what one might call the social appropriation of discourse.” Systems of discourse are a “political means of maintaining or of modifying the appropriation of discourse” (226-7).

¹¹ David Leverenz writes: “the sexualization of revenge accompanies the desexing of love”, in “Mrs. Hawthorne’s Headache” (10).

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