LI

HAUHTHORNE'S HESTER AND FEMINISM

WHEN G. P. Lathrop wrote his A Study of Hawthorne (1876) he found it necessary, in discussing the interpretation of The Scarlet Letter, to protest against the identification of Hawthorne's own beliefs with those given to Hester.¹ Lathrop's protest—which has not much affected subsequent criticism—was directed against a violent review by Arthur Cleveland Coxe, one of three early reviews which mark the beginning of a persistent misapprehension (as it seems to me) in the interpretation of The Scarlet Letter.² It has almost become a convention to insist that Hawthorne means to advocate a new standard of sex morality in passages like Hester's words: "What we did had a consecration of its own. We felt it so! We said so to each other!"³ Austin Warren has found sufficient reason to point out again that Hawthorne is careful to characterize the rebellion of Hester as the rebellion of one who "had wandered without rule or guidance, in a moral wilderness," and that Hawthorne is careful to say that "Her intellect and heart had their home... in desert places... Shame, Despair, Solitude! These had been her teachers... and they had made her strong, but taught her much amiss."⁴

It is the purpose of this note, not to discuss any moral question, but to present one argument against seizing upon the "consecration" of Hester's love as the theme and moral of The Scarlet Letter. There are (I believe) other and more important refutations of this interpretation than the one here offered. But this interpretation, whether combined with approval or disapproval, has obscured an interesting aspect of the character of Hester: the way in which she represents feminist thought in Hawthorne's

¹ G. P. Lathrop, A Study of Hawthorne (Boston, 1876), pp. 214–222.
² George B. Loring, Massachusetts Quarterly Review, III (September, 1850), 484–500; Orestes Brownson, Brownson's Quarterly Review, new series IV (October, 1850), 528–532; Arthur Cleveland Coxe, "The Writings of Hawthorne," Church Review, III (New Haven, January, 1851), 489–511. Lathrop incorrectly says (op. cit., p. 222) that Loring's review followed and answered Coxe's but it seems likely that Coxe's attack was in reality inspired by Loring's review. See Coxe, loc. cit., p. 503 and M. D. Conway, Life of Nathaniel Hawthorne (London, 1895), p. 130. The difference between the two reviews is not a matter of interpretation, but one of attitude.
own time. And this aspect of Hester is important to the proper interpretation of the book, for if Hester is in part a type feminist, Hawthorne would hardly have intended an identification of her views and his own. Austin Warren has called Hester "A feminist in advance of the season."

Our question will be: how far are Hester's feminist attitudes further evidence for Warren's contention that she cannot be supposed to speak Hawthorne's own view or the book's moral?

Feminist ideas were part of the intellectual climate in which Hawthorne lived, and they converged in a movement which, O. B. Frothing-him says, "more definitely than any other . . . can trace its beginning and source of its inspiration to the disciples of the transcendental philosophy." Now what Hawthorne has to say in The Scarlet Letter on Hester's position plainly has contemporary reference, and plainly accords with his remarks on feminism elsewhere. Hester, in her distress, falls into errors that are like opinions Hawthorne saw as errors in his own time. Chapter xiii is, almost in its entirety, a discussion of them. Hester had been estranged from the normal existence of woman, in a different way from the feminists among Hawthorne's contemporaries, but still estranged, as they too were estranged. "Some attribute had departed from her, the permanence of which had been essential to keep her a woman."

In turning away from the normal life of a woman, "She assumed a freedom of speculation"; and her speculation was, "Was existence worth accepting, even to the happiest" of women? Hawthorne proceeds to outline the task of the feminist as he sees it.

She discerns, it may be, such a hopeless task before her. As a first step, the whole system of society is to be torn down, and built up anew. Then, the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit, which has become like nature, is to be essentially modified, before woman can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position.

But not only will these impossible changes have to precede the effective operation of feminist ideals, but woman will have to change her own essential nature, and what then? "Perhaps," Hawthorne answers, "the ethereal essence, wherein she has her truest life, will be found to have evaporated." If a woman have a normal life, these problems do not arise; if she be in normal emotional balance, they solve themselves:

A woman never overcomes these problems by any exercise of thought. They are not to be solved, or only in one way. If her heart chance to come uppermost,

---

5 Warren, p. xxix.

they vanish. Thus, Hester Prynne, whose heart had lost its regular and healthy throb, wandered without a clew in the dark labyrinth of mind: now turned aside by an insurmountable precipice; now starting back from a deep chasm. There was wild and ghastly scenery all around her, and a home and comfort nowhere.7

This is not the splendid example of self-reliance some of Hester's interpreters would have her be; it is, rather, an infinitely pathetic Hester, in whom, to borrow Newton Arvin's words, passion and feeling have given away to thought "expressive not so much of her whole being as of a specialized and 'unwomanly' function," and to whom is lost the sense of human reality.8

It is Hawthorne's treatment, in The Blithedale Romance, of Zenobia and her feminism which offers the closest parallels to his remarks on Hester's speculations concerning women's sphere, although other passages may be cited.9 It is—before Zenobia has learned by experience—her belief and prophecy "that, when my sex shall achieve its rights, there will be ten eloquent women where there is now one eloquent man." Her sphere shall be "the living voice" and by it she shall compel the world's recognition. Coverdale's reflection on all this seems to be Hawthorne's own:

What amused and puzzled me was the fact, that women, however intellectually superior, so seldom disquiet themselves about the rights or wrongs of their sex, unless their own individual affections chance to lie in idleness, or to be ill at ease. They are not natural reformers, but become such by the pressure of exceptional misfortune. I could measure Zenobia's inward trouble by the animosity with which she now took up general quarrel of woman against man.10

Finally, when Zenobia has suffered the loss of Hollingsworth's love, Hawthorne makes her describe her own condition in much the same

7 The Scarlet Letter, pp. 198–201. 8 Hawthorne (Boston, 1929), pp. 188–189.
9 Hawthorne compares Hester to Ann Hutchinson (p. 199). In "Mrs. Hutchinson," one of Hawthorne's early essays, he says: "We will not look for a living resemblance of Mrs. Hutchinson, though the search might not be altogether fruitless. But there are portentous indications, changes gradually taking place in the habits and feelings of the gentle sex, which seem to threaten our posterity with many of those public women, whereof one was burden too grievous for our fathers" (Sketches, p. 217). The question recurs in Hawthorne's last period, and in Septimus Felton he makes Sibyl Dacy speculate upon what she will do for women in the aeons of existence Septimus promises her. But at the end of her questioning she finds no answer: "And then if, after all this investigation, it turns out—as I suspect—that woman is not capable of being helped, that there is something inherent in herself that makes it hopeless to struggle for her redemption, then what shall I do? Nay, I know not . . ." (p. 406). Compare Hawthorne's remarks on women novelists, Caroline Ticknor, Hawthorne and his Publisher (Boston, 1913), pp. 141–142.
10 The Blithedale Romance, pp. 436–457.
terms that he used to describe Hester's, although her speech is, of course, in character, and she retains her resentment. The moral is, she says, "That the whole universe, her own sex and yours, and Providence, or Destiny, to boot, make common cause against the woman who swerves one hair's-breadth, out of the beaten track." But her judgment of herself is, it will be noted, exactly parallel to Hawthorne's judgment of Hester: "Yes, and add (for I may as well own it now) that, with that one hair's-breadth, she goes all astray and never sees the world in its true aspect afterwards."11 Zenobia, her natural affections "ill at ease," though for a different reason from Hester's, like Hester "assumed a freedom of speculation." In both feminism is the product of abnormal adjustment. Both "wandered without a clew."

It need not detract from anyone's appreciation of the emotional richness of The Scarlet Letter to recognize that, in his treatment of Hester, Hawthorne embodies his criticism of a movement contemporary with him, for the portrait of Hester is sympathetic, not satirical. And this aspect of Hester's thinking does show Hawthorne aware of the life and thought about him. Hawthorne's position is plain: there is no abstract solution for a problem so complicated by the nature of humanity itself. He has Hester learn, finally, that a woman estranged from normal experience in whatever way cannot see her own problems in perspective; she recognizes at last "the impossibility that any mission of divine and mysterious truth should be confided to a woman stained with sin, bowed down with shame, or even burdened with a life-long sorrow."12 No one, certainly, is under an obligation to agree with Hawthorne, but there is no reason why one should not attend to what he says.13

University of Wisconsin

13 An amusing sidelight on all this is to be found in a letter from Mrs. Hawthorne to her mother, which comments upon some article of Margaret Fuller's—probably the Dial paper which was later expanded into Woman in the Nineteenth Century. Mrs. Hawthorne writes in much the terms Hawthorne himself might have put into the mouth of a happily married woman, had he portrayed one. She says: "It seems to me that if she were married truly, she would no longer be puzzled about the rights of woman. This is the revelation of woman's true destiny and place, which never can be imagined by those who do not experience the relation. In perfect, high union there is no question of supremacy... Had there never been false and profane marriages, there would... be no commotion about woman's rights..." (Quoted in Julian Hawthorne, Hawthorne and his Wife [Boston, 1885], p. 257. The letter is of 1843). Hawthorne perhaps considered Elizabeth Peabody as among the thwarted women who turned to some activity or agitation as compensation. At least he writes from Liverpool in 1855, evidently in some annoyance: "I sometimes feel as if I ought... to endeavor to enlighten you as to the relation between husband and wife... But the conjugal relation is one God never meant you to share, and which therefore He apparently did not give you the instinct to understand; so there my labor would be lost" (Quoted in Randall Stewart, American Notebooks [New Haven, 1932], p. 328).