

# The Scarlet Letter Casts Its Shadow\_\_\_\_\_

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The headline in the arts section of the *New York Times* on September 12, 2017, proclaimed, “A Revenge Tragedy Colored by Brecht; Susan-Lori Parks’s Riff on ‘The Scarlet Letter’ Returns to the Stage with a New Vitality” (C5). According to the critic, Ben Brantley, Parks’s play, which features a scatological pun in its title that might have surprised Hawthorne, riffs on ‘that great 1850 novel about Puritan guilt and repression.’ Wherever you look, the letter shimmers yet again.

Since its publication in 1850, *The Scarlet Letter* has never been out of print. Unlike that of his contemporaries, such as Melville, Dickinson, Whitman, Stowe, and to a lesser degree, Emerson and Poe, Hawthorne’s work, once embraced by the academy, has always been discussed, critiqued, studied, and analyzed, and has found its place in virtually every high school curriculum. As Hyatt Waggoner asserted in 1979, “Never forgotten, Hawthorne has never needed to be rediscovered” (*Presence* 143). The letter itself still shimmers as a public icon from politics to popular culture. Bruce Daniels revealed that, as of 1997, American literary critics have ranked Hawthorne as the first among American writers and that *The Scarlet Letter* exists in twenty-nine editions.

What I would like to do in a broadly chronological manner is to explore the various critical approaches *The Scarlet Letter* has been subject to over the years from the first polarized assessments in the nineteenth century, where critics and admirers wrestled with the seeming incompatibility of Hawthorne’s “elegant” style and the morbidity of his tales, to the more contemporary positions of feminist criticism, political commentary, and the various contexts of cultural studies. I’d also like to suggest that the book has been easily hijacked by all manner of critical reception because of its peculiar power, its text webbed with secrets, silences, subterfuges, evasions, psychological probings, social hierarchies, and speculations.

These have been tackled by nineteenth-century commentators, modernist critics, postmodernist and deconstructive critics, and more contemporary ones. The text seems to be doing its own critical work for us as Hawthorne assembles and disassembles the dualisms of allegory and laces his work with contradictions and multiple perspectives. As Margaret B. Moore suggested in 1998, “His conclusions were tentative. That is the reason he spoke more in the subjunctive mood rather than in the indicative” (256).

We live in a critical time, Rita Felski wittily reminds us, where the spirit of Paul Ricœur’s “hermeneutics of suspicion” still lingers as critics interrogate, pummel, assault, and batter various texts in terms of their complicity with the status quo, their hidden treacheries and accommodations, their spurious ideological underpinnings, and their reinforcement of political power. *The Scarlet Letter* responds to all of these things, each embedded in Hawthorne’s text and his ideas about creating an American romance as opposed to the socialrealist British writers of his time, such as Charles Dickens and Anthony Trollope.

American critics at the time of *The Scarlet Letter* were eager to crown a “great” American writer to compete with the all-pervasive British imports, and Hawthorne quickly filled that void. He became the Great American Romantic Icon, isolated, solitary, a brooding Byronesque creature doomed to his own shadow of seclusion and reticence. His polite style hid psychological and cultural terrors, his mantle of respectability, and the morbidity and menace of his manuscripts. His allegorical framework with its Christian attributes appealed to his readers while at the same time he was eroding its very essence.

Fashions and attitudes changed, but *The Scarlet Letter* maintained its central place in American literature. Hawthorne’s reputation as a gothic writer only grew over the years, even as both Melville and James couldn’t decide whether or not he harbored a deep dark metaphysical blackness or whether he was just conjuring up aesthetic effects for their atmosphere and coloring. In the modernist era, when Freud and his vision of universal repression took American culture by storm, Hawthorne’s best romance provided the perfect

candidate for analysis and dark unconscious possibilities, complete with “unreliable narrators, conflicting viewpoints, fragmented narratives and metafictional devices. . . .” (Felski 42).

Phenomenological perspectives could focus on Hawthorne’s fetishizing of objects—scarlet letters, houses with seven gables, veiled ladies, and Roman ruins. New Critics, desperate to find an ultimate unity in all things, grappled with ironies and paradoxes and what seemed to be Hawthorne’s neo-Orthodox sensibilities. When the linguistic turn heralded by deconstruction arrived in the 1970s, his style, already deconstructed and deceptive, played yet again right into critics’ hands. Feminist critics praised Hester Prynne’s independence as opposing the hierarchical patriarchy of her day, minimizing how much the Calvinist society permeates her own outlook on the world. She did keep Roger Chillingworth’s true status a secret and wore her letter proudly as its interpretation shifted from “Adulterer” to “Angel,” proclaiming her own artistry in its gold and crimson incarnation. Hawthorne’s politics, particularly regarding his stance on the Civil War in “About War Matters,” were raked over the coals in his evenhanded assessment of the North and South that, like his friend President Franklin Pierce, could be taken for upholding the status quo when tempers and patriotism erupted on both sides, a dualism, however disrupted, that couldn’t be shaken in the heat of war. While much of the critical reception shifted and changed, *The Scarlet Letter* withstood and thrived on all of it.

Upon its publication *The Scarlet Letter* was praised and celebrated more than it was castigated and condemned. Readers were fascinated by its focus on adultery and its very nineteenth-century anti-Calvinist point of view. Dr. George Bailey Loring and the Reverend Arthur Cleveland Coxe (though to see them as opposites, one positive, the other determinedly negative, elevates Coxe’s opinion more than necessary) provide a too-easily polarized response to the romance.

Loring’s impressionistic and convoluted essay is saturated with the concepts of Christian sin and redemption, though he praises Hester’s courage and excoriates Dimmesdale’s secret repentance, his lack of any ultimate wisdom, and his self-proclaimed criminality:

“It would be hard to conceive of a greater outrage upon the freezing and self-denying doctrines of that day, than the sin for which Hester Prynne was damned by society, and for which Arthur Dimmesdale damned himself” (169). For Loring, the Puritan sin lay in condemning human passions, “the foundation of all that beauty which seeks its expression in poetry, and music, and art . . .” (169). Such passions were crimes. Dimmesdale learns nothing from his excruciating self-punishment. Siding with Hester as opposed to society’s hard and cold laws on virtue and chastity, Loring insists that “Between the individual and his God, there remains a spot, larger or smaller, as the soul has been kept unclouded, where no sin can enter . . .” (171). Here lies the nineteenth century’s belief in the democratic center in each individual that transcends society’s rules and remains virtually immaculate. For him, Hester’s line, “What we did had a consecration of its own,” however much a product of conflict and social stigma, encapsulates her ultimate beauty and holiness, however marked by guilt, surrounded by a self-righteous society with “the stiff, formal dignities of our early New England Colony” (169).

Not so the Reverend Coxe who proclaims his sense of outrage. He denounces “the nauseous amour of a Puritan pastor,” which degrades American literature and encourages “social licentiousness . . . Is the French era actually begun in our literature?” (182). *Mon Dieu!* True, Dimmesdale as a character may be interesting, but filthy besmirches his soul. As for Hester, “a frail creature of his charge, [her] mind is represented as far more debauched than her body” (182).

Coxe’s rant does nail the nineteenth-century dilemma when it came to Hawthorne’s fiction that his style is chaste, delicate, and decorous, but his tale is morbid, immoral, and unclean. How can one support the other? Can they ever be reconciled? In a sense this conflict has permeated much of Hawthornian criticism and the challenges of his several biographers: the solitary morbid soul who yet held several public political appointments; the dark-dyed vision embodied in a dedicated family man; the dark night of the soul—Dimmesdale’s, Hester’s—embodied in a perfectly decent and wholesome style.

Orestes Brownson, the transcendentalist who became a Catholic, upbraided *The Scarlet Letter* because it reduced serious theological concerns to mere psychology, another dilemma that plagued the nineteenth century. For him Hester never repents and, therefore, doesn't take her very real sin seriously enough: "We are never to forget that sin is sin . . . But in the present case neither of the guilty party repent . . . they hug their illicit love; they cherish their sin . . ." (177). While Coxe and Brownson remain critical outliers in regard to the romance, much of their attitude continues to the present day which, in popular culture, sees the scarlet letter as a proclamation of guilt, a symbol of punishment and shame, representing "the persecuting spirit" (2) that Philip Roth in his novel, *The Human Stain*, identified as embedded in American culture.

Critics from the beginning commented on Hawthorne's fascination with damaged souls, the existential estrangement between human beings, the severe consequences of concealment, his analytical probing of each of them as if studying them under a microscope and searching for their deepest inadequacies and self-delusions, their unrelievable sense of solitude and separation and their ultimately unfathomable experience of sorrow and suffering, of secret misdeeds and fantasies. Many also pointed out the ruthless playing out of impersonal laws—social, personal, cultural, historical—akin perhaps to the Greeks' sense of fate and self-destruction. They admire Hester's perseverance and courage, while pointing out her submission to Chillingworth's demands that she keep his secret.

Many have also commented upon the structure of Hawthorne's fiction as allegorical, setting up abstract ideas in opposition to one another as opposed to full-blooded characters. The nineteenth century relished allegory, particularly before the Civil War, since most of its writers were familiar with it from their own Christian education and background. Human passion battled patriarchal hierarchies; the heart clashed with the head; sin contended with sorrow as theological perspectives confronted psychological explanations. The coldly analytical Chillingworth dogged the haunted steps of the self-wounding minister and his secret bouts of flagellation, a

penance that always struck me in its masturbatory repetition as sexually charged.

Hawthorne set up various tableaux—the three scaffold scenes, for instance—to focus on these encounters, seemingly siding with Chillingworth’s idea that all has resulted from a “dark necessity,” whereas the modern reader more skeptically assigns this vision to Chillingworth and not entirely to Hawthorne. Modern criticism has explored the conscious breakdown of such frameworks in Hawthorne’s self-proclaimed “blasted allegories”—again the ambiguities: blasted because of a failure of form? Blasted as in condemning allegory as such?—revealing how master and slave depend on one another to establish each other’s role.

*The Scarlet Letter* dovetailed nicely with modernism’s Freudian notions of repression and unconscious compulsions. Newton Arvin struck the note of the soul-haunted, troubled author of such a book, wrapped in solitude and forever isolated from his fellow creatures, a romantic stereotype that has survived the various critical approaches, however attacked, undermined, and rendered too simplistic if not wrongheaded. Hawthorne’s excavation of his characters’ souls exemplified Freud’s examination of his patients. Psychological depth provided the ultimate key to understanding Dimmesdale’s withering, self-imposed self-abasement (albeit in private), Chillingworth’s ruthless pursuit of his quarry’s secrets, and Hester’s obstinate faith in her own self-worth, however compromised, and artistry. Each played off the other’s guilt and dependence, rigorously entangled, however earlier allegorical criticism viewed them as stalwart representatives of certain human traits.

*The Scarlet Letter* also became the perfect candidate for the New Critical approach to paradox, irony, and ambiguity in producing a perfectly unified work of art, created in the shadow of a neo-Orthodox Christian faith and outlook, but as Lionel Trilling in “Our Hawthorne” decided, his work had become an anachronism and was limited and marginal in relation to someone like Kafka’s, since Hawthorne “always consented to the power of his imagination being controlled by the power of the world . . . the modern consciousness requires that an artist have an imagination which is more intransigent than

this” (454). The shadow of allegory as an old-fashioned, rigid, and discredited structure still fell upon *The Scarlet Letter* and led Alfred Kazin to declare, “This is why there are so many theological and psychoanalytical interpretations of Hawthorne; they fill the vacuum created by our modern uncertainty about the use and relevance of Hawthorne’s art” (458). Both believed in Hawthorne’s exploration of dark psychological depths but would have agreed with Mark Van Doren who suggested in 1949 that only in *The Scarlet Letter* did Hawthorne really probe deeply, achieve the perfect balance in his fiction, and then forever after avoided those depths, a backhanded compliment if there ever was one.

F. O. Matthiessen celebrated the optimistic romantic essayists and poets, placing the likes of Hawthorne and Melville off to the side as a kind of tragic chorus that “mainstream” American literature transcended. His Hawthorne comes across as politically conservative and very much a supporter of the status quo, a kind of ancestor to V. S. Naipaul’s idea that one should hate the oppressor and fear the oppressed. However true, if we were to take this perspective literally, it suggests political paralysis and inaction, assisted in Hawthorne’s case by his delight in ambiguity and irony. Matthiessen’s was the search for the voice of the age, the true American sensibility and soul in its remarkable aesthetic expressions such as Whitman’s “Song of Myself” and Emerson’s poetry and essays. In such company Hawthorne was bound to look timid and tame.

Matthiessen’s New Critical approach to *The Scarlet Letter* embraced the various dualisms and polarities: progress versus the status quo, egalitarian democracy versus traditional hierarchies. Dualism threaded his lukewarm appreciation of Hawthorne, both prying his work loose from the rigid nineteenth-century category of allegory and at the same time appealing to it as well. His vision encompassed “devices of multiple choice,” not the mere dualistic nature of allegory: Hawthorne “does not literally accept his own allegory, and yet he finds it symbolically valid because of its psychological exactitude” (277). This underscored Hawthorne’s fascination with mesmerism (and the charismatic power of Hester, Dimmesdale, Chillingworth, and Pearl), which he morally despised

for allowing one human being to gain power over another and yet psychologically recognized the visceral reality of it.

The modernist symbol, often opaque, multifaceted, mysterious, and infinitely suggestive, transcended allegorical bindings, but such Manichean strictures were never totally abandoned by Hawthorne critics and led to future simplistic categories: Hester, the liberally minded protofeminist free spirit; Pearl, the quirky “devil’s child”; Chillingworth, the single-minded, obsessive, and evil scientist-doctor; and Dimmesdale, the self-hating, self-eviscerating Puritan. Hawthorne’s tableaux and especially the three scaffold scenes contributed to this allegorical framework.

The New Critics thrived on polarities with their roots in the allegorical tradition. Their vision of the aesthetic unity of texts arose from the often precarious balancing act between these various dualisms. And even in relatively recent years Magnus Ullen conceived of the importance of allegorical markers in *The Scarlet Letter* along with the more modernist notion of dialectical interchanges and entanglements. In Hawthorne criticism allegory never dies, however reshaped, rekindled, undermined, underscored, and overstated.

Post-New-Critical analysts discovered different approaches. Kenneth Dauber relied on the new waves of critical theory, especially deconstruction, to explore Hawthorne’s fiction. Edgar A. Dryden added to the expanding interest in Hawthorne’s vision of the American romance as a particular genre in opposition to the socially realistic novel. Nina Baym contributed to the new interest in feminist criticism. All three of these critical categories erupted into an avalanche of book-length studies and critical articles, laying waste to the New Critical belief in unity, balance, and the more or less immaculate self-enclosed quality of literary texts.

Deconstruction, the “linguistic turn,” took all of American literary criticism by storm with its emphasis on undecidability, indefiniteness, deferral, disruption, and the way the prison-house of language led only to other cells and texts. Texts became transparently porous and pointed not to well-balanced polarities but to Hawthorne’s linguistic indeterminacy, his rhetorical strategies,

and the slipperiness and elusiveness of language itself. Critics interrogated texts searching out their weak spots, their evasions, their unresolved and unresolvable contradictions, and their glaring inconsistencies and uncertainties. Readers and texts became entangled, almost willfully engaged, scrutinized, seduced, and abandoned. *The Scarlet Letter* proved to be a perfect case study for this mode of critical reception, already fashioned as a very “porous” text.

Kenneth Dauber assaulted unity and wholeness in literary texts. For him texts wrote the author: “the forms of fiction impose themselves . . . To write is to repeat what has already been written. [Hawthorne’s] work exists as a cultural imposition before he begins. It is a tyranny he cannot resist” (41). His attack on Calvinism with self-righteously autonomous individuals and society’s rules and regulations locking horns can also be seen from the perspective of Foucault’s idea of power’s inhabiting all human creatures, not merely as some exterior oppression. Themes are not so much integrated as dispersed. *The Scarlet Letter* wars with itself, wandering in dark corridors of the mind. Hawthorne oscillates: “He presents himself divided against himself, mocking one half with the other” (34) as does language itself. Division rules. Synthesis crumbles. Old categories such as allegory are “so undirected the reader may overcome it with any number of explications of his own. [The reader] works his will on the text” (16-17). Suddenly Hawthorne criticism, which had seemed old-fashioned, outmoded, and stale, burst into new life as Dauber was one of the first to delve into the deconstructed depths of romance.

Other critics struggled to define the American romance as its own special genre, one Hawthorne had helped create and cultivate. Hawthorne’s “neutral territory,” which he describes in “The Custom-House” at the beginning of *The Scarlet Letter*, allows for strange and supernatural events to mingle with the everyday world, pits characters against one another who do represent certain types but are never reduced to them, lures readers into the shadows of the upper story of the Custom-House and the beckoning dark woods where witches and devils may linger, stages stark scaffold tableaux at midnight,

points to strange astronomical signs in the night sky, suggests the diabolical potions and powders that Chillingworth has learned from the Indians, hints at the demonic nature of Pearl's spontaneity and sudden outbursts, explores the dark roots of New England Calvinism that have contributed to mysterious superstitions and terrors, discovers the revelation of something deeper in the reflections that appear in mirrors, and spreads rumors of the Black Man's book and Mistress Hibbins's witchcraft. The craft and ambiguities of such a structure as the American Romance also helped spawn the fictions of others, such as James, Faulkner, Morrison, McCullers, O'Connor, Oates, Didion, and Jackson.

Perhaps Dryden best summarizes the lure of the American romance. Building on works that focused on dualisms, polarities, psychological conditions, and the symbolic in Hawthorne's fiction, he employs the Keatsian dialectic between enchantment and disenchantment, being seduced by the sound of the nightingale and the bucolic scene on the Grecian urn, only to finally pull away and suffer the loss of that romantic ideal of sublime harmony. As a result he suggests, "dreams and reality are unable to coexist as one always seeks to invade and transform the other" (138). Hester and Arthur dream of escape and have escaped into the forest to make love beyond and outside the Calvinist boundaries of social realities and constrictions. Hawthorne's persistent use of mystery, secrets, silences, backgrounds, motives, and unconscious compulsions seduces the reader, sets her up to try and fathom the unfathomable depths of haunted minds, enchanted both by fascination and multiple interpretations. Disenchantment will soon follow—Keats cannot forget the very real possibility of his own death while imagining the continued singing of the nightingale forever—and Dimmesdale will die, but for one sweet shining moment Hester and Arthur seem eternally bonded and self-forgiving.

Nina Baym viewed Hawthorne as a feminist writer, describing Hester and others as courageous, brave, and at times outspoken souls who take on the stringencies of patriarchy and outwit (if only momentarily) the hierarchical reigns of male politicians, mesmerists, reformers, and monks. She traces how Hawthorne grew as a writer

and celebrated human passion as opposed to a repressive society in *The Scarlet Letter*, a theme that over the years has been narrowed to celebrating the marginalized as always preferable to mainstream society, muddying how much of the Calvinist ethic has seeped into Hester's soul as much as she does valiant battle to overcome it.

The self in conflict with society has always been the staple of fiction, but Hester is not as one-dimensional as some critics have made her out to be, excluding Baym and others. In "Revisiting Hawthorne's Feminism," she insists, "In this essay I swim against the tide to argue—again—for Hawthorne as a feminist writer from *The Scarlet Letter* onward" (541). That critical tide had deconstructed a feminist "essentialism" in relying on the hermeneutics of suspicion across the board, but Baym continues her very strong case. Hester's flaws and failures do not automatically invalidate her ideas and perceptions. She is a much more complicated character than that: "To say that Hawthorne's women have more heart than his men does not imply that they have less brain" (553).

Emily Miller Budick discussed the romance form as employed by women writers, such as Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, and Toni Morrison, and how the "Hawthorne Tradition" has influenced them. The women celebrate family and community more than male writers who focus on individual autonomy and patriarchy. From such a position Hester maintains her position as the true hero of *The Scarlet Letter*; particularly because of what she was up against. This conception, however simplified, has not really changed over the years, however modified and nuanced.

Monika Elbert asserted that the feminist perspective is less rigid than the male one and that it views all perspectives as subjective and shifting. It firmly rejects polarized platitudes, such as male versus female, black versus white, past versus present, and insists that such bifurcation is a "male-induced construct" (12) that oversimplifies and constricts actual experience. We can see how this outlook derives from the Calvinist tradition in its rigid view of the saved and the damned, the elect and the doomed, and the male and the female. Such dualisms are arbitrary and underscore the patriarchal hierarchy of society.

Two other critical approaches flourished in the 1980s and are still going strong. The New Historicist method placed novels and their characters within a historical context, thereby linking them to and as products of specific eras. This also involved critical looks at Hawthorne's politics. *The Scarlet Letter* explores the effect and consequences of a Calvinist theocracy on Boston in the seventeenth century. At the same time, written as it was in 1850, it fully reveals the nineteenth century's denigration of and judgment of the strict and harsh Calvinist era, which looked more rigid than it might actually have been because of Hawthorne's attack on his ancestors' involvement in the Salem witch trials. The second emerging critical advance examined the role of racism in all texts, the kind that infiltrates them even if particular African Americans are not mentioned. As Toni Morrison made clear, freedom in America has always been white; slavery has always been black. And that inflexible polarity, however socially constructed, remained virtually unassailable. The devil in *The Scarlet Letter* is embodied by the Black Man in the forest, a demonic creature waiting to seduce the very Calvinists who had conjured him up in the first place.

While he does not deal specifically with *The Scarlet Letter*, Michael J. Colacurcio examines and analyses the moral history and culture of the Calvinist era as seen through Hawthorne's eyes. Instead of allegorical symbols or symbolically allegorical dualisms, Colacurcio was convinced and convincing that Hawthorne was determined "to expose the moral premises which shaped the experience of the past" (150). Colacurcio had no faith in broad, general, and often vague psychological conditions, extracted from a historical context and presented as if they were universal and common to all, but instead concentrated on the historical era, thus creating a wider, more specific cultural milieu for Hawthorne's fiction: "Hawthorne repeatedly allowed the Puritan language of diabolical simulation and, more generally of the 'invisible world' to control the limits of his own psychological investigations" (285). This helps account for Hawthorne's use of archaic language to try to mimic Calvinist conversations and beliefs. Circumstances reveal their distinct historical roots; they are not meant to be simply

allegorical. This method provided a context that the New Critics and deconstructionists had either played down or avoided. American beliefs in self-reliance, the autonomy of individuals, and the religious traditions of salvation and domination become historical markers, not just symbolic states.

Sacvan Bercovitch maintained that Hawthorne's ambiguities cancelled one another out and established a status quo-oriented equilibrium that sought synthesis in the future, not in the historical present. Hester's return to Boston reveals her hope for reconciliation and compromise, assimilated into the community as a sign of future progress toward cultural unity and harmony. Such an approach, I think, minimizes the tragic consequences of the romance and the shadows of Chillingworth's "dark necessity" that forever haunt the text. Bercovitch celebrates "a rhetoric of reconciliation that was rooted both in the ambiguities of legal language and in a providential sense of mission" (66). Arthur may be dead, but he still resides in Boston where Hester will take up her final resting place.

As Arthur Riss argues, "Where once Hawthorne had no politics, now it seems that all he has are bad politics," linking it to Jonathan Arac's notion of "a politics of issueless patience"(17). Larry Reynolds tackles the "issueless" issue head on, placing him directly within the blatant racism of his times, examining his loyal support for President Franklin Pierce, who in trying to straddle both North and South enflamed both, describing Hawthorne's version of John Brown as a violent outlaw who should have been hanged, and disagreeing with the flagrant and outright abolitionism of several of his Concord neighbors such as Emerson and Thoreau.

*The Scarlet Letter*, which exposes the flaws in Calvinist society and in individuals, obviously discredits the Puritans' rigid and theocratic rules and regulations, but nowhere is there any real challenge to the system except in the colorful prominence of Hester's *A*, her willfulness in clinging to Pearl as her child, and her certainty that what she and Dimmesdale did "had a consecration of its own." It may result in a distinctly autonomous personal politics, but it does nothing to change the system. The case can be made that in returning to Boston after Arthur's death and in living in isolation on the

outskirts of Boston before that event, she is as much upholding the Calvinist order as attempting to defy it. Strong political positions for Hawthorne smacked of the obsessive quests and positions of many of his male characters, which often led to “the notion of righteous violence” (203) in the shadow of a cause and ultimately eroded their common humanity.

Racism infiltrates all walks of American life, once raising questions whether or not a slave was even a person. Riss castigates the position that political liberalism tries to blur all racial distinctions in an effort to both overcome and uphold them. “Liberalism . . . brands any specific meaning or identity as arbitrary and contingent,” he insists, “and thus attempts to transcend such particularism” (123), as Hawthorne supposedly does in his many contradictory and ambiguous definitions of Hester’s *A*. From this point of view, ambiguity can be understood as upholding the patriarchal system, supporting slavery, keeping women in their place, projecting a political state of noninterference and indifference, creating “neutral territories” in a way to avoid harsh political and personal decisions, and keeping secrets intact instead of taking direct stands on specific issues. I agree with all of this but at the same time believe that Hawthorne’s tragic awareness of the human condition in all its contradictions and misplaced polarities provided the perfect antidote to a blind faith in progress, Manifest Destiny, Jacksonian Democracy, and that much-blessed myth of individual autonomy.

All these critical approaches to *The Scarlet Letter* remain in circulation today, despite the ups and downs of critical fashions and fads. I agree with Richard Millington who describes *The Scarlet Letter* as the “romance as revision” (59), where characters and readers, however psychologically and culturally limited, continually reinterpret the letter and revise its significance from *Adultery* to *Able* to *Angel* to *Art* to *Arthur* and beyond. The women, Hester and Pearl, grow and mature. The men, Dimmesdale and Chillingworth, wither and die. Revision suggests an ultimate humanity in the wake of certain male obsessions and compulsions. Richard Brodhead suggests that “what we see . . . is a mind playing across objects, allowing them to enkindle reflections and projections onto them

its own thoughts and feelings . . . The scarlet letter itself becomes, in effect, a character, insisting upon itself . . .” (16, 56). Perhaps this helps to account for the book’s lasting popularity and its ability to withstand all levels of critical reception and cross-examination. The letter already shifts and shimmers before critics can even get their hands on it. It embodies the changing patterns of human consciousness and historical and cultural circumstances. And in the future, I suspect, it will continue to do so.

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