"She had not known the weight until she felt the freedom": Feminism and patriarchy in *The Scarlet Letter*

Nathaniel Hawthorne is as much a feminist as I am a loaf of Wonderbread. That is what I would say if I wished to be deliberately pedantic in my exploration of patriarchy in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Discussions about the feminism that is infused in *The Scarlet Letter*, about the female struggles and blatant misogyny, almost always include some kind of tired admission that, 'no, Hawthorne is not technically a feminist because the term had barely been coined in his time.' Although this much is true, I would like to argue that *The Scarlet Letter* embodies several key tenets of feminist literature (albeit before and apart from the time that we had concise language to describe them) making the work a crucially pro-woman, anti-patriarchal rebuke of Puritanical repression and social violence.

While I am arguing that *The Scarlet Letter* is on the whole an important piece of feminist literature, I am not arguing that Hawthorne himself was a feminist. I am not a biographer, and even if I were, I'd have a heck of a time painting over his famous and regrettable phrase about women writers: "America is now wholly given over to a damned mob of scribbling women" (Atlantic, 2011). Whether he himself believed in equality for women or the inalienable rights of women in this country is immaterial — this paper is concerned with analyzing his work, and how that work seized on and arranged perceived injustices, struggles, growth arcs, and moral fluctuations into a form that became blatantly defensive of a publicly castigated woman in Puritan society. As an aside, however, Hawthorne's scathing assessment of the "scribbling women" may not be so damning — as Mary Wollstonecraft puts it in her essay, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, "men, in their youth, are prepared for professions, and marriage is not considered as the grand feature in their lives… Women, on the contrary, have no other scheme to

sharpen their faculties...” (Wollstonecraft, 1792). Essentially, if a woman’s writing strikes a reader as frivolous or superficial, it is the fault of her lack of education, the thing that deprives her of learning to think deeper and construct compelling works of literature. Hawthorne can hardly be blamed for recognizing that frivolity, although his quote lacks some much-needed nuance about the systemic challenges that led to that frivolity in the first place.

The Scarlet Letter, regardless of its author’s personal politics, critiques patriarchal social structures more than it endorses them, and critiques normative definitions of masculinity and femininity more than it upholds them. Formally, the best example of this critique is the book’s informative, non-judgmental tone. Critics who feel that *The Scarlet Letter* simply tells another demonstrative fable about a woman being punished for having sex often overlook this simple fact. The book, from the very beginning, is more than somber — it is empathetic.

In chapter one, Hawthorne writes of the prison’s rose-bush, “This rose-bush, by a strange chance, has been kept alive in history… it may serve, let us hope, to symbolize some sweet moral blossom, that may be found along the track, or relieve the darkening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow” (Hawthorne, 77-78). This rose-bush at the mouth of the prison seems to symbolize all that Puritan society is not — free, beautiful, and independent. These qualities are more than mentioned by the author — they are admired, cherished, wistfully dreamt of in the harsh cold of 1600s Boston. They are made real, moreover, in the beautiful Hester Prynne, whose punishment for making a free and independent decision is certainly mourned by the narrator as powerfully as if that rose were crushed underfoot. Hester Prynne’s beauty is remarked upon a number of times in the text, sometimes with a complimentary air, sometimes a damning one. The narrator, describing Hester’s exit from the prison as she approaches the first scaffold and passes gossiping fishwives, writes, “...never had Hester Prynne appeared more lady-like, in

the antique interpretation of the term, than as she issued from the prison… her beauty shone out, and made a halo of the misfortune and ignominy in which she was enveloped" (Hawthorne).

Hawthorne, by portraying Hester as an undimmed bit of beauty amidst the ugliness (both physical and social) of the Puritan square, draws strong parallels between the upright young woman and the symbolic, undying rose at the prison door. Hawthorne might have simply said, "she was beautiful," or "it was a pity that she committed such crimes, the young thing." However, his narration is tinted with an unmistakable amount of sympathy and even tentative admiration for the way that Hester carries herself ("Wondrous strength and generosity of a woman's heart! She will not speak!" [Hawthorne]). If readers consider that Hester is the antithesis of Puritan society, and therefore of the patriarchal hierarchy, then Hawthorne's text becomes almost explicitly anti-patriarchal and admiring of the people who resist those oppressive structures.

The foremost oppressive structure in any Puritan society, and particularly in *The Scarlet Letter*, is the church. Puritan religion formed as a response to the Church of England, which the Puritans believed was too liberal with its practices and tolerant of ways of living that were not in the Bible. This type of essentialist belief that only "true" Biblical practices were acceptable led to the creation of a regressive and misogynistic religion that used verse to restrict women and deny them their rights. It is not a reach to say that in a literary Puritanical setting, the church represents the will of men as much as it represents God.

The church in *The Scarlet Letter*, then, is reflected in the weak and troubled life of Arthur Dimmesdale, the priest and father of Pearl, Hester's illegitimate daughter. Dimmesdale struggles throughout the book to come to terms with his sin and balance his spiritual checkbook with God. As a minister, he feels inept and trapped in his own dishonesty – "Canst thou deem it, Hester, a

consolation, that I must stand up in my pulpit, and meet so many eyes turned upward to my face, as if the light of heaven were beaming from it!—must see my flock hungry for the truth, and listening to my words as if a tongue of Pentecost were speaking!—and then look inward, and discern the black reality of what they idolize?" (Hawthorne). He is tormented not only by his own conscience and lack of courage, but by Doctor Roger Chillingworth, whose devilry exacerbates Dimmesdale's anguish, and when combined with the latent guilt and pain the priest feels, eventually kills him. Dimmesdale, as the representative of the church and its men, spends most of the book bemoaning his spiritual affliction, avoiding his obligations to his daughter and her mother, and eventually dies having only partially confessed to his crimes. Hawthorne shows this man of God to be deeply, deeply flawed – not a terribly upstanding citizen, nor a brave leader of men. If the church is Hester's primary accuser and aggressor, then Hawthorne is making it abundantly clear that the church is not a worthy adversary, that its standpoint is not superior to that of the free, dignified, noble Hester — the woman who is antithetical to all of that harrowing spiritual corruption. Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* portrays the church in a way that subsequently critiques masculinity, again supporting the claim that this work is, in the end, highly pro-woman.

There is also something to be said for the larger arc of Hester's story, especially in contrast with that of Dimmesdale's. One might expect that Dimmesdale, as a man of God, would suffer the slings and arrows of his life, then survive, and reach some greater satisfaction at the end of his story that was preordained by his belief in God all along. This isn't the case for him, but it *is* the case for Hester. At the beginning of the tale, she is humiliated and ridiculed, denounced, and even feared for the social discord that surrounds her crime of adultery. Over time, however, she endures — despite her outcast status, Hester engages in her craft, slowly

supports and quietly works in the community, and eventually becomes known as a stronger, more capable woman than she may even have been before the business with the scarlet letter. Hawthorne writes, “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” (Hawthorne, 245). In many ways, Hester herself follows a path that mirrors maternal divinity or sainthood, wherein a person’s inner fortitude and steadfast ethical personhood are rewarded with a reputation of honor (even if it takes their literal or metaphorical death to get there). It could be said that by writing an arc for Hester that mimics that of a saint, while the priest himself gets no such symbolic salvation, Hawthorne makes a clear assertion about who is most deserving of forgiveness, and whose toil is rewarded. By tying that reward even more explicitly to “a woman’s strength,” it is difficult to see Hester’s arc toward personal salvation as anything but an endorsement of women in their fight against oppressive power structures everywhere.

Finally, Hawthorne portrays sin as something that carries equal responsibility between a man and a woman. In a time where men were encouraged to win titles and notoriety through conquest (of women, land, enterprise, etc.), it would be quite standard to allow a man to have sexual exploits without consequence, while a woman suffers the results. Of course, it is Hester who is humiliated on the scaffold, Hester who carries and raises the babe. However, Dimmesdale is not let off scot-free. The consequences he faces for not owning up to his role in the adultery are brutal, ravaging his body and soul until he dies with the confession on his lips, and the shame burning on his chest for all to see — “[God] hath proved his mercy… by bringing me hither, to die this death of triumphant ignominy before the people!” (Hawthorne, 386). Hester could have borne and died with the full social weight of their intimacy on her soul, and instead, Hawthorne

makes it clear that Dimmesdale had an equal obligation to feel the shame of being displayed before the town and known for his crime. Although it's a crude form of commentary on equality, it comments on equality nonetheless, holding men and the church responsible for their roles in social dynamics and their responsibility to uphold moral standards as steadily as women are required to.

The Scarlet Letter is full of what modern readers may see as incomplete or even incorrect observations about women, intimacy, religion, masculinity, and more. Those observations are valid criticisms of the work, insomuch as it fails to deliver the real feminist, anti-patriarchal punch that many young people wish it would. However, it is incorrect to state that *The Scarlet Letter* underlines any sort of patriarchal structure as a commendable way of being in community with one another. At every turn, men (and by extension, the church) fail to present the necessary strength, kindness, bravery, or humility to resolve significant problems both within their town and within themselves. The only adult character who is able to apply her own internal strength, in the end, is Hester — the fake widow, the adulterous harlot, the single mother. Hawthorne is not a feminist, fine. Regardless, *The Scarlet Letter* belongs on the shelves of feminist collections everywhere for its striking condemnations of misogyny and its stalwart recognition of the innate, unalienable power within a woman of any station.

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