

Hester Prynne: In a Sphere by Herself

“It had the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and inclosing her in a sphere by herself.” Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter, p. 56.

The following paper presents an overview of the historical facts and inspirations of Hester Prynne from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s 1850 romance *The Scarlet Letter*. For readers unfamiliar, the *Scarlet Letter* is a romance following Hester Prynne, who is living in colonial Boston, sent ahead of her husband. She is charged with adultery by the Puritan theocracy after birthing a child while he is lost at sea. She gives birth in prison, shamed on the pillory, and ostracized from the community, more a symbol than a woman, yet she never tells who shared in her sin (spoiler: it’s her reverend, Arthur Dimmesdale). Her sentence is to forever wear a red A on her chest. While she complies, she also uses her skills to finely embroider it in gold. Hester is complex and multi-faceted, both a conformist and a rebel, using her unique place as a single woman able to use her skill as a trade to defy expectations. Comparing Hester to other Puritan women of that era she was just as complicated and just as trapped. Real women, too, were punished with the letter. However, Hester is a daughter of fiction, and the brainchild of nineteenth century romanticist Nathaniel Hawthorne who, complicated in his own right, who wrote about a character who has been called a “protofeminist” yet was in his personal life opposed to many of the strides made by the rising feminist movement. This paper compares Hester’s narrative circumstances such as her punishment and her marriage to the historical realities of Puritan women. It also explores Hawthorne’s influences in creating the character such as the women in his life and his own sympathies.

If imagining Hester as a real woman, in her historical context, beyond the fiction of her character, it might be useful to construct a backstory. Who Hester Prynne was before she

emerged from the prison door is not of the story's concern. For the drama to play out between Hester, Dimmesdale, Chillingworth, and the town of Boston, a backstory is not only unnecessary, but would unbalance the symmetry of Hawthorne's carefully crafted romance. So, we get only glimpses. Dr. Beverly Haviland's character analysis "What It Betokened: Waiting for Hester in *The Scarlet Letter*" examines Hester's shame and her trauma from a psychoanalytic perspective, picking up on details from the text that present a narrative of Hester as a victim of sexual assault by way of arranged marriage. Shame is an ever-present and deliberate force in the novel, but trauma is rather implied. Hester was born and raised in England to a crumbling gentry family (60) in a precarious social position, so her father would heavily encouraged if not outright arranged her marriage to Chillingworth at an age when she was "too young for her heart to have known better" (Hawthorne 176 qtd. in Haviland) and was implied to be at least of middling class for her religion if not well-off. Poet Anne Bradstreet, who also came from a well-off English family before moving to the colonies, was also married at sixteen years old to a significantly older man, so this reading has basis in reality, though Bradstreet's marriage was, from her own testimony, quite happy. Regardless, marriage was not necessarily the choice of an individual woman, but organized for the benefit of the whole family. A woman was property of her father. Through marriage, the property transfers from father to husband. Therefore, the father of the bride had a lot of say in, if not total control over, who his daughter married. In the text she expresses to Chillingworth that she "felt no love, nor feigned any" (76). Therefore, from a modern perspective, the sex that happened in those marriages, and Hester's, is not always with full consent or agency on the woman's part. Sexual experiences had under these conditions can range from awkward to uncomfortable to traumatic. Since Hester makes her repulsion of

Chillingworth very clear, it might not be due to his physical deformity alone, but that the experiences she had within that marriage were closer to the traumatic end of the spectrum.

When analysing Hester Prynne from a historical perspective, it is pertinent to compare her legal punishment, around which her story revolves, to those administered on actual adulteresses in colonial Massachusetts. It's important to note here that while Hester Prynne would have lived in Massachusetts Bay Colony, rather than Plymouth Colony, the two have enough religious and cultural similarity and geographical proximity to suggest that the theocratic law and moral attitudes of the two colonies would have had some similarities. Both had similar values, believing that the Anglican church was too Roman, too decadent and unholy. A paper by Lisa M. Lauria included in the Plymouth Colony Archive Project analyses law regarding sexual misconduct, encoded beginning in 1636. She quotes from the Plymouth Colony Records:

It is enacted by the court and the authoritie therof that whosoever shall comitt Adultery shalbee seuerly punished by Whiping two seuerall times; namely once whiles the Court is in being att which they are convicted of the fact and the 2cond time as the Court shall order and likewise to weare two Capitall letters namely A D cut out in cloth and sowed on their vpermost Garments on their arme or backe; and if att any time they shalbee taken without the said letters whiles they are in the Gouernment soe worn to bee forth with taken and publickly whipt.

While there are a few minor differences between the punishment encoded in this 1658 revision of the law and Hester's own--the letters AD instead of only the letter A, and its color, though "at least one court case did specify that they be red"--the premise is pretty much the same (Lauria). In all instances, fictional and factual, the convicted are forced to not only face temporary pain and humiliation, like being publicly whipped and/or facing a stint in the stocks, but are made

permanent symbols of sexual misconduct for the whole congregation. Additionally, Lauria notes that adultery was also made a capital offense. This is interesting because, as she states in her paper, nobody was actually recorded as having been executed for adultery. This may be because of often extenuating circumstances, such as the case of Katheren Aines who was also accused of adultery but whose husband had been absent for a period of time that fell within the realm of abandonment (Lauria). There is a written justification, too, for Hester's comparatively light punishment: "[O]ur Massachusetts magistracy, bethinking themselves that this woman is youthful...and doubtless was strongly tempted to her fall;--and that, moreover, as is most likely, her husband may be at the bottom of the sea..." (65). Justifications there may be, extenuating circumstances there may be, but it may be that becoming a symbol of sin itself is no better a punishment than death. Since Calvinist doctrine preached predestination, Hester could not find comfort in her holy actions outweighing her sins and giving her a chance at salvation.

It might be better than death, but being permanently branded as a sinner, an adulterer, and a capital offender, in the colony that was supposed to show the world that a godly nation on Earth was possible, is something of a social execution. Thinking of Hawthorne, who read colonial history vigorously, who meditated for his whole adulthood about the nature of sin and the consequences of his ancestors' puritanical rule, it's easy to imagine how he would read one of these laws in Plymouth Colony records, which say nothing of the adulterer's lives after their cases are concluded, and wondered how these people lived on after as tools of control.

And tools of control they were. Hawthorne's interest in the internal world of someone who has been publicly shamed is apparent. When she is on the scaffold, the first time, Hester seems to dissociate from the situation, with her life basically flashing before her eyes (60). After she snaps back to reality (which occurs upon seeing her true husband in the audience) she

endures an hour of sermoning just for her and her new symbol. “So forcibly did he [the old clergyman] dwell upon this symbol, for the hour or more which his periods were rolling over people’s heads, that it assumed new terrors in their imagination, and seemed to derive its scarlet hue from the flames of the internal pit” (70). As mentioned previously, this was a deeply religious, theocratic society.

It is also one in which neighbors are constantly looking out for one another, but also spying on one another, and are often called to tattle on others’ misdeeds, which is usually how adultery is accused and convicted. Neighborly bonds are strong and community in congregation is important. Hester, and other adulteresses, would have been isolated from that support system. Hester also defied direct orders from church and government leaders to disclose the identity of the father. This defiance further degrades her public image as a sinner, and later sparks rumors that the devil himself is her daughter’s father. Then the sermon from a church elder that might as well be a command to think of Hester no longer as a neighbor, but as a symbol. Even years later, when her good deeds allow her reputation to soften some, it was still socially unacceptable to be friendly with her. Though the letter slowly changed meaning from “Adulteress” to “Able”, her whole manner of dress still signified her as less than.

Clothing in Puritan New England could, without any letters or seals, convey messages and even transform wearers. It is interesting that the letter was so fierce in its hue that it “seemed to derive its scarlet hue from the flames of the internal pit.” At the time, according to Wendy Lucas’s “Damned by a Red Paragon Bodice: Witchcraft and the Power of Cloth and Clothing in Puritan Society,” the brightest scarlets were made from cochineal, imported from Mexico, and reserved for elites only (121). This adds an interesting layer to Hester’s punishment. So important it is that she is properly branded, brightly, and long-lasting, that they would give up

something so expensive to make such a statement. Of course, Hawthorne may not have known this, or not have cared, and his motive for making the letter such a bright red is purely literary. Perhaps the bloody vibrancy of the letter is a distortion of the narrator, or the perception of Hester or the crowd. Or perhaps the cost was worth the attention it received, how fiercely such a bright red caught the eye.

Hawthorne would have been aware, at least, of sumptuary laws and tales from the witch trials in his native Salem-- these ran rampant as any good or bad thing was a sign of the work of the Lord or the Devil for the Puritans. Convicted witch Bridget Bishop was possibly scorned for and identified by her red paragon bodice: a garment of both expensive fabric and color, well above the station of a woman who had once been flat broke and became “middling” after a second marriage (Lucas 123). In contrast, Hester wore dark, coarse, “ascetic” dress (Hawthorne 86), the exception, of course, being the scarlet letter, which was “surrounded with an elaborate embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread” and “of a splendor in accordance with the taste of the age, but greatly beyond what was allowed by the sumptuary regulations of the colony” (Hawthorne 55). On one hand, she was doing exactly what she was meant to do, wearing dress befitting of her station as nearly the lowest of the low on the social hierarchy, covering her hair, and wearing the letter as is legally mandated. But the context transforms the letter into a symbol of defiance. The letter is literally surrounded by Hester’s finest embroidery work in her finest materials. Also, if the authorities told the truth, the only reason that she keeps the letter is because of her disobedience in refusing to disclose the identity of her daughter’s father.

Throughout the novel she oscillates between obedience and disobedience, the temptation of Satan and the light of the Lord, the desire to leave Boston and her shame behind and the duty to stay and live out her punishment. Hester is in a unique position, too, as a single woman with a

sought-after skill and her own trade and home. This gives her power, though she sacrifices social connection for it.

Her power lies on shaky ground. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich cautions against interpreting the tasks and roles of colonial women from a modern perspective as “Colonial women might appear to be independent, even aggressive, by modern standards, yet still have derived their status primarily from their relationship to their husbands” (62). Before Chillingworth returns, her trade, her home, her belongings, even her body all belonged to him. Anything she did was really in his name, even when no news came of him for two years. By refusing to expose Dimmesdale, however, she also refused justice for her husband, possibly because she never loved him and was bitter that she was confined to share her body only with him and not anyone else of her choosing. But once seven years passed without any word from him (as far as the rest of the community was concerned) she was effectively a widow, but still a pariah. Her real power and independence comes when Chillingworth dies in the epilogue. She is finally a true widow. Her young daughter is left with his estate, controlled now by Hester. Legally, her status changes from a wife bound by the law of coverture, the law that dictates that married women must operate legally under their husband’s name, to which “married women in Massachusetts...were more strictly bound” than in England, to a widow with wealth and a skilled trade of her own (Moore). While her power is still technically derived from her connection to her husband, she is legally beholden to no one. She absconds to England during the years of the witch trials (she would have been quite a candidate for the gallows) that Hawthorne as a Salem native and amateur historian would have been intimately familiar with, and returns as the meaning of the letter fades away. The community no longer shuns, but pities. Hester gets to rebuild and reap the social capital that

she'd lost and pay forward the counsel and female support that she'd needed but hadn't received as a young woman.

Hester was not born from the time and place in which her story takes place, though. She was instead conceived in the head of Nathaniel Hawthorne in the 1840's. While it may be easy to look at Hester, who is nuanced and whose character is given much weight and who the narrative treats the best in the end, and assume that Hawthorne was sympathetic to the feminist cause. He was friends with Margaret Fuller, famously defiant author of "Women in the Nineteenth Century". Of course, no author is so simple. What one writes in a different world is not always indicative of their conscious feeling in this one.

Hawthorne was certainly inspired by real-life women when developing Hester. Brenda Wineapple assigns Fuller, Hawthorne's sister-in-law Elizabeth Peabody, and his mother, Elizabeth Clarke Manning Hawthorne, as his flesh inspiration. Fuller's bold disdain of the established order is seen in Hester's fantasies in chapter XIII, "Another View of Hester", where within her austere exterior she imagines overthrowing the Puritan patriarchy (Hawthorne 170-172). Hawthorne's sister-in-law, Sophia Peabody, found herself slandered as "the third party in a failing marriage", and yet refused to denounce her male companion and clear her name (Wineapple 201). Wineapple connects this event with a line spoken by Dimmesdale after Hester refuses to expose him as the father of her child, "Wondrous strength and generosity of a woman's heart" (202). As for his mother, she too raised her children without a husband, as Hester raises her daughter, Pearl, completely alone. Hawthorne's father, Nathaniel Hawthorne, died at sea when he was a young boy, similar to how Hester's husband, Chillingworth, was lost at sea before dying without having anything to do with his wife's child, and how Dimmesdale, too, dies without helping Hester raise Pearl. While nothing I've read suggested that Mrs.

Hawthorne ever was unfaithful to her husband, it could be so that some of Hawthorne's love towards his single mother may have transmuted into sympathy for Hester. One difference between them is that while Mrs. Hawthorne had help in her living relatives, especially her brothers, Hester, as a pariah, had no one.

Hawthorne's sympathy for Hester and desire to render her so complexly and delicately may have been inspired not so much by the desire to write a woman's story, but to write a story that challenges and reveals the Puritan ideals of his forefathers. Specifically, in his writing he took issue with harsh punishment for sin, as sin is part of being human. One example is in his short story "Young Goodman Brown", published in 1935, in which a young Puritan man discovers a Satanic ritual in the forest with all of his fellow Puritans participating; after, he loses his faith and dies miserable. This can be interpreted as a criticism of sheltering the young and hiding them from the inherently sinful nature of the world. *The Scarlet Letter* is a natural extension of the setting and themes explored in his earlier work. Hester is only incidentally a woman, but primarily a sinner, unjustly punished compared to Dimmesdale and the Governor.

There's another explanation for utilizing a female protagonist. Richard H. Millington's lecture "The Meanings of Hawthorne's Women" asks and explores a question that confounded me since I learned more about Hawthorne's life: "What does it mean that Hawthorne-apparently no friend to the hunger for new possibilities and patterns of life felt by the century's emerging feminist thinkers-seems to have written the most powerfully feminist fiction of the American 19th Century?" He presents a few possibilities: one being that he did grapple with feminist sympathies and had a deep understanding of gender dynamics but was too fragile to carry those ideas to the waking world, another being that in his writing he expressed the femininity that lie within him vicariously through his female characters. Millington puts it in historical context by

analyzing a review by Longfellow of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, which praises Hawthorne's work for its feminine touch. He concludes that femininity in the spheres of courtship letters and fiction writing, the traditionally feminine traits of delicacy, tenderness and selflessness. "In a sense," says Millington, "Longfellow welcomes Hawthorne as one of the boys by pointing out his ability to be one of the girls." Lo and behold, *the Scarlet Letter* is his most famous and acclaimed work. Hester herself, too, embodies these accepted womanly traits. In the same chapter that she internally shucks the chains of patriarchal control, outwardly there were "None so ready as she to give of her little substance to every demand of poverty...None so self-devoted as Hester, when pestilence stalked through the town" (166-167). Of course, being generous and helpful to one's community even when it has done one so dirty is noble in its own right, but would be more expected from a woman, who should naturally have that kind of nurturing drive. What may seem progressive, having a complicated, but resolutely feminine female protagonist, is more likely a product of the time than a groundbreaking display of feminist sympathies.

Another inspiration for Hester was Anne Hutchinson. Hutchinson moved to the colony in the 1630s and gained a large following for her religious ideas divergent from those commonly accepted by the Puritan authority. For this she was convicted of heresy and exiled. She is invoked twice in the romance. The first instance is in the very first chapter, the Prison-Door, where a rose bush in bloom is rooted beside the portal, that had been "kept alive in history...as there is a fair authority for believing, it had sprung up under the footsteps of the sainted Ann Hutchinson" (50). A rose bush is on the outside lush, colorful, and beautiful, but sharp behind the blooms--a metaphor for Hester herself? As Hester's internal world becomes more defiant, Hutchinson is invoked again, "had little Pearl never come to her from the spiritual world...Then, she might have come down to us in history, hand in hand with Ann Hutchinson, as the foundress

of a religious sect” (171). This is implied to be a good thing. It is also Pearl that keeps Hester away from Satan in the woods, and from witchcraft; it is motherhood that keeps her in line. If a sense for the feminine was required to develop a strong nineteenth century authorial identity, that might explain the harshness of the introduction to his sketch, “Mrs. Hutchinson”, which dissuades American women from picking up the pen. This is followed by a sketch more reverent to the setting than the woman, but not wholly uncomplimentary either.

Finally, I think that Hester was also infused with Hawthorne’s sense of isolation. He had friends, sure, but many of them short-lived, or contentious. Some were through his class and family connections, others through his wife. He was well-known for being hard to get to know. His childhood was spent bedridden and alone, and long stretches of adulthood isolated in a room in his hometown with a pen and paper. Hester was infused with these ideas of isolation, both from family by geography and from society by sin. Hawthorne as an author and Hester as a character are both singular and unmatched. Both “inclosed” in a sphere by themselves.

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