Throughout *The Scarlet Letter* one particular question generates the action. It is the question on everyone's lips, spoken and unspoken, from beginning to end. It is the question asked the moment Hester steps onto the scaffold in the public square. It is reformulated in various ways not only by the different characters in the novel but also by the reader. Whose child is Pearl? This question does not express some trivial curiosity concerning Pearl's paternity. It also means, what kind of being is Pearl? From what immortal constitution, divine or demonic, does she derive? As such, it represents exactly that inquiry Puritan society must conduct in order to preserve its sense of itself as a chosen people, a new Israel reincarnated in a New England. The issue of Pearl's paternity, in other words, is as much a historical, theological, and philosophical concern as it is a moral and social one. It expresses the Puritans' desire to discover a single line of descent, moving directly from God, the Father, through the patriarchs of ancient Israel, to the (male) leaders of the American entity. The illegitimate (female) child threatens that historical continuity. Interrupting the lines of spiritual genealogy Pearl calls into question the principle of visible sanctity on which the American nation had founded itself. The question, then, Whose child is Pearl? exposes a problem of historical consciousness inextricably linked to an issue in skepticism, where by skepticism I mean the doubt whether one can prove either one's own existence or that of the world, or move from one proof to the other. Through its federal theology and its principle of visible sanctity, the Puritan community tried to resolve any and all doubts concerning itself and the reality of its embodiment of the divine. By tracing in its history a clear-cut, unambiguous line of divine inheritance, it attempted to confirm a relationship between physical evidences and spiritual realities.
The strategy of *The Scarlet Letter* precisely opposes these tendencies in Puritan society. I have argued elsewhere that a defining feature of American historical romance, as practiced by male authors such as Hawthorne, Melville, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Doctorow, and Updike, and as embodied in *The Scarlet Letter*, is its typical employment of nonmimetic modes of representation, at the same time that it insists on specified settings in place and time, in what we usually call history. In so doing, American historical romance, I suggested, recognizes that words and events cannot possess determinate meanings. At the same time, it also affirms the necessity for acknowledging and assuming responsibility both for our words and the world they attempt to describe. In Hawthornean romance, doubt is the condition of our lives in this world. Faith is the willingness to entertain and keep alive our skepticism alongside our commitment to thinking and acting determinately. The medium of this reconciliation between private doubt and social commitment is, for Hawthorne and for other (male) writers in this tradition, a certain consciousness of history. History, in the romance tradition, stands outside the subjectivities of the individual imagination. At the same time, it incorporates the uncertainties which inevitably attend to the irrecoverable and hence unprovable evidences of the past.

In *The Scarlet Letter* Hawthorne explores, in relation to the specific issue of biological progeneration, patriarchy's abuse of history. This abuse evolves out of patriarchy's drive toward certainty, its efforts to authorize the past through a written record which is only a patrilineal genealogy. In Puritan patriarchy, as, perhaps, in all patriarchies, fathers would guarantee knowledge of their sons by regulating the terms and conditions of female sexuality. They would secure themselves against doubt through a legal fiction of family relations. This legal fiction secures history by writing history in the language of the repeating patrinnomial. Hence the community's insistence on discovering, Whose child is Pearl? Hawthorne's manipulation of this question both exposes the false assumptions of Puritan patriarchy and promotes a system of community and history predicated upon the preservation rather than the settling of radical doubt. In Hawthorne's view, the question of paternity must be asked. How one answers that question, however, determines the difference between the repressive authoritarianism of the Puritans and the impulses toward liberal democracy contained within Hawthorne's romantic retelling of their story.

Yet the question, Whose child is Pearl? may be the one question that Hester, as mother, cannot ask. Hester knows, as only a mother can, beyond the shadow of a doubt, whose child Pearl is. Hester
might well suffer considerable doubt about the child’s essential constitution. Theoretically, at least, she might doubt Pearl’s paternity. She cannot, however, knowing that she is the biological mother, mean by the question exactly what the community means. For whatever else a mother might doubt, she cannot, under normal circumstances, doubt that the child reproduces her. As Stanley Cavell has recently suggested, female skepticism may not originate in the same biological realities as male skepticism. Therefore, it may not represent the same questions, the same discontinuities in the processes of knowing, especially bodily knowing, exposed by male skepticism. Female skepticism, therefore, if such skepticism exists, may have to be seen as evolving from some other kind of uncertainty. The woman may have to pose to herself—and answer—some other question. And she may have to conduct and conclude her inquiry on some other, nonhistorical, grounds.

Nonetheless, Hawthorne has Hester ask the question, Whose child is Pearl? (for example, 116 and 121–22). In so doing, Hawthorne attributes to his female protagonist an intellectual depth unrivalled in nineteenth-century American fiction, until Henry James’s The Portrait of a Lady forty years later. At the same time, however, Hawthorne fails to get inside a woman’s doubt. Indeed, he may, even as he is ascribing to women a profound skeptical consciousness, be prohibiting them from entering into the philosophical and literary tradition he initiates. Hawthorne’s Scarlet Letter, I believe, institutes the American romance tradition in terms which make it eminently inheritable by women romance writers a century later; at the same time it threatens to close the tradition to women, necessitating their reinstitution of it later on wholly other terms.

In Hawthorne’s novel, the strict authoritarianism of Puritan patriarchy finds its object in the child Pearl, who, as the living “likeness” of the letter, “the scarlet letter in another form; the scarlet letter endowed with life!” (125), becomes the target of the Puritans’ efforts to control both human sexuality and its literary, historical expression. The Scarlet Letter, in other words, dramatizes a relationship between issues of birth (Whose child is Pearl?) and questions of interpretation (What does the letter mean?). Indeed, one of the ways the text validates the centrality and legitimacy of the community’s doubt about the child is by representing it as its own investigation into its major symbol. At first we might assume that the two kinds of inquiries exist in a relation of mutual opposition. We might feel that the equation between the questions, What does the letter signify? and, Whose child is Pearl? disallows the search for meaning because it reduces human issues to literary ones. We need only recall the
example of Chillingworth and other Hawthornean characters to realize how demonic the desire for knowledge of other human beings can be. Nonetheless, from Hawthorne's point of view, no less than from the Puritans', the necessity to discover Pearl's origins is inescapable. As Hester freely confesses to Chillingworth, she has sinned against him; and that sin has social (if not moral and theological) consequences. At the very least, Hester's adultery disrupts the social order. It leaves Chillingworth homeless and familyless, and it violates the lines of patrimonial inheritance. The odd twist of plot whereby Chillingworth decides to leave his inheritance to Pearl, who is his legal offspring, emphasizes the way in which Hester's adultery complicates historical coherence. This, coupled with Pearl's repeated insistence on knowing her father's identity and the painful repercussions of Hester's prolonged silence, suggests that, though it may be impossible to specify Pearl's nature, it is neither impossible nor irrelevant to discover the identity of her father.

Our desire to fathom the meaning of the scarlet letter is no less justifiable. In the romance tradition to which it belongs, The Scarlet Letter explicitly entertains the indeterminacy of the symbol and, beyond it, of the world. It does not do so, however, to revel in the lack of cosmic coherence which the isolated sign may betray. Rather, the letter, as letter, though the most indeterminate of symbols, is also the basic building block of all meaning, all language. As such, it compels us to enter into the interpretive process, despite our inability to know or understand anything beyond the shadow of our doubt, and despite the danger we run that in combining these indeterminate units on which language depends we may only further complicate the meaning-making process. Though the A's meaning is uncertain, its consequences in the world, which are, in the first instance, no less than Pearl's birth, are decisive.

Hawthorne's gesture of taking the letter upon himself predicts and imitates Hester's similar action at the end of the story. It is a significantly parental gesture. The tradition Hawthorne wishes to establish involves the willingness to acknowledge the sign, to take it upon oneself and make it one's own, despite its somewhat "fictitious" (107), indeterminate meaning. The urgency behind this embrace is explained through the living likeness of the letter—Pearl. For the two are joined at the very origins of the A. In order to "grow up amid human joy and sorrow, nor for ever do battle with the world, but be a woman in it" (268), Pearl must learn what the A means. She must learn who her father is, who her two fathers are, her biological father and her legal father. Indeed, it is only
when Pearl discovers her biological father that she gains her legal
career as well. Pearl leaves New England to reestablish the lines of
patrimony broken in Hester's and Chillingworth's departure from
old England.

In representing Pearl's dual parentage, Hawthorne exposes the
fundamental uncertainty of paternity, which patriarchy wishes to
exclude. He shows us that patriarchies, like Puritan America, would
eliminate doubts about who and what we are by constituting the
self as a vehicle of legal, historical, even transhistorical, inheritance.
At the same time, however, by making Pearl's future success con-
tingent upon her rectifying the social implications of her mother's
adultery, Hawthorne admits the need to deal with the doubts in-
truded by human sexuality. Patrilineage may be a legal fiction,
but it is a response to a genuine problem. Like any fiction, it
deserves, indeed demands, to be interpreted. Patrilineage errs, not
in choosing to respond to the doubtfulness of our birth, but in the
nature of its response. This is to assert itself as fact and deny itself
as fiction.

Given his text's preoccupation with the question of Pearl's patern-
nity, it is not surprising that the major focus of the prefatory
"Custom-House" sketch is Hawthorne's own attempt to locate his
paternal ancestry. A place of "great-grandsires" (42), a "patriarchal
body" (43), the custom-house is quite simply "a sanctuary into which
womankind, with her tools of magic . . . has very infrequent access"
(39). Feminist critics have taken the absence of a strong female
presence in the "Custom-House" to signify Hawthorne's unrelenting
male bias.6 The maleness of Hawthorne's concern is not to be easily
discarded. Indeed, it may be even more invidious than feminist
critics have yet portrayed it. In the first instance, however, it functions
as part of the intricate moral fiber characterizing Hawthorne's un-
dertaking. For Hawthorne the world of the custom-house is no ideal
repository of the ancestral past. In particular it fails to institute the
customs Hawthorne craves. Its sterility, which is closely related to
the major issue of the sketch, Hawthorne's inability to write, is a
direct consequence of its exclusive maleness. To write, Hawthorne
makes very clear, is not to inscribe words which locate one's social
identity and establish one's place and rank in the custom-house.
Taking up a position through political patronage, Hawthorne has
already traveled the road of social and political conformity, and it
has almost destroyed his creative potential. Therefore, Hawthorne
must relocate himself in some more "domestic scenery" (64–65). He
must abandon the "narrow circle" of the custom-house, with its
minimum of "lettered intercourse" (57–58) and get on to what he
calls the "second story of the Custom-House" (58). Here in this second story, which is also, I take it, from tradition’s point of view, a secondary story, he discovers the manuscript of Surveyor Jonathan Pue with its very different kind of intercourse and its very different kind of letter(s). Hester introduces many things into the custom-house—emotionality, passion, motherhood. The most significant of her contributions, however, is her "labyrinth of doubt" (122). Hester unsettles patriarchy’s attempt to certify and institutionalize knowledge, especially of its future. She weds history to fiction, the desire for continuity and even certainty to the acknowledgment that all knowledge is tentative, fictitious.

In order to become something more than a "tolerably good Surveyor of the Customs" (68) and "go forth a man" (70) Hawthorne must end his "term" of confinement (72) in the patriarchal custom-house. He must be born into the world. He must, in other words, discover his mother, which is to say, he must discover his origins in the uncertainties of sexual birth. Not accidentally, Hawthorne’s novel begins at the moment that Hester, having reached the end of one term and having given birth to her baby daughter, is about to reach the end of another "term of confinement" (103), her prison sentence. The ending of Hawthorne’s term and Hester’s coincide. It is as if Hawthorne is born into the world as Hester’s child.

Throughout the story, the affinities between Hawthorne and Pearl are striking. Like Pearl, Hawthorne is by his ancestors’ lights "degenerate," "worthless," and "disgraceful" (41–42). Unlike the “father of the Custom-House,” Hawthorne is not “a legitimate son of the revenue system, dyed in the wool, or rather, born in the purple” (47). Rather, like Pearl, he is the illegitimate child, perhaps even the noninheriting female child of the unaffiliated, unmarried mother, cut out of the cloth that is scarlet in hue. "What is he?” murmurs one gray shadow of my forefathers to the other” (41), echoing the central question of the text: Whose child is Pearl? Given the precariousness of both their pasts, the onus for both Pearl and Hawthorne must be to discover who their fathers are in order to go forth into the world, as man or woman. For Hawthorne the further challenge is to discover his mother as well. Ironically, it is Hawthorne, not Pearl, who follows in Hester’s footsteps (as Hester has followed in the footsteps of another woman). When Hawthorne, the male writer, discovers his mother, the result is that he, and not the daughter, will become her true heir. This has to do, in part, with what Hawthorne’s Hester, as opposed to Pearl’s, gives him in the way of mothering. For Pearl’s mother does not teach her the meaning of language (the A), while Hawthorne’s Hester-as-mother does teach
him. It is also, however, related to Hawthorne's basic assumptions about history and philosophy.

One of the most curious aspects of Hawthorne's tale is this substitution of himself for the child of Hester's adulterous union, the child of doubtful origins who, as the letter's double, raises the problem of social inheritance and naming. In order to become a writer Hawthorne does more than discover his female progenitor. He traces his origins to the illicit union (which we are told is kept from the knowledge of the male's heirs) between an official surveyor of the customs and an adulteress, whose lettered intercourse transforms the pattern of male domination. As the sliding of my terms suggests, this official male surveyor is as much Surveyor Pue of "The Custom-House" as the minister Dimmesdale within the novel itself. Pearl's biological father is Dimmesdale; Hawthorne's spiritual father is this other "official ancestor" (64) with whom Hawthorne shares not a patrimonial but an official name, Surveyor Pue and Surveyor Hawthorne. What makes Pue different from the other custom-house officials, and therefore what legitimates the historical continuity he inaugurates, is that Pue is willing to acquaint Hawthorne with his maternal "predecessor." Even more, he exhorts him to his "filial duty" (64), which is to take up her forgotten, purloined letter. Hester Prynne, Surveyor Pue, and Surveyor Hawthorne constitute a peculiar family at best. But this reconstruction of the family suggests the critical importance for Hawthorne of family itself, of two-parent, heterosexual descent, as the basis on which moral history proceeds: a father who determines the "official" lines of inheritance (by providing a name) and a mother who will insure that the official will never depart from the "fictitious," from the doubts which names cannot dissolve any more than language can and which therefore become the basis for the other-directedness of moral-historical process.

In order to write Hawthorne must recover the letter. Simultaneously he must recover his female "predecessor" in order to know that writing both names our relationship to a past encoded in words and names and raises doubts about it. Discovering his origins in sexuality, the son confronts the fact that knowledge of the father (and hence of history) can never be certain; that fathers may be official ancestors rather than biological ones. In this way the son entertains the doubts of paternity, and thus of identity, which patriarchy tries to banish. He comes to consider the possibility of the illegitimacy of his birth; and hence the illegitimacy of history. The Scarlet Letter, in which Hawthorne retrieves a lost American history, is itself what we might call an illegitimate text. It is explicitly
founded upon the illicit activities of prowling in the attic of the custom-house and snooping into sexual secrets. More important than this, as a fiction it represents, in Hawthorne's cultural context, a somewhat suspicious activity, made even more suspect by Hawthorne's bastardization of form in a work which is both history and romance. Bastard writer of a bastard text, Hawthorne magnificently defines an American tradition of cultural subversion and hence freedom.

Hawthorne's objectives in recovering the mother could not be more moral—either for history or for writing. Yet Hawthorne's substitution of himself for the daughter constitutes an act of aggression difficult to ignore. I cannot fully explore this aggression here. It has to do with processes of identity formation, which are a crucial aspect of the novel's subject, and which have to do with skepticism as a vehicle of self-definition. But Hawthorne's male takeover of one of his major characters also figures his inability, despite his fondest wishes, to exceed his own male prejudice. What is at stake for Hawthorne is the very issue of the future; and this issue, Hawthorne believes, must remain within a paradigm of history which, for all Hawthorne's attempts to wrestle it out of the hands of patriarchy, is nonetheless male dominated, both imaginatively and substantively. It is important in this context that in Hawthorne's view, the patriarchal custom-house, though sterile and dead, still contains the "forgotten" letter, the letter that has been kept from the "knowledge of [its] heirs" (61). Even (or especially) patriarchal society contains the knowledge which both men and women need, though this knowledge has, as it were, been purloined by history. The letter, Hester's mark, contains the secret of the very loins concealed in the title of the Poe story to which Hawthorne's Scarlet Letter may well be alluding. Poe's story, critics have noted, also has to do with sexual secrets, and with the relationship between those secrets and the mysteries of writing.

In the final analysis, Hawthorne is more concerned in The Scarlet Letter with facilitating processes of historical inheritance than with reconstructing the idea of history itself. Despite his recognition of the Puritans' abuse of history, through their repression of women, Hawthorne, as male writer, proposes the same male solution that informs most of his other romances. At the end of the novel Hester rejoins public history. She assumes responsibility for history. Indeed, she becomes history: Hawthorne's history, his reader's, the history of America itself. From one point of view, Hawthorne's incorporation of Hester into American history, as American history, is an important gesture toward opening the tradition to women. Living on the
outskirts of history, on the margins of civilization, Hester, like Ishmael in *Moby Dick*, or like the black McCaslin (Beauchamps) in Faulkner’s *Go Down, Moses*, embodies a history that has been lost or marginalized. This is the history that defies the covenantal authority of white Anglo-Saxon males, who would prevent women, blacks, and others from entering American society. To adapt Walter Benjamin’s thinking, we may say that Hawthorne restores to conscious memory a history that the dominant culture has repressed. This, in itself, establishes the book’s centrality in the current discussion of textual openness and the literary canon. But in order to thus reinstate Hester’s history (and thereby women’s history), Hawthorne can only reinstitute history itself, the public record of social events, as the place in which human beings will work out the differences between them. Hawthorne expands the concept of history as far as he can in the direction of those who have been excluded from history. Yet he cannot get beyond the terms of his own masculinity. He cannot get beyond history itself.

Even more problematic, Hawthorne defines the skepticism upon which the knowledge and enactment of a free, moral history depend in terms which may foreclose for women themselves the possibility of a full skeptical consciousness, and hence of full participation in the historical process. For Hawthorne has Hester ask the question she cannot ask, Whose child is Pearl? Skepticism and history may not be joined for women as they are for men. Indeed, unlike a man, whose doubts about his own past can assist him in dealing with his uncertain feelings about present and future and become a basis for freeing his own children from himself, a woman may find no aid for her relationship to her children in her doubts about her parents. The community’s question, Whose child is Pearl? reproduces the child’s own question, Who is my father? It can stand, therefore, for the basic inquiry into self-identity; and hence it can serve as Hawthorne’s own question, Who am I? There is a perfect symmetry between the father’s inability to know his child and the child’s inability to identify his father—or, for that matter, his (or her) mother. The “shifting scenes” of Hester’s first thoughts as she stands on the scaffold in the public square, thinking back on old England, suggest that this symmetry does not exist for the woman; and this may in part explain why or how Hawthorne substitutes himself for Pearl. Hawthorne realizes that only the male child can use the question, Who are my parents? in order to assert his children’s independence from him: my children have had other roots, he tells us in the “Custom-House,” and they will have different destinies. Not only is a woman’s relationship to her biological offspring dif-
ferent from a man's, but it represents an asymmetry in her own experience of the world. This asymmetry has specifically historical implications. Still on the scaffold, Hester reveals that her reality consists exclusively of the letter and the child. The past has "vanished" (86).

Feminist criticism has been unnecessarily hard on Hawthorne. Nonetheless, the questions it raises have opened Hawthorne's novel to new and different scrutiny. The strength of Hawthorne's book lies in its ability to continue to respond to the questions we put to it. Indeed, The Scarlet Letter not only withstands contemporary investigations, it benefits from them. For even in the area of female skepticism, contemporary feminist romance has something to learn from Hawthorne's novel. Granted Hawthorne's major concern in The Scarlet Letter is not the women's cause (which he vehemently denounces in his sketch of Ann Hutchinson and in the figure of Zenobia in The Blithedale Romance). It is, however, the tendency, expressed in all human beings, regardless of gender, to convert history into the repetition and reflection of self. It is here that Hawthorne's aesthetics outdistance his philosophy. Even though Hawthorne has Hester formulate her skepticism in the possibly inappropriate male question, he has her enact the problems inherent in the mother's knowledge that the child does reproduce her. Again and again Hester dramatizes the ungendered human instinct to make the world into a mirror of self, thus identifying the source of patriarchy's own attempts to control history. Throughout the text, Hawthorne inverts the scheme of patriarchal progeneration and inheritance. He turns the tables on the Puritan patriarchy and proposes in its stead an alternate matriarchal scheme, which will not name the father. Yet matriarchy proves no more nurturing, no more capable of establishing human freedom, than patriarchy. Though the novel's elaboration of the matriarchal alternative is pervasive, I will not go into it here. My point is that for Hawthorne parenting itself causes the problems of social coercion and authoritarianism. The parthenogenesis implicit in patriarchy or matriarchy reveals the desire of all human beings, regardless of sex, to replicate themselves infinitely into the future.

Instead of going this route, Hawthorne tries to discover in the dynamics of family relationship and cultural interrelations forces to oppose the all-consuming egos of women as well as of men. Throughout the book Hawthorne tests varying family arrangements: the single-parent, single-sex family of Hester and Pearl, for example; or the nuclear family defined biologically by Dimmesdale, Hester, and Pearl; or legally by Chillingworth, Hester, and Pearl. He finds all of these family units wanting, because none of them break the
tyrannical force of the individual's desire for self-replication. Yet family is crucial to Hawthorne's larger historical goals. Therefore he constructs an ideal family, consisting of himself, Hester, and his spiritual father and her spiritual lover, Surveyor Pue. Significantly the resolution of the problem of the family occurs, not within the present moment of the novel, but through the communal reconstitution of the family, over time, in history.

What Hawthorne intuits but cannot formally argue is that to know the world beyond the shadow of a doubt will not release us from the desire to make the world into self. Indeed, it may even complicate and retard the evolution of a meaningful skeptical consciousness. Hawthorne recognizes that all of us—men and women—must cultivate our doubts, entertain them Emersonian-fashion. In reclaiming the mother Hawthorne reintroduces the doubts patrimony dissolves. In imagining himself, first as Pearl, and finally as Hester, Hawthorne, for all his inability to escape certain stereotypes of the woman, demonstrates his own ability to imagine himself as totally other. Insofar as Hester and Pearl are his creative offspring, they represent a futurity (like his own biological progeny) which the author intentionally releases into a future which, like the past, must be seen as indeterminate and doubtful. Hawthornean historical romance constitutes a gesture toward dispossessing even the fictive mirrors of self. Hawthorne does not even simply fabricate a female self. He reconstructs her out of the historical Ann Hutchinson. He does not invent Surveyor Pue; he inherits him. In finding himself in the ancestral mirror that he does not create and by accepting the fact, simultaneously, that these ancestral reflections defy his attempts wholly to discover himself, Hawthorne performs vital gestures of creative inheritance, which he bequeaths to a tradition also free to discover and invent. Every effort of his story is to resist the self-reflection that is nonetheless inevitably part of the perceptual, creative condition. Hawthorne inserts himself as writer between past, present, and future, all of which must be acknowledged, though none can be possessed. And like the w he inserts into his patrimomial,9 he finds his unique, personal signature in the lettered intercourse, which, raising our doubts, generates our hopes as well.

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NOTES

1 See Emily Miller Budick, Fiction and Historical Consciousness: The American Romance Tradition (New Haven, 1989). Behind this book are readings of the American Puritans by Sacvan Bercovitch, such as The Puritan Origins of the American Self (New Haven, 1975), and ideas about skepticism and writing developed by Stanley Cavell in, for


5 As Charles Feidelson already suggested, long before semiology and its offspring had taken hold of the literary subject and necessitated such responses: "As a single letter, the most indeterminate of all symbols, and first letter of the alphabet, the beginning of all communication, Hester's emblem represents a potential point of coherence within a manifold historical experience" ("The Scarlet Letter," in *Hawthorne Centenary Essays*, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce [Columbus, Ohio, 1964], p. 37). For a deconstructive reading of the *Letter*, see Millicent Bell, "The Obliquity of Signs: The Scarlet Letter," *The Massachusetts Review*, 23 (1982), 9–26. Bell nonetheless concludes that Hawthorne means for us to try to interpret the letter. See also Earl H. Rovit, "Ambiguity in Hawthorne's Scarlet Letter," in *Studies in The Scarlet Letter*, ed. Arlin Turner (Columbus, Ohio, 1970), pp. 120–32, who argues that "this novel is at last as much about the ambiguity of and impossibility of meaning, as it is about meaning itself" (p. 128).


7 The root meaning of *purloin* is not to steal but to *put away or render ineffectual*. It may well be that Pue, who is spiritually united with the mother/woman, evokes another of Hawthorne's ancestors, Edgar Allan Poe. Playing as he is with letters and names Hawthorne would not have missed the convenient similarity between the names Pue and Poe. He further emphasizes the connection between the two by dwelling on Pue's "mental part and the internal operations of his head" (p. 60). Hawthorne's discovery of the story, he tells us, leads him to "a hundredfold repetition" that sets into motion further patterns of "remembering" (p. 64). If the death of Hawthorne's mother in 1848 prompted his desire to rediscover the mother, perhaps Poe's death in 1849, while Hawthorne was composing his *Scarlet Letter*, activated his search for an appropriate father. Certainly the title of Hawthorne's novel can be understood as alluding to the title of Poe's "The Purloined Letter."

8 In "The A-Politics of Ambiguity in *The Scarlet Letter*," *New Literary History*, 19 (1988), 629–54, Sacvan Bercovitch has discussed the ideological imperatives that seal
Hawthorne's work against endless open-endedness. The present essay has benefited both from Bercovitch's recent work on *The Scarlet Letter* and from his useful comments on my own thinking in this matter.