A Change of Art: Hester, Hawthorne, and the Service of Love

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Entering the Library of Congress a couple of summers ago, I stopped and opened my purse for the usual security check, only to meet the laughing look of the security guard before me. I looked in my purse. There at the top of the pile was my latest choice in romance novels in all its visually unmistakable glory: the embossed pastel cover, the air-blown rendition of a wind-blown Fabio (it really was Fabio, gracing the cover of a Johanna Lindsey novel). The guard chuckled; clowning around, I pulled the book out so the other guards could see, and we all had a good laugh. Later, I wondered why it had been so hilarious. Would we have laughed over a science fiction novel, a detective novel, or even a tabloid or porn magazine? As it happened, although I was reading Johanna Lindsey, my research in Washington was on the nineteenth-century culture of literary leisure and its relationship to writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne. So the other book in my purse that day was The Scarlet Letter (1850), and not for the first time I thought how ironic it is that the term “romance,” so exalted in nineteenth-century U.S. literary studies, should be so debased in the everyday imagination today. And then I began to think about The Scarlet Letter itself, a tale, after
all, of forbidden lust, of suppressed desire and promised release. Was it only an irony that these disparate fictions shared the same appellation?

Although according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* the words "romance" and "romantic" were used in the nineteenth century to convey the "idealistic character or quality in a love affair," the conflation of this connotation and the word's more common signification of a prose genre—"a fictitious narrative in prose of which the scene and incidents are very remote from those of ordinary life"—was not cemented until the middle of the twentieth century, when a "romance" novel or "romance-thriller" came to signify a story of love and, increasingly, a story of love written by and for women. It was during this same period, roughly in the 1950s and 1960s, that Americanist literary critics became interested in examining and elaborating the generic term "romance" as it was defined by canonical nineteenth-century authors—most centrally, of course, by Hawthorne. Although we might hesitate to burden these semantic events with a simplistic causal relationship, it seems reasonable to speculate that the new scholarly and popular usages of "romance" were defined, at least in part, in reference to each other. In both Richard Chase's seminal elaboration of the American romance and Leslie A. Fiedler's meditations on "the novel in America," it is difficult not to detect the inverted ghosts of the ancestors of Johanna Lindsey and the breathless bosoms and fulfilling passions they depict: the high-art American romance, according to Chase, "express[es] dark and complex truths unavailable to realism"; its authors "fled rather than sought the imaginary full-breasted, fully sexed woman," says Fiedler, and its heroes turned their backs on "sex, marriage, and responsibility."1 And insofar as high scholarly definitions of American "romance" thus invoked an evolving commercial genre of the same name, they also, we might venture, conditioned the mutual dependence of the two categories as markers of cultural knowledge. If it is possible to argue, in other words, that the postwar glorification

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of “romance” as an exalted national form encouraged and depended upon the degradation of “romance” as a popular women’s genre, then it is also possible to contend the reverse, that the continued degradation of popular “romance” assures the enduring consecration of high-art “romance.”

In a review of Sacvan Bercovitch’s The Office of “The Scarlet Letter” (1991) and Lauren Berlant’s The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life (1992), Eric Cheyfitz wonders, half-disdainfully, half-incredulously, at what he calls the “irresistibleness” of Hawthorne—a seeming magnetism that, for all Berlant’s and Bercovitch’s interrogations of “Americanness,” of exceptionalism, of canonicity, draws them inevitably, even ludicrously, back to the great centerpiece among American “classics.” Cheyfitz concludes that “the category of ‘great literature’ is a sign of the political need for the irresistible,” in this case an irresistible national narrative encompassed in the mythology of the “classic American novel.” But I would suggest that The Scarlet Letter also draws critics back to itself, because for all that scholarship of the past twenty years has hacked at the wall between high and low and canonical and noncanonical texts, we remain invested as scholars and as readers in The Scarlet Letter’s generic opposite as the rock-bottom rung on a vast ladder of cultural competence. By the same token, I would venture, questions about gender—particularly about women—retain a vitality and urgency in Hawthorne criticism that they do not retain in, say, Melville or even Stowe criticism; for just as our study of Hawthorne’s “romance” refreshes the derogation of the other “romance,” so too our invocations of Hawthorne and his relationship to women reaffirms the gendered, even weirdly homophobic standards by which we ascribe authority in a postmodern cultural hierarchy whose lowest standard of taste is the story of white heterosexual women’s love and fulfillment.

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3 See, for example, the debate on Hester Prynne, Hawthorne, and feminism recently featured in American Literary History, especially Jamie Barlowe’s essay, which revives the question of Hawthorne and the academic culture of misogyny apparently nurtured by his writing (see Barlowe, “Rereading Women: Hester Prynne-ism and the Scarlet Mob of Scribblers,” American Literary History, 9 [1997], 197-225).
With these rather lengthy meditations in mind, I want to turn to a consideration of *The Scarlet Letter* that sees its irresistibility not just as an effect of its place in the national literary canon but also as an effect of its place as an enduring prop in a broad institution of literary taste that still depends on the debasement of a "women's" genre. Written at a moment of personal transition for Hawthorne and a moment of fluctuation in nineteenth-century scales of aesthetic distinction, *The Scarlet Letter*, as most critics now acknowledge, grapples with and tries to fix aesthetic values primarily by inaugurating its own generic standard, called "romance." Although Hawthorne himself would not have taken the term "romance" to mean an identifiably female genre or a narrative about love, *The Scarlet Letter* nevertheless founds the art of the romancer in direct relation to contemporary tales of female desire. I do not want to suggest that Hawthorne’s relationship to these tales was determined by or predicted his famous belligerence toward the “damned mob of scribbling women,” or even that it was conditioned by Hawthorne’s notoriously conservative ideas about women or feminism. Although I will ultimately suggest that Hawthorne rejects the connotatively womanly narratives he summons, I want to emphasize that his invocation of them is initially an act of empathy and identification. Confronted with a crisis in the cultural value of the literary artist, Hawthorne embraced a mass-circulated narrative of women’s desire in an attempt to establish his own significance as a writer of novels.

When Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote *The Scarlet Letter* and its accompanying autobiographical introduction, “The Custom-House,” in 1849, he had reached what he

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4 Nina Baym, in her *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1984), points out that in the late 1840s the word “romance” did not describe its own specific genre but was virtually interchangeable with “novel.” Hawthorne’s efforts to define “romance”—and thus to specify the distinctiveness of his own fiction practice—suggest an attempt to control his own cultural value. Given the burdens carried by the term “romance” in this essay, and given its unspecified meaning in antebellum cultural discourse, I will use the less loaded term “novel” to signify Hawthorne’s long fiction.
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considered one of the lowest points of his career. Suffering for the past three years from writer’s block, recently dismissed from his office at the Salem custom house, accused in the national newspapers of official misconduct, financially destitute, and for the first time in his life wholly dependent for his livelihood on commercial success as a writer, Hawthorne found himself contemplating what he saw as the modern American artist’s meaninglessness and alienation:

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.5

Writing at a time when elite literary production was undergoing a process of privatization that involved its dislocation from civic authorities and institutions, Hawthorne found in his own dismissal from the custom house an exemplary disenfranchisement. In 1816, only ten years before Hawthorne elected to become a writer, the Boston lawyer and litterateur Francis Calley Gray had exalted “the hand of learning” as a figuratively empowered appendage, crucial to a national body politic of “jurist[s],” “statesm[en]” and “orator[s].”6 In his preface Hawthorne depicted his 1849 exit from the custom house—and by implication the modern artist’s severance from the arteries of national life—as a form of dismemberment. Like the atomized inhabitants of Emerson’s modernity in “The American Scholar” (1837), “members” of society who “have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters,—a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow,”7 Hawthorne finds himself a “DECAPITATED SURVEYOR” (“Custom-House,” p. 43).


A product of the violence done to the national body when its imaginative energies are severed from its "system naturally well balanced" (p. 26), the Hawthorne of "The Custom-House" is a figure of castration. He has been mutilated, rendered impotent. He cannot "go forth a man" (pp. 39–40).  

It is perhaps no surprise that when Hawthorne began to write *The Scarlet Letter* he found an analogy to his own sense of powerlessness, loss, and mutilation in the nineteenth century’s foremost parable of bodily and social ruin, the seduction tale. Still a staple of American sensation fiction and newly renovated in the more contemporary novel of adultery, the seduction tale, with its emotionally charged articulation of female vulnerability and displacement, provided Hawthorne with a means of making legible his own dislocation and loss. As many readers of *The Scarlet Letter* have noted, Hester Prynne—ruined, abandoned, and forced to live out her life on the negligible edges of her society—is manifestly offered as an analog to the Hawthorne of the preface, his illegitimacy as an artist commensurate with hers as a fallen woman. Hawthorne’s identification

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of himself with his ruined heroine both recasts the modern artist’s dilemma in recognizable form as a bitter cross to bear and, perhaps more important, allows Hawthorne to entertain a possible resolution to the artist’s plight. Through Hester and her affective powers as the pivot in the seduction tale’s universe of romance, intimacy, and sentiment, Hawthorne attempts to imagine a form of aesthetic value founded not on the “offices” and institutions of the state but on an alternative, overtly private source of “consecration.” And yet while Hawthorne’s identification of himself with Hester allows him to explore alternatives to early republican authority and its state-sanctioned voices, it also provides an even greater reward in that moment when Hawthorne, as an artist, repudiates both his heroine and the genre that inspired her. The grounds on which he does so are suggestive. Hawthorne’s construction of the seduction novel and its protagonist coincides with contemporary descrip-


11 The words “office” and “consecration” are, of course, Hawthorne’s. The first word (or variations of it), given attention in Sacvan Bercovitch’s The Office of "The Scarlet Letter" (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1991), is used repeatedly by Hawthorne in “The Custom-House” (see pp. 12, 14, 29, 30) to signify not just his “office” in the custom house but the whole domain of state authority, which includes Surveyor Pue. The second, “consecration,” which Hester utters in the forest scene (“What we did had a consecration of its own” [Scarlet Letter, p. 195]), refers overtly to their private sanction of adultery. But it is significant that the language of sanctity regularly informs Hawthorne’s discussions of himself as an artist. He refers to the old manse, where he composed his last artistic ventures before The Scarlet Letter, as a “sacred” precinct (see Hawthorne, “The Old Manse,” in Mosses from an Old Manse, ed. William Charvat and Fredson Bowers, et al., vol. 10 of Centenary Edition [Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1974], p. 4). Hawthorne says in a letter to Longfellow that poets belong to a “priesthood” whose “sanctity” must be respected (see Hawthorne, letter to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 5 June 1849, in The Letters, 1843–1853, ed. Thomas Woodson, L. Neal Smith, and Norman Holmes Pearson, vol. 16 of Centenary Edition [Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1985], p. 270). Private “consecration,” in other words, seems to play in opposition to public “office,” each designating a divergent source of artistic legitimacy. It is worth adding that in this essay I exploit the loose convergence of Pierre Bourdieu’s language with Hawthorne’s, in Bourdieu’s discussions of institutions of aesthetic distinction. See, for example, Bourdieu, The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1993), p. 112, where Bourdieu refers to “agencies of consecration.”
tions of the subversive, countercultural energies produced by the “unofficial” voices of those persons excluded from civic and political life—in this case, of course, women. But if the exiled Hawthorne perforce casts his lot with those who have, as it were, no “office,” then he also, I will suggest, finally carves up the domain of the dispossessed, formulating grounds of distinction and exclusion among the authorial “citizen[s] of somewhere else” (“Custom-House,” p. 44). Creating and finally severing his metaphoric and affective link with Hester and her generic antecedents, Hawthorne discovers terms of power and integrity for a newly masculinized American artist, one whose identity as a “romancer” is premised on the rejection of narratives of women’s love and desire.

The idea that Hawthorne initially developed Hester as an analog to his autobiographical persona in “The Custom-House” is suggested by the many markers that map their mutuality. Most obviously, both Hester and the Hawthorne-narrator wear the scarlet letter, and for both of them it produces the same distinct sensations. Having come across the letter in Surveyor Pue’s parcel of writings, the Hawthorne of “The Custom-House” describes how his “eyes fastened themselves upon the old scarlet letter, and would not be turned aside”: “I happened to place it on my breast. It seemed to me,... it seemed to me, then, that I experienced a sensation not altogether physical, yet almost so, as of burning heat; and as if the letter were not of red cloth, but red-hot iron. I shuddered and involuntarily let it fall upon the floor” (pp. 31–32). In the novel, when Chillingworth lays his finger on the letter it “seem[s] to scorch into Hester’s breast, as if it had been red-hot” (p. 73). The Hawthorne of “The Custom-House” is an outcast, flung off like a “nestling” by the maternal America of state patronage (p. 5); in the novel, Hester’s badge has “the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and inclosing her in a sphere by herself” (p. 54). Hawthorne responds to his bleak situation by “dressing up” (p. 33) the tale of the scarlet letter; Hester responds to hers with “embroidery and fantastic flourishes” on the letter itself (p. 53). Hawthorne is exposed to public shame and ridicule; Hester is exposed to public shame and ridicule. Hawthorne’s ancestors would have condemned him for the
generative acts that he commits as an artist; those same ancestors condemn Hester for another sort of generative act.12

While Hester is Hawthorne’s attempt to figure the modern artist’s plight in the culturally familiar rhetoric of fallen womanhood, her particular qualities also suggest that she is intended to be something more than just the modern artist’s duplicate. She appears to be Hawthorne’s attempt to reimagine the modern artist as a figure of power and potential in spite of his debilitating severance from national life. Hawthorne, I have noted, had trouble presenting himself as a figure of potential or integrity in the months following his dismissal from the custom house. Writing to George Stillman Hillard to ask for his help in finding employment, Hawthorne stressed his own helplessness and abasement: “I shall not stand upon my dignity; that must take care of itself. . . . Do not think anything too humble to be mentioned to me.”13 In “The Custom-House” Hawthorne depicts himself as a hapless, fragmented figure, his creativity “suspended and inanimate” within him (p. 26). Hester, by contrast, is a figure of strength, fecundity, and wholeness. When she steps out of the prison she “repels” the hand of the town-beadle “by an action marked with natural dignity and force of character and step[s] into the open air, as if by her own free-will” (Scarlet Letter, p. 52). “Thou art strong,” Dimmesdale tells her (p. 196); and later he tells her: “twine thy strength about me!” (p. 253).

Hester standing on the scaffold with Pearl in her arms is a pattern of iconic integrity: “the image of Divine Maternity, which so many illustrious painters had vied with one another to represent” (p. 56). And not only is Hester typified by “state and dignity” (p. 53) in the face of tribulation, but her very alienation is a source of vitality and creativity. When she steps onto the scaffold, “Those who had before known her, and had expected to behold her dimmed and obscured by a disastrous cloud, were astonished, and even startled, to perceive how her

12 Ken Egan goes so far as to suggest 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’” (“The Adulteress in the Market-Place: Hawthorne and The Scarlet Letter,” Studies in the Novel, 27 [1995], 27).

beauty shone out, and made a halo of the misfortune and igno-
miny in which she was enveloped" (p. 53). The narrator overtly
condemns Hester’s sin, but the emphasis in these initial chap-
ters is not on Hester’s morality but on the creative energy pro-
duced by her exile and isolation, an energy manifested not only
in the “gorgeous luxuriance” (p. 53) of the letter that she em-
broiders while shut away from the world but also in the coher-
ent, implicitly empowered self that she fashions in the face of
her community’s reproval.

Crucial to the energy and animation that define Hester—
and that redefine the modern artist—are her generic proper-
ties as a victim of seduction. Hawthorne’s choice of the seduc-
tion story to represent his own loss and alienation accords with
the political and moral agendas of that genre as they had devel-
oped by the late 1840s. The seduction tale had long fallen out
of favor in elite literary circles, but stories of women’s sexual
weakness and exploitation remained a staple in popular media,
where they functioned as allegories for the witnessing, articula-
tion, and protestation of various forms of social or psychic in-
jury and subordination.14 The majority of antebellum seduc-
tion tales, perhaps best represented by the cautionary literature
of the 1830s and 1840s and, later, by the potboilers of writers
like E.D.E.N. Southworth, recapitulated eighteenth- and early-
nineteenth-century seduction narratives by exploring gender
inequities and the concomitant temptations and abuses to
which women in general were subject. But by the late 1840s

14 See James D. Hart, The Popular Book: A History of America’s Literary Taste (New York:
Oxford Univ. Press, 1950). Hart notes that by “the opening decades of the nineteenth
century” the sentimental seduction tale, as encapsulated by Charlotte Temple and its se-
quel, Lucy Temple (1828), had become fodder for “an unsophisticated class of readers”
(p. 66). By the 1840s the seduction tale was supplanted in parlor and intellectual cir-
cles by the poems and novels of Walter Scott and his American followers, and by the lit-
erature of fashion inspired by Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s Pelham (1828) (see Hart, p. 78).
But narratives of fallen womanhood did not disappear: they were kept alive for elite
readers in the novel of adultery and in poems such as Thomas Hood’s “The Bridge of
Sighs” (1843), and, more important, they became a staple of cheap, mass-circulated
fiction and reform and cautionary literature. See David S. Reynolds, Beneath the Ameri-
can Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville (New York:
Is the Worst of Men: Sexual Aggression in Nineteenth-Century Sensational Novels,”
narratives of women's sexual exploitation were also elaborating a wider range of ills. Class inequalities and abuses in the expanding urban centers of the Northeast were allegorized in tales of rape and enforced prostitution in the "metropolitan" novels of writers such as George Lippard and George Thompson.\textsuperscript{15} Slave narratives and abolitionist writing encapsulated the injustice and perversions of slavery in scenes of coercive sex, made graphically available to a mass audience by Harriet Beecher Stowe's \textit{Uncle Tom's Cabin} (1851–52).\textsuperscript{16}

While antebellum seduction literature exposed a landscape of injustice and dispossession—a landscape that for Hawthorne included the newly dispossessed artist—its seduction heroine offered important opportunities for fantasies of compensation and redress. Late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century American seduction tales like \textit{Charlotte Temple} (1791) or Washington Irving's "The Pride of the Village" (1819) were at pains to stress the disastrous psychic and bodily effects of illegitimate sex on women; indeed, Irving's heroine is "hasten[ed] to the tomb" by the sole agency of impure words.\textsuperscript{17} While later seduction narratives continued to insist on the cataclysmic quality of women's loss of innocence, they frequently posed this cataclysm as potentially galvanic, at once tragic and liberating: they entertained the options flung open to women with nothing to lose. In sensation fiction, premarital sex could transform the shy virgin into what David Reynolds in \textit{Beneath the American Renaissance} describes as "a fantasy figure of vindictive violence" (p. 363). No longer, properly speaking, women, the victims of seduction could operate outside the boundaries of white,

\textsuperscript{15} Fiedler, in \textit{Love and Death}, draws attention to Lippard's use of seduction, "the seduction of a poor girl by a pampered gentleman" (p. 245), as the central allegory in what Lippard called "the advancement of social reform" (quoted in Fiedler, p. 245).

\textsuperscript{16} Although readers have long debated the politics of sentimental seduction literature—as to whether it undermined or merely reinforced white bourgeois values—it is not within the scope of this essay to engage in these debates. My interest here is rather in the lowly place of seduction literature in the 1840s cultural hierarchy and in what was, at the time, its widely perceived affiliation with projects that inveighed against social injustice.

middle-class gender expectation. As one of these lost souls tells her nefarious lover in Ned Buntline's *The G'kals of New York* (1850): "You betrayed me, and knowing me a woman, absurdly imagined that I would tamely submit to the outrage and the shame, and never dream of rising in my strength and avenging my lost honor and my shame." What Buntline refers to as the "strength" of the woman with nothing to lose is likewise a focal theme in Stowe's depiction of the slave Cassy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Cast out of the realms of womanly propriety by enforced concubinage, Cassy is free to act with vengeful aggression: she torments her master, Simon Legree, and organizes her escape from a plantation—and by implication from a whole system of servitude and abasement—that Legree supposes to be inescapable.

In summoning the apparatus of the seduction tale, in other words, Hawthorne was also free to summon what by the late 1840s had become its compensatory conventions. These involved not just the narrative of the downtrodden empowered by oppression and woe, which so clearly adumbrates the characterization of Hester, but also a universe in which social and political abuses were ultimately resolved by the palliative laws of sympathy. As Elizabeth Barnes puts it, "sentimental fiction works out sociopolitical questions and conflicts through a gendered body—the woman's." It also relocates those questions to the gendered terrain of sentiment, postulating a world where sociopolitical conflicts are transformed into problems of feeling and where the resolution of such conflicts involves a change of heart. Thus a novel like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, although it critiques a specific political and social institution, does so on terrain that "stands beyond the boundaries of political affairs," that is represented "as domestic, 'natural,' and apolitical" (*States of Sympathy*, p. 10). The solution that Stowe's novel can offer to the problem of slavery, consequently, is the apolitical one of revolutionized emotion: Americans, according to Stowe, must en-

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sure that they "feel right." Similarly, Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* conjures class and political conflicts in its seduction narrative: the upper-class Montraville, who preys on the genteel but impoverished Charlotte; the Frenchwoman, La Rue, whose republican license undoes Charlotte’s Anglo-American innocence. Yet the resolution that Rowson offers has nothing to do with class or politics. It has to do with the heart. Both of Charlotte’s abusers are punished by feelings of guilt: they drop dead of remorse, prey to what the sentimental genre hypothesizes as a natural human propensity to sympathy and goodness whose perversion destroys the individual.20

In *States of Sympathy* Barnes rudimentarily highlights the extent to which *The Scarlet Letter* draws on such conventions. Hawthorne, she points out, stresses that Hester as a fallen woman creates and moves in the medium of feeling: “the scarlet letter Hester wears—a symbol of her experience—becomes the vehicle through which she is able to sympathize with others: ‘Walking to and fro, with those lonely footsteps, in the little world with which she was outwardly connected, it now and then appeared to Hester . . . that the scarlet letter had endowed her with a new sense. . . . that it gave her a sympathetic knowledge of the hidden sin in other hearts’” (*States of Sympathy*, p. 10).21 But Hester’s newfound sensitivity to suffering and frailty is merely one aspect of Hawthorne’s comprehensive depiction in the first part of the novel of a reality premised on the norms of sentiment—a depiction that both glosses and proposes to alter the modern artist’s marginality. Like the magically opposite, reflected world in Hawthorne’s mirror in “The Custom-House,” Hester’s tale reads like a magically opposite version of Hawthorne’s own, a retelling of the male artist’s dilemma in the feminine form of sentimental narrative. The male artist figure in “The Custom-House” is mirrored by the female seduction heroine in *The Scarlet Letter*. The context of her “dismissal” is not political and sociohistorical, like his, but psychological and sexual, the result of a crime committed where nineteenth-century

21 For the passage that Barnes quotes, see *Scarlet Letter*, p. 86.
women were thought to commit their crimes: behind closed doors. Her masterpiece is not a novel inspired by the letter A, but rather a child inspired, as it were, by what the A signifies. And, most important, her hope for legitimation, rather than residing in a dilapidated state “edifice” (“Custom-House,” p. 5), resides in her dilapidated lover, Dimmesdale. The compensatory dimensions of this remapping of the male artist’s dilemma onto the grid of the sentimental seduction tale are illuminated by the role that Dimmesdale plays. As pastor, community leader, and Hester’s brief former partner, Dimmesdale appears to be analogous to the custom house and Uncle Sam, an embodiment of the national and social order from whose embrace and recognition the artist has been banished. But Dimmesdale is also manifestly distinct from that aspect of society, represented by modern Salem and Puritan Boston, that determines the artist’s negligibility. Rather, as his inordinate sensitivity and secret passions suggest, Dimmesdale seems to represent a deeply private, desiring, and unacknowledged element of the social order—one that the artist, for all his impotence in the public realm, is able to tap. In this sense, the novel poses the artist’s resuscitation and even his possible re-legitimation as synonymous with his infiltration of society’s personalized selves.

For the autobiographical Hawthorne of “The Custom-House,” caught in a contemporary moment between old and new standards of cultural authority, this exemplary interaction between artist and audience perforce remains unrepresented, a prospect conjectured for a future that the narrator cannot yet have encountered. But in The Scarlet Letter this is not the case. With the exiled artist transformed into a beautiful fallen woman and the social order transformed into her secretly yearning and divided lover, the artist’s revitalization becomes a conventional possibility. Hawthorne goes out of his way to describe Hester’s fortitude and to connect her to a sorority of empowered fallen women; but equally important to our perception of Hester’s power and energy is her part in what Eric Sandeen long ago argued was essentially a love story.22 That is, our impression of Hester’s strength resides to a great extent in our impression

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of her enormous effect on Dimmesdale, and, more important, in our impression of her potential ability to alter her state of alienation through a quasi-legitimate erotic and familial liaison with him. While the Hawthorne of “The Custom-House,” in his own relations with his audience, cannot dramatize this liaison of author and personal self, he nevertheless projects it forward onto the reception of his novel. Coming upon Surveyor Pue’s bundle of papers, Hawthorne plays out the reception of his novel by analogy: The Scarlet Letter will be to his audience what Hester is to Dimmesdale, a power that burns into the heart of the receptive self.

The transcription of his story onto the grid of sentimental romance, then, enables Hawthorne to contemplate ways in which the marginalization of the literary artist in American culture might yield its own standard of legitimacy, one that locates its conventions in the manipulation of what at this period were increasingly personalized bodies and emotions. The sentimental seduction tale proves amenable to Hawthorne’s fantasy of legitimacy partly because it had long thematized and hoped pedagogically to effect a similar manipulation. Critics of sentimental seduction fiction emphasize that it not only depicts a world governed by laws of feeling, but also assumes its own sympathetic interaction with its readers. In Janet Todd’s words, “in all forms of sentimental literature, there is an assumption that life and literature are directly linked, not through any notion of a mimetic depiction of reality but through the belief that the literary experience can intimately affect the living one” (Sensibility, p. 4). Sentimental literature is founded on a faith in “the natural goodness of humanity.” Its writers seek to inspire in their readers the same affective responses that they depict in their characters, on the principle that readers moved to tears or outrage will be sympathetically energized, suddenly more open to their own benevolent urges. In this sense, sympathy in sentimental fiction works in a way similar to the sentimental genre itself: just as sentimental literature domesticates the po-


24 See Todd, Sensibility, p. 7.
litical and renders the historical timeless and “natural,” so too
sympathy as a moral energy bypasses institutional authorities
and conventional disciplinary structures in order to work in the
deply intimate realm of personal impulse. Because the tradi-
tional seduction tale already purports to work in the realm of
the personal, Hawthorne finds in it an appropriate vehicle for
imagining a privatized aesthetic orthodoxy available to the art-
ist dispossessed of public status.

But while in the first part of his novel Hawthorne sets up
the sentimental seduction paradigm as the source of a solution
to his own dilemma as an artist, in the second half he foils its la-
tent possibilities. This disqualification has less to do with Haw-
thorne’s refusal to let Dimmesdale and Hester live happily-ever-
after (which in the context of the traditional seduction story
would be a stretch in any case) than it does with Hawthorne’s
more material repudiation of his own metaphoric link with Hes-
ter. Hawthorne does not, in this process, reject the realm of the
personal as the artist’s new source of power and legitimacy. But
the way in which he dissociates himself from Hester divides the
realm itself into a hierarchy of male and female authorities and
masculine and feminine genres, subordinating the conventions
of love to the art of the “romancer.” It is in this division, rather
than in his initial metaphors of identification, that Hawthorne
finally locates the reempowerment of the American artist, an
artist whose authority in the realm of the personal now issues
from his gender.

When Hester goes to Governor Bellingham’s house in
chapter 7, Hawthorne still characterizes her as an analog to
his “Custom-House” persona. Like him, she contemplates the
deep verge of a mirror, whose aesthetic magic strikes her with
its “breadth and intensity of effect” (Scarlet Letter, p. 106). But a
few chapters later, in the chapter fittingly titled “Another View
of Hester,” Hester’s development as a character over a seven-
year period suddenly projects her beyond the static, autobi-
ographical moment of her author’s story. Distanced temporally
from his heroine, the Hawthorne-narrator now approaches her
speculatively, conjecturing as to the causes of her “sad transfor-
mation” and offering not a metaphoric revelation of his own
predicament but what “seemed” to be viable “theor[ies]” of
Hester’s predicament (pp. 163–64). The distinction that Hawthorne makes here between Hester’s subjectivity and the narrator’s is accompanied by a new emphasis on gender, as opposed to sin or alienation, as the determining condition of Hester’s character. Of paramount importance to the narrator’s now speculative gaze is how alienation has changed Hester as a woman: the disappearance of her “rich and luxuriant hair” (p. 163), the stern austerity and “marble coldness” of her once attractive face (p. 164). Although the narrator remarks that “some attribute had departed from [Hester], the permanence of which had been essential to keep her a woman” (p. 163), in this chapter Hawthorne also hypothesizes an essential female-ness that transcends Hester’s loss of femininity. He may grant that “there seemed to be no longer any thing in Hester’s face for Love to dwell upon; nothing in Hester’s form, though majestic and statue-like, that Passion would ever dream of clasping in its embrace; nothing in Hester’s bosom, to make it ever again the pillow of Affection” (p. 163); but stripped of these attributes, Hester is able to contemplate fundamental political questions concerning “the whole race of womanhood” (p. 165). This degree of speculation affects her as a woman, for “a tendency to speculation, though it may keep woman quiet, as it does man, yet makes her sad”; to change her social lot, “woman” must contemplate changing even her “ethereal essence” (p. 165). No longer characterized as exemplary of a potentially universal state of social isolation, Hester is an example of besieged “womanhood” pitted against “the very nature of the opposite sex” (p. 165). However salutary to many readers today, Hester’s contemplation of nineteenth-century feminist questions has the effect of isolating her particular marginality as a woman from Hawthorne’s as a writer.

The content of the chapters that intervene between the “view” of Hester at Governor Bellingham’s mansion and this “other” view is not unrelated to her emphatic gendering. In-

25 Larry J. Reynolds likewise notes that Hester undergoes a transformation in the middle of the novel and that she now seems exempt from the narrator’s sympathies, though for Reynolds the transformation is characterized by her sudden adoption of 1848–49 revolutionary politics (see “The Scarlet Letter and Revolutions Abroad,” American Literature, 57 [1985], 45–67).
stead of focusing on Hester and her predicament as a fallen woman, chapters 9 to 12 leave her in order to focus exclusively on the growing intensity of the relationship between Dimmesdale and Chillingworth. Addressing the homoerotic element in *The Scarlet Letter* in his astute reading, Scott S. Derrick underlines the extent to which Chillingworth in these chapters “surfaces as [Hester’s] rival in the narrative for Dimmesdale’s affections, providing domestic comforts for Dimmesdale in what Hawthorne describes as a substitute for matrimony” (“A Curious Subject,” p. 317). Not only do these chapters temporarily abandon the heterosexual love story, but they also differently sexualize the seduction narrative that structures it, casting Chillingworth in the role of seducer—his friendship with Dimmesdale depicted as a gradual, sadistic assault—and Dimmesdale in the role of hapless, unknowing victim. And just as Hawthorne’s identification with Hester has its source in a crisis of masculine authorial identity, so too, apparently, does his gesture of severance from her. The quasi-erotic, sadomasochistic relationship between Dimmesdale and Chillingworth provides for Derrick the evidence of a kind of “decomposition” or crisis in Hawthorne’s identity, a crisis that Derrick locates in the enormous pressure that Hawthorne felt at this point in his career to succeed as an author and, by extension, as a man.26 As if repudiating or undermining Hawthorne’s conscious investment in his own fulfillment of proper manhood through successful authorship, chapters 9 to 12 evince “a kind of textual unconscious” (“A Curious Subject,” p. 319), veering from the heterosexual love story of Hester and Dimmesdale to dwell defiantly on the illicit, unmasculine erotic interaction between two men.

The location of Hawthorne’s sudden shift in focus, I would add, is not insignificant: it occurs precisely at a point when Hawthorne—who, as modern critics agree, had difficulty with the plot requirements of the long fiction form—needed to map a new direction for the relationship between Hester and Dimmesdale following their encounter at Governor Bellingham’s mansion. I would argue that the pressure of this requirement, and possibly the prospect of a stall in the love story,

erupted into a defiance of the heterosexual love plot altogether. In any case, insofar as these chapters do register a crisis in masculine authorial identity for Hawthorne, this crisis manifests itself not just in a defiance of heterosexual narrative conventions (as Derrick suggests) but also in an aggressive disidentification with the female embodiment of alienated creativity fantasized in the first part of the novel. It is now Dimmesdale who emerges in the story as the creative intelligence, who in his night “vigils” sees “visions” and stares at mirrors, who effectively slips into Hester’s place as a surrogate for the “Custom-House” Hawthorne. To the extent that Dimmesdale takes on the role of seduction victim—assaulted, isolated, even (in the tradition of Charlotte Temple) physically debilitated—the equation of creativity and alienation remains untouched, but it now excludes the seduction heroine.

Following the second scaffold scene, Hawthorne abandons Dimmesdale as surrogate artist and returns to the heterosexual love plot with a vengeance, reuniting Hester and Dimmesdale in the wildly romantic forest scene. But augured in “Another View of Hester” is another view of the love story. It is important to understand that when Hawthorne severs his link to his heroine he does not at the same time alter the terms of her strength and authority. On the contrary, the Hester who meets with Dimmesdale in the forest to argue for the legitimacy of private consecrations is logically more powerful for being more of a woman, since her power to entice and thus to resolve the love plot through a new liaison with Dimmesdale only intensifies as she becomes more representative of womanhood itself. In the forest scene, accordingly, Hawthorne returns to an emphasis on Hester’s womanly bloom and luxuriance, underlining in her attractiveness her potential to actualize her romantic desires. But Hawthorne highlights Hester’s power as a woman in the forest scene in order to highlight a power more substantial than hers. The distinction established between the male author and his heroine in “Another View of Hester” now provides the condition for Hawthorne’s splintering of their two authorities, a move that enables him to stage the subordination of Hester’s authority to his own.
Virtually since the publication of *The Scarlet Letter*, readers have taken note of this subordination by pointing up Hawthorne's exacerbating and painful circumscription of the creative energies released in Hester's long-awaited meeting with Dimmesdale. Richard H. Brodhead identifies this circumscription as a fierce containment of Hester's vitality:

> these energies are fiercely contained . . . first by Dimmesdale, who uses the vigor Hester inspires in him to re-deliver their love to the authority of the old law; then by Hester, who chooses to re-subject herself to the badge of censure she had removed in this scene; and throughout by the book itself, which, on every re-reading, always releases Hester's assertion as a living possibility, then always forbids it to become an achieved reality.\(^{27}\)

As Brodhead's comments suggest, Hawthorne's containment of Hester consists of his staging of her submission not just to the letter she wears but to "the book itself."\(^{28}\)

If the love story is not the less powerful to its readers for this rhetorical move, what is compromised is Hester's part as an agent in the story that follows. The forest scene, accordingly, inaugurates the spectacle of enforced and reactive passivity that characterizes Hester for the remainder of the novel. Arriving at the marketplace for the election procession, Hester in her gray gown appears to "fade personally out of sight and outline," while her face has "the frozen calmness of a dead woman's features" (*Scarlet Letter*, p. 226). Such metaphors of stasis adumbrate Hester's helplessness in these final scenes. She moves through events "as if impelled by inevitable fate, and against her strongest will"; she confronts the "dark and grim countenance of an inevitable doom" (pp. 252, 245). Hester's subordination to the powers of "fate" and "doom"—to the force of a kind of will more powerful than she is—is matched by a similar circumscription of the energies of love and sentiment that continue to define her. Whereas earlier Hawthorne had posed


\(^{28}\) Similarly, in *Love and Death* Fiedler notes: "[Hawthorne] can attribute prophetic anticipations of female discontent to Hester, but there is nothing for her to do with them inside the scene Hawthorne has imagined for her" (p. 222).
Hester’s affective interaction with Dimmesdale as a source of her personal and aesthetic strength, he now stages the inefficacy of affect, the inability of love and sympathy—of Hester’s sphere—to transcend the force of his own narrative purpose. Nowhere is this contest between romance and romance—between love and what Hawthorne now presents as the ruthless requirements of “fate”—more starkly staged than at the moment when Hester sees Dimmesdale pass by her in the election-day procession. Hester is struck by how “remote” he seems, and how “utterly beyond her reach”:

One glance of recognition, she had imagined, must needs pass between them. She thought of the dim forest, with its little dell of solitude, and love, and anguish, and the mossy tree-trunk, where, sitting hand in hand, they had mingled their sad and passionate talk with the melancholy murmur of the brook. How deeply had they known each other then! And was this the man? She hardly knew him now! He, moving proudly past, enveloped, as it were, in the rich music, with the procession of majestic and venerable fathers; he, so unattainable in his worldly position, and still more so in that far vista of his unsympathizing thoughts, through which she now beheld him! Her spirit sank with the idea that all must have been a delusion, and that, vividly as she had dreamed it, there could be no real bond betwixt the clergyman and herself. And thus much of woman was there in Hester, that she could scarcely forgive him,—least of all now, when the heavy footstep of their approaching Fate might be heard, nearer, nearer, nearer!—for being able so completely to withdraw himself from their mutual world; while she groped darkly, and stretched forth her cold hands, and found him not. (pp. 239–40)

Hawthorne’s staging of Hester’s ineffectiveness as a series of battles fought and lost with “Fate”—with, effectively, a force of narrative will that is stronger than she is—suggests the extent to which he premises his resuscitation as an artist on his triumph over her, on his display of an authorial mastery that relentlessly subordinates the sentimental conventions that initially belonged to both of them. Hawthorne underscores this subordination, both at the end of “The Custom-House” and in the “Conclusion” of The Scarlet Letter, through a final series
of distinctions between male author and suffering heroine.\textsuperscript{29} Whereas the novel had opened with gestures of identification that posed the identity of seduction heroine and disenfran-
chised artist, Hawthorne at this point takes pains to mark their difference—a difference located in their respective relationships to sentiment. While he had earlier posed sentiment as the medium of the artist’s reempowerment, Hawthorne now constructs it as a medium of limitation. This is not to say that Hawthorne rejects sentiment or the intensity of its effects; rather, he emphasizes that his own relationship to it consists of strategic manipulation, of control rather than identification. If he once again draws comparisons between himself and Hester, then those comparisons now suggest that his supremacy as an artist lies in his ability to marshal sympathy and love, feeling and pain, without in the least succumbing to their effects.

While “The Custom-House” began by depicting Hawthorne in various states of vulnerability and fragmentation, it ends by emphasizing his aesthetic objectivity and control. Having picked himself up by the bootstraps and returned from his reveries to take up a position of defiance, the narrator at the end exercises his “intellectual machinery” (p. 43). He majestically exempts himself from the “world” and steps into a “realm of quiet” from where Salem (and the custom house), as he says, “ceases to be a reality of my life” (p. 44). The “world,” once the scene of the artist’s dispossession, is now insubstantial, turned by the artist’s “fancy” into a play of “shadows” and a “haze of memory” in “cloud-land” (p. 44). In turn, this assertion of the transformative power of his aesthetic will propels the narrator into a contemplation of his own potential greatness: “the scribbler of bygone days” is insignificant now, but he will one day be “triumphant,” “transport[ed]” (p. 45), a landmark in the mem-

\textsuperscript{29} In “Hawthorne Versus Hester: The Ghostly Dialectic of Romance in The Scarlet Letter,” \textit{Texas Studies in Literature and Language}, 24 (1982), 54–55, Daniel Cotton offers a cogent outline of these differences in order to make a point similar to mine: that Hawthorne’s purpose is to depict the narrator’s opposition and superiority to Hester. For Cotton, however, at stake is the narrator’s “deliverance” from the fate of his characters, a fate bound up with their bodiedness—in Hester’s case, her affiliation with “Nature,” sexuality, and maternity, or what Cotton calls “the living nature represented by Pearl” (p. 59).
ory of future generations. Claudia Durst Johnson notes the sexual potency suggested in Hawthorne's closing reference to his own "Town Pump!" ("Custom-House," p. 45); she also cites lines from Hawthorne's earlier short story "A Rill from the Town-Pump" (1835), which features the pump "talking through its nose": "Here comes a pretty young girl of my acquaintance, with a large stone-pitcher for me to fill. May she draw a husband, while drawing her water, as Rachel did of old. Hold out your vessel, my dear! There it is, full to the brim." If modern critics are correct in assuming that Hawthorne began "The Custom-House" at some point midway into the composition of The Scarlet Letter, then it is also possible to conjecture that his experience writing the novel enabled him to offer the preface as a drama of recovery, one that begins with the artist's powerlessness and marginality and ends with assertions of victory and control.

These same assertions pepper the "Conclusion" to The Scarlet Letter, but with the difference that Hawthorne's strengths as an artist are displayed through what he now offers as Hester's weaknesses. Hawthorne returns in the "Conclusion" to his depiction of Hester as a renegade artist: "Hester was embroidering a baby-garment, with such a lavish richness of golden fancy as would have raised a public tumult, had any infant, thus appareled, been shown to our sombre-hued community" (p. 262). She is offered as a kind of fallen "apostle" for a "brighter period" that transcends Puritan law (p. 263). But this final tribute to Hester as an artist also contrasts sharply with Hawthorne's closing tribute to himself. Like Hawthorne in "The Custom-House," Hester leaves the scene of her isolation, but while Hawthorne takes up residence in an abstracted realm of peace and moves off into a triumphant future, Hester cannot help but return to the "dreary and desolate" (p. 262) scene of her suffering. The Hawthorne-artist transcends the "reality" of Salem by an act of aesthetic mastery, by turning it into "haze" and "shadows" as he declares himself "a citizen of somewhere else" ("Custom-House," p. 44). Hester just as clearly succumbs to "reality": she returns from "that unknown region" because in

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Boston is her only “real life” (*Scarlet Letter*, p. 262). Although Hester’s motives for returning to Boston are never made explicit, her inability to relinquish the scarlet letter—the symbol not just of her suffering but also of her bond to the man whose body vibrated in unconscious sympathy with hers—suggests that Hester’s return has its logic in what Hawthorne in the “Conclusion” poses as a debilitating thralldom to sympathy itself. The Hawthorne-artist can move through and beyond his burning communion with the scarlet letter; he can “erase its deep print out of [his] brain” (p. 259). Although his tale was “shaped” in a “seething turmoil,” that turmoil “is no indication . . . of a lack of cheerfulness in the writer’s mind” (“Custom-House,” p. 43). But whereas the Hawthorne-narrator exploits, marshals, and then exorcises the moment of his sympathetic passion, Hester—at once sentimental artist and sentimental heroine—cannot transcend hers. Even Hester’s “apostolic” mission, which consists of envisioning a time when “the whole relation between man and woman” will be established “on a surer ground of mutual happiness” (*Scarlet Letter*, p. 263), shows her to be a slave to romantic ideals and sentimental hopes. Unable to “erase” or transcend the scarlet letter, Hester goes with it to her grave, her devotion to love offered a final parodic salute in the tombstone that she shares with Dimmesdale.

While the “Conclusion” and “The Custom-House” together suggest Hawthorne’s strengths as an artist and Hester’s weaknesses, they also stage his strength as a function of his control over her—and, by extension, over the realm of sentiment that she represents. It is not insignificant that at the beginning of the “Conclusion” Hawthorne forcefully reintroduces himself, the “Custom-House” surveyor, as the teller of Hester’s tale, mentioning once again the “manuscript of old date” that belonged to Surveyor Pue (*Scarlet Letter*, p. 259). This assertion of his own authority allows Hawthorne, in these final pages, to highlight Hester neither as the target of his identification nor as a competing if flawed authority, but, more germanely, as an object of his aesthetic project. He achieves Hester’s objectification partly through rhetorical links to his other objects: for example, like the custom house officials, who are transformed by Hawthorne’s imagination into “shadows in [his] view” (“Custom-House,” p. 44), Hester is depicted in the “Conclusion” “glid[ing]
shadow-like” into her old abode (p. 261). But Hester’s objectification is achieved far more profoundly through the very mystery that haunts her return. Why must she return to Boston? The overwhelming sense among twentieth-century critics, from Frederic I. Carpenter and Morton Cronin to Sacvan Bercovitch and Lauren Berlant, is that Hawthorne demonstrates a kind of lapse in these pages, and that whether Hester’s return evinces an ideological seam or simply a glaring aesthetic mistake, some crucial energy in the novel has been suppressed, coerced, disciplined, thwarted, silenced, or disallowed. But this sense of suppression or coercion, I would suggest, is itself the point: it gestures at the immensity of Hester and her sentiments—and at the greater immensity of her author. In the “Conclusion” Hawthorne depicts not just the futility of love but its power—its “celestial radiance,” the yearning and devotion it inspires, the “intimacy and heart-knowledge” that “renders one individual dependent for the food of his affections and spiritual life upon another” and “leaves the passionate lover . . . forlorn and desolate by the withdrawal of his object” (p. 260). Hawthorne’s presentation of Hester at the end of the novel as a votary of love in all its power and radiance is like his presentation of her in the forest scene as a vital, redemptive figure: it makes his excruciating containment of her that much more a token of his aesthetic power.

In the opinion of many modern critics, Hester’s suppression is Hawthorne’s loss. According to Cronin, “Hester is perhaps the greatest woman in American fiction” and “a greater Romantic heroine than Hawthorne deserved” (“Hawthorne on Romantic Love,” p. 91). Carpenter speculates that “having allowed his imagination to create an idealistic heroine, [Hawthorne] did not allow his conscious mind to justify—or even to describe fairly—her ideal morality” (“Scarlet A Minus,” p. 179). And for David Leverenz, it is Hawthorne, not Hester, who ends up in the grave, for in the end “Hawthorne’s narrator blends with Boston’s ‘congregated sepulchres,’ while Hester’s life continues to speak with embattled vitality” (Manhood, p. 278). But

uncompromised by this impression of Hester’s superiority to Hawthorne is the companion impression of the superiority of the novel. Indeed, in the opinion of D. H. Lawrence, it is *The Scarlet Letter*’s very demonstration of suppression—in Lawrence’s mind the suppression of “passion”—that makes it “the most perfect American work of art.” The Hawthorne-narrator may disappear into a “haze” of his own making, but the fact that critics regard *The Scarlet Letter* as Hawthorne’s greatest novel precisely because of its representation of Hester’s complex “embattled vitality,” because of its painful, exacting suffocation of romantic love, amply illustrates the success of Hawthorne’s recuperative enterprise.

Richard H. Brodhead begins his study of Hawthorne’s enduring canonical status, *The School of Hawthorne*, by noting that Hawthorne “is the only American author always to have been part of our significant past” (p. 8), the only American author whose exalted nineteenth-century stature has been transmitted almost untarnished into our own day. That Hawthorne could have founded a tradition of American literature is to Brodhead a bit of a mystery, for “unlike the magnificent ego-tists who typically call traditions into being, Hawthorne shows virtually no will to direct the way of another” (p. 14). He “never recruited a disciple” and was “uncommunicative of his work’s intentions,” and “the work itself . . . gives little indication of what it is about or how it could be followed” (pp. 14–15). How, then, does Hawthorne emerge as the supreme “concatenator,” the “estabisher of the coherence and continuity of American literature” (p. 9)? Brodhead himself speculates that Hawthorne’s very indefiniteness is in large measure the lure to his successors, functioning as a kind of blankness upon which they are free to project their own inventiveness. Jane Tompkins argues that Hawthorne’s centrality in the nineteenth-century American canon, which in turn leads to his centrality in the twentieth century, is a function of his material relationship “to the mechanisms that produced literary and cultural opinion”—

i.e., his friendships with the Northeastern literati, including Longfellow, Alcott, Emerson, Ticknor, Lowell, Fields, Duyckinck and Whipple, all men whose enormous cultural influence assured Hawthorne’s enduring reputation.33 But overlooked by Tompkins and Brodhead—invisible, perhaps, in the connotation of words like “tradition” and “canon”—is the idea that Hawthorne’s canonical romances, by incorporating a counter-tradition of mass fiction, also incorporate the standards by which literary traditions are made. Generated in a period of cultural instability, when the early-nineteenth-century print and market revolutions were rapidly disabling traditional consecrating institutions like state patronage, *The Scarlet Letter*, in a manner of speaking, consecrates itself. It establishes an internal mechanism of distinction that hinges on its differentiation from a popular form that it dramatizes as “weaker.”

This differentiation is true not only of *The Scarlet Letter* but also of the novels that quickly followed. If *The Scarlet Letter* was produced in a period of crisis for Hawthorne, which the very process of the novel’s composition resolved, then its publication to huge accolades and brisk (for Hawthorne) commercial success must have affirmed the standards of distinction that it mapped. Accordingly, for both *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) and *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) Hawthorne once again turned for inspiration to existing popular genres: the domestic novel, which was all the rage in the early 1850s, in the case of *The House of the Seven Gables*; and the literature of idle bachelorhood exemplified by “Ik Marvel’s” 1850 best-seller *Reveries of a Bachelor*, in the case of *The Blithedale Romance*. In each case Hawthorne prefaces his novel with assertions of his own detachment and objectivity—what he imperiously calls his “immunities”34—and with affirmations of the power of his imagination to turn “the real world” into “a day-dream” and its fleshly inhabitants into ephemeral “creatures of his brain.”35 Both

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novels feature the capitulation of a popular genre to the superior demands of "romance." The domestic narrative in The House of the Seven Gables—complete with its domestic heroine, "sunny" little Phoebe—is pressed into the service of an alien Gothicism from which it emerges at the end of the novel looking like a stick-figure fairy tale. The lighthearted "reveries" of the idle bachelor Coverdale in The Blithedale Romance are revealed as shallow puddles, incapable of encompassing—in deed, of narrating—the depth and complexity of the "tragic" interplay among the other characters who act in what Hawthorne, in the preface, possessively calls his "theatre" (p. 1).

And yet as much as The House of the Seven Gables and The Blithedale Romance evince the same mechanism of self-consecration as The Scarlet Letter, neither of them was ever dubbed "the most perfect American work of art." Possibly it is Hawthorne's initial affective and metaphoric connection to his heroine, in conjunction with his later objectification of her, that gives The Scarlet Letter the beguiling ambiguity that critics cite as the stuff of its perfection. But The Scarlet Letter may also have endured because, unlike nineteenth-century domestic and bachelor narratives, the formulas of heterosexual love and seduction have never gone out of fashion. The plot of Samuel Richardson's Pamela (1740), a seduction tale that forestalls the seduction in order to veer into a happy ending, is the largely unchanged formula of modern popular women's romance: in the words of romance writers Linda Barlow and Jayne Ann Krentz, "an innocent young woman [is placed] at risk with a powerful, enigmatic male. Her future happiness and his depend upon her ability to teach him how to love." And, finally, perhaps what has assured The Scarlet Letter's modern canonical "irresistibleness" is not only the novel's reference to a still-vital and largely unchanged tradition of heterosexual romance, but also its related incorporation of the consequences of unrespectability. Describing in "The Custom-House" how he, "an idler," must look to his Puritan ancestors, Hawthorne says:

No aim, that I have ever cherished, would they recognize as laudable; no success of mine—if my life, beyond its domestic scope, had ever been brightened by success—would they deem otherwise than worthless, if not positively disgraceful. “What is he?” murmurs one gray shadow of my forefathers to the other. “A writer of story-books! What kind of a business in life,—what mode of glorifying God, or being serviceable to mankind in his day and generation,—may that be? Why, the degenerate fellow might as well have been a fiddler!” (p. 10)

If *The Scarlet Letter* continues to stand as the centerpiece of the U.S. literary canon, then this is perhaps because it not only proffers its own mechanism of consecration, but also hints at the shame that comes with illegitimacy. It describes not only its own parameters of success, but also its own parameters of failure and ignominy. And no reader or writer of modern women’s romance is unfamiliar with the similar parameters that fence off the genre from the ranks of legitimacy. As Jayne Ann Krentz puts it:

> Few people realize how much courage it takes for a woman to open a romance novel on an airplane. She knows what everyone around her will think about both her and her choice of reading material. When it comes to romance novels, society has always felt free to sit in judgment not only on the literature but on the reader herself. The verdict is always the same. Society does not approve of the reading of romance novels. It labels the books as trash and the readers as unintelligent, uneducated, unsophisticated, or neurotic.³⁷

Although *The Scarlet Letter* does not on its own prop up the institutions that derogate heterosexual women’s romance and its readers and writers, its staging of Hester’s submission to art speaks to still-vital distinctions between literary masters and the servants of love.

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