Every student of Nathaniel Hawthorne's work and life knows that he wrote *The Scarlet Letter* because he lost his job at the Salem Custom House. He told the world so in his autobiographical preface to the story, "The Custom-House," and all later biographers have followed his lead while filling out the details. But the sequence of events Hawthorne chronicles in the preface explains no more than how he came to be free to write, and offers no factual basis for understanding what he wrote. To be sure, his angry and defiant heroine might express some of his own humiliation and rage. To write a story which favored the outcast so heavily against the establishment might have been an act of sweet revenge on the author's powerful enemies.

I

But such connections are remote. The essence of Hester's character and story (not to mention Dimmesdale's) is untouched. Why did Hawthorne pick a woman protagonist? Why a lone woman? Why a mother? To the extent that we seek biographical explanations for such choices we are probably always limited to surmise rather than certain knowledge. But it seems fair to say that the biographical accounts we now have do not offer hypotheses which engage with these questions.

Another event occurred in Hawthorne's life at the same time, exactly, that he was dismissed from the Custom House. On 30 July 1849, only six days after the new surveyor was appointed, his mother died. Her health had long been fragile, but she had lived to be sixty-

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nine years old. She was residing in Hawthorne's house (as were his two sisters, both unmarried) when she succumbed to a sudden, relatively brief illness which took the author by surprise. He was greatly affected by her death, coming near to a "brain fever" after her burial on 2 August. Six days later he was writing for the first time of leaving Salem, "this abominable city," forever, as indeed he was to do after finishing The Scarlet Letter. By early September he had recovered from his illness and begun The Scarlet Letter, working with an intensity that almost frightened his wife, and with a speed that brought the book to completion before the year ended. He was inspired as he had never been before, or was to be again.²

Common sense suggests that a work following so immediately on the death of a mother, featuring a heroine who is a mother (and whose status as a mother is absolutely central to her situation), might very likely be inspired by that death and consist, in its autobiographical substance, of a complex memorial to that mother. But one looks virtually in vain for a biographical analysis of The Scarlet Letter which pursues such a suggestion.³ One looks in vain for a reliable, comprehensive account of Hawthorne's mother and his relationship with her. Instead, we have a longstanding and unreliable tradition about her which persists despite a quantity of countervailing evidence. This tradition permits critics to accuse her of a grotesque, pernicious role in his life or, alternatively, to deny her any role at all.

Mark Van Doren, one of the few skeptics, described the situation well: "His mother has long been the subject of a sentimental legend which no evidence supports. She is supposed, soon after her husband's death, to have shut herself away not only from the world but from the Mannings [her natal family] and her own children. There are hints of a darkened room where she takes her meals alone, says nothing, and mourns 'in a Hindoo seclusion' the irreparable sadness

³ Jean Normand, Nathaniel Hawthorne: An Approach to an Analysis of Artistic Creation, tr. Derek Coltman (Cleveland: Case Western Reserve Univ. Press, 1970), and John Franzosa, "'The Custom-House,' The Scarlet Letter, and Hawthorne's Separation from Salem," ESO, 24 (1978), 5-21, find the biographical significance of the romance to reside in the maternal figure of Hester, as I do. But both subsume this figure into larger, abstract schemes, Jungian and quasi-Freudian respectively, and ignore biographical detail.
of her lot. It appears on the contrary that she was an excellent cook, an attentive mother, and an interesting talker about things past and present. Her son’s childhood letters to her, a number of which survive, are addressed to no such awful stranger as the legend suggests.” Van Doren could have added that some of her letters also survive, showing an active, outward-looking disposition and betraying no hint of reclusiveness. But despite evidence accumulated and publicized by such scholars as Norman Holmes Pearson, Randall Stewart, Manning Hawthorne, and (recently) Gloria Ehrlich, the legend persists in newer biographies. Thus when we look for Hawthorne’s mother we have to make our way past a legend constructed, it seems, to deny access.

It is not hard to understand why the legend has persisted. It has Hawthorne’s own authority behind it, as well as the endorsement of his wife, his sister-in-law, and his son. For those seeking a reason for Hawthorne’s supposed lifelong feelings of gloom and alienation, both the maternal rejection and her example of seclusion seem to provide clues. Such early biographers as George Woodberry, Lloyd Morris, Herbert Gorman, Robert Cantwell, and Newton Arvin depended heavily on the legend to explain the oddities of Hawthorne’s imagination and his fiction. To other biographers seeking (for various reasons) to connect Hawthorne to the father he never knew and the father’s family he had nothing to do with, her alleged absence allowed them to follow their preferences by writing her out of his life altogether. Among such biographers one must include Randall Stewart, Hubert Hoeltje, Arlin Turner, and James R. Mellow.

It is not especially difficult to understand the motives of Hawthorne’s surviving family in transmitting to the public a misrepre-

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sentation of his mother. The misrepresentation operated to their advantage, as we shall see; and in any case they would not have been likely to go against a story originating with Hawthorne himself. It is very puzzling, however, to make out Hawthorne’s own motives in this case. But it is important to try to do so, for every conscious misrepresentation points to something hidden. Hawthorne seems to have been trying to hide not merely the actual role that his mother had played in his life, but the fact that she had a role at all. Such a denial—completely unnecessary in those innocent pre-Freudian days—only suggests that her role must have been very large indeed.

The legend made its first appearance of record in his early love letters to Sophia Peabody, where he writes of his mother’s and sisters’ eccentric reclusiveness, and the morbid atmosphere in their house, which he calls “Castle Dismal.” (The phrase later became a favorite of Sophia’s.) Later he resisted Sophia’s urgings that he make their engagement known by citing “the strange reserve, in regard to matters of feeling, that has always existed among us. We are conscious of one another’s feelings, always; but there seems to be a tacit law, that our deepest heart-concernments are not to be spoken of.”

These sentences have carried a good deal of weight with biographers who have taken them at face value instead of observing their highly literary character. They need to be examined for the equivocations of their rhetoric—the unallowable equation of an engagement with deepest, private heart-concernments, for example. And, while asserting the existence of “a strange reserve” these lines imply a group of people deeply attuned to one another’s moods and hence, possibly, an understanding beyond the need for speech. In any event, people who are always conscious of one another’s feelings must be in more or less constant contact. A particular irony of this letter is the way Hawthorne offers up its obfuscation to Sophia as exemplary of how he can gush out freely to her and to her only.

In fine, what we seem to have here is an instance of a lover’s strategy, to claim that nobody understands him and thereby appear both more needy and more interesting in the beloved’s eyes, all the

while giving her the pleasure of enacting the heroine's role in his romantic drama. "Mine ownest," he wrote her on 4 October 1840, addressing her as though they were already married, "Here sits thy husband in his old accustomed chamber, where he used to sit in years gone by. . . . Sometimes (for I had no wife then to keep my heart warm) it seemed as if I were already in the grave, with only life enough to be chilled and benumbed . . . till at length a certain Dove was revealed to me, in the shadow of a seclusion as deep as my own had been. . . . So now I begin to understand why I was imprisoned so many years in this lonely chamber, and why I could never break through the viewless bolts and bars" (Love Letters, I, 223-24).

Sophia's limpid, unsophisticated imagination accepted the lover's hyperbole as literal truth, as Hawthorne expected—for he was aware of, and attracted to, the transparent sensibility which seemed the very opposite of his own. "I tell thee these things," he wrote, "in order that my Dove, into whose infinite depths the sunshine falls continually, may perceive what a cloudy veil stretches over the abyss of my nature" (Love Letters, II, 79). Her simple sincerity guaranteed that she would mistake the veil for the abyss. And, as a result of her mistake, she transmitted the legend through conversations and letters until it became an article of family faith.

Sophia was apparently not the only one to whom Hawthorne talked in this vein in the years before his marriage. When Julian Hawthorne was preparing a biography of his parents in the early 1880s he asked Elizabeth Peabody, Sophia's sister, to write up her recollection of Hawthorne during the period of his courtship. (Peabody had sought Hawthorne out after the publication of Twice-Told Tales and had introduced him to her sister Sophia.) Her memories can be questioned, since they pertain to a period almost fifty years behind her; but the statements she attributed to Hawthorne resemble those he wrote to Sophia. He is represented as saying, "'We do not live at our house, we only vegetate. Elizabeth [Hawthorne's older sister] never leaves her den; I have mine in the upper story, to which they always bring my meals, setting them down in a waiter at my door, which is always locked.' 'Don't you even see your mother?' said I. 'Yes,' said he, 'in our little parlour. She comes and sits down with me and Louisa [Hawthorne's younger
sister] after tea—and sometimes Louisa and I drink tea together. My mother and Elizabeth each take their meals in their rooms. My mother has never sat down to table with anybody, since my father's death.' I said, 'Do you think it is healthy to live so separated?' 'Certainly not—it is no life at all—it is the misfortune of my life. It has produced a morbid consciousness that paralyzes my powers.'

Peabody then goes on to describe the reclusive widow Hawthorne who, through Julian Hawthorne's biography, found her way into the common understanding of Hawthorne's life. But in the very same description she comments on the widow in a manner that undercuts her own account. "Widow Hawthorne always looked as if she had walked out of an old picture, with her ancient costume, and a face of lovely sensibility, and great brightness—for she did not seem at all a victim of morbid sensibility, notwithstanding her all but Hindoo self-devotion to the manes of her husband. She was a person of fine understanding and a very cultivated mind." It takes no great acumen to observe that Elizabeth Peabody could not have known how the widow "always" looked, or characterize her fine and cultivated sensibility if she had seldom left her bedroom. Indeed, the revealing phrase "she did not seem at all a victim of morbid sensibility" shows that Peabody's theories of Elizabeth Hathorne did not mesh with her memories.

Julian Hawthorne was a shrewd and tactful man who doubtless perceived discrepancies in the material he had before him. However, given the filial respect which was his announced motive in writing Nathaniel Hawthorne and His Wife, he could not contradict views of events maintained by his parents. He transmitted much of Elizabeth Peabody's account, and building from its description of the widow's reclusiveness, he attributed Hawthorne's alienated temperament to the mother's unnatural behavior. Hawthorne "was brought up," Julian wrote, "under what might be considered special disadvantages. His mother, a woman of fine gifts but of extreme sensibility, lost her husband in her twenty-eighth year; and, from an exaggerated, almost Hindoo-like construction of the law of seclusion which the public taste of that day imposed upon widows, she withdrew entirely from society, and permitted the habit of solitude to grow upon her to such a degree that she actually remained a strict

hermit to the end of her long life, or for more than forty years after Captain Hawthorne's death. . . . It is saying much for the sanity and healthfulness of the minds of these three children, that their loneliness distorted their judgment, their perception of the relation of things, so little as it did" (Hawthorne and His Wife, I, 4-5).

Only a few pages further on, Julian approves Widow Hawthorne's views on education, and credits her with shaping her son's literary sensibilities by encouraging him to read poetry, romance, and allegory. And he prints recollections by other informants which contradict the legend implicitly. But ultimately he fails to engage with the inconsistencies in his narrative. He needs the widow's morbidity for his thesis, which is that Hawthorne was saved as man and artist through his marriage to Sophia. The story that Julian's father had invented as an ardent lover is respectfully promulgated by a dutiful son.

Perhaps the damage done to Elizabeth Hathorne's reputation resulted inadvertently from Hawthorne's campaign to win Sophia. But, unquestionably, there is malice and hostility expressed toward her in the particular legend Hawthorne devised. In some obscure manner she is held accountable for Hawthorne's incarceration in the Castle Dismal. In the fairy-tale structure of the legend (a variant of "Beauty and the Beast," perhaps) she is allocated the role of the enchanter whose evil spell must be undone by the greater power of Sophia's beneficence. While the structure is demonstrably out of keeping with known facts, it might well be an accurate, though necessarily figural, dramatization of Hawthorne's inner reality. If so, then its representation of the mother as absent actually masks an oppressive sense of her presence in his psychic world. But, known facts do not permit us to characterize Elizabeth Hathorne as domineering and possessive. The presence that is symbolized, then, is the presence of Hawthorne's own deep attachment to his mother.

II

Elizabeth Clarke Manning was born in 1780, the third of nine children of Miriam Lord (b. 1748) and Richard Manning (b. 1755). The other children were Mary, b. 1777; William, b. 1778; Richard, b. 1782; Robert, b. 1784; Maria, b. 1786; John, b. 1788 Priscilla, b. 1790; and Samuel, b. 1791: a total of five boys and four girls, all
surviving to adulthood. The Mannings were a close-knit and late marrying family who lived together in a large plain wooden house on Herbert Street in Salem. The head of the family, Richard Manning, began his working life as a blacksmith and progressed to owning a stagecoach line. Through this and other enterprises, including land investments, he built a comfortable estate.

Although none of the Manning children attended college—Nathaniel Hawthorne would be the first of the line to do so—there was considerable interest in education among them, and all (including Elizabeth) received some schooling. As adults, they were avid readers. Their religious views inclined toward the liberal, as they belonged to the Unitarian church. (Elizabeth and her sister Mary joined the Congregational Church in 1806, however.) Elizabeth was the first to leave the Manning household, marrying Nathaniel Hathorne—as the name was then spelled—on 2 August 1801, when she was twenty-one years old. Hathorne, a sea captain, was five years older than she, and had probably known her for some time because he lived across the back fence in a house on Union Street, where she moved upon marriage. There is evidence of a courtship of some duration: on a voyage two years earlier Nathaniel had written couplets to his “dear Betsey.” The notebook in which these verses were inscribed became in time the property of his son, who copied over one of his father’s amatory couplets: “In the Midest of all these dire allarms/I’ll think dear Betsey on thy Charms.”

The household to which Elizabeth moved was presided over by Nathaniel’s mother, a widow; and his two unmarried sisters also lived there. He and his brother Daniel, also a seafaring man, lived at home when they were on shore, which was seldom. He left for sea very shortly after his marriage and was away when Elizabeth bore her first child on 7 March 1802, a daughter also named Elizabeth though commonly called Ebe.

The date of Ebe’s birth was barely seven months after that of her parents’ marriage. The significance of this seven-month’s child has escaped notice, or at least mention, by virtually all of Hawthorne’s biographers. But it could hardly have escaped the notice of the

three women with whom Elizabeth was now domiciled, nor could it have been insignificant to them. Perhaps they were models for the hostile chorus of women at the beginning of *The Scarlet Letter*. For, as the historian Carl N. Degler reminds us, “bridal pregnancies” in nineteenth-century America appear to have been quite rare—well under ten percent—and, as evidence of sexual relations outside marriage, led to social stigma which “fell like a hammer” on the errant.9 Certainly among conservative segments of Salem society, including quite probably the old-fashioned and pious Hathornes, Elizabeth would have been harshly judged. The daughter Ebe grew up into a strikingly independent, only partially socialized woman, much as though she had been exempted from normal social expectations by those entrusted with rearing her. It is not improbable that Hawthorne’s depiction of the wild Pearl had as much to do with his memory of Ebe as a child, as it did with his observations of his own daughter Una.

Nathaniel Hathorne Jr. was born on 4 July 1803; his father was again away at sea. A third child, Maria Louisa (called Louisa) arrived on 9 January 1808, barely two weeks after the father had again set sail, this time on what proved to be his last voyage. Early in the spring of that year he died of a fever in Surinam. He left Elizabeth a widow at the age of twenty-eight, with children aged six and four and an infant of a few months. In seven years of married life he had spent little more than seven months in Salem, and had been absent from home at the births of all his children. We need hardly look further for sources of the image of a socially stigmatized woman abandoned to bear and rear her child alone.

However, Elizabeth did not have to deal with her harsh lot alone, although support did not come from the Hathornes. Only a few months after receiving word of her husband’s death she returned permanently to the Mannings. It was only prudent for her to do so, since the Hathornes were not well off and she had inherited nothing from Nathaniel. The Mannings were lower on the social scale than the Hathornes but they were prospering, and the family included several vigorous men to look after its interest and conduct its business.

In addition, there is evidence of bad feeling between Elizabeth and her husband's family. Aunt Peabody in her recollection to Julian Hawthorne wrote that Elizabeth "was not happily affected by her husband's family—the Hawthornes being of a very sharp and stern individuality—and when not cultivated, this appeared in oddity of temper." Peabody's syntax is defective here but her intent is to characterize the Hawthornes as people who had, through want of cultivation, let a naturally stern individualism turn to oddness and eccentricity. It may well be that they, rather than Hawthorne's mother, went in for solitude. In any event, after she left them Elizabeth Hathorne made little effort to keep up contacts, notwithstanding their continued proximity. Nor is any effort at relationship recorded from their side. On an occasional Sunday young Nathaniel went over and read the Bible in his grandmother's parlour, and the difference between that household of sharp and stern eccentrics, and the cooperative Mannings, must have been imaginatively striking.

The failure of the Hawthornes to pursue a relationship with Elizabeth seems stranger than her defection from them, because in losing her they lost grandchildren who bore their name. But perhaps Elizabeth's misstep had disqualified her children as Hawthornes in their eyes. Perhaps they viewed her as a social interloper, a female conniver using a woman's age-old trick to entrap a husband. Perhaps their old-fashioned piety led them to perceive her as sinful and fallen. Perhaps the causes of the falling-out were banal. But however it came about, it is impossible that Nathaniel Hawthorne could have absorbed any other perspective on this rift than that of his mother. Through his later readings in New England history he came to associate the early Puritans with the Hawthornes, and this association may go far to explain the severity with which he turns their judging natures back on themselves. The Puritans versus a defenseless woman equalled the Hawthornes versus his mother. If his mother herself suffered some sense of guilt or shame under the judgment, then her psychological turmoil filtering into her son's consciousness might linger to provide a model for Hester's complex ambivalences. In any event, I should suppose that some heightened response to her situation underlies the poignant depiction of Hester's duress in *The Scarlet Letter*.

Of course much would have been beyond his childish understanding. He would have to be old enough to mesh a knowledge of wedding and birth dates with a knowledge of biological processes before he could relate his mother's guilt, her children, and her separation from the Hathornes in one logical structure. But the aura of mystery—of the uncanny—that accompanies so many "adult doings" in his fiction from "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" to *The Marble Faun* may be an expression of just that deeply-impressed early sense of bewilderment.

As he became more knowing, Hawthorne may have come to feel some guilt himself—guilt over siding with his mother, if she was indeed in the wrong; and guilt over carrying the name of people (perhaps sharing their traits) who had repudiated his mother for the sin of bearing children. *He* was one of those children, and when later in his life he was reading New England history and found a variant spelling of the paternal name—Hawthorne instead of Hathorne—his adoption of that orthography may have been a gesture of counter-repudiation.

Elizabeth's return to the Mannings has been seen as the first step in an intensifying withdrawal, but in fact the Mannings were much more in the world than the Hathornes, and there were enough of them to be a world in themselves. In 1808 the entire clan was intact at Herbert Street. This means that ten people were living there, ranging from Mrs. Manning who was then sixty years old to Samuel who, at age seventeen, was only eleven years older than Hawthorne's sister Ebe. These numbers alone explain Hawthorne's subsequent appetite for solitude; he must have had almost none of it in his boyhood. The addition of Elizabeth and her three children to the Herbert Street group brought the total living in that house to an incredible (by our modern middle-class standards) fourteen.

The three children were apparently regarded as a joint family charge, and their futures were discussed and determined upon by all. After the senior Manning died in 1813, and Richard settled in Raymond, Maine, to manage family property there, the business head of the Mannings became Robert, while Mary ran the household. Given the limited biological understanding of the child, young Hawthorne probably never missed his dead father consciously, and since there were male heads of the Manning household in abundance
he probably never grasped, at any level, the fact that he was lacking a father until he was beyond childhood. At the best, this lack could only have been grasped intellectually, for in his emotional world he had several. The evidence is that he missed not one more father, but a home which might be presided over by his mother without the intervention of any other adult. For a while this seemed likely: Elizabeth considered settling near Richard in Maine and running her own farm. She actually tried this way of life, on and off, for six years, and though Hawthorne often had to stay behind in Salem for his schooling, he was anxious for her to make Raymond her permanent residence.

"I hope, Dear Mother," he wrote from Salem on 19 June 1821, "that you will not be tempted by any entreaties to return to Salem to live. You can never have so much comfort here as you now enjoy. You are now undisputed mistress of your own House. Here you would have to submit to the authority of Miss Manning. If you remove to Salem, I shall have no Mother to return to during the College vacations. . . . If you remain where you are, think how delightfully the time will pass with all your children around you, shut out from the world with nothing to disturb us. It will be a second garden of Eden." Two elements of Hawthorne's imagery are noteworthy. First, Raymond was at that time not a garden but a forest setting (although, perhaps not insignificantly, a rose bush grew before Elizabeth Hathorne's door). Ever after, Hawthorne visualized Eden not as a garden but a forest, albeit that vision was often obscured by subsequent grief and loss in his fiction. Too, the "first" Garden of Eden had no children in it, while Hawthorne's second Eden conspicuously lacks an Adam. If Hawthorne secretly casts himself in Adam's role, then he is his mother's son and lover both. For him, Eden is a benign matriarchy.

A year earlier he had written his mother expressing reluctance to go to college and, more generally, to grow up. "Oh how I wish I was again with you, with nothing to do but go a gunning. But the happiest days of my life are gone. Why was I not a girl that I might have been pinned all my life to my mother's apron." Given the

13 "Nathaniel Hawthorne Prepares for College," pp. 69–70.
conspicuous gun image, Hawthorne is not complaining about his gender, but about social rules that force a boy out of the Garden of Eden into the cold patriarchal world while permitting a girl to remain enclosed in the maternal paradise. The search for the lost mother, rather than the lost father, underlies much of the story patterning in his mature fiction, as does the scheme of flight from the patriarchy. The idea of the matriarchy retained a powerful hold on his imagination throughout life, and he could only view patriarchal social organizations—the only kind he knew, though others could be imagined—with enmity.

The enmity may owe its origins precisely to Elizabeth's return to Salem. Hawthorne may have been hurt and angry that his mother disregarded his wishes in favor of her siblings' entreaties. He may have resented her failure to conform her life to his plans; a residue of bitterness may have indeed affected his relation to her after he graduated from Bowdoin and had to come back to Herbert Street instead of Raymond. But he could fault the Mannings too. Hawthorne was glad enough to leave Herbert Street when he was married, but in fact he never felt at home again. Home was mother.

By 1825 the Manning family had suffered from time and circumstance. Only six were still living at Herbert Street when Hawthorne came back from Bowdoin, although some of the others were domiciled close by. Briefly, the senior Richard Manning had died in 1813, his son Richard had gone to live in Maine, and John had disappeared the same year (presumably lost at sea). Maria died in 1814. Priscilla married in 1817 and Robert in 1824; both moved out but remained in Salem. When Hawthorne was married in 1842 the household had been so far depleted as to consist only of his mother and two sisters. Mrs. Manning died in 1826, William went into bachelor quarters, and Samuel died in 1835. At the time that Hawthorne was stressing his solitude to the Peabody sisters, Mary was still living at Herbert Street, but she died in 1841. Robert died in 1842.

For some reason, the probable cumulative effect of all these deaths

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on Hawthorne has never been appreciated, possibly because he said and wrote little about them. Whatever effect they had on him, however, they must have been disastrous for Elizabeth, who had made her whole life within the family circle. It is useful to remember that when Hawthorne was married she was mourning for the sister to whom she had been closest, and was soon to lose a brother. If she seemed somewhat reclusive in the years when the Peabody sisters came to know her, it may have been merely because she was sad. Or because she did not change with her changing world—she was approaching the age of sixty, and may have seen no way to fill the void that her departing siblings created. She did remain close to her surviving sister Priscilla (Mrs. Dike) and to Robert’s widow, Rebecca.

In the years that Hawthorne was living at Herbert Street after graduation, he may well have been the obscurest man of letters in America (as he poetically characterised himself) but he certainly could not have been the most solitary. He may indeed have had to resort to such devices as taking meals in his room and locking his door in order to get some writing done in that busy house. Still, he walked and visited, went on trips with his uncle Samuel, worked on a magazine in Boston (with help from Ebe). He shared his literary plans and agonized over his failures with his mother and sisters. Ebe selected books for him from the Salem Athenaeum. The three knew about his anonymous first novel *Fanshawe*, although Sophia never learned of it. Ebe was able partly to reconstruct, many years later, the early aborted projects for framed collections of short stories. All three women helped him to collect copies of the pieces printed in *Twice-Told Tales* and to prepare the manuscript for publication. Louisa made him a shirt when he went to Brook Farm, while Elizabeth sewed buttons on his trousers and rejoiced in Osgood’s flattering portrait of her son that he had made for her. Louisa, who carried on most of the correspondence with him while he was at the farm, bemoaned the infrequency of his letters and visits in a manner that suggests ordinary family intimacy. That Hawthorne was much petted and greatly adored he implicitly admits (Castle Dismal notwithstanding) in a letter to Sophia gently

16 Mellow, pp. 185–86.
chiding her for having taken offense at something he had written earlier: "Dearest, I beseech you grant me freedom to be careless and wayward—for I have had such freedom all my life" (Love Letters, I, 43).

When Hawthorne fell in love with Sophia Peabody late in 1838 he was thirty-five years old. No evidence survives as to whether his mother and sisters had hoped that he would marry, or wished him to remain single, or simply hoped for his happiness whatever he did. Given their general fondness, the last is the most likely possibility. Certainly, however, they never expected him to conceal an attachment, and when he finally announced his engagement a scant month before his wedding, Ebe at least was angered beyond the ability to forgive or to rejoice in his happiness. She wrote to Sophia as follows:

Your approaching union with my brother makes it incumbent upon me to offer you the assurances of my sincere desire for your mutual happiness. With regard to my sister and myself, I hope nothing will ever occur to render your future intercourse with us other than agreeable, particularly as it need not be so frequent or so close as to require more than reciprocal good will, if we do not happen to suit each other in our new relationship. I write thus plainly, because my brother has desired me to say only what was true; though I do not recognize his right so to speak of truth, after keeping us so long in ignorance of this affair. But I do believe him when he says that this was not in accordance with your wishes, for such concealment must naturally be unpleasant, and besides, what I know of your amiable disposition convinces me that you would not give us unnecessary pain. It was especially due to my mother that she should long ago have been made acquainted with the engagement of her only son.\(^15\)

To some degree, Ebe never forgave her brother for his deviousness. "We were in those [early] days almost absolutely obedient to him," she wrote to Julian. "I do not quite approve of either obedience or concealment" (Hawthorne and His Wife, I, 124-25). And, despite her comment about Sophia's amiable disposition, she never warmed to her brother's wife. "I might as well tell you that [Sophia] is the only human being whom I really dislike," a late letter to relatives said. "Though she is dead, that makes no difference.

\(^{15}\) Turner, p. 141.
I could have lived with her in apparent peace, but I could not have lived long; the constraint would have killed me.” Perhaps Hawthorne’s having chosen so timid and conventional a woman caused Ebe to reassess his character.

But Elizabeth responded in a different way, as Hawthorne wrote to Sophia:

Sweetest, scarcely had I arrived here, when our mother came out of her chamber, looking better and more cheerful than I have seen her this some time, and enquired about the health and well-being of my Dove! Very kindly too. Then was thy husband’s heart much lightened; for I knew that almost every agitating circumstance of her life had hitherto cost her a fit of sickness; and I knew not but it might be so now. Foolish me, to doubt that my mother’s love would be wise, like all other genuine love! . . . Now I am very happy—happier than my naughtiness deserves. It seems that her heart was troubled, because she knew that much of outward as well as inward fitness was requisite to secure thy foolish husband’s peace; but, gradually and quietly, God has taught her that all is good, and so, thou dearest wife, we shall have her fullest blessing and concurrence. (Love Letters, II, 93-4)

Despite his mother’s loving acceptance, Hawthorne’s concealment had done her a great wrong, and he knew it. His little boy’s confession of naughtiness refers to more than that concealment, however. He was also confessing the naughtiness of his involvement with Sophia to his mother. And, too (what he did not confess), there was the naughtiness of the way in which he had misrepresented her and his relation with her, to the Peabody sisters (and perhaps to others as well). In fact, I surmise that it was his complex sense of acting in bad faith toward Elizabeth that led him to desire concealment; and then that this concealment became another act of bad faith, in a chain of the sort that Hawthorne’s fiction sets out so knowingly. Indeed, for the rest of his life Hawthorne was caught by that act of bad faith since he was never able to rectify it except in the oblique language of his fiction.

And I suspect that there was yet more than the lies about Castle Dismal and solitary meals that burdened Hawthorne’s conscience. The constellation of images in which he represented his case to Sophia suggested, as I have said above, that Sophia was to save him

18 Turner, p. 142.
from and substitute for his mother. The image of the one woman annihilates the image of the other; on the inner stage, where the image is the person, to let Sophia rescue him is to kill his mother. No evidence exists to suggest that Sophia or Elizabeth regarded each other as rivals; the narrative Hawthorne projected derives (to the extent that it is sincere) from his own emotions and not fact. The narrative suggests—what the belated adolescent quality of his romance with Sophia tends to confirm—that his attachment to Elizabeth was so deep and pervasive that he experienced his love for another woman as doing some kind of violence to her, as a killing infidelity. At the same time, if Hawthorne blamed her for his long years of "enchantment" in the Herbert Street house while the world of adult sexual relationships passed him by, then he must also assuredly have wanted to kill her to gain his freedom. And so on, through the complex layers of the heart that Hawthorne knew so well.

Doubtless, Sophia caught no glimmer of these depths in his talk of naughtiness, but we can see that she was not entirely satisfied with his explanations because she later worked out a tale which made Ebe (conveniently) the culprit in the concealment. Obligingly, though in revealing language, Julian transmitted her explanation: Ebe, wishing to come between the two lovers, let Hawthorne know that "news of his relation with Miss Sophia would give | Elizabeth | a shock that might endanger her life." As a loving son, Hawthorne was naturally "not prepared to face the idea of defying and perhaps 'killing' his mother" (Hawthorne and His Wife, I, 196-97). This story does not withstand a moment's scrutiny. Ebe could not have forestalled the announcement of an engagement which she didn't know about; her blunt nature was incompatible with concealment; and, of course, Hawthorne knew how his mother was likely to react as well as Ebe did. But, if Ebe had not persuaded Hawthorne that his engagement would kill his mother, he had probably persuaded himself.

However, Elizabeth declined to be killed, and hence not even a temporary break in her relations with Hawthorne actually took place. Granted, she did not attend his wedding; but there are other explanations for this than hostility. During his sojourn at the Old Manse he had more than one occasion to return to Salem, and inevitably he stayed at Herbert Street, dining and chatting with his mother and
sisters. (See *Love Letters*, II, 107, 114, 120–21, 126–27, 155–56.) When he returned with Sophia and his child Una to Salem upon being appointed to the Custom House, he took up residence in Herbert Street while looking for his own home. He did this as a matter of course. The stay lasted several months—longer than anticipated—and seems to have produced tension. But we must remember that Sophia never became a favorite with the three women, nor did she greatly care for them. For example, we find her writing to her mother in January of 1846 that "on many accounts it would be inconvenient to remain in this house. Madame Hawthorne and Louisa are too much out of health to take care of a child, and I do not like to have Una in the constant presence of unhealthy persons. I have never let her go into Madame Hawthorne's mysterious chamber since November, partly on this account, and partly because it is so much colder than the nursery, and has no carpet on it" (*Hawthorne and His Wife*, I, 307–08). A woman who regarded her husband's closest female relatives only as babysitters, described them as "unhealthy persons," and kept her child out of grand-mamma's room for many weeks because it lacked a carpet, cannot be imagined to have encouraged family intimacy. It seems clear that a major goal on Sophia's part was to preserve the autonomy of her own new family.

Nevertheless, when a house (on Mall Street) that finally suited them was found, it was determined that Elizabeth, Ebe, and Louisa should join them permanently. The house, Sophia wrote to her mother, fortunately had a suite of rooms "wholly distant from ours so that we shall only meet when we choose to do so. Madame Hawthorne is so uninterfering, of so much delicacy, that I shall never know she is near excepting when I wish it; and she has so much kindness and sense and spirit she will be a great resource in emergencies. . . . It is no small satisfaction to know that Mrs. Hawthorne's remainder of life will be glorified by the presence of these children [Julian had been born] and of her own son. I am so glad to win her out of that Castle Dismal, and from the mysterious chamber, into which no mortal ever peeped till Una was born and Julian—for they alone entered the penetralia. Into that chamber the sun never shines. Into these rooms in Mall Street it blazes without stint" (*Hawthorne and His Wife*, I, 314). One wonders how Sophia
knew so much about Elizabeth's room if none but the little children had ever entered it, or what opportunities the widow would have had to show her kindness, sense, and spirit if she herself never left it. Indeed, Sophia's obtuseness is equalled only by her complacency (or is some complex defensiveness working itself out here?). What sort of rescue would it be for "Madame Hawthorne" if her lot was to wait in her chamber until called on for help in an emergency?

However, Elizabeth Hathorne had her own kind of spunk, it seems. She made her presence known after all. She began to cook items of food for Hawthorne that he had loved as a boy, and even to carry bowls of coffee to him in his study as he sat writing. Though Sophia was appalled, Hawthorne made no objection. Sophia unbent so far, finally, as to obtain from Elizabeth a recipe for an Indian pudding of which her husband was especially fond."

Hawthorne's feelings about his mother in the years after his marriage are not recoverable, for he spoke of these personal matters only to Sophia and then necessarily in a highly oblique language designed as much to veil as reveal. Sophia regularly read his journal and therefore he had to compose his entries with her expectations in mind. Nevertheless, we can be sure that the threatened loss of his position at the Custom House after the election of 1848 must have been particularly horrifying because he had assumed responsibility for his mother's welfare and undertaken to make a home for her "remainder of life." While he could be sure that the surviving Mannings would provide for her (as they did for Ebe and Louisa after Elizabeth's death), the question was not her physical or even psychological welfare but his own.

Certainly, then, her sudden serious illness and death at just the moment when he became unable to provide for her must have seemed profoundly significant to a man who felt so strongly the force that the inner life exerted on the outer world. It is in the context of a host of like thoughts, which he could not articulate plainly, that we must read his extraordinary journal entry penned the day before his mother died:

"I love my mother; but there has been, ever since my boyhood, a sort of coldness of intercourse between us, such as is apt to come between

persons of strong feelings, if they are not managed rightly. I did not expect to be much moved at the time—that is to say, not to feel any overpowering emotion struggling, just then—though I knew that I should deeply remember and regret her. Mrs. Dike was in the chamber. Louisa pointed to a chair near the bed, but I was moved to kneel down close by my mother, and take her hand. She knew me, but could only murmur a few indistinct words—among which I understood an injunction to take care of my sisters. Mrs. Dike left the chamber, and then I found the tears slowly gathering in my eyes. I tried to keep them down; but it would not be—I kept filling up, till, for a few moments, I shook with sobs. For a long time, I knelt there, holding her hand; and surely it is the darkest hour I ever lived. Afterwards, I stood by the open window, and looked through the crevice of the curtain. . . . I saw my little Una of the golden locks, looking very beautiful; and so full of spirit and life, that she was life itself. And then I looked at my poor dying mother; and seemed to see the whole of human existence at once, standing in the dusty midst of it. (Centenary, VIII, 429)

Though constrained to repeat the legend of coldness since boyhood (which his boyhood letters so decisively refute), and to finish this entry with an expression of hope in the afterlife suitable for Sophia's eyes, Hawthorne nevertheless permits the depths of his grief to come to light. Connecting Una to his mother through himself, and making this linked chain of three comprise the whole of human existence, he effectively expunges Sophia from the record, makes Una his mother's child, and hence makes his mother both wife and mother to him. But these were not his last words on the subject. His real tribute to her, and to her influence, was to come in The Scarlet Letter.

III

The Scarlet Letter obviously cannot be called a work of autobiography or even biography as we use these terms to refer to recognizable literary genres. But this discussion is meant to demonstrate the way in which it, along with "The Custom-House," contains autobiographical and biographical material (his mother's biography) and is engendered specifically by Hawthorne's experience of his

mother’s death. It is not inaccurate to describe *The Scarlet Letter* as Hawthorne’s response to his mother’s death. This response is composed of a number of elements difficult to extricate separately from the one dense texture of the romance. The fact that the woman it writes about is dead is paramount, for her death provides the motive for writing and also the freedom to write. The consciously articulated intentions of *The Scarlet Letter*, one might say, are to rescue its heroine from the oblivion of death and to rectify the injustices that were done to her in life, and both of these intentions take death as their starting point.

It is possible, within the elegiac frame of the work, to point to several autobiographical and biographical strands, some pertaining to the mother herself, some to the mother and son, and some to the son alone. First, *The Scarlet Letter* makes a noble attempt to realize the mother as a separate person with an independent existence in her own right; such an attempt represents the son’s very belated recognition that his mother was a human being with her own life and consciousness, something more than a figure in his own carpet. As a youth of seventeen begging his mother to live in Maine, Hawthorne had his own Garden of Eden in mind, but he never doubted that his ideal would be hers also, and that a life shut off from the world with her children would content her. Perhaps as a mature man he began to know better.

Yet, in realizing the separate individuality, he must make Hester a mother, for that is what Elizabeth inescapably was not only as part of his reality but as part of hers also. So he tries to understand what motherhood might mean for a person who does have, as all human beings do, a sense of independent existence. The way in which Pearl both impinges on and defines her mother’s selfhood vividly dramatizes the claims that children make on their mothers.

Yet even as he strives to provide Hester with an independent existence as the center of her own world, Hawthorne maintains a double focus. Events in *The Scarlet Letter* never work themselves free of the constant voice of the narrator. We are always aware that the character Hester depends for her reality on the act of narrative generosity which is creating her. Here, Hawthorne reverses the biological relation of mother and child and becomes the creator of his mother. It seems to me that such a reversal not only underlies all
representational art, but also responds to a specific set of wishes in the particular author writing at this particular time—the wish to be free of lifelong dependency on maternal power, the wish to have one’s mother all to oneself (even if that possession can be attained only after death).

But—another twist in the cable—Hester’s instant-by-instant dependency on the narrator-author is reversed again in the testimony of “The Custom-House” where “Hester” is defined as a creative force outside the romance which is responsible for his inspiration and his ability to write about her. Thus there is a transcending symbiosis of symbol and artist, mother and son—each created by the other and each dependent on the other for artistic life: the artist dependent on the image which inspires him, and the image dependent on the artist for representation.

There is, finally, an inevitable gap between the image and the being who has inspired it and whom it represents; the image is the refraction of the mother’s influence in the son’s psychic world. And so the work becomes an ambitious attempt to give his mother her own reality and bring to life her image in his mind as well and somehow to keep these distinct. Mediating between the two intentions of biography and autobiography, Hawthorne as narrator creates a structure in which the identities of the two subjects alternately assert themselves independently and then merge into a larger unity. The unity is best symbolized in the icon of mother and child—Divine Maternity—which is thrust on our attention in the first scaffold scene of The Scarlet Letter.

Beyond this complex personal intention, Hawthorne is also concerned to make his romance a public document, and hence much of the work of his text goes into generalizing, extending, and depersonalizing the meaning of his core images. The maternal symbol at the heart of The Scarlet Letter is contained within a sophisticated narrative structure, and this structure is distanced from the reader by the prefatory “Custom-House” essay. The personal meanings of the romance are processed though a sequence of narrators (the narrator of “The Custom-House” is not identical to the narrator of The Scarlet Letter) who are deeply aware of what, in “The Custom-House,” Hawthorne refers to as the reader’s right—the reader’s right not to have unwanted confidences forced upon him.
Some of the resemblances between Hester's and Elizabeth's stories will, I hope, already be evident from the account provided of her life: the questionable circumstances of their children's births, their repudiation by those assigned society's judging function, the absence of spouse and abandonment of the child entirely to the mother. Facing down Hester's critics and overcoming presumed reader resistance to her, Hawthorne goes beyond forgiveness to complete acquittal. The chief agency of Hester's exoneration is Pearl. Although the narrative perspective is resolutely adult, it silently privileges Pearl's point of view toward her mother over all the others. Her very existence is the narrative's first and last fact, and it legitimizes the act of her mother which engendered her. We cannot doubt that Pearl has a right to be, and hence cannot fault the mother for bringing her into existence.

Essentially, too, Pearl is her mother's child only. Though society and Hester are aware that a man participated in the act, Pearl has no sense of this necessity and hers is the view that the reader is forced to adopt. That is, we know that Hester has had a lover but we never really "know" that Pearl has a father. Through Pearl and because of her, then, Hester takes precedence over Dimmesdale and over the society which tries to put him and his cohorts at the organizing center of the fictional world. The world of the romance is organized around her. Matriarchy prevails. Autobiographically speaking, Hawthorne identifies himself once and for all as his *mother's* child.

To be sure, Hester pays a high price for her legitimation, the price of confinement within her motherhood for most of her life. Throughout the romance she is virtually never separated from Pearl; the image she represents, we remember, is inextricably linked to maternity rather than selfhood or even womanhood. The brookside scene in the forest, for all its multiple possibilities of interpretation, dramatizes at some basic level the need of the child to possess the mother all to herself. Pearl recognizes at once through the mother's changed appearance, as Hester blossoms out into relation with Dimmesdale, that the mother is no longer merely and entirely her mother. She cannot abide this. Imperiously she requires that Hester reassume motherhood as her sole reality before she will return to her. The "A" at this point means only maternity: the complex, bewildering, and ambiguous set of events which have set Hester's
course for life are ultimately reduced to the “sin” of having given birth to a child.

The tensions between Hester’s motherhood and personhood, between the needs of her own life and the needs of her child, between the person herself and the figure in the son’s tale, are resolved at a higher level of the story than Pearl’s perceptions. The narrator, taking the roles of her prophet, son, and lover simultaneously, creates an image now responsive to its own rhythms and now to the rhythms of the two beings who impinge on her—Pearl, her figured child, and the author-narrator who in many respects is her child grown up. The image to which both subscribe, and within which they enclose Hester, is the Garden of Eden, the benign matriarchy.

One is reminded not only of Hawthorne’s adolescent letters but of a lengthy passage from “Main Street,” which is the only tale we are sure that Hawthorne meant to include along with The Scarlet Letter in the larger collection he was originally planning. “Main Street” is a rapid survey of New England history and it begins before the patriarchy comes to impose its civilization on western soil, with the timeless land existing under the rule of a woman:

You perceive, at a glance, that this is the ancient and primitive wood,—the ever-youthful and venerably old,—verdant with new twigs, yet hoary, as it were, with the snowfall of innumerable years, that have accumulated upon its intermingled branches. The white man’s axe has never smitten a single tree; his footstep has never crumpled a single one of the withered leaves, which all the autumns since the flood have been harvesting beneath. Yet, see! along through the vista of impending boughs, there is already a faintly-traced path. . . . What footsteps can have worn this half-seen path? Hark! Do we not hear them now rustling softly over the leaves? We discern an Indian woman—a majestic and queenly woman, or else her spectral image does not represent her truly—for this is the great Squaw Sachem, whose rule, with that of her sons, extends from Mystic to Agawam. That red chief, who stalks by her side, is Wappacowet, her second husband, the priest and magician. (Centenary, XI, 50-51)

The white man—adulthood for the race—has arrived, and the happy days of mother-rule retreat to legend and imagination. But within imagination their existence is powerful and pervasive. The Scarlet Letter is Hawthorne’s testimony to the existence of that inner
world ruled over by a woman. The woman in that inner world could never die.

_The Scarlet Letter_ is the only one of Hawthorne’s long romances whose origin can be attributed to a specific autobiographical impulse. Alerted by the kinds of concerns it manifests, one can perceive certain biographical implications in the others, however. Although there is not a trace of the Squaw Sachem in _The House of the Seven Gables_, this is a quintessential family story whose deepest meaning resides, ultimately, precisely in her absence. For it tells a tale of the submersion of individual identity and the total loss of happiness and freedom in a male-ruled household. The reason why the alternatives of Pyncheon and Maule can provide no resolution to the excesses of the other is that each remains in essence a patriarchy. Eliminating Pyncheon, the hero Holgrave has nothing to substitute but—himself. One can interpret the families of Pyncheon and Maule as Hathorne and Manning respectively, the run-down aristocrats and the rising laborers, and recall that neither permitted Elizabeth to be mistress in her own house. From another vantage point, the Pyncheon house can be seen as an amalgamation of both Hathorne and Manning into a composite figure of hated family oppression, an overwhelming symbol of patriarchal usurpation. In sum, the repudiation of father and fathers imaged forth as a minor point in _The Scarlet Letter_ as it defended Hester’s priority here becomes the central autobiographical statement.

In this context Phoebe can be only Sophia, as indeed we are asked to understand by other indications (Hawthorne frequently called Sophia Phoebe). Her role in the rescue, or failed rescue, plot is only superficial, however. She is fundamentally unequal to the other powers in the story and at crucial points in the narrative is shown to be susceptible to victimization by them. Hawthorne, I think, is here beginning to realize, or at least to signify, that Sophia was having far less efficacy in his life than he had originally imagined.

That the simplicity of Sophia’s imagination was more and more seeming like shallowness rather than infinite depths is more overtly suggested in _The Blithedale Romance_ and _The Marble Faun_. In both romances the hated male rulers are abetted, albeit without much awareness, by female figures whose task is to supplant or discredit a more matriarchal or maternal type. (It must be granted that in _The
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Blithedale Romance the matriarchal type is badly flawed, and is so to a lesser degree in The Marble Faun, so to speak truly no possibility for any restoration of the matriarchy is seriously entertained in either romance.) In The Blithedale Romance this dovelike supplanter appears at the beginning as part of the degraded urban complex which the narrator-protagonist wishes to reject for a pastoral ideal. The proper Arcadian values are established at once when the narrator finds Zenobia ruling over Blithedale, but her initial matronly and queenlike authority is systematically undercut and discredited by the collusion of all the other characters until she is driven to suicide. The dove is left in command of the field. But the survivors of the battle are merely the walking wounded, and her lifelong task is to nurse and guard them—a parody of matriarchy, making Blithedale in some sense the dark inverse of The Scarlet Letter.

Something similar happens in the tortured symbolism and obscure narrative line of The Marble Faun, where Kenyon’s election of Hilda, the dove transmuted into a steely virgin, is equivalent to retreat from the complexities of an adult world. Hilda’s cutting simplifications and platitudes masquerade as a world view which the sculptor, finding himself unable to deal with the implications of adult relations between the sexes, gladly espouses. The babylund to which Kenyon and Hilda are returning at the end of the romance is nothing like the ageless forest presided over by the Indian Queen who, disguised in this romance as Venus, has been rejected by Kenyon on the campagna in favor of Hilda. But Hawthorne does not blame Sophia.

Toward the close of his literary career Hawthorne, working up his English essays for publication, inserted a passage into “Outside Glimpses of English Poverty” for which there is no notebook source:

Nothing, as I remember, smote me with more grief and pity . . . than to hear a gaunt and ragged mother priding herself on the pretty ways of her ragged and skinny infant, just as a young matron might, when she invites her lady-friends to admire her plump, white-robed darling in the nursery. Indeed, no womanly characteristic seemed to have altogether perished out of these poor souls. It was the very same creature whose tender torments make the rapture of our young days, whom we love, cherish, and protect, and rely upon in life and death, and whom we delight to see beautify her beauty with rich robes and set it off with jewels. (Centenary, X, 283)
The image goes beyond the gaunt and ragged mother, beyond the young matron, and even beyond Elizabeth Hathorne to the archetype, the Magna Mater enthroned in a blaze of jewels in her son’s imagination. Even at this late date the imagination remains centrally possessed of and by her image. Elizabeth had been dead for fourteen years. Hawthorne would be dead within a year himself. In this ardent image, he indicates that her presence will survive with him to the end.