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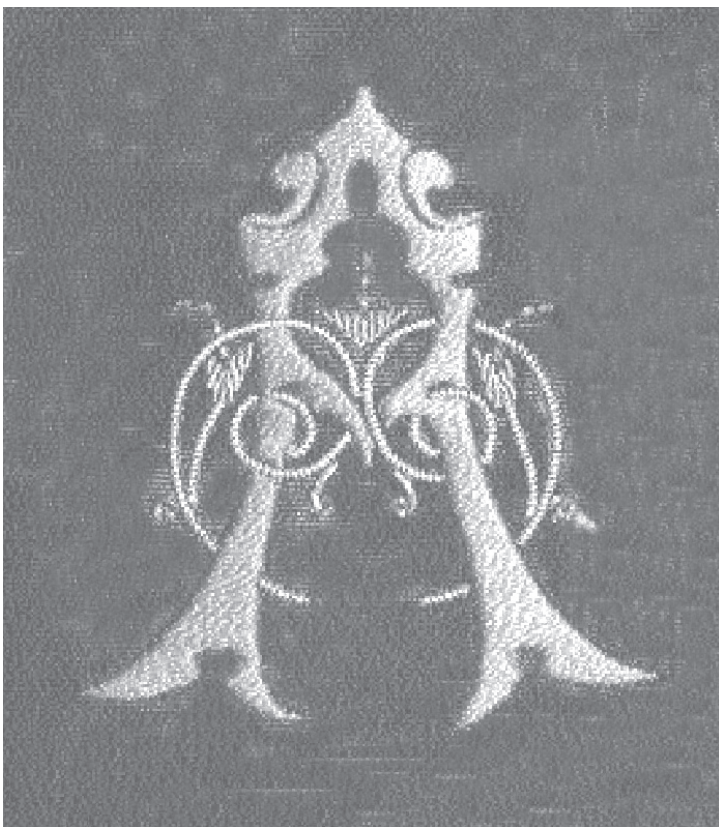
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# The Scarlet Lever: Hester's Civil Disobedience

MICHAEL PRINGLE

The A on Hester Prynne's breast both demands and defies interpretation. That "SCARLET LETTER, so fantastically embroidered. . . had the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and inclosing her in a sphere by herself."<sup>1</sup> Exactly what her extraordinary "relations" to the community are, and how the A functions as social symbol, punishment, and act of rebellion, are questions that grow more complex as the story progresses. Despite this complexity, critical commentary on *The Scarlet Letter* frequently privileges one theoretical position over another. Of particular concern in this discussion, deconstructionists and semioticians of the 1980s tended to give short-shrift to political aspects of the power struggle, while subsequent New Historical readings have rarely done justice to the intricacies of signification. The A, however, clearly operates in more than one arena; the focal point of the novel, it is—among other things—text and penalty, public brand and private albatross, obvious symbol and mystic rune, badge of shame and emblem of pride. Both Derridean possibilities of signification and Foucauldian notions of power relations are certainly useful for interpreting the struggle over the A; indeed, the complicated push and pull between the two comes sharply into focus when we view Hawthorne's novel through the lens of Thoreau's contemporaneous model of symbolic political action in "Resistance to Civil Government."

As many readers have noted, *The Scarlet Letter* foregrounds



*From the inside cover to the first edition of Nathaniel Hawthorne's **Scarlet Letter: A Romance** (Boston: Ticknor, Reed, and Fields, 1850).  
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the signifying process, and while this would seem to invite deconstructionist glosses, such glosses raise a problem of circular logic in a text that foregrounds indeterminacies in signification. One way around this problem is to claim Hawthorne as a deconstructionist—as does Ralph Flores, who sees the novel as an “allegory of an allegory” in which the *A* is endlessly re-allegorized and the symbol’s meaning is endlessly deferred.<sup>2</sup> While there is much in the text to support such a reading, it is not fully adequate to understanding the function of the *A* in the novel. Hawthorne’s Puritans speak through the “godly magistrates” with an unquestioning dependence on moral authority; they are a people for “whom religion and law [are] almost identical” (54, 50). Where political power is linked to God and religion is the center around which the community is structured, there cannot be any casual questioning of the official decree that brands Hester an adulteress. The very core of the Puritan experiment depends on the ability to fix the play of interpretation through access to grace, and hence to God. If the *A* Hester wears begins to signify contrary to what the magistrates have publicly determined, then that shift in meaning constitutes a loss of control and poses a serious threat to the entire structure’s grounding.

The beginning of this “ungrounding” is inherent in Dimmesdale’s private fall from grace and is later strengthened by Hester’s public actions. While at first the magistrates seem to have the power to fix the meaning of the *A* within narrow boundaries, those boundaries expand as the narrative unfolds. Admittedly, the nature of the sign as a sign offers Hester an inherent instability she can exploit; however, she must first find the power to *act* as an individual against a seemingly monolithic Puritan society if she is to resist the brand of “Adulteress.” The *A* isolates Hester, but hardly equips her with the power to resist; however, its indeterminacy enables her to exploit a weakness in the punitive, politically imposed emblem her community uses to discipline her. Indeed, the strategy she employs to gain political power parallels Thoreau’s model of civil disobedience, where action itself becomes symbolic and, conversely, the symbol can become a form of action. If the symbolic *A* can be used to exert pressure on Hester, then it can also, to

borrow Thoreau's figure, be "a counter friction to stop [or slow] the machine."<sup>3</sup> The metaphor of a lever implies a large imbalance in force at the different ends, which pertains in the novel: "The unhappy culprit sustained herself as best a woman might, under the heavy weight of a thousand unrelenting eyes, all fastened upon her, and concentrated at her bosom. It was almost intolerable to be borne" (56). Yet, if the symbol is the lever, then signification is the fulcrum, even though it proves a very slippery site from which to pry.



As Derrida notes, part of "the structurality of structure" is that it necessarily posits a center: "The function of this center [is] not only to orient, balance and organize the structure—one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganized structure—but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure [will] limit what we might call the *freeplay* of the structure."<sup>4</sup> The desire for closure is closely linked to repression in Derrida's model of how language functions in *Of Grammatology*: the closure of semantic play is of prime concern to those invested in a system. While Derrida avoids directly discussing the nature of political power in this text, it is implicated in the establishment and guardianship of a proposed center: even as it offers a guarantee of meaning, it is an instrument of repression. Basic to Derrida's position here is that the very invocation of this "center" to guarantee meaning (through access to some proposed transcendental signifier for ordering all signifieds) risks putting that seemingly fixed center back into play and thus raises the possibility of rupture.<sup>5</sup> This looming possibility runs through *The Scarlet Letter*: when Arthur Dimmesdale attempts to take the A from Hester in the final scaffold scene, the ephemeral nature of the center is ultimately exposed. Rupture can produce a crisis of emptiness, where the center is shown to be nonexistent, and therefore must be refixed, or supplemented (replaced), in some altered form. The A on Hester's chest obviously poses a threat to her (in the form of repression) and, less obviously, to the community (in the risk of rupture). To stop play and fix a center requires power, even violence, as the

famous opening scene of *The Scarlet Letter* clearly shows when the Puritan magistrates demand that Hester name Pearl's father.

Michael Gilmore recognizes in Hester a thinker who resembles Henry David Thoreau and suggests "Thoreau may well have been in [Hawthorne's] mind when he wrote *The Scarlet Letter*."<sup>6</sup> G. Thomas Courser convincingly argues that Thoreau influenced "The Old Manse" (the prefatory sketch to *Mosses from an Old Manse*, 1846) and shows that Hawthorne was in close contact with Thoreau and his ideas in the period leading to the composition of *The Scarlet Letter*, as does Buford Jones.<sup>7</sup> "Twice, during the winter of 1848–1849," for example, Hawthorne "arranged for Thoreau to lecture, offering to put the young man up at his Mall Street house."<sup>8</sup> "Resistance to Civil Government" (or "Civil Disobedience") was first published in 1849, one year before *The Scarlet Letter*, in "Article X" of *Aesthetic Papers*; Hawthorne's "Main Street" appeared in "Article VIII" of the same publication, which was edited by his sister-in-law, Elizabeth Peabody. Given this suggestive proximity, Hawthorne's deepest explorations of the boundaries of society and the powers of individualism—particularly the portrayal of Hester Prynne's resistance—need to be read in dialogue with Thoreau's essay.

As Thoreau recognizes, to "unground" the center one questions requires some access to the system itself: the call to civil disobedience in "Resistance" offers a model for the entangled individual to exert a form of power back against the "machinery" of government.

If the injustice is part of the necessary friction of the machine of government, let it go, let it go: perchance it will wear smooth,—certainly the machine will wear out. If the injustice has a spring, or a pulley, or a rope, or a crank, exclusively for itself, then perhaps you may consider whether the remedy will not be worse than the evil; but if it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine. ("RCG," 73–74)

How deliberate was Hester's decision to break the law in the first place is left to the reader's imagination, but in the marketplace she openly defies authority, her husband, and her lover by refusing to implicate Dimmesdale in return for proffered clemency. Furthermore, she frames the *A* as beyond their control: "Never! . . . It is too deeply branded. Ye cannot take it off. And would that I might endure his agony, as well as mine!" (68). Dimmesdale interprets her refusal to name him as the "generosity of a woman's heart," and she does seem more generous than he deserves. Is this honor among thieves, or is it, in Thoreau's terms, a refusal to "be the agent of injustice to another"? The portrait of Hester that emerges from *The Scarlet Letter* indicates that she finds the imposition of the *A* and the pillory wrong and is strong enough to do what she believes is right. Hester refuses to implicate Arthur even though he is proof that the magistrates do not have access to the font of moral authority—the "thing itself"—implied by the sentence they impose. She alone among the listeners knows this, and the knowledge cannot help but strengthen her sense of being wronged. Arthur Dimmesdale, whose civil power derives more from an interpretative than from a formal judicial role, is also keenly aware of the hollowness at the center, a perfidy he implores Hester to expose: "Take heed how thou deniest to him—who, perchance, hath not the courage to grasp it for himself—the bitter, but wholesome, cup that is now presented to thy lips!" (67).

To speak, to accuse, and to share the stigma under public pressure and scrutiny would, in part, validate the signification the magistrates put on the *A*. To name Arthur would save Hester from wearing the embroidered *A*, but it would help secure the title "Adulteress" as the magistrates define it. Hester chooses silence. The "godly magistrates" rest their authority upon the Divine, and Hester makes an important claim when she denies them the power to remove the *A* or to commute her sentence. Like the elaborate embroidery she has worked into the letter, this claim serves to disassociate the symbol from the magistrates and to link it more directly to herself. The power imbalance between the magistrates and the lone "Adulteress" is great, yet the possibility of rupture in the source of their power is appar-

ent to both Hester and Arthur. Initially, Hester is shamed and punished on the pillory, for she has neither sufficient power nor authority to force that rupture or take sole ownership of the A, and the community meets not only to fix the symbol upon her breast but to fix its signification as well. Hester lacks the power to avoid being branded, but by publicly accepting the punishment meant for two and personalizing the A she leaves no doubt that her own hand affixed the symbol. After being released from prison she takes to the "coarsest materials and the most sombre hue; with only that one ornament,—the scarlet letter,—which it was her doom to wear" (83). Hester effaces her beauty to highlight the A, and she keeps it prominently in the public eye.

The scarlet letter is the lever the community uses to apply pressure to Hester, but as Thoreau points out, such machinery works both ways. Hester takes up the A in earnest and begins to apply pressure back against the community, yet this struggle costs her dearly. Thoreau's rational and moral criteria for disobeying unjust laws implies a critical detachment from those who govern, a collective entity that "never intentionally confronts a man's sense, intellectual or moral, but only his body, his senses": "It is not armed with superior wit or honesty, but with superior physical strength" ("RCG," 80). Hawthorne's protagonist faces a seemingly more formidable "state" in the form of the "godly magistrates," for it is precisely the intellectual and moral senses that they claim as their source of power. Hester cannot stand aloof and utter Thoreau's confident challenge: "Let us see who is the strongest" ("RCG," 81). This is where the model of civil disobedience in *The Scarlet Letter* most differs from Thoreau's, for Hawthorne posits less potential for individual agency and a greater personal toll for being "a counter friction to stop the machine." Hester is in a grim battle, not of her choosing, from which she cannot emerge unscathed. As she leaves the prison, she muses on her future: "The accumulating days, and added years, would pile up their misery upon the heap of shame. Throughout them all, giving up her individuality, she would become the general symbol at which the preacher and moralist might point" (79). This is a stark contrast to Thoreau's jail release, where he immediately



joins a huckleberry party, and soon is "on one of our highest hills, two miles off; and then the State [is] nowhere to be seen" ("RCG," 84). Hester learns in the marketplace both the cost of becoming a symbol and the high price of resistance, but she will not give the magistrates the name they want, will not acknowledge their right to impose or remove the letter, and will not relinquish the symbol.



In a deconstructive, Derridean reading of the novel, the distribution of power between Hester and her community implicitly involves how much "play" will be present when the magistrates impose the signifier for "Adulteress" upon her. In Flores's reading, "play" is never repressed, and signification is endlessly deferred by an infinite number of allegorical substitutions. Allan Lloyd Smith agrees that the *A* is always in play but argues that Hawthorne provides moments of "true-speech—as in Hester's moving defense of her right to keep Pearl, and Dimmesdale's final ability to 'speak out the whole.'"<sup>9</sup> Smith's recourse to "true-speech" is at root non-Derridean, and he reads the overall novel in terms of Dimmesdale saving himself by escaping indeterminacy, by finding access to "true-speech" and "winning ultimate victory over the letter" (80). For Smith, play is a dangerous force aligned with the darker aspects of the novel, but for Monika Elbert slippage in signification is a positive event, which allows Hester to save herself. Elbert sees Hester (ultimately) operating from a position of Amazonian strength: "The emblem that she wears and invests with her own meaning . . . makes her untouched, untouchable, and strong."<sup>10</sup> Sacvan Bercovitch agrees that Hester takes up the struggle against, and in fact represents a radical threat to, the community, but in his view the "office of the letter" involves a process of socialization, where "Hester's 'badge of shame' becomes the 'mystic' token of integration."<sup>11</sup> For Elbert *The Scarlet Letter* is an affirmation of the maternal and of Hester's power, while for Bercovitch (in his first assessment of the novel) it is "a subtle and devastating critique of Hester's radicalism."<sup>12</sup> Both interpretations presuppose that the power of the signifier is crucial: in the former

Hester gains control over the signification of the *A*; in the latter she is finally defined by the community's imposed meaning. But the novel resists the assumption that power lies unilaterally with either Hester or the Puritan community. Foucault has also observed that power has no locus, but exists in complex relational webs: "One impoverishes the question of power if one poses it solely in terms of legislation and constitution, in terms solely of state and the state apparatus."<sup>13</sup> This is to say, not that an institution cannot wield power, but that power does not flow from any one source or in only one direction.

The balance of power within the novel at first seems to weigh overwhelmingly against Hester. If the *A* is a lever, she is clearly on the short end of the stick. Hawthorne's Puritan Boston is rigidly ordered into a solid community "as befit[s] a people amongst whom religion and law [are] almost identical" (50). While the reader sees some interpretive play in the crowd, to Hester it appears monolithic, and though the settlement is relatively new, the narrator describes it in terms that lend it an air of stolid permanence. The community that gathers to condemn Hester is "somber . . . grave . . . heavy . . . unrelenting . . . solemn . . . leaden": clearly, they are not to be taken lightly (56–57). The town's people present an apparent front of moral certainty around Hester as she emerges from her jail cell, and they make up the bulk of the audience as she is displayed on the pillory: "They were stern enough to look upon her death, had that been the sentence, without a murmur at its severity" (56). The clergy and magistrates (with the notable exception of the tremulous Arthur) claim to speak with absolute, transcendent authority: "Woman, transgress not beyond the limits of Heaven's mercy!" (68). Hester is displayed, with the *A* and Pearl, and a formidable force arrays itself around her to fix these conjoint symbols with a single, irrevocable signified.

Hester is separated from the community and exhibited as a criminal to ensure that all know the meaning of the *A* and to whom it applies. Yet even had Hester been among that "leaden" crowd, she would have stood out markedly by dint of her commanding beauty and assertive individualism: "The young woman was tall, with a figure of perfect elegance, on a large scale. She had dark and abundant hair, so glossy that it threw

off the sunshine with a gleam, and a face which, besides being beautiful from regularity of feature and richness of complexion, had the impressiveness belonging to a marked brow and deep black eyes" (53). Hester, presumably, is not ignorant of her own beauty; nor is the community: "Those who had before known her, and had expected to behold her dimmed . . . were astonished, and even startled, to perceive how her beauty shone out." Her pulchritude, her fatherless child, and her *A* work to set Hester apart from the community; yet, from the outset of this "spectacle of guilt and shame," she does some staging of her own, by the only means available to her (53, 56).

For this occasion Hester wears a rich gown that accentuates her beauty, just as she accentuates the red *A* with gold thread and elaborate needlework. "She hath good skill at her needle, that's certain," a female spectator exclaims; "but did ever a woman, before this brazen hussy, contrive such a way of showing it!" The letter, "so fantastically embroidered," defies expectation, and Hester's detailed illumination invites different interpretations (54, 53). The older women see her action as proud and disrespectful, while a young woman interprets it as a sign of burden and pain: "Do not let her hear you! Not a stitch in that embroidered letter, but she has felt it in her heart" (54). Even at the moment when the magistrates bring to bear the full weight of the community's legal, religious, and social power, Hester works her needle to create a small space for alternate interpretations. She personalizes the symbol and makes it even more conspicuous on her breast, confounding expectation by taking ownership of the letter rather than trying to distance herself from it. Hester plies her needle in an act of resistance against her punishment, although her powers of resistance are limited by the role assigned her in the community's drama of discipline.<sup>14</sup> "Knowing well her part, she ascended a flight of wooden steps, and was thus displayed to the surrounding multitude" (55–56).

Thoreau turns his act of civil disobedience into a public speech, first delivered at the Concord Lyceum on 26 January 1848, but Hester has no such avenue open to her. Thoreau's famous opening line, "I heartily accept the motto,—'That government is best which governs least,'" has its ironic opposite in

the edicts of the Puritan magistrates, who attempt to govern not only behavior but also individual souls. The only public voice allowed Hester is to answer the magistrate's question, to which she replies, "Never! . . . I will not speak!" (68). Elbert—who sees the conflict in this scene in terms of matriarchy and patriarchy—claims that "Hester's silence is victorious over her male judges."<sup>15</sup> Silence is a part of Hester's strategy for resistance, but the long battle is only begun in the marketplace, and it is difficult to infer victory for her from this encounter: "After her return to the prison, Hester Prynne was found to be in a state of nervous excitement that demanded constant watchfulness, lest she should perpetrate violence on herself, or do some half-frenzied mischief to the poor babe" (70). Hester's limited power lies in the secret of her lover's identity and in her symbolic actions. Her first action is to make the letter distinctly her own, and her second, when she is released from prison, to "besto[w] all her superfluous means in charity, on wretches less miserable than herself." The public plying of her needle is equally overdetermined and excessive: "By degrees, nor very slowly, her handiwork became what would now be termed the fashion" (83, 82).

In numerous critical studies that attend to Hester's artistry, the *A*, as well as Pearl, figure as extensions of her creativity. Hester uses her needle to draw further attention to the *A* as well as to Pearl through the latter's gorgeous clothing: "It was a remarkable attribute of this garb, and, indeed, of the child's whole appearance, that it irresistibly and inevitably reminded the beholder of the token which Hester Prynne was doomed to wear upon her bosom. It was the scarlet letter in another form; the scarlet letter endowed with life!" (102). When the magistrates stand Hester alone before the community and brand her with the *A*, denying her the power to turn away from the public gaze, her first impulse is to cover the symbol by hugging Pearl to her breast; "however, wisely judging that one token of her shame would but poorly serve to hide another, she took the baby on her arm, and, with a burning blush, and yet a haughty smile, and a glance that would not be abashed, looked around at her townspeople and neighbours" (52–53). Hester defiantly returns the gaze and quickly realizes that cowering

or hiding the emblem would tacitly grant the full signification the community attempts to attach to her letter (and her Pearl). Rather, she chooses to do everything in her power to display these "tokens" as prominently as possible, and throughout the novel characters attempt to read their significance.

Thanks in part to Pearl's visibility, she remains largely outside of the community, and as a signifier she becomes increasingly ungrounded, and thus open to interpretation and appropriation. Until Hester steps forward to claim her, Governor Wilson initially has no clue what to make of Pearl when he finds her in his mansion. Chillingworth, who knows more about Pearl than most, is also confused by her: "There is no law, nor reverence for authority, no regard for human ordinances or opinions, right or wrong, mixed up with that child's composition. . . . What, in Heaven's name, is she?" (134). Often even Hester isn't sure: "Child, what art thou?" (97). Pearl is the *A* rampant: cut loose from any "center" or transcendent signifier, she represents the sort of "play" that threatens to undermine the authority of those who would fix meaning. While Hester deliberately works to create a parallel between Pearl and the *A*, it proves to be a dangerous maneuver, for it excites the magistrates' interest in the child's "present depravity, and future destiny." As a result Hester nearly loses her Pearl, and only a thinly veiled threat to Dimmesdale saves her: "Speak thou for me! . . . thou knowest what is in my heart. . . . Look thou to it! I will not lose the child! Look to it!" (112, 113). Dimmesdale promptly looks to it, and Wilson puts Pearl's soul into his care.

Although Elbert claims that "Hester's maternity is ultimately her weapon against patriarchy," Hester actually miscalculates here and nearly loses her daughter.<sup>16</sup> She is too sure of her own power, "so conscious of her own right, that it seem[s] scarcely an unequal match between the public, on the one side, and a lonely woman, backed by the sympathies of nature, on the other" (101). The "public," however, still has the power to determine what is "right," and her voice falls on deaf ears. Through her leverage on Dimmesdale she is able to keep Pearl, but Hester's relative powerlessness before the magistrates is once again forcibly impressed on her. They will not hear of

any “right” but what they decree, and to resist them she must return to her silent strategy of ungrounding the letter. Even Pearl cannot draw glosses on the letter from her, for Hester does not have the power of voice to change its signification, and she would not have Pearl know of its “meaning.” When Pearl creates an imitation A of grasses and places it on her chest, she wonders “if mother will ask [her] what it means!” Pearl, herself an unreadable rune of both innocence and sin, comes before her mother “dancing, laughing, and pointing her finger to the ornament upon her bosom.” “‘My little Pearl,’” Hester says, “after a moment’s silence, ‘the green letter, and on thy childish bosom, has no purport. But dost thou know, my child, what this letter means which thy mother is doomed to wear?’” (178). Hester is unable here to determine how much the child actually understands about why she must wear the letter, but Pearl does accurately link it to a concealed cause: “It is for the same reason that the minister keeps his hand over his heart!” (179). Pearl’s response is typically both naïve and perceptive, but it reinforces the novel’s exploration of links between social action and meaning. Hester opposes the magistrates through limited action combined with passive resistance, and she uses both the letter and Pearl to create alternate possibilities for signification.

Hester creates friction, keeping her fantastical A in the public gaze, year after year, constantly forcing it back upon the community, forcing interpretation and reinterpretation. She acts, in the limited space allowed her, slowly building a public identity as an agent of mercy and kindness: “Such helpfulness was found in her,—so much power to do, and power to sympathize,—that many people refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification. They said that it meant Able; so strong was Hester Prynne with a woman’s strength” (161). The town begins to call her “our Hester,” but she is not *their* Hester; she is working to become her own Hester—and becomes less theirs with every reinterpretation of the A. In spite of these reinterpretations, the A never completely loses its original stigma, for those who praise her also remember the scene in the marketplace: “Then, it is true, the propensity of human nature to tell the very worst of itself, when embodied in the person of

another, would constrain them to whisper the black scandal of bygone years" (162–63). Nonetheless, Hester succeeds in opening up some play, and the signifier begins to invoke different signifieds: Adulteress, Able, Affection, Apostle, Angel, and so on. This ungrounding of the signifier represents a threat to the Puritan community—which has invoked a transcendent, divine center to fix the letter's tendency toward play—but it also represents a threat to Hester.

If we accept the premise that signification depends on limiting play—on protecting a "center" linked to power structures within a given society—then Hester's project threatens to cut her loose from the very powers that hold society together. When, after seven years, Chillingworth mentions that the magistrates are considering removing the letter, Hester again denies the community's power to apply or reclaim the A. "It lies not in the pleasure of the magistrates to take off this badge. . . . Were I worthy to be quit of it, it would fall away of its own nature, or be transformed into something that should speak a different purport" (169). Her distance from the community is metaphorically represented in chapter 16, "A Forest Walk." Like Young Goodman Brown's before her, Hester's journey into the woods offers an ambiguous mix of freedom and danger. The narrator is alert to the gender issues raised: "The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread. Shame, Despair, Solitude! These had been her teachers,—stern and wild ones,—and they had made her strong, but taught her much amiss" (199–200). In *The Politics* Aristotle claims: "The man who is isolated . . . is no part of the polis, and must therefore be either a beast or a god."<sup>17</sup> The portrait of isolation that Hawthorne paints in *The Scarlet Letter* is congruent with Aristotle's dictum, for as Hester wanders further (in thought and belief) from her community, she becomes more "wild." Ultimately, all that binds her to it is the letter and Dimmesdale, and when Dimmesdale agrees to escape with her, she decides to sever the final tie and throws the A into the brook. The decision to leave, take Arthur with her, and cast off the symbol shows Hester's remaining strength and her heroic qualities; beside her, Arthur seems like a tremulous wisp of a human being. However, for all her strength, Hester is neither

a beast nor a god, and she cannot safely sever the ties to community. Years of resistance have worn her down, and her life at the periphery of society has plunged her into a "dark labyrinth of mind," with "wild and ghastly scenery all around her, and a home and comfort nowhere" (166). In this novel there is no solid place to stand outside of society to criticize it, no condition of "sainted individualism," and when Hester casts off the last vestige of her community (even one she is deliberately undercutting), she is adrift. For Hawthorne, stepping outside of society is akin to decentering the self.



If we view Hester's resistance as civil disobedience, using the office of the A as a lever to exert "a counter friction to stop the machine," then we find in *The Scarlet Letter* an implicit criticism of Thoreau's positioning of the individual in relation to the slave-holding society of the era. Thoreau posits the state as a collection of autonomous individuals who must decide for themselves what is just and unjust, and he assumes a solid margin where a citizen dissenting from the dominant slavery-tolerating society may operate as a "free agent." While the model of dissent in *The Scarlet Letter* critiques such a concept of radical individualism, it does not necessarily critique radicalism or individualism per se. The view that people cannot separate themselves from their culture does not inevitably lead to the conclusion that they cannot resist societal pressures. It is also important to note that despite Hester's humbled and seemingly powerless position, it is not the most humble or powerless position imaginable to Hawthorne's or Thoreau's readers. The specter of slavery haunts *The Scarlet Letter*, most obviously in the figure of Hester on the scaffold in the marketplace, and in what Jean Fagan Yellin terms the novel's "obsessive concern with blacks and blackness."<sup>18</sup>

Teresa Goddu situates Hawthorne in a market economy permeated by the slave trade and links his customhouse duties to a commerce dependent on slavery: "Realigning Hawthorne's career through his edited works and situating him within a circum-Atlantic maritime/mercantile culture makes intelligible



how the slave trade structures Hawthorne's authorship, as well as his art." Goddu convincingly argues the pervasiveness of slavery in the New England market economy; however, her claim that "Pearl is not only figured as a commodity but also associated with the Caribbean" and that she "signifies slave as property" is less compelling.<sup>19</sup> The slave occupies the most helpless and alienated place in society, and even as Hester and Pearl bring slavery to mind we must recognize the racial advantages that privilege them above African slaves in North America. Leland S. Person clearly maps the distinction:

Refusing to name her child's father, resisting the efforts of the good masters to take her child away, planning an escape to freedom—Hester resembles the slave mothers like Harriet Jacobs even as her actions signify and thereby underline the politics of racial difference. Situating Hester in a complex and objective position in which slave motherhood and anti-slavery feminism come together, [Hawthorne] represents the presumption—the identification of black and white women's experiences and politics—that cuts as sharply today as it would have in the nineteenth century. Hester's abject dependence upon patriarchal sufferance for her mothering rights links her to her slave sisters, but her ability to mother at all marks her feminist difference from slave mothers like Harriet Jacobs.<sup>20</sup>

The echoes of the slavery debates of the mid-nineteenth century that occur in *The Scarlet Letter* do indirectly correlate with the characters of Hester and Pearl, but Hawthorne does not take on the issue of abolition directly in the novel. Despite Hester's "blackness," she retains racial privileges that allow her to resist in ways that slave women could not.<sup>21</sup>

Hawthorne's protagonist is invested in her community, and vice versa, in ways never open to antebellum slaves but often afforded to white reformers and radicals. Hester, with all of

her heroic qualities, risks becoming lost when cut off from her community—even to the point of considering infanticide and suicide—but Arthur Dimmesdale also contemplates shocking forms of antisocial behavior. Arthur is a community-minded creature: “his native gifts, his culture, and his entire development would secure him a home only in the midst of civilization and refinement” (215). Once he accepts Hester’s plan to abandon the community, he is completely ungrounded; he becomes the “Black Man” who haunts the forest, the devilish deconstructionist who wants to wreak mischief. Hester makes this connection when Pearl asks if she has ever met the Black Man: “Once in my life I met the Black Man! . . . This scarlet letter is his mark!” (185). Disrespect, lechery, blasphemy, and absurdity all boil over in the minister as he walks from the woods, and in several impetuous moments he longs to undo what he has spent a lifetime helping to build. Hester becomes self-destructive, but Arthur becomes a menace to the Puritan strategy of repressive order, wishing to uncover all that has been suppressed and disciplined: “Scorn, bitterness, unprovoked malignity, gratuitous desire of ill, ridicule of whatever was good and holy, all awoke, to tempt, even while they frightened him” (222). Hawthorne vividly portrays the danger of cutting loose the bonds of society in the decentered Arthur Dimmesdale, but he also shows that Hester fares better. In Hester’s strong and intuitive individualism, her ability to walk the margins of society, and her desire to change the status quo, we can see strong parallels to Thoreau. Conversely, in Dimmesdale’s reaffirmation of the center, and his implicit defense of the status quo, we can find echoes of Hawthorne’s conservatism: the support of Franklin Pierce, the defense of inaction, and the failure to support abolition.<sup>22</sup> It is, then, not too large a leap to suggest that the unusual and troublesome union between Hester and Arthur may have some of its genesis in the unlikely friendship between Thoreau and Hawthorne.

Arthur cannot live, even briefly, outside of his society. He has neither Hester’s long-suffering practice nor her strength, and he spins out of control in the first hour after he cuts himself free. Dimmesdale must recenter himself, and he does so at his peak, in his final election sermon, at Hester’s expense.

"He stood, at this moment, on the very proudest eminence of superiority, to which the gifts of intellect, rich lore, prevailing eloquence, and a reputation of whitest sanctity, could exalt a clergyman in New England's earliest days, when the professional character was of itself a lofty pedestal" (249–50). In a stunning final act of betrayal, Arthur attempts to take from Hester the symbol she has worked seven long years to make her own, and over which she has repeatedly denied the magistrates power. "People of New England! . . . [B]ehold me here, the one sinner of the world!" (254): Arthur belatedly imposes the letter on himself in the very spot where Hester withstood her trial and attempts to reinvest it, using all of his power and prestige, with the magistrates' original meaning. In this act, while Hester physically supports him, he undermines her long battle with the symbol by opting to "save" himself: "'Is not this better,' murmured he, 'than what we dreamed of in the forest?'" Arthur, determined to die pure, goes out preaching to the woman he never claimed as his wife. However, Hester is unwilling to accept his moral dictum, the one she has fought throughout the novel; she is still metaphorically in the woods, harboring the destructive thoughts brought on by the rupture with her community: "'I know not! I know not!' she hurriedly replied. 'Better? Yea; so we may both die, and little Pearl die with us!'" (254). In belatedly claiming his shame, Arthur reinvokes the stigma on Hester with nearly its original fixity and then leaves her to bear it alone. Worn down, humiliated, betrayed, and deserted, Hester finally breaks.

Unable to live any longer with the Puritans, or apart from community, Hester ends her resistance and flees to Europe with Pearl. Dimmesdale's final act, where he literally bares his breast to display "the ghastly miracle" of his hysterical *A*, confuses his parishioners as much as it reinscribes the symbol (255). Debate ensues as to whether the *A* actually appeared, what it means, and how he acquired it. Inadvertently, Arthur's action further puts the signification of the symbol into play, and even the narrator cavils: "The reader may choose among these theories" (259). Arthur attempts to reenact the original scaffold scene and expunge his moral cowardice by taking the letter on himself; however, his confession casts serious doubt on the magistrates'

access to an inviolable font of moral authority, which allowed them to fix the signifier with only one meaning. At his zenith as a minister, Arthur Dimmesdale confesses before the whole community that he was never any better than Hester. By seizing and elaborating the A with which she was branded, Hester had wrested alternative possible meanings of the talisman from the "fixed" original, and Arthur's confession (though far from his intent) further decenters the signifier. Hester had melded with the letter: "giving up her individuality, she [became] the general symbol at which the preacher and moralist might point, and in which they might vivify and embody their images of women's frailty and sinful passion" (79). After Arthur's confession "their images" lose a great deal of authority.

With Arthur dead and Hester (along with her scarlet letter) gone, the signifier becomes a mystical symbol in the imaginations of the interpretative community: "The story of the scarlet letter grew into a legend. Its spell, however, was still potent, and kept the scaffold awful where the poor minister had died, and likewise the cottage by the sea-shore, where Hester Prynne had dwelt" (261). The revived, embodied signifier disappears, but the conflict over signification gains a life of its own, ambiguously divided between the symbols of the scaffold and Hester's empty hut. The potent spell of Hester's story not only holds sway over the Puritan community but pins her firmly in New England despite her years of absence after Arthur's death. Hawthorne likens the social bond, reified in the scarlet letter, to an iron chain that "never could be broken" (80). Hester never allowed those bonds to form on Pearl, and what initially appears to be an escape from the repressive community of Puritans is merely a trip to transplant the "little elf" (92) into a more hospitable environment. We are not to imagine that Pearl remains free of societal bonds, only that they form elsewhere, without her mother's stigma. Pearl makes a clean break and lives, presumably happily, married and wealthy, somewhere in Europe. Hester comes back: "There was a more real life for Hester Prynne, here, in New England, than in that unknown region where Pearl had found a home. . . . She had returned, therefore, and resumed,—of her own free will, for not the sternest magistrate of that iron period would have

imposed it,—resumed the symbol of which we have related so dark a tale” (262).

Why Hester takes up the symbol again is important to understanding *The Scarlet Letter*. Although Bercovitch once saw the novel as a “subtle and devastating critique of Hester’s radicalism,” in his fuller treatment of *The Scarlet Letter* he modifies that view to one that credits both socialization and resistance: “the scarlet letter is an adversarial representation of cultural process, whose radical office lies in its capacity to be nourished by the structures it resists.” Bercovitch acknowledges Hester’s individualism and defiance, yet still sees the resumption of the letter as “her final acquiescence.”<sup>23</sup> Bercovitch’s argument has largely defined the critical debate surrounding *The Scarlet Letter* in the last decade, and one of the most thoughtful responses is Robert Milder’s nuanced account of Hawthorne’s uneasy acceptance of “the requirements of social and moral order that make suppression, repression, and human deformity a condition of society as it has always existed.”<sup>24</sup> While any discussion of Hester’s return necessarily enters into the extended discussion of the A and its disciplining office, the primary purpose here is to tease out the model of Hester’s civil disobedience in conjunction with Thoreau’s ideas.<sup>25</sup> When we view Hester’s actions through the lens of civil disobedience, it is not her return, but rather her departure that signals capitulation to societal forces.

Hawthorne opens the novel with the epitome of powerlessness: a disenfranchised, unwed, defiant mother standing before the authority of the Puritan magistrates and her community, branded with the cruel and unusual symbol of the A. Considering that at least half of the culpability for the “crime” lies in the very bosom of the magistrates, this is clearly an example of Thoreau’s notion of an “injustice [which] has a spring, or a pulley, or a rope, or a crank exclusively for itself.” Thoreau warns that the remedy (resistance) may be worse than such an evil, and sets the additional criteria that “it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another” before advocating civil disobedience (“RCG,” 73). The parallels between Thoreau’s model and Hester Prynne’s resistance are more than coincidence—Hester refuses to speak the father’s name and takes the penalty, literally, onto herself, meeting all of Thoreau’s

criteria for becoming a “counter friction to stop the machine” (“RCG,” 74). After Arthur’s attempt to recenter and reclaim the A, Hester surrenders her long struggle for a time, but her return is not an acquiescence; rather, it is a resumption of her resistance.

Hester is tied to her community, but so too is it bound to her. The narrator tells us that not the “sternest magistrate of that iron period” would re-impose the symbol on Hester when she returns, but her resumption of the A shows that it no longer belongs to the magistrates. Hester’s return opens old wounds, forces back on the interpretative community a symbol it would rather forget, and reinitiates the long struggle over signification. It is too triumphant a reading of Hester’s return to suggest that she has succeeded in making the A completely indeterminate (as Flores suggests), or that she has managed to affix her own signified (as Elbert claims). The special properties of the signifier aid Hester in her resistance, and she succeeds in opening some play within the structure—a Herculean task considering the forces set against her. She cannot deconstruct the Puritan patriarchy, nor gain access to any transcendental signifier on her own; however, she does unground the A enough that it “cease[s] to be a stigma which attract[s] the world’s scorn and bitterness,” a relatively small but important victory for friction against the Puritan order (263).

*The Scarlet Letter* is a fictional arena where Hawthorne pits an apparently powerless individual against a repressive social order and shows the high cost of resisting civil government. Those who see Hester as the “winner” of this elemental struggle, a model of individualism triumphant, miss the important fact that Hester never escapes the pressures of her community and that she incurs grave risks in living too close to the outer boundaries of her society. Conversely, the view of Hester as a soul crushed into conformity by socialization—a proto-Winston Smith who finally loves Big Brother—ignores the pressures that she applies back onto her community as well as the space for dissent she opens within the Puritan order. While Hawthorne does not agree with Thoreau that the “individual [is] a higher and independent power, from which all [the state’s] own power and authority are derived,” *The Scarlet Letter* is dynamic evidence

that he believes in the power of individual action to change the social order ("RCG," 89). Hester Prynne never stands above or beyond her community, and when she escapes to give Pearl a fresh start in Europe, she leaves behind an "awful," empty space where she had worn a niche for herself. The scarlet letter is not only Hester's life sentence; it is her life's work. When she returns to take it up again, it is not with enthusiasm but with a grim, weary determination, and the community immediately feels the heat. She who had once been "the general symbol at which the preacher and moralist might point" becomes a kind of authority herself. The aggrieved, the sorrowful, the confused and the discontented all "c[o]me to Hester's cottage, demanding why they [are] so wretched, and what the remedy!" (263). Hester has no better answer than that she believes things will eventually change, but her own transformation encourages them to hope and to question their social conditions in a manner markedly different from the "monolithic" crowd at the novel's beginning.

Hawthorne's model of resistance to civil government differs from Thoreau's insofar as the individual must work from within a community rather than from a proposed neutral margin, but he ultimately agrees that an individual can create friction to wear against the machine, and that such friction can eventually smooth out some injustices. Hester is not a heroic figure with a lever searching for some imagined archimedean site from which to move her world; rather, the conflict between the magistrates and Hester can be visualized as a Venn diagram, where Hester's "counter friction" creates a gap—a "magic circle of ignominy"—from within the magistrates' sphere of influence (246). The cost of resistance is high because the friction wears both ways, but Hester succeeds in exploiting the instability of the symbol and altering the status of the *A* through stamina and courage. The combined weight of the magistrates' power, the condemning communal gaze, and the societal chains that bind Hester to New England all mount up to a more formidable civil opponent than Thoreau posits in "Resistance"; however, and perhaps surprisingly, *The Scarlet Letter* supports Thoreau's position that effective individual resistance is possible against, and healthy for, the civic body. The dark, gloomy aspect of the

novel shows that Hawthorne believes that such resistance will be long and difficult—in stark contrast to Thoreau’s caustic efforts to wake (and shame) his neighbors into action—and that the results may be somewhat ambiguous. Hester, after all, ends up next to Arthur beneath a “simple slab of slate” with the *A* rendered in “the semblance of an engraved escutcheon.” The armorial *A*, both as blazon and shield, signifies for both combatants in the fray, and the struggle for control over the signifier literally follows Hester to her grave, leaving the reader to “perplex himself with the purport” (264). Dimly, an “ever-glowing point of light gloomier than the shadow” retains the lambency of friction and counter friction, and continues to produce some critical heat.

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#### NOTES

1. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, ed. William Charvat et al., vol. 1 of *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne* (Ohio State Univ. Press, 1962), 53–54. All further references are to this edition of *The Scarlet Letter* and are cited parenthetically by page number.
2. Ralph Flores, “Underground Allegory: The Deadly Living Letter in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*,” *Criticism* 29 (1987): 338.
3. Henry D. Thoreau, “Resistance to Civil Government,” in *Reform Papers*, ed. Wendell Glick, in *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1988), 73–74. All further references are to this edition and are cited parenthetically as “RCG.”
4. Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 1978), 278.
5. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1997).
6. Michael Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* (Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 1985), 85.
7. G. Thomas Courser, “‘The Old Manse,’ *Walden*, and the Hawthorne-Thoreau Relationship,” *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 21 (1975): 11–20; Buford Jones, “‘The Hall of Fantasy’ and the Early Hawthorne-



- Thoreau Relationship," *PMLA* 83 (1968): 1429–38, esp. 1434.
8. James R. Mellow, *Nathaniel Hawthorne in His Times* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1998), 289.
9. Allan Lloyd Smith, "The Elaborated Sign of the Scarlet Letter," *ATQ* 1 (1987): 69–82.
10. Monika M. Elbert, "Hester's Maternity: Stigma or Weapon?," *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 36 (1990): 198.
11. Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Office of "The Scarlet Letter"* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1991), xii.
12. Sacvan Bercovitch, "Hawthorne's A-Morality of Compromise," *Representations* 24 (1988): 1.
13. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, trans. Colin Gordon, et al. (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 158.
14. For further discussion of Hester's needlework as an act of resistance, see Gilmore, *American Romanticism*, 85; Rita K. Gollin, "'Again a Literary Man': Vocation and the Scarlet Letter," in *Critical Essays on Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter"* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1988); Leland S. Person Jr., *Aesthetic Headaches: Women and a Masculine Poetics in Poe, Melville, & Hawthorne* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1988); and Jon B. Reed, "'A Letter,—The Letter A': A Portrait of the Artist as Hester Prynne," *ESQ: A Journal of the American Renaissance* 36 (1990): 79–108.
15. Elbert, "Hester's Maternity," 179.
16. Elbert, "Hester's Maternity," 198.
17. Aristotle, *The Politics*. trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Modern Library, 1943), 6.
18. Jean Fagan Yellin, *Women & Sisters: The Antislavery Feminists in American Culture* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1989), 138.
19. Teresa A. Goddu, "Letters Turned to Gold: Hawthorne, Authorship, and Slavery," *Studies in American Fiction* 29 (Spring 2001): 49–76, 65.
20. Leland S. Person, "The Dark Labyrinth of the Mind: Hawthorne, Hester, and the Ironies of Racial Mothering," *Studies in American Fiction* 29 (Spring 2001): 49–76.
21. In addition to the studies cited above, see the following for a more complete discussion of slavery in *The Scarlet Letter*: Deborah L. Madsen, "'A' for Abolition': Hawthorne's Bond-Servant and the Shadow of Slavery," *Journal of American Studies* 25 (1991): 255–59; Jean Fagan Yellin, "Hawthorne and the American National Sin," in *The Green American Tradition: Essays and Poems for Sherman Paul*, ed. H. Daniel Peck (Baton Rouge:

- Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1989), 75–97; Jay Grossman, "'A' is for Abolition?: Race, Authorship, *The Scarlet Letter*," *Textual Practice* 7 (Spring 1993): 13–30.
22. In her biography of Hawthorne, Brenda Wineapple comments on the roots of Hawthorne's conservatism: "To one who never felt quite at home, the symbolic loss of one—the dissolution of the Union—was intolerable"; see *Hawthorne: A Life* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2003), 262.
  23. Bercovitch, *Office of "The Scarlet Letter,"* 154, 116.
  24. Robert Milder, "*The Scarlet Letter* and Its Discontents," *Nathaniel Hawthorne Review* 22 (Spring 1996): 23. This issue of *NHR* carries a series of responses to Bercovitch.
  25. Bercovitch published a subsequent article, with some response to the criticism in *NHR* 22, in the following fall edition: "*The Scarlet Letter: A Twice-Told Tale*," *Nathaniel Hawthorne Review* 22 (Fall 1996): 1–20. These two issues, in conjunction with *The Office of "The Scarlet Letter,"* offer an excellent entry point into this complex discussion of *The Scarlet Letter*.