A New Source for the Title and Themes of The Scarlet Letter

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The present article proposes a hitherto unrecognized source for the title and some of the central themes of The Scarlet Letter (1850). In the course of my research, I was puzzled to find that none of the records concerning the punishment of adultery in the Puritan colonies, cited by Hawthorne scholars, actually state that the letter A, or AD, to be worn by convicted adulterers actually had to be scarlet, or even red—and some, in fact, make no reference to color at all.\(^1\) It is, of course, undeniable that Hawthorne was inspired by actual judicial practices of seventeenth-century Puritans, who sometimes made convicted adulterers wear a sign of their transgression.\(^2\) However, neither in the 1694 Plymouth legislation recorded in Joseph B. Felt's Annals of Salem (1827) and cited by Charles Ryskamp, nor in the records of a 1641 sentence quoted by Laura Haft Korobkin, is there any reference to the color of the letters that the convicted adulterers were to display "daily, upon the outside of their uppermost garment, in a most eminent place thereof.\(^3\) Other attempts on my part to trace the use of the term “scarlet letter”—in the context of judicial punishment—to a time prior to Hawthorne have only led to circular references to the Scarlet Letter itself; ironically enough, the OED is somewhat ambiguous in stating that the term “scarlet letter” is “a representation of the letter A in scarlet cloth which persons convicted of adultery were condemned to wear, as described in the novel by Hawthorne . . . 1850” (emphasis mine). With the premise that Hawthorne drew the concept of the letter's associations with the color “scarlet” from somewhere other than historical, judicial records, in order to embellish the details of the punishment in a richly figurative form, I would like to propose a new source for the novel's title and some of its major motifs.

As Frederick Newberry has noted, Hawthorne’s profound interest in British history was considerably significant to his writing, and one
which Hawthorne scholars long ignored, despite the fact that Marion L. Kesselring's research into Hawthorne's barrowings from the Salem Athenaeum revealed the author's reading of "no fewer than forty-four works of British history, compared to sixty on American history, excluding biographies." The text I would like to propose is not recorded in Kesselring's bibliography, though it is perfectly plausible, as textual evidence strongly suggests, that Hawthorne obtained the text somewhere other than the Salem Athenaeum; it is, moreover, a work of Elizabethan history of a kind—a history play, in fact.

As it will be shown, Hawthorne was quite probably inspired by Thomas Dekker and John Webster's *The Famous History of Sir Thomas Wyatt* (1607). *Wyatt* is set against the historical backdrop of the Duke of Northumberland's political scheme to pressure the childless Edward VI and his council into removing the king's sisters, Mary—a Catholic—and Elizabeth—of allegedly illegitimate birth—from the line of succession; as a historical sequel to this plot, Northumberland briefly raised his own fifteen-year-old daughter, Lady Jane Grey, to the English throne—with tragic consequences.

In the Dekker-Webster play, the English Lords gather behind Northumberland and Suffolk, two powerful aristocrats, whose desire to corrupt the succession leads to their cementing a marriage alliance between their respective children, Lady Jane Grey and Guildford Dudley. Only Sir Thomas Wyatt—characterized by his unswerving loyalty to a vision of religiously-ordained rule—refuses to join the conspiracy. Ironically, his refusal to support the conspiracy leads to his own tragic demise when he later rises against the inequities of Mary's rule and is condemned to die along with the innocent Jane and Guildford. The tenor of Wyatt's refusal to support Northumberland is highly significant because the play's eponymous hero identifies the conspiracy not merely as a crime but as a *sin* to be judged in the hereafter:

\[
\text{He dambe my soule for no man, for no man.}
\]

\[
\text{Who at doomes day must answere for my sinne:}
\]

\[
\text{Not you, nor you my Lordes (Wyatt, 1.1.34–36).}
\]

The motif of the Day of Judgment is taken up again in a later scene, which involves the repentant figure of Northumberland himself; it is
here that the reader may recognize a very likely source for significant motifs in Hawthorne’s novel as well as for its title. In the scene, Northumberland, his conspiracy foiled, and himself a prisoner in the Tower of London, nobly accepts his inevitable punishment: “My crime is great, and I must answere it” (2.2.105). Riven with guilt, moreover, he faces the tragic fate of Jane and Guildford, unfortunate pawns in his political machinations:

O my Children! my soule weepes endlesse teares for you.
O at the generall Sessions, when all soules
Stand at the bar of Iustice, and hold vp
Their new immortalized handes, O then
Let the remembrance of their tragick endes
Be racd out of the
bed-roule of my sinnes:
When ere the black booke of my crime’s vnclaspt,
Let not these scarlet Letters be found there:
Of all the rest, only that page be cleere (2.2.111–19; emphases mine).

In Northumberland’s lament appears a reference to the day of judgment as an occasion when a person’s sins are exposed and judged—the record described as a type of list, or bead-roll (line 116) and as a “black booke” to be “vnclaspt” at that time (118). This reference to a book of judgment and damnation presents nothing less than a source for the imagistic link in *The Scarlet Letter* between the embroidered letter worn by Hester—as well as the transgression which brought her such punishment—and the book of the “Black Man,” in which the letters of the sinner’s name would be inscribed in the scarlet hue of their own blood (*Scarlet* 184–85). Northumberland’s lament in *Wyatt* also resonates with Dimmesdale’s reply to Pearl’s question in the midnight scaffold scene—whether he will stand with her and Hester on the scaffold the following day. He replies: “Not then, Pearl . . . but another time!” That time will be “At the great judgment day! . . . Then, and there, before the judgment-seat, thy mother, and thou, and I, must stand together” (153).

In the usage it receives in Dekker and Webster’s *Wyatt*, the term “scarlet Letters” defines the record of one’s sins—and, due to visual
associations with blood-guilt, the adjective “scarlet” probably suggested particularly “heinous, deep-dyed” misdeeds (see OED: “scarlet,” which cites Isaiah 1:18: “Though your sins be scarlet, they shall be as white as snow”). Metaphorically speaking, “scarlet Letters” also implies the embodiment of one’s guilt in the person of one’s victims. For Northumberland’s phrase, “these scarlet Letters,” not only refers to the record of his guilt in causing the deaths of the young couple—as recorded in the book of judgment—but also metaphorically defines the youthful victims themselves, perhaps “scarlet” with shame; their guiltless blood that will be spilled; or the royal garments that their ambitious relatives urged them to wear. This conflation involving the term “scarlet Letters” brings to mind the well-known parallels drawn in Hawthorne’s novel between the scarlet A on Hester’s breast and her daughter Pearl, herself ostracized by the Puritan children for her mother’s transgression, and hence Hester’s identification of her child with the scarlet letter of her own punishment, which Pearl both shares and embodies. As the narrator elaborates, the “analogy between the object of [Hester’s] affection, and the emblem of her guilt and torture” is, in fact, understandable, since, for the penitent outcast, Hester, Pearl is both “the one, as well as the other” (102).

In the novel’s main plot, the attendant dehumanization of mother and daughter in such circumstances is also illustrated through their contact with the authorities; here, various religious connotations of the term and concept of “scarlet” and “scarlet letter” are revealed. Thus, in chapter 8 (“The Elf Child and the Minister”), a disapproving Governor Bellingham associates Pearl with her mother’s transgression, as he exclaims of the pert child: “Nay, we might have judged that such a child’s mother must needs be a scarlet woman, and a worthy type of her of Babylon!” (110). Notably, Hester is not seen simply as a person—even a condemned, criminal subject—but as a type. While, clearly, Hester is accused of simple immorality—of being, a “scarlet woman,” loosely defined as both “notoriously immoral” and, by implication, “a prostitute” (OED)—she is also aligned in the governor’s Puritan discourse with demonized Catholic corruption, a motif which can be traced to early modern England, where Protestant writers equated the Whore of Babylon in the Book of Revelation with the
Roman Catholic Church. Tellingly, one of the earliest known texts to make this association was Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (c.1590);\(^8\) in a relevant verse, where Duessa—the *duplicitous* temptress, symbolic of the Catholic Church and Una's avatar—attempts to corrupt the Redcross knight, she is described as a "scarlot whore" (I.viii.29; cited in OED, "scarlet"). Hawthorne's familiarity with Spenser is, of course, well-known, since the novelist named his own daughter, Una, after Spenser's heroine.\(^9\) It is my contention, however, that the title of the novel did not simply develop from his dwelling on such Spenserian associations, but, rather, that the phrase—so integral to the author's playing with the web of connotations attached to the color scarlet—was found by Hawthorne, ready-made, as it were, in Dekker and Webster's *Wyatt*.

Although these textual points of convergence may appear circumstantial or tenuous if taken on their own, there are other connections between Hawthorne's novel and the work of Dekker and Webster, connections which would appear to be more than mere coincidence when addressed in conjunction with the verbal and thematic parallels discussed above. In these terms, in a late chapter of *The Scarlet Letter*, "The New England Holiday," a nostalgic Hawthorne draws some ironic analogies between the Governor's inauguration day and the tradition of civic pageantry in early modern London, namely finding in the Puritan ceremonies "The dim reflection of a remembered splendor, a colorless and manifold diluted repetition of what they had beheld in proud old London,—we will not say at a royal coronation, but at a Lord Mayor's show" (230).\(^10\) As Newberry notes, Hawthorne contrasts the festive, communal nature of the old English custom with the "colorless" echo it finds in the "installation of magistrates" in his novel's seventeenth-century New England setting (243).

Thomas Dekker's output as a professional writer is highly suggestive in this regard; his works include perhaps his best-known play, *The Shoemaker's Holiday* (1599), which concerns the meteoric rise of a shoemaker to the revered post of Lord Mayor. In addition, Hawthorne's reading of such early modern chronicles as *The Narrative History of King James, for the First Fourteen Years* (London, 1651)—an earlier edition of which Sir Thomas Overbury had collaborated
might have led him to the Dekker and Webster, who were important contributors to Jacobean and Caroline civic pageantry. Dekker, for instance, worked extensively on London pageants held on occasions of both royal and specifically civic celebration, including “The Magnificent Entertainment,” to honor the “Triumphant Passage” of James I and his family “through the Honourable Citie (and Chamber) of London” (1603; pub. 1604) as well as several Lord Mayors Shows, those annual events publicly staged to mark the appointment of the city’s leading official. Webster, in turn, is known to have produced at least one such pageant, “Monuments of Honour” (1624); in addition, he contributed with Dekker to the expanded edition of Joseph Hall’s Characters of Virtues and Vices (1608; expanded 1614), which included “the posthumous appearance of Sir Thomas Overbury’s poem, A Wife.” Given the well-known allusions in The Scarlet Letter, as explored by Alfred S. Reid, to material concerning the murder of Overbury, and the role of Dekker and Webster as London civic writers, such a connection between Overbury and the these authors makes it quite plausible that Hawthorne could also have read their collaborative play, Sir Thomas Wyatt.

Of course, Arlin Turner’s well-known identification of Cotton Mather’s writings on the subject of witchcraft as a source for the passage involving the “Black Man” and the signing of his black book in blood would be difficult to refute. Yet it is also clearly in harmony with the motif in Wyatt that involves the inscription of one’s sins in a book of judgment—and hence of damnation. Similarly, it is of more than passing interest that Thomas Overbury’s Vision (1616), along with other Jacobean records relating to Overbury’s murder, should also point in the direction of two of its authors. In addition, of course, Dekker and Webster collaborated on the play that I propose as a very likely source for some of the motifs as well as the title of The Scarlet Letter.

In terms of Hawthorne’s allusion to the world of Elizabethan-Jacobean England, there also appears an explicit reference to the affair of the murder of Thomas Overbury: “an aged handicraftsman . . . who had been a citizen of London . . . now thirty year agone” recalls seeing Chillingworth “with Doctor Forman, the famous old conjuror, who
was implicated in the affair of Overbury” (127). Of course, the witness’s identity as a former “handicraftsman” and “citizen of London,” though a point of lesser significance, also fits neatly with my arguments about the importance of Dekker and Webster’s Wyatt play; for besides Dekker and Webster’s work on civic pageants and numerous plays set in his contemporary London, as noted above, Dekker’s The Shoemaker’s Holiday—one of the most successful works of the Tudor-Stuart stage—celebrates the legendary fortunes of a London shoemaker—an archetypal of the traditional handicraftsman.

Although there is no specific supporting evidence in the list of books that Hawthorne consulted in the Salem Athenaeum, Kesselring’s book does provide a great deal of evidence that Hawthorne was extremely interested in texts dealing with early modern England, including Elizabethan drama such as Christopher Marlowe’s Works (London 1826), and even texts concerning religious conflict and martyrdom, which included accounts of the deaths of Guildford Dudley and Jane Grey, those quintessential Protestant martyrs, dealt with in Wyatt. Two such texts that Hawthorne consulted were the Memoirs of the Tower of London (1830) and The History of the English Martyrs, who suffer’d Death for Opposing the Romish Religion (1760).

In summing up this proposal for a previously unnoted source for the title of The Scarlet Letter and some of its important themes and motifs, I would like to reiterate, first, Hawthorne’s deep interest in historical and literary works from early modern England, including evidence that he read other material by both the authors in question. Second, the existence of thematic parallels between Dekker and Webster’s The Famous History of Sir Thomas Wyatt and Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter, namely, the theme of parental responsibility and guilt relating to unmerited suffering of a culprit’s children. Third, the presence in both texts of multiple figurative and verbal equations between the terms “scarlet letter(s)” and (1) the spiritual record of sin, or crime itself; (2) judgment and/or damnation in the hereafter; and (3) the person of the victimized, innocent offspring whose suffering becomes an embodiment—and living reminder—of the parent’s guilt.

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Notes

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1 For example, the 1636 Plymouth legislation regarding this matter determined that adulterers were "to weare two Capitall letters viz. AD cut out in cloth and sewed on their upermost Garments on their arm or back." See The American Notebooks of Nathaniel Hawthorne: Based Upon the original Manuscripts in the Piermont Morgan Library, ed. Randall Stewart (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932), 229.


7 By extension, just as the passage in Wyatt focuses on parental transgression and the sense of guilt regarding the punishment of the innocent child, in Hawthorne's novel such a concern is found even prior to the body of the novel proper, in "The Custom-House," where the author not only expresses "shame" for the actions of his Puritan ancestors—rather cavalierly contemplating their likely damnation—but also reveals


14 Arlin Turner identified the influence of Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702), citing such particulars as “the proposal by Mistress Hibbins that Hester accompany her to a witch meeting,” an invitation which involved “the signing in the devil’s book with an iron pen and with blood for ink” (“Hawthorne’s Literary Borrowings,” *PMLA* 51 [1936]: 546, quoted by Ryskamp, “The New England Sources” [202])

15 *The Shoemaker’s Holiday* was a popular classic both on stage and in print, with six quarto editions published by 1657 (Fredson Bowers, “Textual Introduction,” 9.

16 Cited by Kesselring 56.

17 Kesselring 45.