Hawthorne’s Feminine Voices: Reading The Scarlet Letter as a Woman
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A great deal of recent criticism of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* has focused on the two general areas of narrative theory and feminism. Feminist readings of the novel have abounded since Nina Baym opened the subject up to debate in 1982 (Murfin 282); and, whether feminist, materialist, psychoanalytic, deconstructionist—or any combination of these and more—most critics devote considerable scrutiny to the “conflicted” and equivocal quality in the novel’s narrative technique.¹ The narrator’s “equivocal” style has inspired much critical speculation as to the novel’s “underlying ideology,” including debate over whether the novel is a seminal work of proto-feminism or just the opposite. Nevertheless, the equivocation in *The Scarlet Letter* is not merely a dialectic of two contradictory voices; the narrator seems to speak in *many* voices, to present multiple points of view, and to share sympathies with them all just as much as he reveals them flawed. The lack of a single guiding voice is, perhaps, what gave Mrs. Hawthorne her famous headache. However, it is also the quality that makes the novel remarkable—and, I would like to assert, remarkably feminine. Although the narrative contains many passages that characterise the narrator as a champion of patriarchal values, Hawthorne also makes use of what can be labelled “feminine” narrative techniques and styles, with the effect of creating a narrative of radical sympathy for women suffering under patriarchal oppression. While all of the voices are not consistent in voicing this sympathy, the polyphony of contradictory voices—both masculine and feminine—can, in itself, be labelled a feminine technique, as it is inclusive rather than restrictive. It includes marginalised perspectives and allows the reader a range of interpretation rather than one unified, coherent and “authoritative truth” in the text.
Gendered Discourse?

Let me acknowledge, before proceeding any further, that the distinction drawn between “masculine” and “feminine” discourse is entirely problematic, and necessarily artificial. The habit of binary opposition in the sociolinguistic sphere has led to an identification of non-gendered objects and ideas with either the masculine or feminine gender. In addition, the male half of the binary pair has been privileged over its feminine counterpart, with the effect of creating assumptions of “natural” male superiority and female inferiority. This “habit” becomes problematic—indeed, it begs deconstruction—when discussing literature, for writing itself is considered the “feminine” half of the speech/writing pair of binary opposites.

While feminist critics have been able to identify and define “masculine” forms of discourse (easily done since they are the ones that have been recommended in language and rhetoric manuals since Plato), they have much more difficulty describing or defining “feminine” discourse. Virginia Woolf, without ever stooping to vulgar definitions, presents the “feminine sentence”—through example—as one that cannot be limited to a single perspective or thought, but instead leads to multiple digressions. Hélène Cixous assures us that, while it may be “impossible to define a feminine practice of writing,” that “doesn’t mean that it does not exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallocentric system” (340). Many critics, nevertheless, have managed to make some defining observations regarding gendered discourse. It is important to keep in mind that these distinctions are only arbitrary, and necessarily artificial, based on social constructions, not biology; silence, for instance, may be no more inherently “feminine” than sunlight is inherently “masculine,” except that we have been conditioned to think of it as so:

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<td>logic/reason</td>
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<td>head/mind/intellect</td>
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<td>beginning-middle-end</td>
<td>centre, outward, centre</td>
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<td>one subject perspective</td>
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linear progress of time  
cyclical; “monumental” time (Kristeva)

objective/historic  
subjective; subversive

one meaning/logos  
plurality of meaning

public  
private

This schema by no means provides a complete, or even adequate, list of distinctions. Susan Lanser, for instance, cites “power” as another of the fundamental differences between “masculine” and “feminine” speech patterns: powerless (feminine) speech is “polite, emotional, enthusiastic, gossipy, talkative, uncertain, dull, chatty,” while powerful (masculine) speech is “capable, direct, rational, illustrating a sense of humor, unfeeling, strong (in tone and word choice) and blunt” (617). She argues, consequently, that Bakhtin’s concept of polyphony, a multi-voiced quality operating in all narratives, is “more pronounced and more consequential in women’s narratives” (618). “Polyphonic” can easily describe the multiple voices in the narrative of The Scarlet Letter.

If one follows Jonathan Culler’s suggestion and reads The Scarlet Letter “as a woman”—that is, resisting the tendency to “read as a man”?—feminine discourses and techniques seem to emerge from the novel in profusion. My first reading of the novel was, perhaps, a “masculine” reading, as I found that the narrative gave me, as it is said to have given Mrs. Hawthorne, a headache. The lack of consistency and coherence in voice and vision was confusing and even irritating. Only in a second—perhaps more “feminine” reading—did this perceived “lack” become rife with expression and meaning. This “feminine” reading reveals the many “feminine” characteristics of the narrative, and suggests—at the very least—the ambivalent attitude towards patriarchal oppression of women displayed in the text, and possibly a much more profound sympathy with female oppression than is usually to be found in a male text. The multiple voices present multiple perspectives and ideologies, or an anti-logos narrative, rejecting the possibility of one logocentric truth or one phallocentric view of history.

The Sting

In the bitingy ironic “Custom-House” sketch, the narrator (who most certainly implies that he is at least the author of the sketch, if only “the editor, or very little more” [23] of The Scarlet Letter) insinuates himself firmly
into the historical setting of his “found” story. He implies that he is Nathaniel Hawthorne, author, and familiar to the readers through his stories written in an “old manse.” He traces his ancestry back to early Puritan times, when his forefathers were community leaders, not unlike those ruling over the Salem of Hester Pryne. While entrenching himself in this masculine world, he is also distancing himself from it, not only through his ironic descriptions of the “venerable personages” (52) of the custom-house, but through other narrative techniques as well. The writing of The Scarlet Letter itself is a distancing act, and he imagines the stern rebuke of his Puritan ancestors at his chosen vocation of story-telling (27). He chooses not to record a “respectable” history in true patriarchal fashion—which he well might do, given the nature of the “authorized and authenticated . . . document” he has found (44, emphasis added); nor does he choose to transcribe the heartily masculine tales of seafaring directly from the sailors frequenting the custom-house. Instead, he chooses to write a romance. In addition, he employs the convention of the “found story,” a respectable literary convention of the time, but in this case his use of it can be taken for little less than a patent lie, which undermines his authority and reliability from the start. For in the same paragraph he undermines his own convention when he admits that he has not confined himself to Poe’s “half dozen sheets of foolscap,” but has allowed himself “nearly or altogether as much license as if the facts had been entirely of my own invention” (44). This equivocation results in a fundamental problem of reading: how is the reader to respond to the expectations created by the use of generic literary conventions that are undermined by a narrator almost in the same breath that he has constructed them?

While insisting on the authoritative historicity of his tale with one voice, he calls it a romance with another. Because writing romances was not altogether a manly occupation in Hawthorne’s day, it is one that many modern critics have come to regard as revolutionary. Michael Davitt Bell, for instance, argues that to “indulge in the delusion of romance was to undermine the basis of psychological and social order, to alienate oneself from [as Thomas Jefferson so prosaically put it] ‘the real business of life’” (37). A change in the political weather has resulted in the author/narrator being fired from his position within a frozen masculine world that has effectively numbed his creative side. The “wretched numbness” resulting from his tenure in the custom-house has affected his creativity to the extent that his characters “would not be warmed and rendered malleable, by any heat that I could kindle at my intellectual forge” (45). The political ousting has enabled him to rekindle his
imaginative fires. He rejects the masculine milieu in order to enter the world of imagination and creativity. However, he abjures the more acceptable “realistic” form of the novel (ruled in his day by verisimilitude, or “probability” and convention), in favour of a form that he saw as having more freedom to indulge in the fantastic and marvelous, freedom to present “the truth of the human heart” in a manner of his own choosing. Heather Dubrow suggests that “if writing in a form that is not in vogue is a way of distinguishing oneself from the dominant literary culture of one’s age, it can also be a way of aligning oneself with a subculture, with the rebellious sons who are challenging the authoritarian fathers” (13). In this case, Hawthorne may be aligning himself with the rebellious daughters—the “scribbling women” (he calls himself a “scribbler” at the end of the Custom House sketch)—rather than with the male novelists of his time. In telling the story of the scarlet letter, he has chosen to tell a woman’s story; and in choosing a “feminine” form to present it, he has adopted what have come to be thought of as “feminine” techniques.

This discussion of the Custom House sketch, nevertheless, remains problematic, for it leaves out a great deal of contrary information given by the narrator. The most consistent characteristic of the narrator is that he is rarely consistent on any topic. The story could never be mistaken for a univocal manifesto of proto-feminism. The narrator does not simply reject the masculine milieu; he leaves it reluctantly and somewhat bitterly, referring to himself as “decapitated” by the political powers that have ousted him from his masculine profession (and symbolically castrated him). Janis Stout notes an “inner duality regarding conventional moral standards” in the narrative (234); but the conflict is expressed as more than a simple “duality.” A multiplicity of conflicting voices oppositely and convergently narrate the story. In entering the “feminine” world of romance, the narrator agrees to give his “predecessor’s memory the credit which will be rightfully its due” (44). Since Pue’s manuscript is an obvious fiction, this vow may signal an intention to attend faithfully to historical representation. He vows, for instance, to be the “representative” of his Puritan ancestors while writing his story (27). He admits that “strong traits of their nature have intertwined themselves with mine.” He wants to take on their “shame,” and perhaps remove the curse that has seemingly been laid upon them for their ceaseless oppression of women (27). He wants to redress history’s selective remembrance of Puritan severity, and its neglect of their “better deeds, although these were many” (27). He calls them “earnest” and “energetic”; he appreciates the simplicity and seriousness of their morality (59); and he admires their attempt at creating the
“new Jerusalem.” This connection with his past has moved Henry James to comment on the narrator’s relationship with the Puritan heritage as it pervades the novel:

Puritanism, in a word, is there, not only objectively, as Hawthorne tried to place it there, but subjectively as well, not I mean, in his judgment of his characters in any harshness of prejudice, or in the obtrusion of moral lesson; but in the very quality of his own vision. (51)

At the same time he incorporates a “Puritan voice” into his narrative, however, the narrator also wants to acknowledge the motivations and feelings of characters who have sinned and broken the laws of this Puritan community.

It is the juggling of the multiple voices, perspectives, and ideologies that makes the narrative of The Scarlet Letter speak with a feminine sensibility. The narrator maintains a constant push-pull relationship with his past, one moment identifying with his patriarchal ancestors and co-workers, the next condemning them. This endless equivocation is the fundamental narrative technique used throughout the novel, as the narrator rarely states anything straightforwardly, frequently allowing a variety of interpretations and points of view (two possible explanations for the existence of the rose bush [54]; several reasons for the popularity of Hester’s needlework [77]; three reasons why Hester remains in New England [75]; four explanations for the marks on Dimmesdale’s chest [197]; and innumerable “whether . . . or . . .” constructions liberally peppered throughout the novel). His narrative authority certainly “goes off in all directions.” If there is an “authorial” phallocentric voice in the narrative, it is not the only—nor even the primary—voice of the omniscient narrative “truth.” The many voices and perspectives allow for multiple and even contradictory interpretations, as readers can choose which voice they want to give “authority” or predominance, and which perspective, if any, holds a poetic “truth.”

The equivocation prominent in the narration of The Scarlet Letter undermines the logocentric concept of a singular meaning and confounds a totalizing phallocentric interpretation; in the logic of binary opposition, this technique rests decidedly on the feminine side of the scale. Ignoring the many meta-discourse equivocations in the Custom-House sketch, the story itself begins with the narrator offering us alternative and heterodox interpretations. The narrator’s canonisation of Ann Hutchinson at the opening of the story
reveals an unorthodox inclination from the start. He undermines the idea of
the Puritan “utopia” with the description of the “practical necessities” of the
cemetery and prison (53). At the door of the prison—indeed, at the very
“threshold of our narrative”—we are given the image of the rose bush, a
symbol of beauty, contrasting with the stern colourlessness of the Puritan
landscape. We are allowed to choose for ourselves which interpretation of its
origin we prefer: the supernatural belief that it has sprung up under the “foot-
steps of the sainted Ann Hutchinson,” which the narrator assures us “there is
fair authority for believing,” or the more prosaic explanation that it “merely
survived out of the stern old wilderness” (54). Obviously the latter is the
more reasonable and logical explanation; but the narrator seems to prefer the
former, more romantic interpretation. He urges the reader to do the same by
giving it a “fair authority,” and by plucking one of the flowers from the rose
bush and presenting it to the reader, that it might either “symbolize some
sweet moral blossom, that may be found along the track, or relieve the dark-
ening close of a tale of human frailty and sorrow” (54). This act, fraught with
gender significance (as men traditionally give women flowers), it could be
said, interpellates the reader to “read as a woman” and resist over-thematizing
the story in a masculine manner. By favouring the supernatural reading over
the logical one, the suggestion in the opening passage of the narrative privi-
leges a “poetic truth” of romance rather than historical realism, and a fem-
nine perspective rather than a masculine one.

The “Problem” of Interpretation

The constant narrative equivocation presents obvious problems for inter-
pretation—perhaps more clearly to recent critics steeped in the ambiguities
of reception theory, feminism, deconstructionism, and postmodern ambiva-
ience, than to Hawthorne’s contemporaries. Early critics were not as eager
to recognise the text’s refusal to be interpreted in a singular way. The novel was
alternately lauded and decried by those critics as a work of either supreme
didacticism—whether pro or anti-Puritan—or complete immorality, “unfit
for the subject of literature” (Brownson 36). E. A. Duyckinck’s great admir-
ation for Hawthorne’s “psychological romance” comes from its “moral,”
which, “though severe, is wholesome, and is a sounder bit of Puritan divinity
than we have been of late accustomed to hear from the degenerate succes-
sors of Cotton Mather . . . . The spirit of his old Puritan ancestors, to whom he
refers in the preface, lives in Nathaniel Hawthorne” (24-25). In contrast,
George Bailey Loring found that the tale “properly exposed the inhumanity of Puritanism, which repressed the sensuous element in human nature” (Murfin 207). George Ripley, in his discussion of the novel’s “moral,” comes closer to a modern perspective in asserting that “the moral of the story—for it has a moral for all wise enough to detect it—is shadowed forth rather than expressed in a few brief sentences near the close of the volume” (26), but, perhaps wisely, Ripley refrains from specifying what this singular “moral” might be.

The first critics mentioned seem to have heard only the “public” voice of the narrator, the one seeking to be authorial, direct, and “illustrating a sense of humor.” Perhaps, reading as men, they only heard the masculine voices in the narrative. Perhaps Ripley heard a more private narrative voice, one undermining that public stance of masculine authority. However, even that public voice was heard to speak contradictorily—to which the opposing interpretations of Brownson and Duyckinck attest—indicating that the “voices” are not limited to a simple opposition of “public” and “private.” The narrator is not merely jumping back and forth between his constrained Puritan persona and a mid-nineteenth-century modern thinker. The focalization is constantly shifting among many public and private voices and perspectives, as well as among the characters. In the opening scene of the novel, the narrator creates a point of view for himself through the “early severity of Puritan character,” through whose perspective he imagines the many possible spectacles that might be beheld on the scaffold of early Puritan Salem (54). A few pages later, the narrator imagines how a “Papist” might perceive the woman and child on the scaffold, as an image of Divine Maternity, “but only by contrast” since in this image was “the taint of deeper sin in the most sacred quality of human life, working such effect, that the world was only the darker for this woman’s beauty, and the more lost for the infant that she had borne” (59). This harsh judgment seems straightforward and “authorial” until one remembers that it is focalized through the point of view of the “Papist.” This double-voiced quality obscures the intent of the statement.

In his contemporary, and perhaps most public, voice—the one which seems most “authorial”—the narrator tends to generalise and judge didactically and overtly. Susan Lanser’s distinction between public and private narrative voices is based on the narratee implied by the voice. A private narrative, the traditional area to which women writers were relegated, posits a particular narratee, usually in diary or letter form. The public voice hails a public audience. It inhabits the same narrative level as the reader, and can often be seen as an
“author/narrator” (Lanser 617). The narrator of _The Scarlet Letter_ admirably fits Lanser’s description of the public narrator when he adopts his authorial tendency to generalise and judge. He speaks directly to the implied reader, and becomes overtly generalising and judgmental when he characterizes the early Puritan women as stronger, more solid and forceful, and even more beautiful in their “substantial” way than their descendants—his own female contemporaries (55). But in the scene that follows, he undermines his own authorial perspective by allowing these “hard visaged dames” to show themselves harsh, even shrewish, and certainly unattractive in their desire for more extreme punishment of Hester than that decreed by the magistrates. One “autumnal matron” asserts that “at the very least, they should have put the brand of a hot iron on Hester Prynne’s forehead” (56). Another woman, “the ugliest as well as most pitiless of these self-constituted judges,” adds that “this woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die” (56). The narrator renders his own diegetic summary of these women unreliable by presenting them mimetically as contradicting his generalisation of early Puritan women.

Monika Elbert characterizes these post-menopausal women as mimicking the patriarchs of their community. They are no longer maternal, and therefore have no value in a patriarchal system, except what they can appropriate for themselves as _faux_ men. They have denied their gender, their maternal power, and have no recourse in a patriarchal society but to adopt masculine power: “These antagonistic women see Hester’s sexuality in the way men conventionally have viewed it, as a threat” (175), and have dealt with that threat by “becoming more male, more hard, than the toughest patriarch” (176). The only female voice that speaks out sympathetically for Hester is the young mother in the crowd. The unnamed, undescribed, unpublished but still present “Puritan” focalizer, whom the narrator occasionally allows to speak through his narrative voice, must feel some uneasiness before the heartlessness of many of the Puritan Goodwives around the scaffold; for, indeed, the narrator has a man in the crowd chastise the women for their harshness: “That is the hardest word yet! Hush, now, gossips” (56). This anonymous “man in the crowd” speaks for the narrator on more than one level: he silences the women who are undermining the public narrator’s attempt to resurrect the “better deeds” and more noble traits of the Puritans; at the same time he is the sympathetic, yet socially orthodox voice that condemns the method and severity of judgment, if not the judgment itself. As a character and not overt narrative
voice, he is part of a mimetic—thus more “objective”—presentation of the harshness of Puritan judgment.

Raising the “Fallen Woman” to a New Art

Janis Stout observes that the novel’s conflicted authorial voice challenges the patriarchal stereotype of the fallen woman and the Puritan treatment of her, but never questions the reality of Hester’s sin or guilt. She hears no irony or double-voiced quality when the narrator speaks of Hester’s sin, guilt and shame, and asserts that “however strongly he may deplore the narrowness and insensitivity of the self-righteous Puritan system, he must choose law over the trackless wilderness of moral chaos” (237). Although the narrator seems to abhor their methods, he seems fundamentally in agreement with the Puritan philosophy, and thus, in Stout’s view, he “cannot leave unchallenged the radical social ideas he attributes to her” (238). Stout does not cite a page number or state specifically to which passage she is referring, but the following excerpt seems to be an appropriate example to highlight the conflicted nature of the author/narrator’s treatment of Hester and her radicalism. It is the strongest of several passages in which Hester voices passionate, unorthodox opinions and feelings, and which the narrator consistently follows with a seemingly negative judgment. While the narrator’s challenge to Hester’s radical social ideas may seem authorial because of their placement immediately following Hester’s thought—and, therefore, carry the authority of “the last word”—these judgments are not only ambiguous, but are heavily outweighed by the narrator’s assignment of an eloquent passion in the free-indirect-discourse blend of his and Hester’s voice (italics indicating FID are my emphasis):

Indeed, the same dark question often rose into her mind, with reference to the whole race of womanhood. Was existence worth accepting, even to the happiest among them? As concerned her own individual existence, she had long ago decided in the negative, and dismissed the point as settled. (134)

Subsequent to this passage about Hester’s inner turmoil, the narrator provides a generalisation about women. It is written in the present tense, making Hester a kind of “everywoman,” and therefore, interpellating female readers to agree, while creating a kind of sympathetic understanding for male readers:
A tendency to speculation, though it may keep woman quiet, as it does man, yet makes her sad. She discerns, it may be such a hopeless task before her. As a first step, the whole system of society is to be torn down, and built up anew. Then, the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit, which has become like nature, is to be essentially modified, before woman can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position. (134)

This passage, commonly attributed to Hester, is quite clearly spoken by the narrator; it is he who voices the radical ideas, in a profound empathy with Hester’s state of mind, and with the perception, as suggested in the passage, of women in general. He is adding his own voice to her complaint—not in the ambiguous form of free indirect discourse, but plainly in his “public” persona—giving it the weight of “authorial” conviction. The judgment following the revolutionary passage focuses not on Hester’s radical ideas, but on her thoughts of suicide:

Thus, Hester Prynne, whose heart had lost its regular and healthy throb, wandered without a clew in the dark labyrinth of mind; now turned aside by an insurmountable precipice; now starting back from a deep chasm. There was wild and ghastly scenery all around her, and a home and comfort nowhere. At times, a fearful doubt strove to possess her soul, whether it were not better to send Pearl at once to heaven, and go herself to such futurity as Eternal Justice should provide.

The scarlet letter had not done its office. (134)

Beginning with the word “thus,” the narrator subsumes his radical sympathy with Hester under a general guise of psychonarration—implying that he has been merely presenting Hester’s thoughts all along. The public “Puritan narrator,” with a simple, if not exactly straightforward, statement of judgment, disavows the fragile sympathy his alter (“Other”) ego created. This “public” persona aligns himself with the Puritan patriarchal system in judging Hester not only as a sinner but as a revolutionary; but the more private or subversive narrator has unquestionably shown his allegiance with Hester’s radicalism, even if he is conflicted about the moral nature of the “sin” that helped produce it.
While several critics have noted that “it is through Hester’s voice . . . that Hawthorne speaks as a revolutionary” (Martin 128), an even more tangible subversion is enacted through Hester’s silence and non-verbal communication. The narrative calls attention to the “feminine” discourse of silence and gives it a power as great or greater than the logos of patriarchy. Her refusal to name the father of her child confounds the leaders of the community. This refusal to be bound to a “father,” even if beyond the laws of marriage, gives Hester a greater individuality. She does not conform to an acceptable model of womanhood that reflects the man to whom she might belong; she belongs to no man in her community, and thus projects her own meaning. She belongs to the community as a whole—as the negative example, as the abjected, sin-infected “other”—but, in the eyes of the community, she is no man’s wife, sister, mother, daughter. She is simply Hester Prynne, wearer of the scarlet letter. The letter they have “sentenced” her to wear attempts to define her as a transparent sign—as a transgressor of man’s laws, if not as a lawful reflector of a man. The attempt, however, backfires—Hester’s needle subverts the interpretive code.

Shari Benstock observes that Hester’s embroidery “makes a spectacle of femininity, of female sexuality, of all that Puritan law hopes to repress” (289). Hester subverts the patriarchal sign by adding a non-linguistic feminine subtext to it, making the symbol stand for “woman.” Patriarchal law effectively defines woman as the “outlaw” or “other,” and within patriarchal language, she can rarely find the words to defend herself. In representing “woman,” Hester’s sign does not simply brand women as “other,” but condemns patriarchy and its system of language for its inability to express and conceive of women as anything more than either transparent stereotypes or outlaws.

When the community first views the embroidered letter on Hester’s breast on the scaffold, one woman indignantly interprets Hester’s embroidery as an attempt to make a “pride out of what they, worthy gentlemen, meant for a punishment” (58). However, the narrator reveals this interpretation to be an over-simplification, if not a complete misreading. Whatever Hester’s motive, the effect of her art is the transformation of the intended meaning of the letter; instead of hiding her shame, she draws the gaze more intently to the symbol on her breast, pronouncing her separateness more loudly than the pronouncements of the magistrates. The letter, “so fantastically embroidered and illuminated upon her bosom . . . had the effect of a spell, taking her out of the ordinary relations with humanity, and enclosing her in a sphere by her-
self” (58). Slowly, she subverts the intent of shame by transforming the object of law into an object of art, with its own semiotic system of meaning. By going beyond the sumptuary regulations, the symbol becomes lawless instead of representative of the law. She has obscured and confused the legal intent of the symbol by making it an illegal accessory. The narrator never raises the question of Hester’s motive, but his and Hester’s silence on this subject—combined with the attempts of other characters to read and interpret her intent—allows the symbol itself to speak volumes. Indeed, the intended signifier of the scarlet letter—“Adulteress”—is never mentioned in the narrative. However, like Dimmesdale’s double-voiced sermons, and like the narrator’s multifarious narrative, the various and transitory meanings that the symbol absorbs as it slides its way around the text and onto other characters is a subject of endless speculation.

Without benefit of a suitable language, Hester communicates through her feminine artistry of needle-work—an artistry that the narrator recognises as “almost the only one within a woman’s grasp” (76). The women in the community recognise her non-verbal, feminine form of communication, and thereby recognise—perhaps nothing so definite as their own “outlaw” status as women under patriarchal rule—but possibly a vague sense of the insufficiency of the patriarchal system of language and law to adequately represent and to serve the “unspeakable” needs and desires of women. They come to her with “their sorrows and perplexities,” seeking her counsel and sympathy as someone who has been a public victim as they are private victims. Only in this non-verbal, semiotic system can she begin to take control, to some degree, of her identity; and only through the use of this semiotic power can she subvert the patriarchal symbol of punishment placed on her breast, as well as the patriarchal power placed over all women in the community.

The narrator/author—as he characterises himself—associates Hester, as he does Pearl, with artistry, creativity, and imagination, and by doing so, implies a connection with his own artistry as a writer. When Hester rejects the joy (jouissance?) she receives from her art of embroidery as a sin, the narrator is quick to correct this view, saying that “this morbid meddling of conscience with an immaterial matter betokened . . . something that might be deeply wrong, beneath” (78). While the public narrator may be conflicted about the masculine world view of being a “writer of story-books,” the private voice cannot help but affirm the “jouissance” of creative expression, be it Hester’s embroidery or his own writing. Hester’s “morbid meddling of conscience” is temporary, for by the end of the narrative Hester is joyfully
“embroidering a baby-garment, with such a lavish richness of golden fancy as would have raised a public tumult, had any infant, thus apparelled, been shown to our sombre-hued community” (200). Hester continues to write her rebellion in lace, outside the boundaries of law—as Hawthorne writes his in romance, outside the boundaries of patriarchal convention.

As a writer, the narrator, like Hester and Pearl, is outside the patriarchal community. Nina Baym sees Hester as a symbol of Hawthorne’s own rebellion against his politically motivated firing, which resulted in his ousting from masculine society. In writing *The Scarlet Letter*, he has, in effect, put on the scarlet letter and shown his affinity with Hester. Robert K. Martin, in a similar vein, sees in *The Scarlet Letter* Hawthorne’s “reworking of the figure of the strong erotic woman artist” and an expression of his own anxieties—“anxieties [that] were as much about his intrusion, as a man, into a female world as about women’s intrusions into his male world” (122). The narrator practically says as much in the Custom-House sketch when he finds the scarlet letter in the heap of papers—although it takes some time for him to resist “reading as a man.” First, he describes his absurdly masculine “examination” of the cloth, perceiving that it “assumed the shape of a letter. It was the capital letter A. By an accurate measurement, each limb proved to be precisely three inches and a quarter in length” (42-43). However, he soon finds that this examination does not reveal the “deep meaning in it, most worthy of interpretation . . . which . . . streamed forth from the mystic symbol.” While the meaning “communicated” itself to his (feminine) “sensibilities,” it evaded “the analysis” of his (masculine) “mind” (43). Only by “reading as a woman” does he effect a solution to this riddle. Placing the cloth on his breast produces a profound effect: “It seemed to me,—the reader may smile, but must not doubt my word,—it seemed to me, then, that I 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” (43). He has branded himself, as Hester has been branded, as an outsider, an Other, living on the edge of patriarchal society. An empathy—indeed, a physical sympathy—with Hester has been established through the semiotic power still vested in the letter. In establishing his semiotic connection with Hester through her symbol, he has branded himself not only as a writer, but as a writer of a woman’s story, told in a womanly way. After this branding, the narrator admits, “I shuddered, and involuntarily let it [the scarlet letter] fall upon the floor.” One can understand a certain reluctance on the part of a man to take up the voice of the “m/other.” He is still a man living in an oppressive patriarchal society, and the patriar-
chal voice, too, is part of him and cannot be ignored or silenced. It speaks along with the many other voices of the narrative.

Pearl the Elf/Child

The symbolism of the scarlet letter is most obviously and repeatedly associated with Pearl. She is “the scarlet letter endowed with life” (90), both in her appearance and her function. Like the letter, Pearl is the constant reminder to Hester of her sin, but also of her redemption; the child is her punishment and her reward. For if Pearl is identified with the lawlessness that Hester has embroidered around the letter, she is also identified with the law within, which determines that Pearl must, in some way, be Hester’s penance. It is difficult not to read Pearl allegorically, as the narrator repeatedly insists on her symbolic significance. Nina Baym sees Pearl as Hester’s id, acting out her unconscious rebellion against the unfairness of Puritan justice (138). The doubling of Hester into two characters of ego and alter ego makes her more acceptably sympathetic—at least to the more puritanic ethic of Hawthorne’s contemporaries.

Regarding Hester’s behaviour, the narrator asserts that

it is remarkable, that persons who speculate the most boldly often conform with the most perfect quietude to the external regulations of society. The thought suffices them, without investing itself in the flesh and blood of action. So it seemed to be with Hester. Yet, had little Pearl never come to her from the spiritual world, it might have been far otherwise. (133-34)

Outwardly, Hester conforms to the standards of her society, while Pearl embodies the “flesh and blood” acting out the repressed fantasies of rebellion. Without Pearl to act out her unconscious desires, Hester, the narrator confides, “might have come down to us in history, hand in hand with Ann Hutchinson, as the foundress of a religious sect” or, more likely, as a fellow victim to Mistress Hibbins. Lois Cuddy notes that “in each scene Hester behaves in one way, according to Puritan principles, but her feelings are often in conflict with her external appearance” (102). However, the narrator rarely gives us such an explicit characterisation of Hester’s feelings. We only surmise that her feelings are in conflict, partly because we believe they must be—the narrative explicitly throws a glove in the unrelenting face of Puritan
law—but mostly because of the symbiotic relationship between Hester and Pearl. Through the repeated scenes of allegorising, we come to see Pearl as representing Hester’s unconscious desires. Perhaps this is why Hester does not censure Pearl’s “anti-social” behaviour. Like her embroidery, Pearl’s behaviour is one of the few outlets for expressing repressed feelings that Hester has. Not surprisingly, Pearl’s behaviour, as representative of Hester’s repressed and unconscious urges, is seen as malevolent by the Puritan community, given the Puritan’s systematic repression of inner desires and passions.

Pearl is seen by the townspeople—and even by her mother—as a “demon offspring” (88), an “infant pestilence” (90), an “imp of evil” (84), a “fiend” (87), and other such demonic images. These perceptions, however, are consistently corrected by the narrator. He reminds the reader, in his “authorial” historian’s voice, that Luther was also considered a demon offspring, “according to the scandal of his monkish enemies”; “nor was Pearl the only child to whom this inauspicious origin was assigned among the New England Puritans” (88). He constantly belies Hester’s anxieties about Pearl’s nature with marvelous descriptions of her, characterising her as an extraordinary, but not malevolent child. He applies imagery of witchcraft in an approbatory way, associating it with the imagination and creativity of a solitary person, thereby negating its connotations with evil:

At home, within and around her mother’s cottage, Pearl wanted not a wide and various circle of acquaintance. The spell of life went forth from her ever creative spirit, and communicated itself to a thousand objects, as a torch kindles a flame wherever it may be applied. The unlikeliest materials, a stick, a bunch of rags, a flower, were the puppets of Pearl’s witchcraft, and, without undergoing any outward change, became spiritually adapted to whatever drama occupied the stage of her inner world. Her one baby-voice served a multitude of imaginary personages, old and young, to talk withal . . . . It was wonderful, the vast variety of forms into which she threw her intellect, with no continuity, indeed, but darting up and dancing, always in a state of preternatural activity . . . . It was like nothing so much as the phantasmagoric play of the northern lights. In the mere exercise of the fancy, however, and the sportiveness of a growing mind, there might be little more
than was observable in other children of bright faculties; except as Pearl, in the dearth of human playmates, was thrown more upon the visionary throng which she created. (85-86)

It is the Puritan ethic that sees the solitary and imaginative as evil. The narrator rescues this impish image—an image presumably originating in Pue’s (fictional) manuscript—by characterising her as an extraordinary but essentially natural child. The narrator seems to take great delight in his descriptions of Pearl. These passages are without doubt the brightest in the sombre novel. They seem, nevertheless, to be overshadowed in the minds of many readers by the dark perspectives of Hester and the Puritan community.

The image of Pearl that seems to dominate is the one of imp. Henry James describes a painting he saw as a child of Hester and Pearl, in which Pearl is an “elfish-looking little girl” standing between her mother’s knees, glancing “strangely out of the picture” and “malignantly playing” with the scarlet letter on Hester’s breast (49-50). The image persists in art as well as critical commentary. On the other hand, Ann Abbot, a contemporary critic of Hawthorne, sought a different perspective of Pearl:

Let the author throw what light he will upon her, from his magical prism, she retains her perfect and vivid human individuality. When he would have us call her elvish and imp-like, we persist in seeing only a capricious, roguish, untamed child, such as many a mother has looked upon with awe, and a feeling of helpless incapacity to rule. (33)

Abbot seems to have heard the voice of the private narrator without realising it. For when one separates the narrator’s descriptions of Pearl from those descriptions strongly focalized through other characters, that is precisely the light that is thrown on Pearl. She is the rose, plucked by the narrator from the rose bush, and handed to the reader at the beginning of the novel. She is the “sweet moral blossom” (54) that relieves the excessive darkness of the tale; but she is also “a lovely and immortal flower” sprung “out of the rank luxu- riance of a guilty passion.” She is natural innocence—a “noble savage”—but also the emblem of sin. This double view of Pearl emphasises the nature of perception—of the tendency to see what one expects or is told to see. Perhaps someone “reading as a man” will be more likely to accept the “de-monized” Pearl, as she is so forcefully characterised by her Puritan commu-
nity, and as James’s description suggests; whereas someone “reading as a woman” might be more likely to resist this demonization, and see Pearl simply as a child, as Abbot does.

The twinning of Pearl also reveals the narrator’s conflict regarding the nature of the sin that produced her. The narrator characterises Hester’s attitude toward her “sin” as conflicted: “She knew her deed had been evil; she could have little faith, therefore, that its result [Pearl] would be for good” (81); but she also exclaims to Dimmesdale that “what we did had a consecration of its own” (154), and, together at the brookside, Hester and Dimmesdale contemplate Pearl as “the living hieroglyph ... the oneness of their being... the material union, and the spiritual idea, in whom they met” (162). If Hester’s is the revolutionary voice in the novel, then Pearl’s is the romantic. However, such high romanticism seems hardly compatible with the Victorian prudery exhibited elsewhere by the narrator. Indeed, the narrator undermines his own romantic imagery when Pearl, roaming the forest, and charming all the wild animals into a harmonious accord of untamed sympathies, happens upon a wolf, whose wild nature she subdues long enough for him to offer “his savage head to be patted by her hand,” compelling the narrator to admit that “here the tale has surely lapsed into the improbable” (161). Yet the narrator still implies the romantic connection between the “mother-forest” and the “kindred wildness in the human child” (161). While the text resists a completely fixed reading, the narrator’s technique in presenting Pearl suggests that the demonized perception of Pearl is surely an equally improbable one.

Many critics have found Hawthorne’s descriptions of his own children in his notebooks to correspond—at times exactly—with the descriptions of Pearl, suggesting that, unless he found his own children demonic, he intended the characterisation to be a positive one. The persistence of the evil imagery surrounding Pearl, however, has less to do with damning her than with condemning the narrow perspective of Puritan and patriarchal judgment, and its morbid effect on Hester. Pearl allows Hester to grow imaginatively and philosophically. Pearl is not only the evidence of the sin for which Hester has been cast out of her society; she is also a source from which Hester imbibes identity. Seeing her unconscious, repressed emotions played out publicly in Pearl, Hester’s identity takes on a greater complexity. Any remnants of the stereotypical “fallen woman” that might have remained, despite the narrative’s attempts to sweep them away, disappear in the complex rendering of Hester’s psychological drama. Like Pearl, who behaves as though
she could "be a law unto herself, without her eccentricities being reckoned to her for a crime" (113), Hester realises that "the world's law was no law for her mind" (133)—at least not the law of the Puritan world. Pearl's unrestrained imagination, as much as her own outcast state, awakens Hester's mind to a variety of philosophical possibilities, and to judgments of her own.

**Mistress Hibbins and Historiographic Metafiction**

The narrator's presentations of Mistress Hibbins also shatter stereotypes, but in a much different way from those used to portray Hester and Pearl. It seems at casual glance that the narrator implicates himself in the guilt of his ancestors by overtly portraying Mistress Hibbins as an evil associate of the "Black Man." However, a closer look at the four scenes in which she appears and the five references to her by other characters reveals that the narrator is playing with the presentations of this character in ways that undermine her historical representation as a witch.

David Ketterer, discussing witchcraft in the novel, observes that to "judge from the meagre critical commentary that exists on the matter, the portrait of Mistress Hibbins, sister of Governor Bellingham and the resident witch in mid-seventeenth-century Boston, would appear to vindicate the persecuting spirit of John Hawthorne" (295). Mistress Hibbins was presumably based on the historical Ann Hibbins, who, less than a year after her husband died, leaving her impoverished, was executed as a witch by the Salem magistrates. The charges were brought by neighbours, who, according to historical records, found her "turbulent," "quarrelsome," and "odious" (Ketterer 296). Mistress Hibbins is the first character mentioned in the story: an observer of events around the scaffold might suppose "a witch, like old Mistress Hibbins, the bitter-tempered widow of the magistrate, was to die upon the gallows" (54). In this allusion, the narrator not only reasserts the quality for which the Puritans are perhaps best known—persecution of witches—but also introduces this intriguing character into the narrative.

In her first appearance, a purely mimetic narrative presentation, Mistress Hibbins acts exactly like we would expect a stereotypical witch to act—indeed, exactly in accordance with how we might expect Surveyor Pue to have presented her. She accosts Hester as she leaves the Governor's house, after Dimmesdale has argued in favour of her keeping Pearl, and tempts her:
“Hist, Hist!” said she, while her ill-omened physiognomy seemed to cast a shadow over the cheerful newness of the house. “Wilt thou go with us to-night? There will be a merry company in the forest; and I wellnigh promised the Black Man that comely Hester Prynne would make one.” (100)

After Hester politely declines the invitation, the narrator considers whether we should “suppose this interview betwixt Mistress Hibbins and Hester Prynne to be authentic, and not a parable” (101), for how could such a preposterous event be true? He not only subverts the witch stereotype by ridiculing it, but he also reverses the hierarchy of Platonic and Aristotelian rhetoric that has privileged mimesis over diegesis (presence over absence; speaking over writing; history/tragedy over fiction/poetry). Mimetic presentation presumably reads as “objective” and, therefore, “true,” while diegetic summary is suspiciously tainted by subjectivity. Here, the reverse is true. The mimetic scene is impossibly ludicrous, while the diegetic implication of a “parable” is far more plausible.

The other three scenes in which Mistress Hibbins appears make use of the same or similar techniques to undermine the validity of historical representation. During the minister’s midnight vigil on the scaffold, his cry awakens the governor and his “sour and discontented” sister:

_Beyond a shadow of a doubt, this venerable_ witch-lady had heard Mr. Dimmesdale’s outcry, and interpreted it, with its multitudinous echoes and reverberations, as the clamour of the fiends and night-hags, with whom _she was well known_ to make excursions into the forest. (123, emphasis added)

This passage is highly reminiscent of the irony in the Custom-House sketch, especially regarding the much-repeated use of the word “venerable.” The ironic overstatement, “beyond a shadow of a doubt,” undermines the validity of Mistress Hibbins’s characterization as a witch, and reflects more on Dimmesdale’s state of mind than on the state of Mistress Hibbins’s soul. When the governor and his sister cease their peering into the night, Dimmesdale observes that the governor merely “retired from the window,” whereas “possibly, [Mistress Hibbins] went up among the clouds” (123). During Dimmesdale’s walk home from his forest encounter with Hester, he meets Mistress Hibbins, who seems to know all about their relationship. His
meeting with the “witch-lady” is the final catalyst that causes Dimmesdale to wonder if he has sold himself “to the fiend whom, if men say true, this yellow-starched and velveted old hag has chosen for her prince and master!” Following their dialogue, the narrator asserts that “his encounter with Mistress Hibbins, if it were a real incident, did but show his sympathy and fellowship with wicked mortals” (173, emphasis added). Again, questioning the historical reality of the incident, the narrator undermines both the historical identity of Mistress Hibbins as a witch, and Dimmesdale’s excessively morbid moralising. The narrator cannot go so far as to proclaim a “truth” that the modern world sees as self-evident: that Mistress Hibbins stands for the victims of outright and systematic murder of women who were not under the protection of a man; of women who chose to espouse unorthodox views and behaviour; of women who were simply irritating. He can (and does), however, undermine the authenticity of Poe’s manuscript, he throws a subversive light over the “truth” of history, and its systematic oppression of women.

The Endings . . .

Critics—particularly New Critics—have devoted considerable praise to the novel’s “perfection” of structure. They applaud the symmetry of the three scaffold scenes, and extol other examples of the novel’s “thoroughly fused,” “whole,” “complete,” and “balanced” form (Murfin 212). It is no coincidence that critics who see perfection in the plot line also see Dimmesdale as the central character of the novel. How could a novel of such central importance to the American literary canon be “about a woman”? But if Dimmesdale’s final scene on the scaffold is the climax of the novel, the narrator’s adherence to Aristotelian plot structure seems a bit strained in view of the multiple endings he provided.

Even in the first ending, Dimmesdale’s, the narrator gives us many possible perspectives and interpretations of Dimmesdale’s last minutes on the scaffold, including the source of the scarlet letter on his breast:

Some affirmed that the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale . . . had begun his course of penance . . . by inflicting a hideous torture on himself. Others contended . . . old Roger Chillingworth . . . had caused it to appear . . . through the agency of magic and poisonous drugs. Others, again, — and those best able to appreciate
the minister’s peculiar sensibility...whispered their belief, that the awful symbol was the effect of the ever active tooth of remorse, gnawing from the inmost heart outwardly, and at last manifesting Heaven’s dreadful judgment by the visible presence of the letter. The reader may choose among these theories. (197)

While giving the reader a choice, the narrator tells us implicitly which theory to choose; who but the reader is “best able to appreciate the minister’s peculiar sensibility” after the narrator has taken such pains to present it to us? Among the versions we are not given to choose from is the “singular” version that denied there was any mark whatever on [Dimmesdale’s] breast . . . . Neither . . . had his dying words acknowledged, nor even remotely implied, any, the slightest connection, on his part, with the guilt for which Hester Prynne had so long worn the scarlet letter. (197-98)

On the nature of this interpretation, the narrator states,

we must be allowed to consider this version of Mr. Dimmesdale’s story as only an instance of that stubborn fidelity with which a man’s friends—and especially a clergyman’s—will sometimes uphold his character; when proofs, clear as the mid-day sunshine on the scarlet letter, establish him a false and sin-stained creature of the dust. (198)

This statement emphasises the perversity of wilful and ideologically motivated interpretation, and warns the reader against falling into a similar trap. At the same time, the narrator lays a trap for the reader in articulating the moral: “Among the many morals which press upon us from the poor minister’s miserable experience, we put only this into a sentence: “Be true! Be true! Show freely to the world, if not your worst, yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred!” The moral contradicts the narrator’s consistent strategy, for he, like Dimmesdale, has presented his subversive, unorthodox ideas covertly, in marginalised and contradictory voices. If the reader were not straining to hear them, these voices might go entirely unnoticed. Just as Dimmesdale’s parishioners cannot hear the “confession” in his sermons, it is
possible that readers may not hear the voicings of "oppression" in the narrative. The narrator is certainly not freely showing his "worst," but "shadowing it forth." In undermining his own authoritatively stated moral, situated in the "denouement" of the plot's overt structure, the narrator is undermining the entire symmetry of his plot structure. By definition, a denouement should clear up the complications of the plot; but this denouement creates more loose ends than it tidies up. The novel does not click neatly shut, enclosing the tapestry created by the interwoven voices of the narrative, but leaves strands of plot messily lying about, insinuating their way into readers' subjectivities.

The story is not "about" the linear progress of a man's moral dilemma. The multiple endings and the cyclical turning of the plot subvert the Aristotelian symmetry. The story does not end with Dimmesdale's death, nor even with the questions about the meaning of his death. The public narrator addresses his narratee, explaining that he has "a matter of business to communicate to the reader" (199). In a seemingly offhand and parenthetical way, the narrator continues the story, providing several endings, and some beginnings. The narrative opens with a reference to the "footsteps of the sainted Ann Hutchinson" and ends with Hester possibly following in them. The cyclical nature is also emphasised in the presentations of female characters as child, sexual woman and crone: as Hester becomes (or, perhaps, replaces Mistress Hibbins as) the crone, Pearl matures into womanhood, becoming—like the narrator—a "citizen of somewhere else" (52). The letters Hester receives and the baby clothes she fashions indicate that the matriarchal/maternal cycle continues.

Pearl's is the second ending, and, although the history of Pearl's life after leaving Salem is shrouded in mystery, the narrator implies that it is a happy one. The final ending, Hester's, comes full circle to the first mention of the heroine of the story in "The Custom-House," where she is an old woman, remembered by "aged persons alive in the time of Mr. Surveyor Pue" (43). These aged persons remembered an old woman of "stately and solemn aspect" from their childhood, a woman who had the habit of wandering about the country as a kind of voluntary nurse, doing whatever miscellaneous good she might; taking upon herself, likewise, to give advice in all matters, especially those of the heart; by which means, as a person of such propensities inevitably must, she gained from many people the reverence due to an angel. (43)
From this first outer glimpse of Hester, the narrator, by degrees, takes us further inside the psychology of her character, revealing the complexities and conflicted nature of human subjectivity. By the end of the story, she is again associated with the “angel”—perhaps even the “domestic angel” in the Puritan house, “toilsome, thoughtful and self-devoted”—but by no means a stereotypical one. Through the narrator’s carefully constructed rendering of her character, we have a much more complex understanding of this “fallen angel.” Hester’s decision to remain in Salem, whatever the motive, results in a subtle enlarging of her sphere of quietly rebellious influence. Hester’s decision to stay symbolically paves the way for some future woman to be the “angel and apostle of the coming revelation” that might reveal a “new truth” and “establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness” (201).

These last sentiments are Hester’s, narrated in free indirect discourse, smoothly blending the narrator’s and Hester’s voices. True to form, the narrator follows the sympathetically rendered passage with an authorial disclaimer: “So said Hester Prynne, and glanced her sad eyes downward at the scarlet letter.” One last time, the narrator distances himself from the radical sentiments of his heroine, never quite letting the reader feel on solid interpretive ground. However, this “disclaimer” might also be read as a refutation of Hester’s self-deprecating image as too “stained with sin” to take on the role of angel that she envisions for a more “lofty, pure” woman (201). “So said Hester Prynne”—but another voice suggests perhaps she already has assumed this role.

Ellen Moers characterizes the equivocal technique as “Hawthorne’s devious plot structure” (54). She asserts that this structure dooms any dramatised version to failure because the narrative raises principal questions that are never answered: is Dimmesdale “a villain or a saint? Is Hester a spokeswoman for nineteenth century feminism or its refutation?” She concludes that “had Hawthorne told his story straightforwardly, from beginning to end, he would not have been able to avoid supplying answers to these questions” (54). But he did not choose to tell his story straightforwardly—for such a telling would necessarily be fraught with lies, or, at least, artificial constructions of a version of truth based on a single perspective. If there is any subject upon which the narrator is consistent, it is the difficulty of “reading”; and if the novel can be said to be “about” one thing in particular, it is about subjectivity and the problems of interpretation. All of the characters present
problems for interpretation: Hester and her scarlet letter are continually scrutinised and interpreted by her community, but the meaning never becomes transparent; the narrator’s many perspectives on Pearl serve to debate her (un)natural identity; Mistress Hibbins’s very existence in the narrative is called into question, forcing the reader to reconsider the validity of historical representation; and Chillingworth’s “reading” of Dimmesdale (and whatever he finds on Dimmesdale’s chest) provides a significant contrast to the Puritan community’s reading of their minister. There is no final solution to any of these “problems,” making the novel something of an inkblot test; interpretations reflect more meaningfully on the reader than on the text.

In the first paragraph of “The Custom-House,” the narrator attempts to define his ideal reader: “the author addresses, not the many who will fling aside his volume, or never take it up, but the few who will understand him, better than most of his schoolmates and lifemates” (22). Here is a formidable task for the reader, but the narrator makes it much easier by providing a multitude of voices, both public and private, that address a multitude of readers’ sympathies. The play of “masculine” and “feminine” voices and techniques used throughout the narrative is not merely a dialectic of gendered binaries, but a continuum of subject positions, which interpellates, not a coherent unified subject, but a realistically conflicted subjectivity.

The many contesting voices of the narrative merge and meander to narrate a euphoniously equivocal story—a true polyphony—a multiple voicing of a variety of narrative ideologies. A singular, authoritative, narrative voice cannot be pinned down, enabling the text to be read according to one’s own desires. Indeed the multitude of voices creates a polyphony that allows the feminine voices to emerge and, depending on how one listens, perhaps even over-power the masculine. However, if one is looking for a single authoritative voice, one might—like Mrs. Hawthorne—end up with a headache. For above all, polyphony resists singular and fixed interpretation. Assigning a singular meaning to the novel may be as reckless as assigning a fixed signified to the symbol that gives it its title, as there will always be evidence to refute it in the equivocal and conflicted narrative. If one voice dominates, it will be the voice that the reader most wants to hear. Reading as a woman, one may find the predominant voices of the narrative in The Scarlet Letter to be the “feminine” ones. Listening to these voices may mean tuning out other, contradictory ones, but in doing so, one hears the feminine discourses and techniques that undermine the patriarchal foundations of history—and of
society—and that begin to rescue the heroines from the literary stereotype of the “villainess.”

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Notes


2. Jonathan Culler admits that his definition of “reading as a woman” is purely differential: “to read as a woman is to avoid reading as a man, to identify the specific defences and distortions of male readings and provide correctives” (516). He states that reading as a woman asserts the “continuity between women’s experience of social and familial structures and their experience as readers” (511). Like many critics trying to describe or define a feminine literary aesthetic, Culler manages to make himself understood without need of exacting terminology. The “definition,” while vague, is inclusive, and one of the main tactics of reading as a woman is to be inclusive, to avoid the “limitations of male readings” (58).

3. Michael Davitt Bell follows his article with extensive notes and bibliographical references of other critics who see Hawthorne’s decision to write a Romance as “revolutionary.”

4. See David Van Leer’s discussion of the comparison between descriptions of Pearl and Hawthorne’s own children, in which he refers to Volume VIII, pages 398-436, of Hawthorne’s notebooks for descriptions of his children.

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