Poison in the system: symbols on the body and the body as a symbol in select works of Nathaniel Hawthorne

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POISON IN THE SYSTEM:

SYMBOLS ON THE BODY AND THE BODY AS A SYMBOL

IN SELECT WORKS OF NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

by

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ABSTRACT

In three texts by Nathaniel Hawthorne, “The Birth-Mark,” “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” and _The Scarlet Letter_, the main female characters share one central trait: a problematic femininity that causes the men in their lives to regard them as something other, and thus suspect. Hawthorne develops this idea of femininity as a defect, and endows these women with actual bodily anomalies in order to explore the ways in which the symbols on the body, or the body itself, invite a variety of interpretation. In doing so, he shows that these interpretations reveal as much or more about the interpreter as they do the object on display. The progression of these texts, from “The Birth-Mark” published in 1843, to “Rappaccini’s Daughter” published in 1844, to _The Scarlet Letter_ published in 1850, serves to set the stage for a protagonist who can emerge from her status as a symbolized woman. While in the first two of these texts, subjugation and the loss of an individual perspective occur, in _The Scarlet Letter_ such control is rejected, and the artist figure is born in the character of the protagonist. These texts show how female individuality can be maintained only when one embraces the role of the outsider. It is from this position that the female protagonist looks beyond the dominant male perspective and claims her own version of authority.
INTRODUCTION

In a laboratory or a secret garden, or upon a scaffold for all the town to see and scorn, we find Nathaniel Hawthorne’s heroines—“marked” women each of them—trying to survive in a world where they are undeniably different. The central female characters in “The Birth-Mark,” “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” and *The Scarlet Letter* are ostracized, chastised, or even destroyed for reasons that, though seeming to be superficially valid, reveal certain prejudices entrenched in their respective patriarchal societies. These women share several traits, not the least of which is their problematic femininity that causes the men in their lives to regard them as something other, and thus suspect. By endowing these women with actual bodily anomalies Hawthorne develops this idea of femininity as, in fact, a defect. He gives Georgiana a crimson hand-shaped birthmark, Beatrice a body nourished with poison, and Hester Prynne a scarlet letter that she must always wear on her breast. In doing so, he ensures that all of the other characters’ hostility, longings and confusion are directed onto these physical objects. He explores the ways in which the symbols on the body, or the body itself, invite a variety of interpretations; and he shows, in turn, that these interpretations reveal as much or more about the interpreter as they do the object on display. Most significantly, Hawthorne accomplishes all of this within the text, so that the interpretation is actually enacted by the characters themselves.

It is a generally accepted fact among scholars and students that Hawthorne’s works are deeply symbolic, but too frequently they interpret such symbolism as something that only readers can decipher in a text. As readers, we believe that symbolism
is external to the action of the text, an added layer that places characters in a context of which they will never be aware; thus, we tend to approach it as something distinctly literary. Reading in this way we fail to see that often the characters themselves play a part in creating the symbols we are attempting to interpret. In these three Hawthorne stories, the symbols alone mean nothing—and indeed are not symbols at all—until their meaning is written into them by characters who are in the position to do so; that is, by characters in positions of power. Particularly in stories about women, the concept of rewriting and reinterpreting is crucial. By looking more closely at these texts, we can learn more about what it means in Hawthorne’s fiction both to symbolize and to be symbolized.

Perhaps it is easiest to first start by comparing these female-centric texts against one with a male protagonist; in this way, we may see how Hawthorne’s treatment of the body differs between the sexes, and what, in turn, this might say about the difference between male and female subjectivity. In “The Minister’s Black Veil,” for example, Reverend Hooper deliberately places a veil over his face, knowing that such an object will change how he is perceived and imply certain details about his character and personal history. This veil is not merely the device of an author, but something that belongs, as the title suggests, to the character. As one of Hooper’s parishioners observes, “He has changed himself into something awful, only by hiding his face” (Hawthorne, “The Minister’s Black Veil” 1312, emphasis added). Thus, Hooper has the power to transform himself, and he exercises this right. He exercises control over his own symbolization by choosing the object, its placement, and his audience.

In “The Minister’s Black Veil” interpretation begins in the text, and later moves outward to include the reader, who can then interpret the whole story on a larger scale. Of
course, in this case, the minister himself controls the veil, and thus the symbolism. He is in a more powerful position than the women in the other three texts, for no one—not a parent, nor a lover, nor even nature—has forced Hooper to bear this symbol. Choice is what ultimately separates Hooper from the women, Georgiana, Beatrice, and Hester. At any given moment, Hawthorne’s male characters like Reverend Hooper—or even Arthur Dimmesdale—have physical control over their bodies. They are not asked to look a certain way, nor to act a certain way, nor are they considered in terms of being “curable” or “perfectible.” The only ailments they suffer are psychological ones, and it is this influence, not any external one, that imposes the sorrowful symbols upon these men. In “The Minister’s Black Veil” we learn that the veil “kept [Reverend Hooper] in the saddest of all prisons, his own heart” (1319); similarly, in The Scarlet Letter Dimmesdale’s letter is a “burning torture to bear upon [his] breast,” and although he attributes the letter to God, it is clear that his own internal anguish has played a role in his physical decline (1489). Both of these male characters have deeply tragic internal lives, but their tragedy arises only from within themselves. This is strikingly different from the situation of the female characters, because they have all had tragedy inflicted upon them by outside forces; this difference raises two questions that are central to the discussion of Hawthorne’s “marked” women: What happens when symbolism is imposed by one character onto another? What does it mean when the symbolism is not a choice but the effective dehumanization of a victim by an oppressor?

Far more complicated is the body symbolism that exists on and within Hawthorne’s female characters in “The Birth-Mark,” “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” and The Scarlet Letter. As these titles imply, the women protagonists of these stories do not have
control over their interpretation. They can claim no ownership or possessiveness (as the minister can), nor any place of their own. Georgiana is reduced to her birthmark, Beatrice to her relation to a male figure, her father, and Hester to the scarlet letter she wears upon her chest. None of these women have chosen these reductions, these dismissive appraisals, and yet their bodies have nonetheless been transformed by them. Georgiana’s birthmark, which was never of any concern to her, becomes the obsession of her husband, and his interference eventually leads to her death. The mad science of Beatrice’s father transforms Beatrice, born healthy and normal, into a poisonous flower closed off from love and affection; furthermore, she is reimagined as a “poisonous woman,” as deadly as she is idealized. Hester Prynne, sentenced to wear the letter that speaks of her sin, keeps the past forever present, and cannot escape the mark of difference that becomes a part of her. What hope can there be for the salvation of any one of them? How can these women assert any claim to their own experience when that experience has already been claimed and distorted by others?

The progression of these texts, from “The Birth-Mark” published in 1843, to “Rappaccini’s Daughter” published in 1844, to The Scarlet Letter published in 1850, serves to set the stage for a protagonist who can emerge from her status as a symbolized woman. Unlike her literary forebears, Hester Prynne is able to transcend the symbol she wears upon her body. She does this by embracing the role of artist, a position that solidifies her place as an outsider, to be sure, but also as an individual. While in their respective stories, Georgiana and Beatrice remain victims, defined by others but never by themselves, Hester becomes empowered by her symbol and her ability to influence its meaning. Indeed, Hester represents far more than what her letter A is meant to signify:
she is a modern woman—and a modern American—for whom definition begins with the self.
CHAPTER 1: PROBLEMATIC FEMININITY
AND THE MARKED INDIVIDUAL IN SOCIETY

In Hawthorne scholarship, discussion of the symbolically marked body is nothing new, nor are feminist interpretations of each of these female-centric texts. Readings by both feminists and anti-feminists, in fact, have reached similar conclusions—though for different reasons—on the representation of women in these stories (Baym, “Thwarted Nature” 58). This paper will revisit many of these interpretations, finding common ground in the understanding that femininity is problematic and the chief offense of each of these symbolized women. It will differ, however, in its interpretation of Hawthorne’s presumed patriarchal attitudes, the existence of which is often claimed in both feminist and pre-feminist criticism. Instead of making claims about these women on an external level, this paper will examine what they symbolize for the characters whose own interpretations drive the plot of each story. While Hawthorne’s intent is certainly not irrelevant, particularly when he includes himself as a character in “The Custom-House,” his introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*, speculation on this topic must be approached cautiously. Before attempting this, however, we must first understand what it means to mark, and why each of these women must be marked in her own way. Even more fundamentally, we must understand what it means to be a woman in the special contexts of each character.

In *The Resisting Reader*, Judith Fetterley writes that the condition of woman is isolation, and that, as a consequence of her condition, “her self-image is monstrous” (ix). Indeed, the concepts of isolation and monstrosity feature prominently in these three
Hawthorne texts: Georgiana is isolated in Aylmer’s laboratory, Beatrice is isolated in her father’s garden, and, of course, Hester is isolated from society; furthermore, each woman is constructed in terms of the monstrous, the poisonous, and the untouchable, respectively. As we find in these stories, often the isolation imposed upon these women by outside forces serves to promote a negative self-image by reiterating and reinforcing the idea of the woman’s monstrosity. In “The Birth-Mark,” for example, Georgiana is gradually indoctrinated into her husband Aylmer’s way of thinking because she is separated from the rest of society. Aylmer’s dominant reading, which in seclusion is met with no opposition, replaces any positive interpretation of the birthmark so that eventually Georgiana must accept it as truth.

Of course, as this monstrosity is constructed, any discussion of curing it is misguided. The monster cannot be made human, for as Fetterley states, “to be human is to be male” (ix). Her topic is reading—specifically the canon of American literature—as a woman, but it can just as easily be applied to the woman reading herself. Hawthorne’s women characters are at a distinct disadvantage for understanding themselves because they are placed in their own rather sensational context, wholly isolated, and interacting primarily with male characters. They are, like the female reader, asked to identify with men, and thus to see women, themselves, as the other, the monster. They identify against themselves, and in doing so, they relinquish their own identity and adopt the one that meets no resistance. For this reason, both “The Birth-Mark” and “Rappaccini’s Daughter” end tragically: Georgiana and Beatrice, as women striving to be human, and thus not women, discover that the only way to be “cured” of their monstrosity is to cease to exist. Their deaths reconcile such contradictions of reading in a way that living,
without an adjustment to their method of interpretation, could not. Hester Prynne is exempt from such a fate precisely because she embraces a feminine—and a personal—reading over a masculine one. She may be the other to society, but she is, crucially, not an other to herself.

In *The Mark and the Knowledge*, Marjorie Pryse explores what it means to mark someone in society, and why it is, in fact, necessary to define society in opposition to marked individuals. She explains that marking is about not only noticing difference, but also communicating that difference (1). Thus, the true essence of marking is conveying how an individual does not conform to a certain ideal or a concept of what is expected. The women in these Hawthorne stories are marked with a physical, bodily difference because their inner difference must be made explicit. Pryse traces this particular American tradition of marking to early-American Puritanism, noting its emphatic reliance on symbolization. She writes,

> The impulse to mark within the Puritan consciousness expressed a pervasive metaphysical insecurity that cannot tolerate paradox or ambiguity, desires not that God’s will be grace but that God’s will be known, and forces this “knowledge” by assigning labels...to individuals...who then serve as the scapegoats in modern enactments of ancient rituals. The path to self-knowledge for the Puritans and their heirs lies in the creation of a social symbolism—a system of marks and brands. The subject matter of the American novelist reflects the symbolizing process of his own art as well as his historical consciousness (11).

Given his ancestry, Nathaniel Hawthorne is necessarily cognizant of the Puritan tradition in America and, specifically, in American literature, and thus his stories reflect its influence on the American psyche. Symbolization in “The Birth-Mark,” “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” and *The Scarlet Letter* is, as Pryse’s argument suggests, a convenient narrative constructed to prevent ambiguities. We find that such marking is especially
necessary for the women in these specific stories, wherein their actions or appearances do not match the image they are presenting to society. They are all defined by their troubling contradictions: Georgiana’s facial flaw belies her angelic nature and suggests her mortality, her humanity, and, above all, her sexuality; Beatrice’s education is unacceptable for a woman of her time; and Hester is a shamed or fallen woman, but does good deeds and is artistically talented. Each character is interestingly complex, but in a way that cannot be celebrated. These characters, whose “defects” are all in some way connected to their femininity, must be made into scapegoats because they represent, at least in the minds of those in power, a transgression.

This is most apparent in the experience of Hester Prynne, whose donning of the scarlet letter is actually imposed by society, and who, thus, “bears the burden of communal evil” (Pryse 9). A more straightforward punishment is not possible because the offending action, for the Puritans, must be acknowledged. To punish Hester privately, without the involvement of society, would be to allow the nature of the crime to go unrecognized. This cannot be: Hester must be made synonymous with her actions, for by making her synonymous with her actions, society as a whole absolves itself from her sin. If Hester defines adultery, then the meaning is controlled; her definition precludes other possible definitions of the same term. As Pryse writes, “the Puritans manage hidden and formless emotions by externalizing them in a sign” (27).

Of course, the unintended consequence of the creation of the social outcast is the attendant creation of the artist figure, who responds to the imposed isolation by creating his or her own codes and symbols. Hester expresses her artistic side by embroidering the letter according to her own fancy, and thus challenging its meaning as an object of scorn.
Georgiana and Beatrice, meanwhile, do not question their placement as outsiders and accept the interpretations of their respective stigmas. By fulfilling their assigned roles, and not looking beyond them, they are forever the “other,” never the subject.

This is, in fact, similar to Judith Fetterley’s argument about the female reader, and her call for this “outsider” to enter the system not from within but from without. She writes:

Consciousness is power. To create a new understanding of our literature is to make possible a new effect of that literature on us. And to make possible a new effect is in turn to provide the conditions for changing the culture that the literature reflects (xix-xx).

As we have seen, the marked woman is no different than the female reader. She is a reader in her own right, only her body is the text. Like the reader that Fetterley discusses, the marked woman is constantly asked to identify with the male perspective, and thus risks losing—or never developing—her own perspective. As an outsider, however, she can never successfully function from within; on the inside she is figured only as the other, the monster, the opposite of what is expected and valued. In her biography on Hawthorne, Brenda Wineapple observes that “Hester ultimately triumphs only by taking up the mark—and mask—identifying her as woman” (216). Femininity, though constructed in terms of the problematic, is not something that can be fixed and brought into the dominant perspective. It exists and finds its value outside of that discourse; the female subject gains her strength as the artist/outsider whose mark of femininity is embroidered by her own hand.
CHAPTER 2: “THE BIRTH-MARK”

“The Birth-Mark” is the earliest of these three Hawthorne stories, and, fittingly, it features the smallest of all the symbols: a tiny hand-shaped birthmark upon the newlywed Georgiana’s cheek. Although this birthmark can be concealed, as Georgiana herself explains, with just “the tips of two small fingers,” it is nonetheless the object of her husband Aylmer’s great obsession and disgust (Hawthorne, “The Birth-Mark” 1323). The birthmark, which in the past had been called a charm by those with less power over Georgiana, is variously called by Aylmer a “defect” and “a visible mark of earthly imperfection” (1321). Furthermore, the narrator notes that “Aylmer’s sombre imagination was not long in rendering the birthmark a frightful object, causing him more trouble and horror than ever Georgiana’s beauty, whether of soul or sense, had given him delight” (1322). It is clear from these terms of utter repugnance that Aylmer could never, to put it in Georgiana’s terms, love what shocks him. Thus, what shocks him must be transformed into something he can love. Aylmer’s control over the interpretation of the birthmark is immediate and definitive; once he has expressed his abhorrence of it, all other interpretations are nullified. He will not be persuaded to see the birthmark as a mark of beauty, or ever regard it as a tolerable sight. And so, the text poses the question: How can Aylmer and Georgiana ever have peace in their marriage while he finds an essential part of her so repellent?

In its simplest description, the plot of “The Birth-Mark” can be reduced thus: A dedicated scientist decides to settle down with a beautiful woman in the hopes that she may displace his overwhelming passion for science. Rather than displace it, however, she
invigorates it, causing her husband to become obsessed with the removal of a tiny hand-shaped birthmark on her left cheek. This mark, hitherto considered a “charm,” is abhorrent to the husband, an unbearable blemish on an otherwise perfect body; he persuades his wife of this opinion, and she consents to have it removed. He then sequesters her in his laboratory and calls upon his vast scientific knowledge to discover a way to eradicate it. The mark is stubborn, but when he finally removes it, he discovers an unintended consequence: he has, in the process, killed his wife. As Fetterley writes, “At the end of the story Georgiana is both perfect and dead” (23).

On the surface, the story may appear to be a cautionary tale about the dangers of attempting to transcend nature, but, as Fetterley points out, “It is not irrelevant that ‘The Birthmark’ is about a man’s desire to perfect his wife, nor is it accidental that the consequence of this idealism is the wife’s death” (22). Aylmer has failed not because he has dared to improve upon nature, but because he never truly understood his task—or his intent. Indeed, we might argue that he actually succeeded in his attempts, for he does, ultimately, rid himself of that most offensive object; he simply does not realize that the thing so horrible to him was actually Georgiana’s ineradicable femininity. In fact, it was never the birthmark he could not accept, but rather what it stood for in his mind. We are at first led to believe that the mark represents “the fatal flaw of humanity,” but that is not entirely accurate. Rather, it represents the fatal flaw of women, which is, incidentally, to be female. While no doubt the reminder of Georgiana’s susceptibility to “sin, sorrow, decay, and death” does influence his feelings, Aylmer is more strongly affected by the suggestion that Georgiana may experience something which he cannot control; he cannot accept her as a person with her own subjectivity, autonomy, and independent past
(Hawthorne, “The Birth-Mark” 1322). Furthermore, it is worth noting that Georgiana, as far as the reader is concerned, does not experience “sin, sorrow, decay, and death” until Aylmer becomes obsessed with removing her birthmark.

Of course, we readers are given little insight into Georgiana’s life before she met Aylmer, and our inability to know her, and her birthmark, before Aylmer’s interference colors the way we perceive the birthmark. Significantly, when the description of the mark appears in the first few pages of the text, the narrator has already established Aylmer’s view of it. Before ever “seeing” the mark, we learn that Aylmer considers it no less than “shocking.” By the time we read the narrator’s eventual description of the mark, we are already considering the symbolic significance of its size, its shape, its color, and its other unique qualities:

[I]n the centre of Georgiana’s left cheek, there was a singular mark, deeply interwoven, as it were, with the texture and substance of her face. In the usual state of her complexion,—a healthy, though delicate bloom,—the mark wore a tint of deeper crimson, which imperfectly defined its shape amid the surrounding rosiness. When she blushed, it gradually became more indistinct, and finally vanished amid the triumphant rush of blood, that bathed the whole cheek with its brilliant glow. But, if any shifting motion caused her to turn pale, there was the mark again, a crimson stain upon the snow, in what Aylmer sometimes deemed an almost fearful distinctness. Its shape bore not a little similarity to the human hand, though of the smallest pygmy size. (Hawthorne, “The Birth-Mark” 1321)

First, we should consider the fact that this mark is described as being “deeply interwoven” with the face; indeed, at one point Georgiana herself suspects that it “goes as deep as life itself” (Hawthorne, “The Birth-Mark” 1323). Here, then, is a clue that what so offends Aylmer is deeply entwined with Georgiana’s entire being; it is what Fetterley calls, “one of Georgiana’s givens, in fact equivalent to her” (25). Abhorring this mark that is inseparable from the texture of his wife’s face and the substance of her being,
Aylmer reveals a hatred of his wife as well. He hopes to cure this hatred by erasing the mark completely, yet, as we already know, to erase Georgiana’s birthmark is to erase Georgiana herself.

We should also isolate three key qualities that appear in this description and recur in various references to the birthmark throughout the rest of the text. This seemingly simple sketch of the mark is not without its own symbolic undertones, so that the emphasis on and presentation of certain traits in it create an image that is informed by a specific interpretation. The first quality is the birthmark’s color, which is termed not only a deeper version of her normal skin color, but crimson in hue. This crimson color is later aligned with blood, the implication being that the mark is not only blood-red, but has a symbolic connection to blood in some way. The second quality is the mark’s relation to the face, which, though “deeply interwoven” with it, nonetheless varies in prominence. When Georgiana blushes, the mark becomes less apparent, as her whole face assumes a color similar to that of the birthmark. When she turns pale, however, the mark is more distinct, the red a great contrast to the whiteness of her cheek. Finally, the shape of the mark is compared to a tiny human hand. References to the birthmark’s “grip” on Georgiana abound, and it is even considered a “spectral hand” capable of “[writing] mortality” (Hawthorne, “The Birth-Mark” 1322). The irony, of course, is that it is actually Aylmer who writes Georgiana’s mortality, and his grip that controls her. His reading reveals more about himself than he realizes; the qualities, which he ascribes so conclusively to the mark, are no indication of Georgiana’s flaws or secrets, but rather a glimpse into his own inner psychology.
Implicit in Aylmer’s reading of the birthmark is something that, to him, is far more troubling than simply the impression of Georgiana’s mortality. He reads within it a hint of sexuality, of women as having a separate, unfathomable sexual existence. The narrator deliberately notes that Aylmer does not have a problem with the birthmark until after he becomes Georgiana’s husband: Aylmer discovers his feelings “[a]fter his marriage—for he thought little or nothing of the matter before” (Hawthorne, “The Birth-Mark” 1321). The color of the mark in particular seems to draw an intentional comparison to blood, even at times being referred to as the “Bloody Hand” (1321). It is clear that this is a distinctly female mark or, at least, that it is read in a distinctly feminine context because of Georgiana’s sex. Judith Fetterley and Jules Zanger both elaborate on the mark’s connection to menstruation, which Zanger notes was “perhaps the best kept secret of sexual life for the male half of the population” in nineteenth-century America (368). Zanger reflects on what a shock it would have been for a newly-married nineteenth-century man to discover this “dirty” little secret; indeed, the taboos of the time would not have made acceptance of it an easy endeavor.

The logic of the story conforms to the generally-held ideas of the age: namely, that a menstruating woman was “unclean,” and thus ought to be secluded, as she posed a threat to both “growing things” and “male enterprises” (Zanger 369). This idea is developed more explicitly in “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” which will be treated in the next section, in that Beatrice’s seclusion is specifically connected to her toxicity. In the case of this story, Georgiana represents a more nebulous threat; the result, however, is largely the
same: she is hidden away in Aylmer’s apartments, “cut off from the light of day and from social intercourse until her ‘imperfection’ is cured” (369). Unfortunately, Georgiana’s imperfection is not so much her menstruation as it is, simply, that she is female. For this, there is no cure, and thus Fetterley astutely recognizes that “what perfection means is elimination” (25).

This interpretation of the “ Bloody Hand” is consistent with both Aylmer’s general disinterest in women and his obsession with triumphing over nature. From the very beginning, readers are informed of his deep love for science, and it is clear that this love has taken the place of a traditional romantic relationship. The narrator goes as far as to state that, by itself, love for a woman would never be enough for Aylmer:

He had devoted himself, however, too unreservedly to scientific studies ever to be weaned from them by any second passion. His love for his young wife might prove the stronger of the two; but it could only be by intertwining itself with his love of science, and uniting the strength of the latter to his own (Hawthorne, “The Birth-Mark” 1320-21).

Thus, Aylmer’s longterm romance with science precludes any possibility of his accepting a relationship with Georgiana, or any woman, as a suitable substitute. He cannot appreciate Georgiana for the person she is, or even tolerate any perceived flaws in her, because he is not actually interested in having a woman for a wife: his true wife is science. The revelation of any secret imperfection in his wife, therefore, is magnified, and at the first hint of the unfathomable Aylmer rushes back to his first love. Science promises him the possibility of control, and it is only through science that he can find a way to relate to his wife. Using the birthmark as an excuse to introduce science into their union, Aylmer finally pretends a more genuinely intimate relationship with Georgiana;
although he cannot find fulfillment in Georgiana alone, he becomes rapturous simply at imagining his removal of her birthmark.

The sexuality Aylmer reads into the birthmark could, in fact, be taken two ways: it represents both the shocking reality that “even the purest and proudest of women have sexual natures” and the chance for Aylmer to access his desires in a scientifically-sanctioned way (Baym, “Thwarted Nature” 69). Aylmer is horrified by the mark, as his moral code dictates that sex is somehow unnatural. At the same time, however, he finds in this mark the scientific justification to circumvent his shameful feelings about sex. By replacing the sexual act with the act of removing the birthmark, he satisfies his desires while, in his mind, retaining his moral superiority.

In “Thwarted Nature: Nathaniel Hawthorne as Feminist,” Nina Baym examines this recurrent quirk of Hawthorne’s male protagonists: they cannot embrace women completely because they fear the sexual implications of doing so; thus, they operate on the level of substitutions and distortions. She writes that Hawthorne “shows men who, while rejecting real women who unavoidably inhabit physical bodies, substitute fantasies of them that are truly unnatural, fantasies of lust, power, degradation and control. These fantasies are the outgrowth of the unnatural male psyche” (69). Aylmer is a perfect example of such a man, for he creates a fantasy in which his wife Georgiana is not a normal woman, but a compelling science experiment. His duty to her is not to fulfill the traditional role of husband, but to play the scientist responsible for curing her. Her body causes conflicting emotions in him, so he frames it in the terms with which he is most comfortable. He sets about perfecting it, because to perfect her body is at once to avoid confronting the actual problem—of her femininity, or at least his inability to accept her
femininity—and to immerse himself in his greatest vocation, improving the works and capabilities of nature.

Before he begins his quest to remove the birthmark, Aylmer’s scientific achievements are limited to worthy attempts: almost all of his experiments are actually failures, falling short of his vision. Within the story, in fact, there is surprisingly little evidence of his scientific ability; when he is not working on the birthmark, the best he can muster is some illusions meant to soothe and distract Georgiana. The fact that he conjures fantasies is but another example of Baym’s point, that he is more taken with an ideal, the product of his imagination, than he is with reality. Even his illusion is noted as a convincing representation of reality, “but with that bewitching, yet indescribable difference which always makes a picture, an image, or a shadow so much more attractive than the original” (Hawthorne, “The Birth-Mark” 1325). Aylmer is not interested in the world around him as it is, but only as it might be. He wants to use his scientific knowledge to rival nature—Mother nature, as Judith Fetterley points out—but before Georgiana, he could produce only clever imitations of it. With Georgiana, he finally has the opportunity to improve upon nature by “remaking her creation” (Fetterley xiv). To triumph over the birthmark will be to triumph over nature—not only the nature that has made the mistake of marring a beautiful woman’s face, but also the nature that has made women so inscrutable, their experience so foreign and disturbing.
The second notable quality of the birthmark, which actually reveals more about Aylmer’s intentions toward his wife, is that when Georgiana blushes, the mark becomes increasingly indistinct. Thus, it is implied that if Georgiana were always in good humor, her birthmark would barely be noticeable. Of course, this is not what happens at all: it is, in fact, her husband’s behavior toward her that ensures she is perpetually pale. By encouraging Georgiana’s anxiety over the mark, which eventually blooms into full-blown disdain, Aylmer, in effect, causes the mark to appear more vividly. Why is it, if he truly wishes to help Georgiana, that he is constantly exacerbating her (and his) problems? Why does his “protection” throughout the story only lead to her growing unhappiness and, finally, her death?

The answer must be that Aylmer does not have Georgiana’s best interests at heart. But, more than that, he is really not even thinking of Georgiana. If he cared for his wife, the logical course of action for him would be to learn to accept the birthmark. He would promote an atmosphere in which the mark would be just another part of her face, something barely noticeable amid her usual blush. Yet Aylmer deliberately isolates the birthmark, focusing on it as if nothing else deserves as much attention. As I mentioned previously, there are many reasons for this, including his need to mediate his marriage with science rather than with love.

The absence of love in the story is certainly not subtle, but Aylmer’s systematic substitution of science for love forms the less obvious complement to love’s absence. Aylmer deprives Georgiana of a normal relationship, so she is compelled to accept his
experimentation on her as a loving act. She believes, or chooses to believe, that the birthmark represents the only part of her that is not perfect, and that with her husband’s intervention, she will finally reach her true potential. What she does not see is that Aylmer is trying to remove from her what it already missing in himself.

We already know that the suggestion of Georgiana’s sexuality shocks Aylmer and causes him to regard the mark as the embodiment of her impenetrable feminine experience. On a more basic level, however, we may see the birthmark as evidence of Georgiana’s capacity, and her desire, to love. The birthmark reflects the color of her face when she is flushed with love and happiness—or, indeed, with any strong emotion. Aylmer wishes to remove from her that last part of herself which reflects her need for love and affection; he wishes to isolate that part of her that is enlivened by mysterious motivations. He either does not see—or does not care—that Georgiana will match his perfect vision of her only when she is dead.

In short, Aylmer cannot, and will not, satisfy his wife emotionally, so he instead offers to help her, scientifically, by inventing a problem with her body. To be sure, if it were not for his persistent offers to remove the birthmark in the first place, Georgiana would never have believed that there was anything grotesque about it. Yet by the latter half of the story, we recognize that she has completely subscribed to his misguided, misogynistic reading of her birthmark when she states,

I might wish to put off this birthmark of mortality by relinquishing mortality itself in preference to any other mode. Life is but a sad possession to those who have attained precisely the degree of moral advancement at which I stand. Were I weaker and blinder it might be happiness. Were I stronger, it might be endured hopefully. But, being what I find myself, methinks I am of all mortals the most fit to die (Hawthorne, “The Birth-Mark” 1330).
For Georgiana, life itself has lost its appeal. She has been put in a position where any next move is impossible: to live with the birthmark is to be an object of disgust both to her husband and to herself, but to live without it is to risk discovering that she is still undesirable. Georgiana recognizes the futility of striving for human perfection.

Furthermore, she may understand that the perfection her husband seeks is incompatible with who she is as a woman. Yet his preoccupation with her birthmark is the only attention he offers her, and the closest substitute for the love she craves. Like Beatrice in “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” Georgiana finds that her need to be loved ensures that she will submit to any approximation of love. And upon realizing that she cannot escape the expectations and “cures” of men, she will choose, or at least accept, death as the only alternative.

III

Finally, we should look at the specific shape of the birthmark, that of a small hand. Because of its distinctive appearance, Aylmer and Georgiana think of it as performing the actions of a real hand. Furthermore, they believe that the grip of this hand is oppressive—a grip in which “mortality clutches the highest and purest of earthly mould, degrading them into kindred with the lowest” (Hawthorne, “The Birth-Mark” 1322). It is clear from this description that Georgiana now defers to Aylmer’s understanding of her body, thus allowing for this misinterpretation of, the “grip” that the birthmark has on her. She accepts that it is something horrifying, something that must be
loosened. Yet she still does not question why this grip must necessarily degrade her, or why something so deeply ingrained in her cannot be seen in positive terms. In obsessing over this imaginary grip, she fails to recognize, or to be alarmed by, the very real grip that her husband has on her. Hawthorne makes this explicit in one scene, when he writes: “He rushed towards her and seized her arm with a gripe that left the print of his fingers upon it” (“The Birth-Mark” 1329). This is perhaps the clearest example of Kate Lawson and Lynn Shakinovsky’s reading of the text—as a tale of domestic violence—for Aylmer has literally laid a hand upon his wife. Still, it also highlights the issue of who—literally and metaphorically—has a grip on Georgiana’s life. The moment the two attempt to remove the birthmark, Georgiana’s life is already lost to her. Aylmer wants to rewrite Georgiana, making himself, his grip, the primary influence on her. In doing so, he inevitably, and perhaps intentionally, destroys her.

In “Romance, Obsession, and Death in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s ‘The Birth-Mark’,” Lawson and Shakinovsky introduce another possible function of the hand. They argue that the symbol of the crimson hand stands for “a kind of women’s writing” (28). Certainly, we have already established that the mark here must stand for a uniquely feminine experience. Yet what does it mean to equate the mark with writing? By virtue of that fact that Aylmer’s own misreading of the birthmark develops the plot of the story, we must consider the birthmark in terms of a symbol that can, and will, be read. Is it not logical, then, to extend the metaphor and state that the hand itself conjures female authorship?

Georgiana’s birthmark represents her subjectivity. It reveals a side of her that Aylmer will never truly understand. We may say that this birthmark does not write only
Georgiana’s own experience onto her, but also the experience of every woman. It is, to put it simply, the mark of womanhood. Thus, while Aylmer may be correct about the meaning of female sexuality that he reads in the mark, he is undoubtedly incorrect in reading it as shocking. It is instead quite ordinary, representing the story of every mature woman. When Aylmer proposes to remove it, he wishes to erase—that is, to make unreal—what he considers an uncomfortable truth. He wishes to place women in his, a man’s, own context, and to tell their stories for them in a way that makes sense to him. Thus, when he imagines that he can use his science to “draw a magic circle” around Georgiana, what he really wants is to rewrite the female “author” using science (Hawthorne, “The Birth-Mark” 1325). He wants to place his wife in a circle that exists solely in his own sphere; this is why the action must move from the “fantastic elegance” of Georgiana’s boudoir to the “severe and homely simplicity” of the apartments Aylmer uses for his laboratory (1328-9).

One way to control authorship is to define who “owns” the authorial voice, and what constitutes a legitimate literary perspective. As I discussed in the first chapter of this paper, the woman reader, by being forced to conform to the dominant, male perspective, learns to identify against herself and allows the power to remain in the hands of men. Aylmer, of course, influences Georgiana’s reading of her birthmark by isolating her from the outside world—and from other interpretations. His control, however, is even more comprehensive than that, as it also reaches Georgiana as an actual reader. In “The Birth-Mark” Georgiana is, significantly, engrossed in reading a particular work of writing: her husband’s journal detailing his past scientific experiments. Although the journal reveals Aylmer’s susceptibility to failure, its discourse inspires no less than worship in Georgiana
(1328). Aylmer has thus captured his wife’s imagination not only with his speech, but also with his written words; furthermore, his words are not poetry, but science. Georgiana, who is not the scientist, has learned to read Aylmer’s scientific writings as if they reveal great truths. Even as she recognizes that they catalog her husband’s own shortcomings, she becomes convinced that the lofty aims of his science are more important than her life.

Science plays an interesting role not only in this text, but also in “Rappaccini’s Daughter” and The Scarlet Letter. Science is a realm that seems to belong only to men, and it is frequently placed in opposition to writing and authorship, which are generally related to women. It appears to be a governing passion for the otherwise passionless and is marked by an obsessiveness that can cause irreparable harm to other people who are viewed only as objects of study. With these tropes, Hawthorne develops a neat dichotomy between men and women: men are experimenters, while women are their experiments; men exert power, while women have their power taken away. He juxtaposes cold, impersonal science with warm, subjective femininity, ultimately suggesting that women are the victims of men who are too egotistical to consider anyone outside of their own insular sphere. While women crave love and respect, these scientific men can offer none; worse yet, these women are forced to accept the men’s dangerous obsession with changing them as if that change is synonymous with love.

In “The Birth-Mark,” Aylmer accomplishes the reverse of what he set out to do at the beginning of the story. Rather than develop a love for his wife that rivals his love for science, he falls more deeply in love with science and allows his feelings for it to replace any sexual desire he may have for his wife. Fixated solely on her mark, Aylmer finds the
rest of Georgiana irrelevant except to the extent that her mark becomes a science experiment. He acknowledges that “it will be such rapture to remove it” (Hawthorne, “The Birth-Mark” 1325), and when he and Georgiana retreat to his apartments to begin the process of its removal, he “[leads] her over the threshold of the laboratory” as if their true wedding night will occur only now, when he experiments on her (1324). Of course, Aylmer is not working with an unwilling subject; Georgiana is perfectly compliant, encouraging her husband and trusting him implicitly. Perhaps she feels that that is her only option. It seems that Georgiana does not recognize her birthmark for what it could be—a sign of empowerment—or simply does not see how it can possibly help her. She fears it and rejects it because it inspires fear and rejection from the man who is supposed to love her. She forsakes it, and her life, because she feels her story is already lost to her.
CHAPTER 3: “RAPPACCINI’S DAUGHTER”

Although Georgiana in “The Birth-Mark” becomes the experiment of her scientist husband only after their marriage, Beatrice in “Rappaccini’s Daughter” is a science experiment from birth. Nourished with the breath of her poisonous sister-flower, Beatrice matures within the walls of a beautiful but isolated garden. She knows no company beyond her father, Rappaccini, whose science and selfish ambition have made her deadly and untouchable. Closed off even from love, Beatrice must direct her affection toward the plants that only she can tend safely. While she yearns for companionship, she understands that her love would mean death for anyone to whom she offers it too freely. She thus must content herself with her plants, which she knows as well as—or perhaps even better than—any accomplished scholar.

As with Georgiana’s story, however, Beatrice’s does not truly begin until a male figure enters to obsess over her abnormality. In “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” Beatrice’s life of isolation is complicated by the arrival of a young student, Giovanni Guasconti, who moves into the villa overlooking Rappaccini’s garden. Admiring Beatrice from a distance, Giovanni immediately becomes enamored of her; he watches her with fascination, but also with growing perplexity. Giovanni recognizes that Beatrice is different from other women, more like “another flower, the human sister of those vegetable ones,” than a marriageable maiden, and observes that she is “as beautiful as they, more beautiful than the richest of them, but still to be touched only with a glove, nor to be approached without a mask” (Hawthorne, “Rappaccini’s Daughter” 1335). His behavior encourages Beatrice to entertain the idea of a romantic relationship, but
Giovanni is himself ambivalent. In fact, his desire for her mixes with horror when he witnesses certain unexplainable occurrences in which she seems capable of some sort of dark magic. He sees that she fawns over the plants while her father avoids them, and that her very breath appears to strike small creatures dead. Eventually, Giovanni reaches the conclusion that Beatrice is poisonous—a poisonous woman. Yet, even when he believes that she is malevolent, he still cannot resist her. In the end, he decides to “cure” her with an antidote to her poison on the assumption that, by doing so, the two can pursue a “normal” relationship. As happens in “The Birth-Mark,” this plan backfires; attempting to make her like everyone else, Giovanni gives her an antidote that is a poison to her venomous constitution, and so Beatrice dies.

The most tragic aspect of this story is not that Beatrice is poisonous, or that Giovanni has inadvertently killed the object of his affection, but, rather, that Beatrice is given no say at all in her fate. She is first the instrument of her father’s scientific compulsion, and later the victim of Giovanni’s selfish love. She is sacrificed as these men pursue goals they can never really attain; she is the blank canvas onto which they project their ambitions and anxieties, never once realizing, or caring, that she is not actually blank at all. Beatrice’s own subjectivity is frustratingly unexplored, both by the men in her life and in the text itself. This appears to be by design: the story is not so much about a poisonous woman as it is about a woman who has been constructed as poisonous. Put another way, “Rappaccini’s Daughter” is not a story that belongs to the title figure, but one that uses her as a vehicle to examine the thwarted desires of the men who know her. She is not, as Richard Brenzo notes, the stereotypical “femme fatale” operating as a corrupt influence on Giovanni’s life, but, instead, someone who has herself been
corrupted, not only constitutionally, but also in her reputation. Brenzo advises that “one must look beyond such femmes fatales to the hommes fatals who make them deadly” (151-152).

Indeed, Beatrice has been “made deadly” in more ways than one. The fact that her touch causes plants to wither and lizards to expire is, in truth, hardly where her threat lies. Far more sinister, to the characters at least, is Beatrice’s perceived power in the domains where she should be subservient. To Pietro Baglioni, Rappaccini’s enemy and Giovanni’s professor, Beatrice represents an academic rival. As he tells Giovanni, “I know little of the Signora Beatrice save that Rappaccini is said to have instructed her deeply in his science, and that, young and beautiful as fame reports her, she is already qualified to fill a professor’s chair. Perchance her father destines her for mine!” (Hawthorne, “Rappaccini’s Daughter” 1337-8). Although Baglioni frames this bit of information as an absurd anecdote, his later role in Beatrice’s demise suggests that there was more truth in what he reported than he was willing to admit. If Rappaccini was capable of creating a poisonous monster, disguised as a beautiful young woman, why would he not be able to create an equally rare breed: an educated woman? And, if this were true, then what could be deadlier at the time, to one’s career and reputation at least, than to be academically rivaled by a woman? Baglioni envisions Beatrice as a monster who must be destroyed, and thus facilitates this destruction. He does not even know if she possesses the scientific gifts she is professed to have, or if she would ever demonstrate those abilities, but the fact that she represents something so abhorrent in his mind is enough to convince him that such a threat must be eliminated. Ultimately, Beatrice is not even the enemy he wishes to
destroy; her destruction is simply the means by which Baglioni will punish Rappaccini for his unholy science.

To Giovanni, however, Beatrice represents a threat more typically feared by Hawthorne’s male protagonists. The mixture of attraction and revulsion that he feels for her is not dissimilar to Aylmer’s reaction to Georgiana’s birthmark. In Aylmer’s—and Giovanni’s—case, the offending quality is the body’s hint of sexuality, the confirmation that the woman is, in fact, female, with all that implies. Giovanni is clearly not prepared for an adult relationship—nor is Beatrice, for that matter—but he is tantalized by the possibility. He vacillates between pursuing Beatrice and shunning her; she, likewise, encourages him to come closer, but maintains a physical distance from him. It is as Giovanni becomes more intimate with her that he also becomes more convinced that she is poisonous.

In *The Sins of the Fathers: Hawthorne’s Psychological Themes* Frederick C. Crews confirms this interpretation, writing:

> If Beatrice’s “poisonousness” accounts for [Giovanni’s] characteristically ambivalent reaction, then the poisonousness may stand for her sexuality as it affects his contrary impulses. Hope and dread wage continual warfare in Giovanni’s breast because he fears exactly what he desires. His sexual ambition triggers his fits of revulsion, for the closer he comes to Beatrice, the more he is appalled by her implied sexual power. (119)

Indeed, Beatrice’s implied sexual power is what makes her truly deadly. If she were simply poisonous, Giovanni would be able to avoid her, or at least to avoid physical contact with her, thus making her no threat to him at all. The problem with her poisonous body is that Giovanni desires contact with it, even though he fears being corrupted by such contact. As Crews explains, Giovanni fears what he desires, and his fear manifests
in his ever-shifting interpretation of Beatrice. Is she a demon or an angel? Does growing
closer to her involve a victory or a sacrifice? Brenzo argues that, “For Giovanni, sexual
commitment to Beatrice means ‘death’ in the sense of being dominated by a woman,
being robbed of his independence, and having his personality swallowed up” (146). To be
sure, the type of life Beatrice offers him is one in which he will be as much an outsider as
she, for, in being with her, he will take on her poisonous properties. But how can readers
be certain that a relationship with Beatrice will be as Giovanni portrays it? Is he not
simply projecting his anxieties over a committed adult relationship onto the first woman
he has seriously considered as a romantic partner?

Crews likens “Rappaccini’s Daughter” to a psychological allegory, suggesting that
the action is seen through the medium of Giovanni’s imagination (124). In fact, it could
be argued that imagination—particularly the male imagination—is actually poisonous,
for it pollutes reality with a dark, dangerous fantasy. Nina Baym’s argument from
“Thwarted Nature” is relevant here as well: that the men in Hawthorne’s stories reject the
reality of women and substitute fantasies—of power, degradation, and control—that are
by far more unnatural than the women themselves. She explains, “these stories are
making statements not about the real nature of women but about the way in which men
imagine them” (65).

Even before Giovanni officially meets Beatrice, his imagination has already been
captured by her allure. Owing, perhaps, to her mysterious lifestyle, or his own form of
isolation (he is separated from his family and friends in a new city where he knows
virtually no one), Giovanni becomes obsessed with watching her. Beatrice is more than
just a curiosity to him: she is a vessel into which he pours his hopes, desires, and even
fears. Watching her “soon becomes Giovanni’s full-time occupation” because he has found nothing else to occupy his time (Bensick 1). Under such scrutiny, Beatrice’s every action is subject to debate. She is immediately idealized, as when she emerges from under a sculpted portal and is described as being “arrayed with as much richness of taste as the most splendid of the flowers, beautiful as the day, and with a bloom so deep and vivid that one shade more would have been too much” (Hawthorne, “Rappaccini’s Daughter” 1335). She is a living flower, a beauty made more beautiful by the vibrant, and unusual, company she keeps. This is problematic, for it shows that even if she were not poisonous, Beatrice would still be a symbol. In fact, it is probably only because she is poisonous that Beatrice as a symbol, to the men in the story, is of any concern at all.

Yet, it would be irresponsible to sidestep what Beatrice’s body truly symbolizes. She is not some abstract danger, an arbitrary scapegoat that the men in the story fear simply because their fears need an outlet. Her body is not menacing only because of its poisonous qualities, but also because of its form. Baym observes that women in Hawthorne’s stories always signify their own sex: “a protagonist who rejects a woman character is rejecting her as a sign of woman as much as he is rejecting her as a sign of various other values” (61). Thus Beatrice, as the “poisonous woman” is as much of a threat for being poisonous as she is for being a woman. To interpret the story is not to separate Beatrice from her body, to isolate her symbolization, but to witness how the female body invites distinctly feminized interpretations.

Brenzo stresses that the men’s various reasons for exploiting Beatrice in the story are all “based on [her] femaleness” (142). Their motivations are inextricably tied to the fact that she is a woman, and informed by their conceptions of what a woman should be.
For Giovanni, her femininity entices him romantically, yet even as he desires her sexuality, he “fears its power to dominate and destroy him” (Brenzo 151). For Baglioni, her status as a woman should preclude her status as an academic, and the fact that it does not tests his confidence in his own abilities as both a scholar and a man; therefore, he must attempt to “neutralize her by diverting her energies to woman’s proper sphere, marriage” (151). For Rappaccini, finally, Beatrice must fulfill all of the requirements of a dutiful daughter. She must be “beautiful enough to win a husband, dependent enough to remain in his home, obedient enough to do his bidding, and compliant enough to be molded to his standards” (151). Of course, in order to meet these impossible standards, Beatrice cannot be her own person at all. And this is precisely the story’s point: to allow a woman to live for herself, at least according to the rationale of such male protagonists, is to let the poison spread. Isolated in her garden, Beatrice cannot do much harm, but when she is allowed to interact with others, she is capable of corrupting them with those qualities that define her difference.

It is only when Beatrice develops a relationship with Giovanni that she, however inadvertently, infuses him with her poison. To combat her dangerous influence, Giovanni, and the other men in her life, must redefine her and reduce her to something mythic (and thus unreal). The “poison” must thus be redistributed, coming not from Beatrice, but being directed onto her. While in the final scene this takes the form of the antidote that is deadly to her envenomed body, it is seen earlier as the gossip and insinuation that cast Beatrice as a poisonous woman in the first place. Before he even knows Beatrice, Giovanni harbors suspicions about her body’s unusual qualities; according to the narrator, regardless of Beatrice’s physical reality, “she had at least
instilled a fierce and subtle poison into his system” (Hawthorne, “Rappaccini’s Daughter” 1340). Thus, Beatrice is linked to poison in Giovanni’s mind as well as the reader’s, but in the story she is not yet figured as a malevolent force, nor is her poisonous nature yet described as being deadly to men. It is not until the conniving Baglioni captivates Giovanni with a sinister, and familiar-sounding, story that Beatrice ceases to be a beautiful curiosity and becomes a monster who must be cured of her physical abnormality.

In a seemingly casual conversation Baglioni introduces a very deliberate topic:

“I have been reading an old classic author lately,” said he, “and met with a story that strangely interested me. Possibly you may remember it. It is of an Indian prince, who sent a beautiful woman as a present to Alexander the Great. She was as lovely as the dawn and gorgeous as the sunset; but what especially distinguished her was a certain rich perfume in her breath — richer than a garden of Persian roses. Alexander, as was natural to a youthful conqueror, fell in love at first sight with this magnificent stranger; but a certain sage physician, happening to be present, discovered a terrible secret in regard to her.”

“And what was that?” asked Giovanni, turning his eyes downward to avoid those of the professor.

“That this lovely woman,” continued Baglioni, with emphasis, “had been nourished with poisons from her birth upward, until her whole nature was so imbued with them that she herself had become the deadliest poison in existence. Poison was her element of life. With that rich perfume of her breath she blasted the very air. Her love would have been poison — her embrace death. Is not this a marvellous tale?” (Hawthorne, “Rappaccini’s Daughter” 1346).

Indeed it may be a marvelous tale, but that is not why Baglioni has told it. The tale has been deliberately chosen to define Beatrice in certain terms; in short, it answers Giovanni’s questions about the young woman without asking him to go to the source. In *La Nouvelle Beatrice*, Carol Marie Bensick notes, “The minute Baglioni utters the word *poisonous*, all Giovanni’s dim fears become substantiated in the image of Beatrice” (14).
Suddenly, her body is exclusively a symbol of poison and no longer a recognizable representation of femininity. Giovanni either cannot recognize, or is in denial about, the implicit connection between the two.

As we saw in “The Birth-Mark,” the female body is inherently threatening to the men who do not understand it. Metaphorically, we may even call it poisonous, for such men so wholly fear contact with it. While we may be inclined to call the body’s comparison to poison superficial, or even a gross overstatement, we have to recognize that such ideas, even in the nineteenth century may still have been prevalent in regard to menstruation. In the Zanger article previously mentioned, we learned that the menstruating woman was, to some degree, thought to bring a “blight upon growing things” (Zanger 369). Later in the article, in fact, there is a direct reference to a series of experiments done on the effects of menstruation on plant life. This, curiously, coincides perfectly with Beatrice’s unique powers, right down to the bouquet of roses which, apparently, when given to a menstruating woman “by the following day faded” (Zanger 369). As unscientific as we now see these experiments and views, we cannot help but wonder if that idea of the poisonous touch really did insinuate itself into the nineteenth-century psyche. It seems fair to say that in “Rappaccini’s Daughter” Hawthorne is taking further the themes he introduced in “The Birth-Mark.” Yet while Georgiana had but a tiny blemish to suggest her unfathomable sexuality, Beatrice has her entire body. As such, she must be carefully portrayed in those terms of the “poisonous woman.” The idea of her entire body as a symbol of that sexuality is undoubtedly overwhelming. Is it any wonder that Giovanni must frame her as “malevolent” despite the fact that her every action proves otherwise?
When Beatrice is “confirmed” to be poisonous, she is also confirmed to be female. Yet this is not the sweet femininity that Giovanni discerned in her in the past; it has suddenly metamorphosed into something monstrous. Giovanni fears contact, worrying that he too will become poisonous. He does not want to be implicated in her monstrosity; when he discovers that the venom is becoming “normal” to him, he reacts with disgust. He addresses Beatrice as a “poisonous thing,” and accuses her of making him “as hateful, as ugly, as loathsome and deadly a creature” as she (Hawthorne, “Rappaccini’s Daughter” 1350). In one sense, we could read this as his horror at being acclimated to the female sphere. He now belongs in Beatrice’s garden, he is on her level. This is an affront to his masculine sensibilities; he cannot accept Beatrice as a separate being outside of himself. Still, even if we are unsure of how to read it, we cannot deny that the prospect of being equal to Beatrice, to being her poisonous mate, is wholly repugnant to him. Perhaps it is enough to note that “at some level Giovanni fearfully equates adult female sexuality with some definite notion … of comprehensive moral and physical depravity” (Bensick 24).

Giovanni constantly confounds sexual maturity and toxicity, and he does not permit Beatrice to retain her innocence as long as she is poisonous, or as long as she is womanly. Beatrice can either be his childlike companion—sweet, innocent, and harmless—or his toxic adversary—sexually imposing, guilty, and of a venomous constitution. When she inspires romantic feelings in him, she triggers a fearful response, and Giovanni sees her as monstrous. His most hateful outburst to her, in fact, occurs when the two appear destined to spend the rest of their lives together, contaminated and suitable only for one another (Hawthorne, “Rappaccini’s Daughter” 1350). Giovanni cannot grasp that
Beatrice can be at once desirable—that is, poisonous—and virtuous. He, like Aylmer, cannot reconcile the outer self with the inner self. If Beatrice is a poisonous woman, then she cannot be good; those “dreadful peculiarities” in her physical being cannot exist “without some corresponding monstrosity of soul” (1348). Giovanni’s imagination, so adept at creating fantasies of female treachery, cannot look beyond the body to behold the soul. Even when Beatrice maintains that “though my body be nourished with poison, my spirit is God’s creature, and craves love as its daily food,” Giovanni cannot be persuaded to accept her as she is (1350). He remains convinced that “the physical directly implies the moral” (Bensick 48). Thus, Beatrice’s body must match her soul; she must be given the antidote to her poisonous being. Giovanni is asking for no less than a complete transformation of Beatrice’s bodily composition.

In the end, rejecting Beatrice’s love and destroying her in his efforts to perfect her, Giovanni is no doubt the story’s greatest villain. With her dying breath, Beatrice insinuates that from the start Giovanni has been far more poisonous than she (Hawthorne, “Rappaccini’s Daughter” 1352). Although this may be her only triumph, it is a significant one. She shows that male egotism is far more insidiously evil than any malevolence ascribed to women. Furthermore, she suggests that there is a poison in the system (that is, of patriarchal society) rather than in her system. While she may be the one unfairly reduced to her poisonousness, she takes solace in knowing that her nature is benevolent. When we readers strip away the stories of the “poisonous woman,” we find, in the end, just a woman.
CHAPTER 4: THE SCARLET LETTER

In *The Scarlet Letter*, his first major novel, Nathaniel Hawthorne brings together various threads from his short stories “The Birth-Mark” and “Rappaccini’s Daughter” and elaborates on them to show how the symbolic body can function as a scapegoat for all of society. Although in “The Birth-Mark” and “Rappaccini’s Daughter” Hawthorne’s female protagonists were isolated from society and their interactions limited to a small, contained cast of characters, in *The Scarlet Letter* Hester Prynne is intimately connected to society, even when she is cast out from it. Hester’s stigmatization comes not from a husband, a would-be suitor, or a father, but from a whole town affirming its moral superiority against her as a woman who has transgressed its laws. As in “The Birth-Mark” and “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” in this novel it is Hester’s femininity that defines her difference, and thus her sin, but in *The Scarlet Letter* hers is not femininity in the abstract. Whereas Aylmer and Giovanni fear the potential sexual power of Georgiana and Beatrice, the citizens of Boston are confronted with the reality of Hester’s sexuality in the form of her daughter, Pearl. Indeed, as Brenda Wineapple observes, because *The Scarlet Letter* is the first of Hawthorne’s stories to actually produce a child, it demonstrably removes sexuality from the realm of speculation (174-5).

Hester fulfills a role that asserts, rather than suggests, her womanhood, which means that her body cannot be figured as a monstrous threat, but, instead, as a problematic reality. Since this aspect of her womanhood could not be suppressed before her crime took place, Hester must be transformed into the outcast, and her story into a cautionary tale. She is disqualified from full social acceptance, yet curiously integral to
the functioning of society (Pryse 25). In short, she is not the personal threat so feared by men like Aylmer and Giovanni as the woman who both attracts and repels as a love object, but she is rather society’s scapegoat, someone who helps to define the community by being what it is not. Put another way, she possesses, as Marjorie Pryse phrases it, the townspeople’s “birthmark,” which “must be revealed, in an attempt to erase it in themselves” (23).

If Hester is the embodiment of her transgression, then she contains the sin, and it does not extend to others in her community. Thus Hester Prynne, unlike the Hawthorne women who came before her, is not someone who can be cured or perfected; she can only serve as a warning to those who may be tempted to follow her down her sinful path, as a marker who defines the boundary between what is socially acceptable and what is not. In some ways, this may in fact be Hester’s salvation, for as a marker she is largely free from the interference of those who pretend interest in her well-being. The question is not whether she can be “fixed,” but whether her suffering is just and her isolation an effective barrier against her contamination of others. Because of this, she is, ironically, allowed to develop as a person—and, most significantly, as an artist. Her symbol does not represent the part of her that must be changed or obliterated; instead, her symbol is “her passport into regions where other women dared not tread” (Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter 1459).

Still, it is not simply Hester’s situation that separates her from her more passive predecessors: it is also her strength of character, the way in which she accepts her branding without allowing it to define her personal conception of herself. Perhaps by virtue of her story extending to novel-length, Hester is allowed to develop as a more proactive character than either Georgiana or Beatrice. She is not merely absorbing the
public’s interpretation of her, but creating her own narrative. Thus, the story of Hester Prynne is not one of victimization and untimely death, but of empowerment and continued living. That is, *The Scarlet Letter* does not chronicle the downfall of its heroine; rather, it celebrates her capacity to adapt, to endure, and even to grow. A closer look at the plot of the novel reveals the many instances in which Hester must *act*—for her sake, and for the sake of her child—and does so. Although her public branding visibly changes her, she does not allow it to rewrite her selfhood. Instead, she is the one who participates in the act of rewriting. She takes up her needle not only as a means of financial support, but as a means of artistic expression.

When the novel begins, Hester Prynne—having engaged in an adulterous affair that produced a child, and refusing to name the father—is sentenced to wear the uppercase letter A (for adultery) on her breast. She is displayed on a scaffold so that all of society can witness her shame; then, she retires with her daughter Pearl to a cottage on the outskirts of the town. In her isolation Hester draws strength from her daughter; she cherishes the child, even though Pearl is the proof of her sin, the scarlet letter in another form. She supports herself and Pearl through her skillful needlework, and she abandons all hope of romantic love. Over time, she is recognized not simply as a fallen woman, but as a talented artist who serves her community. Still, this comes at the cost of her passion, her womanhood—those characteristics that made her appear so incompatible with patriarchy. She becomes less outwardly subversive, yet she is still capable of secretly subversive acts.

During a forest rendezvous with the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale, Pearl’s undisclosed father, Hester and her former lover plan to escape from their restricted lives
in New England and remove together to Europe, where the three will live as a family. There, Hester will cast off the burdensome scarlet letter, and Dimmesdale will finally be free of the guilt that he feels whenever he portrays himself as a pious man to his parishioners. Of course, the two are fated to remain in Boston. Hester’s vengeful husband, who returned under the pseudonym Roger Chillingworth on the day of her public shaming, has been plotting to destroy Dimmesdale since the moment he suspected the man’s role in Hester’s infidelity. Chillingworth books passage on the same ship that was to take Hester and Dimmesdale away to Europe. At this point, it is clear that the only possibility of freedom lies in confession, and in the acceptance of a public punishment. Dimmesdale dies on the scaffold, revealing in his last moments his shared responsibility for Hester’s adultery. Hester leaves Boston only to return some years later and take up the scarlet letter again. Although the letter has ceased to be a stigma, it nonetheless remains an integral part of Hester’s identity; even with its signification for both Hester and the community changed over time, the letter has still left an indelible mark on her.

While *The Scarlet Letter* no doubt has many tragic elements, it is, above all, the story of a woman who bears harsh punishment with strength and fortitude. Though she is severely judged, summarily ostracized, and treated as a symbol of sin instead of as a person, she nevertheless finds a self-worth that enables her not to perish but to persevere. She offers a fascinating counterweight to society’s manifestation of strength; while “the community is strong through law and might,” Hester is strong through character (Baym, *The Scarlet Letter: A Reading* 12). Indeed, she cannot escape her punishment, by virtue of the community’s “law and might,” but this does not mean that she must succumb to it. Hester is not like Georgiana or Beatrice, who are desperate to please and submit to any ill
treatment in the hope of eventual acceptance. Knowing that her crime—and punishment—signifies a break with the community anyway, and that she will never again be accepted on its terms (a lesson Georgiana and Beatrice do not learn), Hester instead bears her punishment on her own terms. As Nina Baym explains in *The Scarlet Letter: A Reading*, “She has no choice but to accept her punishment, but will do so as if by her own free will” (12). While this initially makes her seem contrary and proud (after all, the letter is embroidered, by Hester’s own hand, to be fantastically ornate in a way that does not befit a somber punishment), her later actions serve to cast her strength of character in a more favorable light. In fact, she is eventually recognized more for her virtues than for her sin.

Hester’s ultimate triumph comes in the public reversal of the scarlet letter’s meaning. What was once the mark of adultery now becomes the symbol of Hester’s own version of authority. As the narrator explains, the letter becomes something to be “looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too” (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* 1492). No doubt authority, which, significantly, begins with the letter A, is one of the central themes of the text and the foundation upon which patriarchy is based. While in “The Birth-Mark” and “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” authority remains in the hands of men—and the women, powerless against this system, must accept whatever fate these men choose for them—in *The Scarlet Letter*, authority is more fluid than it at first seems. Although the novel begins with a “throng of bearded men,” it ends with Hester and her complicated scarlet letter (1377). Indeed, this letter—and the woman who bears it—takes on a special significance in the community, invoking its own sort of power in spite of its initially negative connotations. Even as it elevates Hester to a position of disrepute, it
simultaneously makes her a visible figure in society. As her good deeds earn her a more favorable reputation, her sin not forgotten but also not belabored, Hester becomes a valued member of the community.

It is interesting that Hester should feature so centrally in community life when she has, in effect, been cast out from it. Yet the reader is given numerous examples of the ways in which society makes use of her handiwork: “Her needle-work was seen on the ruff of the Governor; military men wore it on their scarfs, and the minister on his band; it decked the baby’s little cap; it was shut up, to be mildewed and moulder away, in the coffins of the dead” (Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter 1396). Hester Prynne’s “mark,” as it were, can be seen everywhere—except for “the white veil which was to cover the pure blushes of a bride” (1397). Certainly, this last part reveals that there remains something taboo about her, something that is not consistent with the Puritan way of life.

Nonetheless, Hester is identified with Puritan authority figures, achieving, through them, a prominence unprecedented for someone of such insignificant standing. This is particularly important to consider in light of Baym’s observation on the key figures in the text. She writes, “Since the Puritans revere authority, their authorities really are their representatives; and this is why the only developed Puritan characters in The Scarlet Letter are the rulers of church and state” (The Scarlet Letter: A Reading 53).

While Baym’s point is valid, it immediately calls attention to the exception to this rule: Hester Prynne. The juxtaposition of Hester to these rulers of church and state is interesting for a few reasons. For one, it suggests that Hester has achieved a role in society that, while based on her notoriety, is in some ways just as important as the roles fulfilled by the rulers; for another, it suggests that Hester also serves as a sort of
representative for her Puritan community, regardless of whether her community recognizes and accepts her in this role. The fact that the average members of society are anonymous while Hester is not emphasizes the extraordinary space she occupies in that society. To be fair, they are the ones who have made her extraordinary by singling her out as the scapegoat, the marked woman; yet Hester does not function in this role for the entire novel, which is what truly makes her more than just the representation of her symbol. She soon exhibits new dimensions of her character, and furthermore is recognized for them. Her own actions both help to change the public’s opinion of what her letter stands for and affirm her value as a person, rather than as a static symbol.

Of course, the very point of the scarlet letter, which Hester so effectively proves, is that it does not actually stand for anything at all. Or rather, it can stand for many different things, depending on who is interpreting it. The letter A “does not uniquely represent anything except a sound,” thus allowing it to “take on any meaning required of it in the formation of words” (Lloyd Smith 1). In essence, the letter A is a surprisingly ambiguous choice for a Puritan community, for it invites the possibility of misinterpretation regarding the many words the letter may represent. This is most explicit in the appearance of the celestial A on the night of Governor Winthrop’s death: what Dimmesdale reads as a mark of his own guilt broadcast in the night sky is later interpreted by the rest of the townspeople, who had also seen the light, as an A for angel in acknowledgment of the governor’s passing.

Throughout the novel, Hawthorne explores a number of variations on the theme of marking and symbolization, examining both the myriad forms in which the scarlet letter can appear and the different persons it can affect. He even introduces the novel with
a lengthy section on his experiences while working in a custom house, during which time he professes to have discovered the scarlet letter and tried it on himself. Hawthorne relates that he 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” (The Scarlet Letter 1369). Charles Feidelson, Jr. argues that this scene is, in fact, replayed over the course of the novel through the lens of multiple characters. He writes, “Every character, in effect, re-enacts the ‘Custom House’ scene in which Hawthorne himself contemplated the letter, so that the entire ‘romance’ becomes a kind of exposition of the nature of symbolic perception. Hawthorne’s subject is not only the meaning of adultery but also meaning in general; not only what the focal symbol means but also how it gains significance” (10).

Of course, the scarlet letter is primarily the symbol worn upon Hester Prynne’s chest as the society-sanctioned sign of her adultery. Yet it is also mirrored in the very body of Pearl, the living consequence of Hester’s sin. Interestingly, it is Hester herself who develops the connection between Pearl and the letter, going so far as to dress Pearl in scarlet to match the letter, and Pearl, in return, is the one who insists that Hester continue to wear her emblem, even when no one else is around. Finally, the letter appears in some form on Arthur Dimmesdale’s exposed chest at the end of the novel, when, after delivering his Election Day sermon, he reveals his role in Hester’s sin and Pearl’s existence. And then, of course, we may assume that, “if truth were everywhere to be shown, a scarlet letter would blaze forth on many a bosom besides Hester Prynne’s” (The Scarlet Letter 1399). Indeed, the title of the novel may be something of a misnomer, for in fact there are numerous scarlet letters repeated throughout the story; the exponential
growth of scarlet letters may itself be yet another symbol, perhaps suggesting how
difficult it is to pin down meaning in an ever-evolving society.

I

In order to understand how the meaning of the scarlet letter differs according to its
bearer, we must take a closer look at the three central characters who, while bearing the
letter, are each symbolized by it in their own unique ways. In doing so, we may gain
further insight into the difference between the male body as symbol and the female body
as symbol. Furthermore, we may glean how Hester Prynne, though outwardly
symbolized, manages to transcend her scarlet letter, while Dimmesdale, only inwardly
symbolized, is ultimately destroyed by his.

There is no doubt that the first scarlet letter, the intended version of the letter, is
the one that Hester wears upon her breast. We are introduced to this letter in the second
chapter of the novel, when Hester first emerges from the prison:

On the breast of her gown, in fine red cloth, surrounded with an elaborate
embroidery and fantastic flourishes of gold thread, appeared the letter A. It
was so artistically done, and with so much fertility and gorgeous
luxuriance of fancy, that it had all the effect of a last and fitting decoration
to the apparel which she wore, and which was of a splendour in
accordance with the taste of the age, but greatly beyond what was allowed
by the sumptuary regulations of the colony.
(The Scarlet Letter 1380-1381).

This description immediately establishes two crucial facts about Hester: first, she is a
skilled artist, having turned her stigma into something beautiful, and second, somewhat
related to first fact, she is strong-willed person who defiantly goes against the regulations
of the colony. Hester knows that she now belongs outside of society—the letter itself announces as much—and so she does not have to bother with the conventions that usually bind individuals to the standards of their community. In important ways Hester has been granted unprecedented freedom, for although she may still be subjected to the cruelty and judgment of her Puritan neighbors, she is now freed of the necessity of being one of them. She no longer has to subscribe to the same beliefs that made a sinner and a symbol out of her, so that, as Nina Baym writes, Hester “takes herself as a law” (*The Scarlet Letter: A Reading* 64). This freedom suits Hester, for it serves to preserve her independent spirit with the result that the intended effect of the letter fails entirely to alter Hester’s character; as Baym sees it, by “turning her into a public symbol,” the letter “conceals her individuality and thus protects it” (*The Scarlet Letter: A Reading* 64).

Although Baym’s construction may seem like a contradictory statement, especially in light of my earlier argument that symbolization divests Hester of her individuality by imposing a fixed meaning on her character that precludes selfhood, it is completely logical. While Hester’s immediate situation plays a role in the nature of her symbolization—she is a symbol of sin on a large scale which is exploited by the community for political reasons—perhaps the most significant, discernible difference between the community’s power over her identity and Hester’s own lies in her artistic skill, which provides her the means to define herself. In the case of Georgiana and Beatrice, once subjectivity is shifted away from them, they permanently lose control of their stories. Hester, however, is able to maintain her hidden individuality because she has embroidered it, both physically and metaphorically, onto the letter. She is outwardly symbolized, which ensures that judging eyes will never regard her as anything other than
a living sign of adultery, yet through her art she possesses the freedom to be inwardly true to herself. Hester is an individual in the way few people in her society can be: having already fallen, she no longer needs to maintain a communally acceptable façade.

The difference between façade and reality plays a significant role in *The Scarlet Letter*, and it is worth noting that appearance is of paramount importance to the Puritans. First, the Puritans “are all alike and, taking themselves for the standard, see all difference and variety as unnatural, bad” (Baym, *The Scarlet Letter: A Reading* 53). Hester must wear the scarlet letter in the first place because she has transcended the boundaries of the average Puritan, and thus proven herself to be unnatural. Although the first symbol written onto Hester’s body is actually her pregnancy, her pregnancy is too impermanent: it cannot both stress her otherness and make an example out of her. Furthermore, her pregnancy has been written onto her by nature, not by the law. The Puritans must make their own mark on her in order to exercise their control over her; they must determine who she is (an adulteress), and where she belongs (in prison, on the scaffold, or outside of the boundary lines of local society), in order to ensure that Hester cannot blend in with the rest of society. The Puritans’ obligation to mark raises the question: “Is it the act, or the sign of the act, that matters?” (Baym, *The Scarlet Letter: A Reading* 14). If Hester looked like everyone else, then no one would know who was an adulteress and who was not; thus, conceivably, everyone could be an adulteress. By enforcing strong standards for appearance, the Puritans maintain the semblance of order; by maintaining an outward semblance of order, they perpetuate their belief that people are “all exterior, and as such there is nothing in them that is not appropriately subject to the state” (Baym, *The Scarlet Letter: A Reading* 55). As we quickly discover in the story, this is far from the case.
Hester’s symbol is also interesting for another reason, one directly related to its particular appearance. The letter, like the crimson hand mentioned earlier, can be interpreted to represent not only sexuality, but also women’s writing. Indeed, Georgiana’s hand-shaped birthmark is notably similar to the scarlet letter in two ways: first, they are both shades on the same red spectrum; second, they both invoke similar symbols of language: the A being the first letter of the alphabet, and the hand suggesting the act of writing. Yet while they both seem to suggest a writing on the body that has particular feminine significance, their origins are very different. Georgiana’s crimson hand has always been a part of her, a mark upon her pure white face that hints at an unknown side to her. By contrast, Hester’s scarlet letter has been placed on her breast by law. Thus, the women’s very different fates may be attributed to the manner in which each responds to her symbol. Perhaps the key difference is that Georgiana, by rejecting her birthmark, rejects her own writing and replaces it with her husband’s rewriting; in essence, she rejects an essential part of herself. Hester, on the other hand, accepts the scarlet letter only on her own terms and designs the mark with her own needle. In effect, Hester transforms the scarlet letter into the symbol of women’s writing; she channels active acceptance of one’s situation, while Georgiana succumbs to passive rejection.

II

Of course, Hester is not the only character to bear a scarlet letter on her breast, nor is she the only one to be punished for her sin. Yet Hester’s very public punishment is contrasted with one that exists largely in secret. Arthur Dimmesdale, as we readers know
long before his shocking revelation on Election Day, is Pearl’s secret father and Hester’s partner in her crime. As he is a public figure (significantly, a minister) and bases his entire self-worth on public opinion, he neither acknowledges his part in Hester’s public sin nor accepts the community’s punishment for it. Dimmesdale is a strange, complicated character, perhaps because he is so devoted to that Puritan ideal of preserving an outward appearance of goodness. But his outward appearance is a sham, a sham that belies an inner torment.

Dimmesdale is the perfect foil to Hester because they are opposites in so many ways: he is a public figure, while she has been relegated to the outer limits of the town; he depends upon and seeks society’s approval, while Hester does not care about such approval and is met with none. Still, the most interesting contrast between the two is Hester’s outward acceptance of her sin and punishment, and Dimmesdale inner guilt over not being able to admit publicly to either his actions or his personal responsibility toward Hester and their child. Readers are ultimately led to believe that by facing her fate Hester is freer than Dimmesdale, while he, by evading his responsibility and fate, will never know inner peace, not even in death. Baym considers this further, noting that their positions are actually the inverse of one another: “While on the outside Hester is a branded, shamed woman, on the inside she is independent and free. Dimmesdale, externally independent and free, is internally branded and shamed” (The Scarlet Letter: A Reading 68).

Thus, when Dimmesdale is revealed to bear the mark of the scarlet letter, we understand that his letter is entirely different from Hester’s. As Hester has grown, so too has the definition, or definitions, of her letter; Dimmesdale, by contrast, has let the mark
fester and gnaw ever-deeper into his heart. His definition is a single one, and it speaks directly to the guilt he feels over not confessing his own sin. Curiously, while Dimmesdale escapes being publicly branded, he is ultimately the one who suffers most severely. Thus, although in contrast to Hester he appears to have control over the way his body is marked, that superficial control he seems to possess does not prevent his soul from being terribly affected by his guilt. Perhaps the main difference between Hester and Dimmesdale, then, is that she is portrayed as strong, while he is shown to be weak. Dimmesdale becomes defined by his scarlet letter not because society insists upon it, but because he has internalized society’s expectations in place of his own.

As the novel makes clear, neither Hester nor Dimmesdale could escape being marked with the scarlet letter. Their sin, whether publicly revealed as in Hester’s case or privately hidden as in Dimmesdale’s, demanded that they be marked, and as they had chosen that sin, so had they in some sense accepted the letter. While the product of their sin, their daughter Pearl, played no part in their downfall, she is nonetheless implicated in it as well. Indeed, Pearl may be considered the living embodiment of the scarlet letter, for the same sin led to their existence.

III

Pearl is an interesting character, for she fulfills a number of symbolic roles. Unfortunately, on some level she is never fully able to be a person in her own right. As Allan Gardner Lloyd Smith argues in *Eve Tempted*, Pearl “has to be redeemed in the course of the novel”; that is, she needs to be humanized (14). Pearl’s behavior is often
described as being elf-like and otherworldly; indeed, she does not appear to be like other children, perhaps because she has only ever known the company of her mother. Pearl has grown up with the scarlet letter, and perhaps the relationship between the two is somewhat akin to Beatrice’s with the purple flower in her garden: they have been raised as sisters. At one point, Pearl is even described as a “lovely and immortal flower,” whose innocent life has sprung “out of the rank luxuriance of a guilty passion,” so she may share more than a passing resemblance to Beatrice (Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter 1399). They are both certainly isolated enough, welcome in nature but shunned by society. One could even argue, as Chester E. Eisinger does in “Pearl and the Puritan Heritage,” that Pearl is virtually synonymous with nature; she belongs to it, and as is nature, Pearl is also untamed. Eisinger argues that “Pearl is wild because she is a child of nature. Nature is wild, untrammeled, because man cannot put his stamp upon it and regulate it” (327). The fact that man cannot put his stamp (or mark) upon nature is crucial, for it shows that Pearl exists outside of the social order that has condemned her mother. Likewise, she cannot be controlled by the oppressive laws that would serve to constrict either her individuality or her freedom. Nonetheless, this also means that she is closed off from greater development, for while nature is “never subjugated by human law,” it is also not “illumined by higher truth” (Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter 1461). Thus, Pearl represents an ideal that can never be. To remain in her natural state is to forfeit a part of her personhood, and thus to remain a symbol.

Both Hester’s and the scarlet letter’s influence on Pearl define the child in her early life. In turn, Pearl serves as a constant reminder to Hester not only of the significance of the scarlet letter, but also of Hester’s own emotions, particularly those
from the most difficult times in her life. Discussing the theory of the maternally-marked child, Philip K. Wilson writes: “An age-old belief, which persists in many cultures, alleges that a pregnant woman’s imagination, frights, or longings can be transferred to her unborn child, thereby imprinting the child with characteristic marks or deformities” (1-2). Although Pearl is not actually deformed, she certainly has been “marked” or inscribed upon in some way by the trials of her mother. This is connected to, though not necessarily the same as, Pearl’s relation to the scarlet letter. Both present Pearl as the messenger, reminding her mother of her history whenever she thinks she can escape it. Whenever Hester believes she might cast off the scarlet letter and start anew, Pearl reminds her that she cannot be her mother without the letter, for “[s]hould Hester repudiate the letter, she will repudiate Pearl” (Baym, *The Scarlet Letter: A Reading* 57).

**IV**

Hester’s letter is a part of her, regardless of whether she is wearing it; she has made it so. She has embroidered it to be beautiful and distinctive, and with that she has inscribed her own meaning into it. Baym and Lloyd Smith both consider the multiplicity of meanings the scarlet letter holds, particularly in what the A may signify. Certainly, every reader knows that it is intended to stand for “Adultery,” but, by the end of the novel, this is hardly the letter’s dominant point of reference. Far more likely is that the A stands for “Artist,” as it is Hester’s artistic manipulations of the symbol that create a new definition for it and for her. So, too, might the A stand for “Author,” or “Act,” or even “Arthur,” perhaps, thus slyly naming the father without actually uttering a word (Baym,
The Scarlet Letter: A Reading 88). We might also consider whether the “A” stands for “American.” If we believe that it may, then we must wonder whether Hester represents a new type of American or whether she is already possesses the quintessential American character.

Sylvia Söderlind suggests that “the public branding of the subject’s body by the law may actually lead through the individual conscience to a new selfhood, which in turn may help transform the collective imagination” (69). Indeed, this seems to be the prevailing interpretation of The Scarlet Letter. Because of her public branding Hester becomes an “agent of social change” (Baym, The Scarlet Letter: A Reading 91). After being marked, she works hard to alter public opinion of herself and of the letter and eventually encourages the community to accept a new reading of both. Hester’s power to change society makes her both an emerging American hero and the rarest of Hawthorne heroines: a woman who breaks free of her symbolization. She accomplishes this feat by resisting any interpretation that reduces her to a lesser version of herself. Indeed, all of Hester’s designations—Artist, American, Able, perhaps even Adulteress—constitute her character, her identity; therefore, only by accepting a complete picture, a composite of every definition, can she reclaim her subjectivity.
CONCLUSION

In “The Birth-Mark,” “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” and The Scarlet Letter, Nathaniel Hawthorne offers three different versions of the marked woman, showing in each story the various ways that men in authority attempt to control the female body. While in the first two of these texts, subjugation and the loss of an individual perspective occur, in The Scarlet Letter such control is rejected, and the artist figure is born in the character of the protagonist. These texts show how female individuality can be maintained only when one embraces the role of the outsider. That is, the female protagonist endures only when she looks beyond the dominant male perspective and develops her own. By doing so, as in the case of Hester Prynne, she claims her own place and defends her own existence. She assumes the role of authority—and of author—thus imbuing her “mark” with a meaning all her own.
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