

The adulteress in the market-place: Hawthorne and The Scarlet Letter

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Abstract:

Author Nathaniel Hawthorne posits the view that artists can prevail over the oppression shown them by other people in his book 'The Scarlet Letter.' The oppressed artist in Hawthorne's book is represented by the heroine, Hester Prynne, whose adulterous act can be seen as representative of artistic ability. Art's identification with adultery is later seen in Hawthorne's autobiographical sketch, 'The Custom-House.'

Full Text:

Readers have long lamented the absence of Arthur Dimmesdale's Election Sermon, the inspiring though pathetic discourse which serves as prelude to the tragic conclusion of *The Scarlet Letter*. But perhaps all along we have been overlooking the obvious: Hawthorne did in fact transcribe such a sermon, but he did so under the cover of his autobiographical sketch, "The Custom-House." Written before the final three chapters of the novel were composed (that is, before the sermon is described in the text), "The Custom-House" conforms to the "jeremiad" tradition of election-day sermons.(1) Though cast in a satiric mode, the "sketch" balances the elements of guilt and redemption, past and future, sin and salvation typical of the Puritan genre. However, this is a jeremiad with a difference, for as the autobiographical narrator reminds us repeatedly, while he "represents" his Salem progenitors he is by no means identical with them. Thus it should not be surprising to discover that Hawthorne's "Election Sermon" is written from a distinctly different vantage point than that of the Puritan minister. Indeed, it is as artist and author that Hawthorne comes before the public to condemn the sins of his generation and project his own future fulfillment. Put differently, Hawthorne's "sermon" recounts his own election as "author," a sanctification which issues from the terrible suffering of his "decapitation." Rather than celebrating a communal victory over Satan and sinfulness, "The Custom-House" employs a form of Puritan discourse to celebrate the individual artist's prevailing over oppression.

Art and artistry are crucial to the novel as well. Joel Porte has put the case most succinctly when he writes, "The Scarlet Letter, in short, can be read as an allegory of art."(2) Porte calls our attention to Hawthorne's struggle to justify romantic art in a culture dominated by pragmatic concerns. Not surprisingly, then, we have focused on correspondences between the writer of the text and his artistic rebel, Hester Prynne. Both Hawthorne and Hester can be seen as subversive artists who must enter "the market-place" with a scarlet letter, signifier of pride and shame, achievement and alienation. However, we have not paid sufficient attention to role of adultery in this "allegory of art."(3) Though Hester's "sin" is never openly announced, the text cleverly alludes to adultery and "adulteration" throughout, creating a kind of fetishistic fascination with the "nameless" crime. Granting that the novel and its prefatory sketch are concerned with the artist's role in antebellum America, the reader can fairly ask, "in what sense is artistic reproduction an act of adultery"? But I want to push this issue even farther by insisting on the question, "in what sense is the male author an adulteress?" Put in these terms, the issue resonates with concerns about Hawthorne's attitude toward women in general and female writers specifically. I will argue that, for Hawthorne, to be a male writer in his culture was necessarily to be an "adulteress," that is, a feminized adulterer of "the truth." Furthermore, his status as "adulteress" virtually required him to enter "the marketplace" of literature, for his transgressions of gender role and vocation forced him out of the paternalistic "house of custom" into the masculinist market. That is, having violated the expectations of a cultural son, the hermaphroditic writer must compete in the acquisitive, rowdy capitalist economy of antebellum America. Thus, the figure of the adulteress serves as a nexus for complex issues of vocation and gender Hawthorne had to confront at the moment of composing his novel and sketch.

In *Adultery and the Novel*, Tony Tanner asserts that the adulteress represents the violation of social contract and the harmonic interrelation of clearly defined roles:

The figure of the wife ideally contains the biological female, the obedient daughter (and perhaps sister), the faithful mate, the responsible mother, and the believing Christian, and harmonizes all the patterns that bestow upon her these differing identities. But if the marriage starts to founder, then the different identities and roles fall apart or come into conflict . . . [I]t is now perhaps clear why adultery should be the main, if the undescribed, topic for the bourgeois novel. For without anything or anyone necessarily having changed place or roles (in social terms), the action of adultery portends the possible breakdown of all the mediations on which society itself depends, and demonstrates the latent impossibility of participating in the interrelated patterns that comprise its structure.(4)

This strikes me as an extraordinarily important description of both Hester and Hawthorne's dilemmas. Hester is indeed a kind of "liminal" character, caught betwixt and between social roles as a result of her passionate transgression.(5) That liminality is emblemized by her virtual marginality, her abode located in the border region between city and forest, between the urban and the wild. Furthermore, as she attempts to fulfill her roles as mother and mate following the adulterous act and its issue, Hester struggles to meet the social demands of those roles. Her psychological traumas largely result from her confused desire to fulfill socially defined obligations while at the same time living on the margins of those obligations. Put differently, Hester attempts to be a "good" wife and mother while living out the legacy of her social disgrace.

Likewise, the Hawthorne represented in "The Custom-House" suffers from a crisis of "mediation" between himself and his society. More specifically, he struggles to keep in balance conflicting roles within antebellum culture, and his failure to achieve that balance leaves him in the interstices of his culture. Hawthorne initially hoped to sustain two contradictory roles, those of "public man" and "author." His letters to friends just prior to his dismissal as a surveyor for the Salem custom-house indicate that, in Hawthorne's eyes, his literary vocation should have provided a kind of "immunity" for him as public man, for he expected protection from partisan political decisions. As he wrote to his friend George Hillard on March 5, 1849, "it seems to me that an inoffensive man of letters - having obtained a pitiful little office on no other plea than his pitiful little literature - ought not to be left to the mercy of these thick-skulled and no-hearted ruffians."(6) And again, writing to Longfellow in anticipation of his vengeance against such "ruffians," he remarked, "This I will do [wreak vengeance], not as an act of individual vengeance, but in your behalf as well as mine, because he [an unnamed 'high official'] will have violated the sanctity of the priesthood to which we both, in our different degrees, belong. I do not claim to be a poet; and yet I cannot but feel that some of the sacredness of that character adheres to me, and ought to be respected in me, unless I step out of its immunities, or make it a plea for violating any of the rules of ordinary life."(7) Hawthorne's faith rests on at best a naive and at worst a demeaning concept of his own art, for he should be protected as long as he is not "dangerous," as long as he is "normal" in outward aspect. Hawthorne does not yet perceive that to be an author in America is, by its very nature, to "violat[e] . . . the rules of ordinary life," one of the bitter discoveries forced upon him by his ouster.

If his artistic vocation should provide Hawthorne political immunity, conversely, a secure public appointment should provide the financial cover to achieve his artistic ambitions. Some six years earlier, upon the birth of his daughter Una, Hawthorne had written to Hillard, "God keep me from ever being really a writer for bread! If I alone were concerned, I had rather starve; but in that case, poor little Una would have to take refuge in the alms-house - which, here in Concord, is a most gloomy old mansion. Her 'angel face' would hardly make a sunshine there."(8) The passage is typical of Hawthorne's financial worries both before and after his marriage. Uncannily, the letter anticipates key imagery in "The Custom-House" itself, for the narrator implies that the official building has become a kind of alms-house for the ancient crew, and a "gloomy" one at that. In a sense Hawthorne had already imaginatively rejected the Custom-House as safe haven before he took up his duties there. Nonetheless, financial security was very much on Hawthorne's mind when he accepted the post. For instance, the autobiographical subject ruefully observes of custom-house documents, "But, then,

what reams of other manuscripts - filled, not with the dulness of official formalities, but with the thought of inventive brains and the rich effusion of deep hearts - had gone equally to oblivion; and that, moreover, without serving a purpose in their day, as these heaped-up papers had, and - saddest of all - without purchasing for their writers the comfortable livelihood which the clerks of the Custom-House had gained by these worthless scratchings of the pen!"(9) Thus Hawthorne initially saw the Custom-House position as enabling his "participat[ion] in the interrelated patterns of his culture," specifically, the activities of the commercial man and the artist, the financially secure and the ideologically protected.

Ironically, neither expectation was realized, and "The Custom-House" records those discoveries in the strongest possible terms. First, Hawthorne came to realize (much as he had at Brook Farm) that the weight of daily experience pressed hard upon his artistic faculties. Far from creating the economic space necessary for his composition, the job as surveyor made authorial activity impossible. As Hawthorne phrased it in an oft-quoted passage,

My imagination was a tarnished mirror. It would not reflect, or only with miserable dimness, the figures with which I did my best to people it. The characters of the narrative would not be warmed and rendered malleable, by any heat that I could kindle at my intellectual forge. They would take neither the glow of passion nor the tenderness of sentiment, but retained all the rigidity of dead corpses, and stared me in the face with a fixed and ghastly grin of contemptuous defiance. "What have you to do with us?" that expression seemed to say. "The little power you might once have possessed over the tribe of unrealities is gone! You have bartered it for a pittance of the public gold. Go, then, and earn your wages!" (pp. 34-35)

Hawthorne suggests, then, that art and commerce are mutually exclusive, or at least exercise a deleterious effect on each other. Curiously, as I will show later, through artistic adultery Hawthorne seems to find a means out of this self-defeating opposition between Mammon and Art.

If the writer came to see that wages conflicted with his art, he discovered even more painfully that art could not protect him from politics. Hawthorne learned that in the house of "custom" his art was either worthless or a source of suspicion. It is suggestive that the sketch focuses on the fellow-workers' "accustomed corners" (p. 14), emblematic of their "sluggish and dependent mode of life" (p. 16). From the perspective of this "customary" position, Hawthorne's artistic ambitions were absolutely meaningless: "It is a good lesson - though it may often be a hard one - for a man who has dreamed of literary fame, and of making for himself a rank among the world's dignitaries by such means, to step aside out of the narrow circle in which his claims are recognized, and to find how utterly devoid of significance, beyond that circle, is all that he achieves, and all he aims at" (pp. 26-27). Hawthorne's discoveries about art's relationship with "custom" take on a more dire cast when he considers his ancestors. The critic Evan Carton has been especially sensitive to this play upon the sketch's title, observing that "throughout the essay, 'custom' is a rich and ambivalent symbol for Hawthorne: it is a duty that he collects and a less tangible but more burdensome one that he pays; it stands for the materialistic present in which, as a customs house officer, he is mired and for the most real and valuable portions of the legacy of the past to which that same customs house lends him access."(10) Carton calls our attention to "custom" as accrued tradition, the weight of the past upon the present character. In this context, Hawthorne can only sense hostility toward his role as author, for he imagines his progenitors heaping scorn upon "a writer of story-books" (p. 10). Indeed, Hawthorne focuses upon his ancestors' persecution of women and witches, crucial because Hawthorne saw himself as a kind of latter-day witch. In yet another letter inspired by the Custom-House controversy (his expulsion fueled some of his finest correspondence), Hawthorne playfully remarks to Horatio Bridge, "I feel an infinite contempt for them [the Salem people], and probably have expressed more of it than I intended; for my preliminary chapter has caused the greatest uproar that ever happened here since witch-times. If I escape from town without being tarred-and-feathered, I shall consider it good luck. I wish they would tar-and-feather me - it would be such an entirely novel kind of distinction for a literary man! And from such judges as my fellow-citizens, I should look upon it as a higher honor than a laurel-crown."(11) One needs no further proof of the writer's identification

with Hester Prynne, for Hawthorne melodramatically reenacts the scaffold scene which begins the novel proper, casting himself as heroine scornful of the unjustified judges!

Hawthorne's unconscious identification with the Salem witches suggests a more profound sense of transgression than we have uncovered so far. Under the hegemony of the Jacksonian "cult of manhood," the male writer was already a suspect figure, a kind of hermaphrodite.⁽¹²⁾ After all, his letter to Bridge hints at similarities between "the literary man" and the victims of "witch-times." Furthermore, in the letter to Hillard quoted above, Hawthorne explicitly chastises "thick-skulled and no-hearted ruffians," a conventional description of aggressive masculinity in the antebellum United States. The acquisitive male, on the make in the capitalist economy, was assumed to lack the intelligence and the affections of womanhood.

As an author of "minor literature," Hawthorne saw himself in conflict with the dominant image of male available within his culture. In his important study of women and masculine aesthetics during the nineteenth century, Leland S. Person, Jr. has addressed precisely this crisis of gender definition, observing that "given the identification of masculinity with vigorous, self-reliant activity both inside and outside the home, it must have been difficult indeed for male writers to reconcile their profession with their masculinity."⁽¹³⁾ Like Hester, the male writer must dwell among multiple, conflicting personae while somehow making a living and maintaining an imaginative integrity. A father, a husband, a son, a worker, Hawthorne must yet acknowledge his "feminine" qualities, those qualities associated with his "authorship."⁽¹⁴⁾ In light of the writer's much discussed diatribe against "the d----d mob of scribbling women" and his unkind cut of Margaret Fuller after her death, perhaps this claim for sympathy with women seems overstated. But as one critic has recently asserted, for Hawthorne, "in their marginal relation to American political and economic life, their uneasy submission to or rebellion against the ideology of domesticity, and their use of fiction and poetry as indictment, revenge, and compensation, these women [Fanny Fern, Margaret Fuller, and Julia Ward Howe] are the perfect images of the artist in America, including [himself]."⁽¹⁵⁾ A remarkable verbal echo reaching over five years from the composition of the novel to his comments on Ruth Hall provides dramatic evidence that in fact Hawthorne felt sympathy for the devil, that is, for enraged femininity. In a letter to Horace Conolly, dated June 17, 1850, Hawthorne sarcastically thanks his reader for helping evict him from office: "If I had stayed four years longer in the Custom House, I should have rusted utterly away, and never have been heard of more, but being kicked out (through your good offices) just at the nick of time, I came forth as fresh as if I had been just made, and went to work as if the devil were in me, if it were only to put my enemies to the blush."⁽¹⁶⁾ Compare this language with the description of Fanny Fern included in a letter to William D. Ticknor dated February 2, 1855: "The woman writes as if the devil was in her; and that is the only condition under which a woman ever writes anything worth reading."⁽¹⁷⁾ Given his earlier reference to his own "devilry," Hawthorne might have written that it is only under possession by such agency that he himself "writes anything worth reading."

What, then, does it mean to say that the devil inspires a literary text? In part, of course, the male writer refers to a wrath generated by social injustice. But surely Hawthorne also has in mind what might generally be termed "desire" and more specifically termed "sexuality."⁽¹⁸⁾ Here is another, more specific sense in which Hawthorne identifies with the adulteress. In addition to transgressing social contract and defined roles, adultery openly announces sexual desire. For unlike sex in the nineteenth-century marriage, which at best would serve the purpose of procreation and at worst serve to allay male passion, adultery nakedly asserts pleasure in sex. In that remarkable forest scene in *The Scarlet Letter*, the long repressed/suppressed sexuality of Hester is suddenly exposed when she releases her hair. The reader immediately recognizes that the complex art of her sewing, her re-presentation of her sin and art in Pearl, and her subversive political visions largely originate in that passionate core. So, too, did Hawthorne describe the libidinal origins of his art in his love letters to Sophia. In a remarkably frank passage (remarkable in part because Sophia chose not to excise it), the male writer indulges in a complex sexual metaphor to describe his creative activity: "Dearest, would it be unreasonable for me to ask you to manage my share of the correspondence, as well as your own? - to throw yourself into my heart, and make it gush out with more warmth and freedom than my own

pen can avail to do?"(19) Not only is this letter notable for the implied connection between sexual love and verbal expression, but it suggests as well a cross-gender fantasy in which Sophia plays the part of the penetrative male and Nathaniel plays the part of the receptive female.(20) In fact, throughout the love letters of the late 30s and early 40s, Hawthorne characterizes Sophia as an "inspiring" agent who helps him produce his correspondence. No doubt we are witnessing the recurring mythology of the female muse, but Hawthorne's imagination seems to go beyond this facile cliché to project the possibilities of giving birth to utterance. Here, also, we see a remarkable and revealing correspondence between the adulteress and the male writer, for as her "deviltry" issues forth in a "scarlet letter endowed with life" (p. 102), so does the author bring forth his novel, an animated version of the scarlet letter discovered in the Custom-House. As Zelda Bronstein has cleverly remarked of the novel, "like Pearl, 'The Scarlet Letter' issues from an illicit union of an artist and a public man."(21) In that formulation we find a convergence of the senses of "adulteress" we have explored to this point: the failed mediations of defined vocational and gender roles result in a "corrupt" offspring, the novel itself.

If comparisons between authoring and birthing seem far-fetched, we should recall, first, that "to author" originally meant "to make to grow, originate, promote, increase."(22) While the root suggests insemination, it is useful to notice the connection between writing and procreation. Hawthorne himself called attention to this analogy, most notably in "The Artist of the Beautiful," surely his most important meditation on his role as artist prior to the major novels. In that story the narrator contrasts the "offspring" of the idealistic artist Owen Warland (who is, true to his name, his "own war land"), and that of the carnal couple, Robert and Annie Danforth. In what seems like an authorial regression to his pre-married life, Hawthorne stages a dramatic conflict between these "children," for Owen's "spiritualized" butterfly, the product of an almost autistic artistic sensibility, is crushed by the "natural" child of the married couple: "With a wavering movement, and emitting a tremulous radiance, the butterfly struggled, as it were, towards the infant, and was about to alight upon his finger. But, while it still hovered in the air, the little Child of Strength . . . made a snatch at the marvellous insect, and compressed it in his hand . . . The blacksmith, by main force, unclosed the infant's hand, and found within the palm a small heap of glittering fragments, whence the Mystery of Beauty had fled for ever." (23) It is apparent, then, that in this 1844 story Hawthorne could not imagine a meeting point between the natural and the ideal, the biological and the cultural forms of creation. By contrast, the adulteress represents a fusion of these creative processes. In an obvious sense she incorporates the dichotomies of "The Artist of the Beautiful," for in her giving birth to Pearl she emulates (if illicitly) the creativity of Robert and Annie, while in projecting her social reforms for women she models the idealistic thoughtwork of Owen. However, at a kind of juncture or meeting point between the biological and the cultural, Hester produces her astonishing art: "She had in her nature a rich, voluptuous, Oriental characteristic, - a taste for the gorgeously beautiful, which, save in the exquisite productions of her needle, found nothing else, in all the possibilities of her life, to exercise itself upon" (p. 83). The passage carefully balances "voluptuous" against "exquisite," the passional against the refined, suggesting a more complex understanding of authorial creativity than Hawthorne demonstrated in "The Artist of the Beautiful."(24) Not only did Hawthorne reveal a similar "voluptuousness" in his love letters, but upon the birth of Una he expressed a similar sense of "falling" into the biological, material world, a fortunate fall into the realm of care, human relations, and pain:

I find it is a very sober and serious kind of happiness that springs from the birth of a child. It ought not to come too early in a man's life - not till he has fully enjoyed his youth - for methinks the spirit never can be thoroughly gay and careless again, after this great event. We gain infinitely by the exchange; but we do give up something, nevertheless. As for myself, who have been a trifler preposterously long, I find it necessary at last to come out of my cloud-region, and allow myself to be woven into the sombre texture of humanity. There is no escaping it any longer. I have business on earth now, and must look about me for the means of doing it. (25)

It is as if Hawthorne were announcing his transformation from an Owen Warland into a Hester Prynne, a conversion from the inhabitant of a "cloud-region" to a participant in "the sombre texture of humanity." For

writer and protagonist both, the child is mother to the authentic artist.

To this point I have emphasized what might be termed the "empowering" or "liberating" qualities of Hawthorne's identification with the adulteress. At the very least, Hawthorne sets aside a trivializing self-image as artist in favor of a "devilish" author who "gushes forth" his words. As part of that transformation, Hawthorne identifies with females in general and female writers in particular in their struggle with marginality and silence. At the same time, Hawthorne seems to affirm the carnal origins of his own creativity, ironically dismissing the "shrunken" male artist such as Owen (and one might speculate, Dimmesdale as well). Yet, as Frederick Crews has forcefully observed, "even for the most bounteously passionate of Hawthorne's characters ... art and guilt are intertwined." (26) The novel registers this sense of guilt, for despite Hester's obvious appeal - her heroism, her endurance, her daring - she remains a censured figure, not only by surrounding characters, but by the narrator himself. No doubt this censure issues from Hawthorne's complex filio piety, for not only does he relish the differences between himself as writer of story-books and his ancestors, but he also acknowledges the correspondences.

More importantly for purposes of this analysis, Hawthorne's often critical characterization of Hester leads us to consider additional meanings of "adulterate." What about the process of "adulteration" might cause Hawthorne to feel guilt or shame? Or, pursuing another possibility, might Hawthorne need to adulterate in order to succeed as an artist, especially in his treatment of the adulterous heroine? In its widest application, "to adulterate" means "to render spurious or counterfeit; to falsify, corrupt, debase, especially by the admixture of baser ingredients." (27) Hawthorne lived in a kind of global terror of "adulteration," a dread that he practiced such "counterfeiting" every time he took up the pen. Terence Martin makes a crucial observation when he writes, "'The bane of your life has been self-distrust,' wrote Horatio Bridge to Hawthorne in 1836; and, although he meant that Hawthorne distrusted the quality of his work, he might correctly have added that the primary difficulty derived from a fundamental doubt about the efficacy of fiction. Having decided to be a writer, Hawthorne found it extremely difficult to sustain a belief in the value of his fiction." (28) In part, as Martin has helped us see, Hawthorne battled a common-sense philosophy of art which elevated the "fanciful" and chastised "the imaginative." Though Hester seems to provide a new conception of the romantic artist, at the same time Hawthorne continues to wrestle with these latent demons of artistic guilt. It is at least suggestive that as Hester confronts the community upon the scaffold, the narrator directs the reader's vision to "the unadulterated sunshine" (p. 65), an apt figure for divine judgment, "the light of common day," and perhaps even a Platonic realm beyond this fallen world. Hester's adultery transgresses all three worlds, for she has sinned against her religion, evicted herself from the "common" world, and "fallen" into "the sombre texture of humanity" out of the "cloud-regions" (to quote once again Hawthorne's letter to Hillard). Hawthorne as author also "adulterates" the truths of these three realms, as well as the interior regions of his psyche. His famous "definition" of romance (surely it is more an atmospheric evocation of that genre) suggests a desperate need to "balance" the competing demands of world (the furniture in the room), the heart (the firelight), spirit (the moonlight), and imagination itself (the mirror). He seeks a formula for mixing these ingredients into an attractive, "probable" concoction. But notice that by the very act of "mixing" Hawthorne has succumbed to "adultery," for he must by necessity "falsify" and "corrupt." Hawthorne even confesses to his "crime" as romancer when he suggests that he might have written far better had he "attempted a different order of composition," say a more straightforward narrative of the "veteran shipmaster," "since scarcely a day passed that he did not stir me to laughter and admiration by his marvellous gifts as a storyteller" (p. 37). More generally, Hawthorne remarks, "the wiser effort would have been, to diffuse thought and imagination, through the opaque substance of to-day, and thus to make it a bright transparency" (p. 37). Granted, there would still be an element of adulteration in this latter scheme, but one might say that the artistic "corruption" would be less. That is, in the "wiser effort" the author would reduce the elements under consideration, simplify the task, mix fewer ingredients, and remain truer to the "unadulterated sunshine" of our common world. Certainly the author would be less dangerous, less subversive, less peculiar. This famous caveat by the romancer has struck readers as amusing and perhaps a bit trivial. However, I take the autobiographical subject at his word here, accepting as authentic his sense of failure, his sense of sin, his sense of adulteration.

I suggest, then, that the novel censures Hester in part because her "sin" of "adultery" implicitly recalls for the writer his own sins of authorial "adulteration." But in another sense, a far more cynical and yet self-protecting sense, the author uses adulteration to his advantage, and his female protagonist practices this same cunning art. In addition to the general definition discussed earlier, "adulterate" has traditionally referred to a process of preparing a product for sale by "mixing in baser elements." (29) Unquestionably Hawthorne sensed that he could achieve an authorial "ten strike" by "mixing in the baser elements" of sex, adultery, and ministerial misdeeds. In his study of popular culture during the antebellum era, David S. Reynolds points to common motifs in sensational literature available to the author of *The Scarlet Letter*. Reynolds observes, for instance, the popularity of "the justified pariah" and "the reverend rake." (30) Despite his ennobling claims for his "spiritualized" art, Hawthorne surely knew what he was about when he "mixed in" these lurid character types. But he adulterates in the other direction as well, for having introduced these sensational themes, Hawthorne refuses to exploit their libidinous potential fully. Indeed, carefully balancing desire and repression, curiosity and primness, Hawthorne "adulterates" the story of Hester by questioning her morality and her repentance. Once again, I am convinced Hawthorne as professional writer knew he was playing with fire and chose to temporize. Writing to his publisher James T. Fields prior to the novel's publication, Hawthorne remarked, "'The Scarlet Letter' is rather a delicate subject to write upon, but in the way in which I have treated it, it appears to me there can be no objections on that score." (31) The same "Fanny Fern" (Sarah Parton) praised by Hawthorne for her deviltry provides testimony to just how dangerous adultery could be for antebellum women and writers. We need only consider the debacle of Parton's second marriage, a marital disaster in which the future writer was accused of adultery by her husband, resulting in a divorce. The event was so devastating that Parton refused to discuss it openly in later years. Even more significantly from our present perspective, Parton deleted the entire episode from the otherwise faithfully autobiographical *Ruth Hall*. Adultery not only threatened Parton as a wife and mother but as a writer. (32) Though Hawthorne could not have known of this incident in the life of a contemporaneous writer, it suggests that his caution in representing adultery was well-founded.

We know (and Hawthorne anticipated) that *The Scarlet Letter* was a modest commercial success, and thus the writer's acts of adultery paid off. If we feel inclined to accuse Hawthorne of hypocrisy or acting in bad faith toward his protagonist, we need only recall what Nina Baym has written about Hester's art: "in a society that does not recognize and provide forms for imaginative expression, the artist of the private must always make her statement covertly by distorting the available public forms of expression. The executed product therefore involves a compromise, sometimes a very radical one, between the conception and its final shape. In the interplay between Pearl and the letter, Hawthorne and Hester both wrestle with the problem of bringing together the artist's 'idea,' which is nonsocial and even nonverbal, and the eventual product." (33) To survive in the marketplace, the author/adulteress must compromise, must balance internal vision against external form, subversive drives against communally sanctioned genres. Ironically it is as an adulteress that Hawthorne found the resolution of that conflict between "public man" and "artist," between the financially solvent and imaginatively inspired personae. Once he had entered the marketplace as a scandal, he could exploit the "shame" for financial benefit, an attitude made transparent by his composing "The Custom-House." Indeed, Hawthorne frequently mentioned that it was the satiric sketch which drew the most attention to his text. (34)

But the question remains: by what logic must the adulteress (either Hester or Hawthorne) enter the marketplace at all? Put simply, by transgressing paternalistic norms, the adulteress perforce must pay his/her own way in the world. Once the individual citizen becomes an "author," a creative, self-authenticating individual, he/she must by necessity step outside the protection of "authority." As Hester Prynne exchanged the protective custody of "Chillingworth" for the site of the male gaze, so too must the androgynous author. (35) Hawthorne makes this point eminently clear in "The Custom-House." He places stress upon his felt dependence while employed as surveyor, as in this comment: "while [a Custom-House officer] leans on the mighty arm of the Republic, his own proper strength departs from him. He loses, in an extent proportioned to the weakness or force of his original nature, the capability of self-support" (p. 38). Hawthorne elaborates

upon this theme of financial and emotional dependence by calling attention to the "patriarchal" qualities of his fellow-workers, reminding the reader several times that these ancient personages are the models of dependence and "custom" (that is, conformity to the norms of the Custom-House). Furthermore, the sketch highlights the "unadulterated" quality of its key inhabitants, including the permanent Inspector and the "man of business." In one of the more memorable moments in the text, the narrator cannot repeat often enough the shallow, superficial, spirit-less qualities of the Inspector, who is the "unmixed" image of man as animal: "The careless security of his life in the Custom-House, on a regular income, and with but slight and infrequent apprehensions of removal, had no doubt contributed to make time pass lightly over him. The original and more potent causes, however, lay in the rare perfection of his animal nature, the moderate proportion of intellect, and the very trifling admixture of moral and spiritual ingredients; these latter qualities, indeed, being in barely enough measure to keep the old gentleman from walking on all-fours" (p. 17). If anything, the "man of business" is even more perfectly suited to the scene than "the father of the Custom-House," for "would he forthwith, by the merest touch of his finger, make the incomprehensible as clear as daylight" (p. 24). Set against these "person[s] thoroughly adapted to the situation which [they] held," Hawthorne could only appear an oddity, a disturbing mixture of artist and surveyor, one who ultimately must fall back on his idolatrous art for sustenance because he cannot "adapt" himself to the mind-numbing, spiritless routines of the Custom-House.

Thus Hawthorne the artist was indeed a kind of adulteress, for he transgressed vocational and gender boundaries, acknowledged sexuality as a prime mover in art and culture, confessed to "adulterating" the truth in all its possible manifestations, and made due with an independent source of income closely linked to his "adulterous" behavior. "The Custom-House" remains the eloquent testimony of the outsider who cannot quite accept that status, the liminal writer who chastises his commercial culture while at the same time longing for its emoluments. If the analogy between Hawthorne and Hester still seems far-fetched, I would refer the reader to yet another treatment of the male artist and the "sinful" female, *The Blithedale Romance*. Hawthorne's fourth novel provides a parodic revision of many elements of his earlier prose, especially in his characterization of gender roles and the function of the narrative consciousness.⁽³⁶⁾ It is as if Hawthorne asked himself, "what sort of story would an 'inoffensive man of letters' produce, especially upon confronting a powerful, intelligent, expressive female character such as Zenobia?" The result is the comic, often squeamish, ultimately evasive narrative of *Miles Coverdale*. By contrast, the narrative consciousness of "The Custom-House" and *The Scarlet Letter*, endowed with "deviltry" and made arrogant by justified wrath, produced a classic study of the artist's complex fate in American culture.

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NOTES

1 For the definitive scholarly treatment of this sermonic tradition, see Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1978). Interestingly, in *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1975), Bercovitch has interpreted Hester's story as an eschatological "sermon" (pp. 176-78). As Bercovitch remarks, we might add "America" to the list of referents for the scarlet A, symbolic of Hester's role as prophet in the future glory of the United States.

2 *The Romance in America: Studies in Cooper, Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, and James* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1969), p. 99. See also Nina Baym, *The Shape of Hawthorne's Career* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1976), esp. pp. 142-51; Michael Davitt Bell, "Arts of Deception: Hawthorne, 'Romance,' and *The Scarlet Letter*," in *New Essays on The Scarlet Letter*, ed. Michael J. Colacurcio (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 29-56; Rita K. Gollin, "Again a Literary Man': Vocation and *The Scarlet Letter*," in *Critical Essays on The Scarlet Letter*, ed. David B. Kesterson (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1988), pp. 171-83; and most recently, Jon B. Reed, "'A Letter, - the Letter A': A Portrait of the Artist as Hester Prynne," *ESQ* 36 (1990): 79-107.

3 In "His Folly, Her Weakness: Demystified Adultery in The Scarlet Letter," in *New Essays on The Scarlet Letter*, pp. 137-59, Carol Bensick locates Hawthorne's novel in the tradition of "the novel of adultery," asserting that while *The Scarlet Letter* employs key motifs of that tradition, it violates generic expectations by creating "the happiest possible ending," that is, by allowing the adulteress to live. In *Secrets and Sympathy: Forms of Disclosure in Hawthorne's Novels* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1988), Gordon Hutner comments on Hawthorne's "attraction" to the theme of adultery: "In the novel, Hawthorne makes metaphoric the literal charges against him by enlarging the allegation of political misconduct, which so mortified him, into an indictment significant enough to include the social extent of private transgressions ... Perhaps as a guilty consequence of blinking at Custom House graft, Hawthorne believed his transgression betrayed an image of himself, thus violating Sophia's redemptive love in being untrue to the spirit of bourgeois respectability that he believed had graced his marriage" (pp. 27-28). I do not so much take issue with these readings as build upon them.

4 *Adultery in the Novel: Contract and Transgression* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1979), p. 17.

5 For an excellent discussion of Hester's liminality and her empowerment through that marginal status, see Reed, "A Letter, - the Letter A': A Portrait of the Artist as Hester Prynne," especially pp. 90-93.

6 *The Letters, 1843-1853*, ed. Thomas Woodson, L. Neal Smith, and Norman Holmes Pearson (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1985), p. 264.

7 *The Letters, 1843-1853*, p. 270.

8 *The Letters: 1843-1853*, p. 23.

9 *The Scarlet Letter* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1962), p. 28. Further quotations from this text will be cited parenthetically.

10 *The Rhetoric of American Romance: Dialect and Identity in Emerson, Dickinson, Poe, and Hawthorne* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1985), p. 156.

11 *The Letters, 1843-1853*, pp. 329-30.

12 For the most complete discussion of masculinity and creativity in the antebellum United States, see David Leverenz, *Manhood and the American Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1989), esp. Chapter One, "'I' and 'You' in the American Renaissance," pp. 9-41.

13 *Aesthetic Headaches: Women and a Masculine Poetics in Poe, Melville, and Hawthorne* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1988), p. 8.

14 In an intriguing (though speculative) analysis of Hawthorne's relationship with his daughter Una, T. Walter Herbert, Jr. has aptly described Hawthorne's place in the interstices of his culture, observing that "Hawthorne's unstable fusion of feminism and misogyny is one feature of the interference pattern set up by ceaselessly colliding self-appraisals, the convulsive uncertainties regarding his sexual identity that permanently characterized his emotional life" ("*Hawthorne, Una, and The Scarlet Letter: Interactive Selfhoods and the Cultural Construction of Gender*," *PMLA* 103 [1988]: 285). Milton R. Stern has stated Hawthorne's dilemma in even stronger terms: "Disconnected from the work of the world, like Owen Warland, Hawthorne's *Artist of the Beautiful*, the male writer was too easily disowned as 'unmanly' - a person of vaguely epicene uselessness or detriment to the mainstream of Americans fulfilling God's plan among the important actualities of life" (*Contexts for Hawthorne* [Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1991], p. 40). For a thorough discussion of Hawthorne's ambivalent attitude toward women and his own femininity, see Jennifer Fleischner, "Female Eroticism, Confession, and Interpretation in Nathaniel Hawthorne," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 44 (1988): 514-33.

15 James D. Wallace, "Hawthorne and the Scribbling Women Reconsidered," *American Literature* 62 (1990): 221-22.

16 *The Letters, 1843-1853*, p. 345.

17 *The Letters, 1853-1856*, ed. Thomas Woodson, James A. Rubino, L. Neal Smith, and Norman Holmes Pearson (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1987), p. 308.

18 In *The Romance in America*, Porte has argued, "in a remarkable insight underlying much of his work and clearly anticipating Freud's notions, not only of the sources of art in general, but more particularly of those dreams and fantasies which are the type of romance, Hawthorne suggests that there is a connection between 'sin' (by which he means sexual knowledge and passion) and artistic understanding and power" (pp. 102-03). Joanne Felt Diehl has recently developed this interpretation by focusing on the "family romance" inscribed in the novel. See "Re-Reading The Letter: Hawthorne, the Fetish, and the (Family) Romance" in *New Literary History* (1988): 655-73.

19 *The Letters, 1813-1843*, ed. Thomas Woodson, L. Neal Smith, and Norman Holmes Pearson (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1984), p. 388.

20 In "Hawthorne's Love Letters: Writing and Relationship," *American Literature* 59 (1987), Person comments on this letter:

"[Hawthorne] seems to offer Sophia a kind of 'male drag.' He resigns control over his own interior space and invites her to take his place, speaking and writing in her own voice after reading his thoughts. The imagery he employs, furthermore, is striking for its suggestion of gender reversal. Instead of penetrating Sophia, Hawthorne himself is penetrated and virtually - verbally - impregnated. With Sophia empowered in his 'inmost regions,' he will in effect give birth to a new, more self-expressive kind of writing, gushing out in 'warmth and freedom' as he has not been able to do before." (pp. 223-24)

Later in the same article Person speculates that Hawthorne identifies with Dimmesdale, who is "inspired" by Hester. I would suggest that we pursue the logic of this cross-gender fantasy to its conclusion, considering the possibility that Hawthorne identifies with his powerful heroine and associates Sophia (in part) with Dimmesdale.

21 "The Parabolic Ploys of *The Scarlet Letter*," *American Quarterly* 39 (1987): 206. My analysis of Hawthorne's cross-gender fantasy of birthing is indebted to Bronstein's insight that, for Hawthorne, "procreation figures literary production" (p. 205).

22 *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), p. 143.

23 "The Artist of the Beautiful," in *Tales and Sketches* (New York: Library of America, 1982), p. 930.

24 In *The Shape of Hawthorne's Career*, Baym comments, "At the core of 'The Artist of the Beautiful' is Hawthorne's recognition of how inadequate a figure Owen is for the vocation he has chosen, how timid and shrunken his conception of art. The narrative belies the narrator's claim for Owen's artistic stature and calls for another kind of artistry than his" (p. 111). Thought of in these terms, Owen represents the "minor" artist Hawthorne characterizes in his letters to Hillard and Longfellow, the artist who is deposed and goes on to write his "h-ll-fired story." Significantly, Baym later observes that *The Scarlet Letter* echoes but "goes beyond" "The Artist of the Beautiful" in its characterization of the artist (p. 148), an argument I develop in this section of the article.

25 Letter to G. S. Hillard dated March 24, 1844, in *The Letters, 1843-1853*, pp. 22-23.

26 *The Sins of the Fathers: Hawthorne's Psychological Themes* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), p. 158.

27 *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary*, p. 33.

28 Nathaniel Hawthorne, rev. ed. (Boston: Twayne, 1983), p. 8.

29 *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary* cites nineteenth-century uses of "adulterate" in this sense, including a passage from 1822 which refers to the adulteration of bread with alum and chalk (p. 33).

30 *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), p. 260.

31 *The Letters, 1843-1853*, p. 305.

32 For a thorough discussion of this crisis in Parton's life, see Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984), pp. 264-68.

33 *The Shape of Hawthorne's Career*, pp. 132-33.

34 It is on these grounds that I take issue with Michael T. Gilmore's important analysis of *The Scarlet Letter* in *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1985). Gilmore distinguishes between the artistic endeavors of Hester and Dimmesdale in these terms: "The difference in status and behavior of Hawthorne's principal characters dramatizes the conflict in his mind between two radically opposed conceptions of the artist's role and relation to the public. On one side is the version of the artist represented by Hester, a scorned outcast who makes no compromises with her audience and is indifferent to its approval ... Dimmesdale, who embodies the other side of Hawthorne's thinking, is a type of the artist for whom fame and popularity are everything" (p. 76). Gilmore rightly emphasizes recurring puns on "market-place" within the novel and Hester's reticence in her transactions with the surrounding community. However, he overemphasizes the symbolic import of her scenes in the literal marketplace, arguing that her silence about her lover is writ large throughout the text in her artistic or authorial silence. But as I have just suggested, Hester's relationship with her culture is far more complex than Gilmore allows, for she does extract a modest living for herself and her child through her art. She does so by "accommodating" her passionate designs to the prescribed patterns of her community's needs.

35 For an illuminating analysis of the antebellum literary marketplace and Hawthorne's vexed relationship with it, see Stern, *Contexts for Hawthorne*, "A Marketplace Context," pp. 36-105.

36 See my "Hawthorne's Anti-Romance: Blithedale and Sentimental Culture," *Journal of American Culture* 11:4 (Winter, 1988): 45-52 for an analysis of Hawthorne's parodic tactics, especially in his characterization of Coverdale and the "minor poet's" relationship with Zenobia.

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