NARRATIVE OF THE CAPTIVITY AND REDEMPTION OF ROGER PRYNNE: REREADING *THE SCARLET LETTER*

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Pearl’s lack of a father lies at the heart of *The Scarlet Letter*. It is not surprising, then, that many scholars find *The Scarlet Letter* resolved when Pearl’s biological father, the minister Arthur Dimmesdale, publicly acknowledges her. My reading differs. One effect of Pearl’s illegitimacy, her fatherlessness, is that it leaves her available to claims from numerous potential fathers. Her existence is threatened by her unknown biological father as well as by an invisible heavenly father (an alternative she finds especially appalling). The Puritan elder John Wilson suggests a host of fathers for little Pearl, remarking to Chillingworth, “every good Christian man hath a title to show a father’s kindness towards the poor, deserted babe.”1 “I am Mother’s child” (p. 76). Pearl argues, but because fatherlessness and its inherent result, a vaguely menacing multiplicity of fathers, was a problem in Hawthorne’s life as well. I propose that considering *The Scarlet Letter* in light of Hawthorne’s biography creates an opportunity to explore Pearl’s relationship to her mother’s husband, Roger Chillingworth, and changes the way we understand the novel’s apparent resolution.

A scene near the novel’s conclusion clarifies for me the significance of the collapse of Hawthorne’s biography (his lack of a father combined with multiple father figures) into story (Pearl’s lack of a father combined with multiple potential father figures). It is Election Day and, as Hester, Pearl, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth all pass through or linger in the marketplace, a “shipmaster” appears (p. 158). Because we know that Hawthorne’s father, Nathaniel Hawthorne, was a ship captain who died at sea when the future author was not yet four years old, we can understand the shipmaster of *The Scarlet Letter* to be a revenant, a ghost speaking out of Hawthorne’s personal past. Additionally, notice that Hawthorne’s substitution of “shipmaster” for

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the more commonly used “ship captain” (his father’s title) plays on Chillingworth’s lost name of “Master Prynne” —something I will bring out more fully. Like a long absent father, the shipmaster is captivated by Pearl and grabs for her, trying to “snatch a kiss” (p. 165). He fails: “Finding it as impossible to touch her as to catch a humming-bird in the air, he took from his hat the gold chain that was twisted about it, and threw it to the child. Pearl immediately twined it around her neck and waist, with such happy skill, that, once seen there, it became a part of her, and it was difficult to imagine her without it” (pp. 165-66). This shipmaster can no more touch her than can a dead father touch a living child. What he can do, as this passage underscores, is invest Pearl with his possession—an improvisation that Chillingworth will repeat.

Captain Nathaniel Hathorne left an insubstantial material inheritance to his family. A gun and a ship’s log were saved for Nathaniel, but the legacy was largely, impoverishment, with the result that his widow, the former Elizabeth Manning, was forced to live off her family. His Grandfather Manning, however, did eventually leave Nathaniel Hawthorne an inheritance, with which Hawthorne began the highly mythologized internship writing in his mother’s attic. The psychological drama suggested by these details adds symbolic weight to my reading of the shipmaster scene. Pearl’s gold chain is ostensibly precious while highly ambivalent. Symbolizing wealth, the gold chain also symbolizes bondage—a perverse though apt metaphor for inheritance. “[T]wined . . . around her neck” (p. 166), the gold chain is like a hangman’s noose that may have threatened Hester, and it is like an iron chain that oppresses a slave or drags a body to the ocean floor. The connection between the shipmaster and his gold chain and Chillingworth, AKA Master Prynne, tightens when the shipmaster makes Pearl the bearer of a message for her mother from “the black-a-visaged, hump-shouldered old doctor.” For most readers of the novel, this gesture is ominous. When we invest the shipmaster with the presence of Hawthorne’s dead ship-captain father, we see that Hawthorne has subverted a more obvious equation between biological fathers (his and Pearl’s). He draws out the menace of being fathered by a spectre.

Literal or legal illegitimacy is Pearl’s special challenge, but figurative illegitimacy—which I claim as Hawthorne’s special burden—pervades each characterization in the novel: thus, innumerable scholars have been able to demonstrate how Dimmesdale’s recognition resolves difficulties for Pearl, for Dimmesdale, and to some extent for Hester. However, I wish to demonstrate that Nathaniel Hawthorne’s paternal deprivation and ambivalence toward other father figures is mirrored and distorted not only in the biological family group of *The Scarlet Letter*, but also in the figure of Roger Chillingworth. The ways in which Chillingworth’s portrayal shadows the story of the lost Captain Hathorne are also important here. Overall, I’m
concerned to show how Hawthorne's ambivalence creates images that disturb readers, fend off interpretation, and cause us to fail to acknowledge Chillingworth's full potential in the novel, particularly in the novel's closing images.

**The Family Romance**

Born in Salem, Massachusetts, 4 July 1804, Nathaniel Hawthorne was the legitimate second child and only son of his parents. For many years he was also the only male heir of his generation in both the Manning and Hathorne families. Despite his hyper-legitimacy, a theme of figurative illegitimacy was present in his family romance. At the time of his birth, his mother lived in the Hathorne family home with Nathaniel Sr.'s widowed mother and unmarried sisters. A sea-going brother made his home there as well, but, in the phrase of Arlin Turner, the Hathorne home was "only rarely and temporarily invaded by the father." According to Nina Baym, First Mate and later Captain Hathorne spent only seven months at home during his seven-year marriage. On 28 December 1807, when Nathaniel was three years and five months old, Captain Hathorne sailed on yet another trading expedition, this time bound for South America. A third child and second daughter was born two weeks later, but Captain Hathorne was never to see her. In January he contracted yellow fever and, brought ashore, he died in a boarding house in Surinam. When his ship returned to Salem harbor in early April, it bore news of his death, but no body. Biographers pinpoint his father's death as the originating event for Hawthorne's lack of a conclusive identity: Edwin Haviland Miller, for instance, calls the death of Captain Hathorne "traumatic," and the "worst" of events for the young child, but, only three years and nine months old when he learned of his father's demise. Nathaniel may have had no conscious memory of him. If he remembered Captain Hathorne's occasional disruptions of the household, had he enjoyed or resented them? Did he feel anguished when he learned of his father's death, or omnipotent—or both?

In later life, Hawthorne claimed to remember nothing of his father's death. His older sister, Ebe, fortunately, remembered the day well enough to give us a glimpse into Hathorne and Manning family dynamics: "[M]y mother called my brother into her room, next to the one where we slept, and told him that his father was dead. He left very little property and my Grandfather Manning took us home." Ebe's memory sets the two families on opposing sides of a skirmish: Captain Nathaniel Hathorne, deceased, was "his" (Nathaniel's) father; their mother's father was "my [Ebe's] Grandfather Manning." At their father's house the children slept in a "room" (not "our bedroom" or "nursery") as if they were boarders; conversely, "Grandfather Manning took us home" (emphasis added). One wonders why Ebe, at age six probably better able to process such information, wasn't given the news
directly, along with or instead of Nathaniel. According to other sources, Ebe’s recollection is unreliable: Elizabeth did not immediately move her young family from one house to the other, but only after several months. I imagine young Nathaniel, who turned four in July, experiencing the awakening of his conscious life and memory as the singular male of the Hathorne household. The move to the Manning home considerably altered his position.

Little is known of Hawthorne’s relations with the Hathornes. They lived only a few houses away from the Mannings, but Ebe avoided them and Nathaniel, too, seldom visited. In “Nathaniel Hawthorne and His Mother: a Biographical Speculation,” Baym argues that a germ of illegitimacy infects even this circumstance. In his preface to The Scarlet Letter, “The Custom House,” Hawthorne describes his Hathorne ancestors as rigorously Puritanical, leading Baym to speculate that because Ebe was born after her parents had been married only seven months, her paternal grandmother and aunts may have looked askance on her birth, and on her mother (p. 43). Elizabeth Manning and Nathaniel Hathorne enjoyed a long and apparently affectionate engagement (at least. Nathaniel’s logbook includes affectionate remarks), but Baym asserts that “the old-fashioned and pious Hathornes” must certainly have believed Elizabeth Manning had resorted to a feminine trick to speed her wedding date (pp. 42-43). To push Baym’s speculation further, did the Hathornes consider Elizabeth a loose woman because of her bridial pregnancy and thus question the paternity of all her children? Whatever the case, Elizabeth, a widow at age twenty-eight, was not to benefit from any Hathorne largesse.

Whether her move a few months after hearing of her husband’s death was a symbolic repudiation of the father who left them impoverished, or a rejection of-or by-the Hathornes, the Hathorne children now became wards of the more generous and more overwhelming Mannings. In 1808, Elizabeth’s parents and seven of her eight brothers and sisters still occupied the family home. His mother and sisters slept in a room together, but Nathaniel went upstairs to sleep with his uncles. Complicating matters, Elizabeth, reportedly, became a recluse. She wore black for the rest of her life, seldom if ever ventured out of doors, and conferred at least a portion of her parental responsibilities onto her family. (Baym persuasively argues that Elizabeth took a more active role in her children’s lives than other biographers have believed.)

Robert Manning, one of Elizabeth’s bachelor brothers, bore the most responsibility toward her children as well as to the family business. According to their letters, the Mannings regarded Robert as the children’s social father. Gloria Erlich employs tonal evidence from Robert’s letters to Elizabeth (“warm” and “solicitous” versus the “brief” and “functional” tone of letters to his wife) to suggest that Robert’s “most intimate feelings [were] preempted by his sister and her family” (p. 47). Although Robert and
Elizabeth's relationship is not my topic here. I agree that Hawthorne's ambivalence toward father figures in his fiction was fostered in part by his confusion about his uncle's affection and fatherly discipline. Determined to educate his nephew to follow in his footsteps, Uncle Robert became the father figure against whom young Nathaniel rebelled.

In The Bastard Hero in the Novel, Margaret Bözenna Goscin argues that illegitimacy empowers characters. And Hawthorne's pervasive sense of figurative illegitimacy can be understood as an empowering factor in his success at writing his way out of the family script: though later political appointments seem to resonate with his first American ancestors, he did not go to sea in the manner of the Hathorne men of the two generations prior to his own: and he did not go into the Manning family business despite Uncle Robert's having educated him for exactly that purpose. Hawthorne wrote his way out of the family script in other ways as well. In "The Custom-House" he avoids the question of his Manning ancestors altogether and assumes his Hathorne ancestors would not recognize him as their descendant: "No aim, that I have ever cherished, would they recognize as laudable; no success of mine—if my life, beyond its domestic scope, had ever been brightened by success—would they deem otherwise than worthless, if not positively disgraceful." He takes on their mantle of guilt, but eschews any other inheritance.

Written upon the death of Hawthorne's mother, The Scarlet Letter mirrors both aspects of Hawthorne's sense of illegitimacy—his physical lack of a father and his emotional ambivalence toward father figures. Thus the romance's resolution in a chain of interlocking re-legitimations would seem to be the point of its denouement: Dimmesdale recognizes his child and reconciles with his God; Pearl kisses her father and thereby claims a right to "grow up amid human joy and sorrow, nor for ever do battle with the world, but be a woman in it" (p. 173); Hester atones for her sin first by publicly recognizing her daughter's father, then by returning to America and mentoring unhappy young women. And Hawthorne seems to further resolve the plot in its closing image of the single tombstone engraved with Hester's infamous A. On the surface of these legitimations, Hawthorne has been thought to recuperate the union of his biological mother and father—even going so far as to bury them side by side in the cemetery at King's Chapel. The father's body has been redeemed at last. Or so it would seem.

Hawthorne's biographical tensions suggest that one's illegitimacy is not so easily resolved. Illegitimacy, figurative or literal, raises anxiety about all precursors. Can "old Roger Chillingworth," the former "Master Pynne" remain, then, outside the reformed bonds of the other primary characters, and outside the resolution? Although many critics notice that Chillingworth invests Pearl with his estate, enabling her to travel to Europe and, perhaps, to marry well, they persist in imagining him at the romance's end as a devilish
entity stripped of all power, separated from humanity, unmourned in a forgotten grave. Gillian Brown, in "Hawthorne, Inheritance, and Women's Property," acknowledges Chillingworth's agency, but then writes of "Hester's legacy to Pearl [which] deeds her daughter entry into future narratives of property." Emily Budick argues that Chillingworth symbolically legitimates Dimmesdale via his descendents. I find, however, that Hawthorne's extreme ambivalence toward father figures creates a potential for Chillingworth's recuperation as a type of Captain Hathorne. Indeed, I argue that we can understand The Scarlet Letter as the tale of Chillingworth's fall and redemption—enacted through a series of opportunities to claim Pearl as his child.

"My home is where thou art..."

To begin with, even though she is not his biological daughter, Pearl resembles Chillingworth. Excrucia of the biological parents' relationship (as someone has said of Pearl), both characters function to test Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale. Chillingworth, like Pearl, has dubious parentage. While both Hester and Arthur reflect on legitimate family histories and, albeit briefly, invoke for the reader their birthrights of genteel upbringings. Roger Chillingworth does not. He seems never to have been a child, but to have sprung up from "the nether earth" (p. 83). Like Pearl and like the scarlet letter she embodies. Chillingworth is a palimpsest or, better, a Rorschach blot, paradoxically unreadable and multiply read. Furthermore, when he exchanges his patronymic, Prynne, for a pseudonym, he undergoes a metamorphosis (apart from the freezing of his assets that "Chillingworth" implies). His "old studies in alchemy" define his character (p. 51). Not stability but transformation is his hallmark, as it will become Pearl's.

This is not to deny his primary role in the novel. Despite his mutability (or as another sign of it). Chillingworth holds a perverse authority over the other characters and represents the most legitimate class in their Puritan society. The patriarchal leaders and historical figures Governor Bellingham and the Reverend John Wilson keep company with him. and though they do not necessarily believe Chillingworth to be of the Elect (one of God's chosen for salvation), the "elder ministers of Boston and deacons of [Dimmesdale's] church" deem it "providential" that Chillingworth should be Dimmesdale's private physician (p. 84). "Providential": so if Chillingworth is not exactly of God, he is at least commissioned by God. Additionally, Chillingworth in seeking revenge appoints himself to a God-like, law-bearing role. His mission is to uncover the name of the father who has transgressed against Puritan law. In short, his function is to name Pearl. Naming is central not merely to The Scarlet Letter but to illegitimacy generally. Furthermore, it suggests Puritan Election—having one's name written on God's invisible
roll—a concept relevant to the story’s setting and suggestive of another way in which this theme resonates throughout the novel.

Our first view of Chillingworth, like later views, is filtered through Hester’s considerable bias against him. Even so, what we first observe about him underscores his mutable nature. When he steps out of the wilderness and into the Boston marketplace, he is positioned so as to appear figuratively illegitimate, standing beside his “Indian attendant” at the forest verge, physically marginalized at the “outskirts” of a crowd, hoping to be “redeemed out of [his] captivity” (p. 43). He arrives at a place where he expects to discover his wife and property and reclaim his identity as a member of a family. Separated from Hester for two years, he shouldn’t be surprised to discover that they have produced a child of two or three years of age. As he comes to understand that the object of the crowd’s attention is a young mother—his wife—standing on a scaffold and holding not a toddler but a squalling infant, he is stripped of any hope of re-identification.

Beneath the surface of this non-reunion lies the Hathorne family romance. We can imagine Elizabeth and her children—Ebe and the five-month old Nathaniel—greeting Captain Hathorne in the fall of 1804. Unlike the captain, Chillingworth reacts to the sight of his wife with a child with a repulsion physically manifested as a “writhing horror” that twists “itself across his features, like a snake gliding swiftly over them” (p. 44). T. Walter Herbert describes Chillingworth’s response as masturbatory: the “snake-like writhing” is an intimation of the “erotic energy invested both in the hidden feelings and in the compulsion to keep them concealed.” According to Herbert, Chillingworth’s reaction imitates the sexual transgression and consummation that have resulted in Hester’s infamy. But Herbert’s analysis is especially astute if we imagine Chillingworth unconsciously replicating Pearl’s procreation: claiming her on a visceral level.

Recovering his rational faculties, Chillingworth begins his interrogation of the scene by asking a townsman, “Tell me of Hester Prynne—have I her name rightly—of this woman’s offences” (p. 44). He, by rights, does “have” her name. The Bostonian’s reply is worth noting in full:

Yonder woman, Sir. you must know, was the wife of a certain learned man, English by birth, but who had long dwelt in Amsterdam, whence, some good time ago, he was minded to cross over and cast in his lot with us of the Massachusetts. To this purpose, he sent his wife before him, remaining himself to look after some necessary affairs. Marry good Sir, in some two years, or less, that the woman has been a dweller here in Boston, no tidings have come of this learned gentleman. Master Prynne, and his young wife, look you, being left to her own misguidance. (p. 45)

Hawthorne’s verbal playfulness here, “you must know,” “necessary affairs,” and “Marry good Sir.” feeds into Chillingworth’s surprised response. a
climactic "Ah–aha!–I conceive you." and sets up additional symbolic engenderings. The Bostonian continues, speculating as to whether Master Prynne is alive or dead: "If he be still in life." or "at the bottom of the sea." Which is it? Chillingworth could immediately decide the question by asserting his legitimate identity. Instead, he joins Hester’s silence, opening the door for his abandonment of the former name and mastery of "Master Prynne." In other words, he seizes on the coincidence of his anonymous arrival with Hester’s humiliation as an opportunity to de-legitimize himself. By vacating his name. Chillingworth drains it of significance, un-naming both Hester and Pearl. announcing, in effect, "this woman is not my wife" and "this child is not my child."

Hawthorne’s ambivalence manifests itself here as hesitation. Chillingworth’s attire—a strange disarray of civilized and savage costume—and Indian escort open a small window of opportunity through which we may imagine him as an emerging American hero—earthborn like Cooper’s Natty Bumppo, adopting a pseudonym like Melville’s Ishmael, possibly about to turn around and light out for the territories like Twain’s Huck Finn. He could also return to the Old World where, as the inheritance with which he endows Pearl later informs us, he has amassed property. He takes none of these actions; instead, he is a study in ambivalence. He first gestures to Hester to keep silent, but then calls out, "Speak, and give your child a father!" (p. 49), risking that she will identify him. Does he invite her to do so? Hester, "turning pale as death" at the sound of his voice, "which she too surely recognized," invokes instead a "Heavenly Father" for her child and promises that "she will never know an earthly one."

Though he would seem to have made his choice, Chillingworth continues to hesitate on the threshold of possibility. The apparent unraveling of identity and legitimacy begun in the marketplace where he first encounters his wife continues when they share a residence in the Boston prison. This lodging represents to Chillingworth merely a realistic aspect of Puritan hospitality. "the most convenient and suitable mode of disposing of him" until his "ransom" has been agreed upon (p. 50). For Hester, the prison is mercilessly oppressive. Within her cell she considers both suicide and infanticide. Oddly, it is Chillingworth’s mission to restore mother and child. And he does. In fact, here we witness a "male birth" typical in the literature of bastardy, nearly so dramatic a male birth as when Mr. Earnshaw in Wuthering Heights opens his coat to reveal the child Heathcliff. The scene in The Scarlet Letter again underscores the resemblance between Chillingworth and Pearl. Earlier, Chillingworth was crippled by "a writhing horror." a "convulsion" (p. 44), now the infant "writhe[s] in convulsions" (p. 50), as much a "forcible type" of Chillingworth’s earlier "moral agony," as she is of her mother’s. Called on for his medical skills, Chillingworth balks: "Here, woman! The child is yours,—she is none of mine. neither will she recognize my voice or aspect as
a father’s” (p. 51). Hawthorne could have omitted “as a father’s”; he could have written, “as a physician’s” or “as a friend’s.” The authorial choice nudges us to notice Chillingworth’s loss. When Hester refuses to give her husband’s potion to Pearl, he must concede to give it himself and he expresses what I construe as longing: “were it my child—yea. mine own, as well as thine!—I could do no better for it.”

Hawthorne presents Chillingworth ambivalently. He has Chillingworth speak to Hester “half coldly, half soothingly” (p. 51; emphasis added). “Thy acts are like mercy.” Hester notices, though she continues, “But thy words interpret thee as a terror!” (p. 54). Most readers agree with her second finding: they declare Chillingworth nastily asexual and react with horror to any suggestion of his parenting Pearl. David Reynolds lumps him with other “frigid villains” such as Rappaccini who poisons his beautiful, motherless daughter in the earlier Hawthorne tale. The notion that Chillingworth is inherently evil leads some readers to believe that Hester escaped from her husband to come to Boston: Chillingworth’s aforementioned surprise at the Bostonian’s story perhaps allows us to think so. However, she has kept his name, and her neighbors know her story. Hawthorne’s narrator tells us that she had come ahead of her husband to prepare a home. Furthermore, on our first glimpse of him back in the marketplace. Chillingworth is neither crippled nor old, nor is he monstrously deformed as he appears to Hester seven years later. George Eliot’s characters Adam Bede and Silas Marner overcome similar deficiencies, but in this novel, physical incapacity is damning. Notice, though, that despite Chillingworth’s appearance in Hester’s memory—“well-stricken in years”—Hawthorne’s narrator remonstrates that he “could hardly be termed aged” (p. 43). As to whether Chillingworth is asexual or impotent (arguments that various readers have made), he has chosen a given name. Roger, which was a colonial epithet for adulterous intercourse or rape. Regardless of how we view him, he views himself as a potent force, a male rival of Hester’s unnamed lover.

In the prison Chillingworth says that if Pearl were his own, he could “do no better” for her (p. 51). Nonetheless, I am building a case in which he could do better for his wife’s child. Hester has offended her husband by having an adulterous affair, yet her lover has done nothing to support her emotionally or financially. Despite her later assertion of the “consecration” of her sexual union with Dimmesdale (p. 133), she has formed neither a new marriage nor any lasting bond. What would happen if Chillingworth, invoking the colonial laws of coverture, declared his true identity, and reunited with Hester? Such a resolution would be, one assumes, not in Hester’s best interests. Even so, Hawthorne has embedded his characters in an era when the governing bodies nearly insisted that a husband take responsibility for his wife’s actions. As the character most allied to the office of law-giver, this seems Chillingworth’s obvious duty. Could Hester acquiesce to be rescued? Would
Master Prynne then spend his autumnal years at the hearth he feels robbed of: entertained by the antics of a lively and legitimate(d) child (like Silas Marner), doted on by a grateful wife?

I meet with considerable resistance when presenting Chillingworth as an alternative for Pearl’s social father. But, while The Scarlet Letter does not encourage the likelihood of Chillingworth’s reintegration into the human family, other novels do admit such possibilities and thus they demonstrate choices Hawthorne doesn’t make. In Hobomok (1824), L. Maria Child allows one lover, the heroine’s Narragansett Indian husband and the father of her child, to step aside when her former lover, an Englishman, returns. Because he has been thought lost at sea and given up for dead (as has Chillingworth), the Englishman views his fiancée’s infidelity in the most generous light. In Silas Marner (1853), George Eliot seems deliberately to recuperate and redeem Chillingworth, writing of a crippled protagonist who has been duped and jilted, a miser who one day finds his gold happily replaced by a golden-haired toddler. In Adam Bede (1859), Eliot makes the interloper her protagonist, describing Adam at the novel’s beginning as older and with a shoulder deformed similarly to Chillingworth’s as he first appears in the marketplace. The allusion seems deliberate (Eliot’s adulterous characters are named Arthur and Hester), yet Adam overcomes this description to emerge as a heroic protagonist. A much darker British vision is Thomas Hardy’s The Mayor of Casterbridge (1886) in which the protagonist in a drunken rage sells his wife and daughter to a stranger, only to make a home for them years later when his ailing wife returns with a teenaged girl—a girl whom he vainly wishes were his lost biological child. In Henry James’s Portrait of a Lady (1881), Isabel Archer sacrifices her romantic potential in order to parent her adolescent step-daughter, her husband’s bastard child. Similarly, Edith Wharton’s Summer (1917) can be read as a recuperation of Hawthorne’s theme, a story resolved—albeit unsatisfactorily—when a young woman’s foster father marries her after she is impregnated and abandoned by another, younger lover. Wharton’s Charity and lawyer Royall carry on Hawthorne’s vexing ambiguity and ambivalence. Although some readers are incensed by Royall’s apparent entrapment of his stupified ward, others applaud Charity’s good sense in appropriating Royall’s legitimacy for her unborn child.30

Is there any likelihood that the Chillingworth Hawthorne presents to us could be reintegrated into the human family—even in so vexed a manner? If we are led by Hester’s repugnance at reunion with her husband (though her repugnance can be no greater than Isabel’s at rejoining Osmond, or Charity’s at marrying lawyer Royall), Chillingworth seems nonetheless perched on the verge of just such an action. The narration lingers over the image of Pearl fallen into a “dewy slumber” in his arms (p. 51). Having ministered to Pearl and Hester’s physical needs (the sort of act, after all, that builds attachment), Chillingworth suggests an even more radical alternate family than one in
which an emotional or societal parent takes the place of a biological one: “Here on the wild outskirt of the earth, I shall pitch my tent: for, elsewhere a wanderer, and isolated from human interests. I find here a woman, a man, a child, amongst whom and myself there exist the closest ligaments ... Thou and thine, Hester Prynne, belong to me. My home is where thou art, and where he is” (p. 54). Despite all else that transpires in this scene, here Chillingworth has said, explicitly, that Hester, her child, and her lover comprise his home. They are his family. Read unsympathetically, his pledge to her seems wholly perverse—he uses the language of ownership and slavery. Read sympathetically, Chillingworth’s oath creates an important moment for my argument. For good or ill, ownership underlies patriarchal conceptions of the family, and in using the intimate pronouns “thou” and “thine,” Chillingworth seems to be reimagining a family for himself. Similarly, Chillingworth’s “closest ligaments” resonate with the “lig” of religion, both of which derive from *ligare*, to bind. His diction may remind us of the biblical story of Ruth who, despite her husband’s death without progeny, remains loyal to her mother-in-law: “Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go: and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God, my God: where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if thou art but death part thee and me” (Ruth 1: 16-17). Chillingworth, too, is loyal: he will remain by Hester’s side until death parts them.

A reconstituted family along the lines of *Silas Marner* does not seem possible here. In the same speech, Prynne-Chillingworth overturns his chance for a new domestic religion, refusing to “encounter the dishonor that besmirches the husband of a faithless woman” (p. 54). Possessing “the lock and key of her silence” (p. 81), Master Prynne then “vanish[es] out of life as completely as if he indeed lay at the bottom of the ocean whither rumor had long ago consigned him” (p. 82). That his identity should be lost in the vastness of the ocean is, of course, significant to Hawthorne’s early loss of his father. And, like the lost father, Chillingworth—in abandoning this family group potentially encompassing himself, his wife, her lover, and her child—takes on a tremendous power to haunt.

Chillingworth’s symbolic power exacts a steep price. Consider, in contrast, Pearl’s effect on Hester. Although Sacvan Bercovitch (along with Hawthorne’s narrator) argues that it is the office of the scarlet letter to domesticate Hester, “I find (as does Baym) that what stitches Hester back into the fabric of the human family is not the letter, but Pearl. Helping her to command her more radical instincts, the child softens Hester’s heart and enables her to endure and partake in her oppressive community. Hester is a model for reintegration in more ways than one. for, as Michael Ragussis asserts in *Acts of Naming: The Family Plot in Fiction*, “to recognize publicly one’s kindred is the moral concomitant to engendering, defining the family
not merely biologically but morally.” In these terms, refusing to publicly recognize Pearl and Hester is disastrous for Dimmesdale, but refusing Pearl is equally disastrous for Chillingworth. His tragedy is Dimmesdale’s, and more, for while Dimmesdale knows unambiguously that he must confess his sin and paternity (though he takes seven years to do it). Chillingworth fails to understand the nature of his own tragedy. In attempting to reveal the genetic father of his wife’s child’s he works toward the wrong end, and he obscures his own potential. Although she is solely burdened with Pearl’s care and financial support, Hester, the illegitimated mother, has a more legitimate life than either Dimmesdale or Chillingworth.

His adoption of a pseudonym does not end Chillingworth’s opportunities to name himself Hester’s husband and Pearl’s father. Moreover, in later scenes we continue to glimpse a potential for Hester to reassess Chillingworth. The first opportunity occurs when Pearl is three years old and refuses to be catechized by the Puritan elders. Chillingworth is, arguably, her only sympathetic onlooker, showing a grandfather’s amusement at Pearl’s antics. Despite his smiles—I’m stubbornly interpreting his smile as genuine rather than devilish—Hester perceives only how ugly Chillingworth is, “how his dark complexion seemed to have grown duskier, and his figure more misshapen” (p. 77). Hawthorne demurs to depict her consciously assessing Chillingworth’s potential to assist her, but the images convey exactly this potential: about to lose her child, desperate for some action. Hester turns to Dimmesdale only after first appraising and rejecting Chillingworth.

Another opportunity for appraisal occurs in the second scaffold scene when Pearl is seven years old and Chillingworth stands once more at the margin of the biologically-bound group. Again, the images conjure the possibility for his acceptance, this time by little Pearl. While Pearl and Hester stand at midnight with Dimmesdale, Pearl twice draws her hand out of Dimmesdale’s to point at “old Roger Chillingworth” (pp. 106, 107). Her gesture both accuses and includes him. For his part, Chillingworth stands watching as if “to claim his own” (p. 107). As in the Governor’s hall, the ambiguity and ambivalence of his interest render his appearance ghastly. We cannot understand his motives, though we may guess at them, particularly because in this scene Dimmesdale perceives him for the first time as an “arch-fiend.” The uncanny vividness of his expression, or the intensity of “the minister’s perception of it...” remains “painted on the darkness,” a Cheshire cat grin. This would seem to complicate any hope of reinterpretation. Through whose perspective, however, do we view Chillingworth?

Soon after the second scaffold scene, when Hester confronts him on the ocean shore, Chillingworth undergoes a moment of tragic self-recognition. Legitimacy is identity, and mirrors are literal and figurative reflections of identity; thus, in *The Scarlet Letter* (as in “The Custom-House”), mirrors are unreliable. While specchifying about human hearts and fiends.
Chillingworth is suddenly stopped—he sees another face “usurping the place of his own image in a glass” (p. 117). The moment resembles an earlier one in which Hester seems to glimpse a fiend “peeping out” from Pearl’s eyes (p. 68). The earlier scene matters. Both Chillingworth and Dimmesdale look at Pearl, hoping and dreading to see a reflection of her genetic father: Hester, on the other hand, gazes into the lens of her daughter’s eyes and sees what she does not expect. I have always thought that she sees a “fiend” where she would expect to see her own image reflected, but Budick suggests another possibility: that Hester expects to see Dimmesdale reflected in Pearl’s features and instead sees Chillingworth (p. 26). In the scene on the seashore as well, the gazer looks as if into a mirror and sees something other than what ought to be reflected there. For Chillingworth. “It was one of those moments . . . when a man’s moral aspect is faithfully revealed to his mind’s eye” (p. 117). A humanist would call him fortunate: “Not improbably, he had never before viewed himself as he did now.” It is a potential turning point, another chance for redemption.

This brief moment at which the novel reveals Chillingworth’s perspective has consequences for the scene that unfolds from it. Hester’s response to Chillingworth’s discomfort suggests an extent to Mr. and Mrs. Prynne’s previous intimacy not previously revealed. Despite their estrangement of nine years, she discerns his vulnerability and takes advantage, asking mercy: “Has he [Dimmesdale] not paid thee all?” (p. 117). “No!” Chillingworth responds. “He has but increased the debt!” (p. 118). But then, Chillingworth, grappling with his identity, abandons the economic metaphor and reminds Hester, “Dost thou remember me?—Was I not, though you might deem me cold, nevertheless a man thoughtful of others, craving little for himself—kind, true, just, and of constant, if not warm affections. Was I not all this?” Hester’s response should surprise us: “All this, and more.” If she doesn’t consider re-legitimating her marriage, Hester at the very least in this scene invokes an honest emotional response from Chillingworth. She anguishs that there is “not good” for anyone involved, but Chillingworth admits pity for Hester and feels “a thrill of admiration” for her. Her speech becomes conciliatory. She seems about to bargain with Chillingworth. Would she offer her companionship and that of her daughter for Chillingworth’s pardon of her lover? “[B]e once more human” she entreats him, and, overturning her previous exclamation, promises, “There might be good for thee, and for thee alone” (p. 119). Reconciliation seems an unlikely extremity... yet she attempts to enlist Chillingworth’s support and uses the vocabulary of her daughter’s naming (the Pearl of great price) when she asks, “Wilt thou reject that priceless benefit?” If Chillingworth hears duplicity in her offer, he ignores it. Responding to the sympathy he chooses instead to discern, he offers absolution: “Ye . . . are not sinful . . . neither am I fiend-like.”
His priestly words of compassion leave Hester unconvinced. Illegitimate, unredeemed, cuckolded, stripped of his proper name, Chillingworth has, indeed, become a fiend. His eyes glare red. His appearance is monstrous: "a deformed old figure, with a face that haunted men's memories longer than they liked" (p. 119). When he parts from Hester, he goes "stooping away along the earth" more like a devil than a man. We may wish to notice that Hawthorne, like Hester, has consistently marshaled conventional prejudices against Chillingworth—he is ugly, "dusky," deformed, and he spends too much time thinking. For some readers, these are reasons enough to dislike him. I want to make obvious, however, our reaction. Particularly because our sympathy is here entwined with Hester's, it is suspect. Without pausing to analyze the exchange between them, she resists the domestic peace she previously admitted of her marriage. "Be it sin or no," she now says bitterly, "I hate the man!" (p. 120).

Perhaps it is Chillingworth's fiend-like appearance that prompts Hawthorne to have him described next by the shipmaster, who, as I have suggested, also stands in for him. The interaction between the shipmaster and Pearl encapsulates the relationship that soon unfolds between Pearl and Chillingworth. Signifying Chillingworth's wealth, the gold chain given to her by the shipmaster is perfectly suited to Pearl's form. That she should possess it, we are told, is natural, like a genetic inheritance (p. 166). Booking passage with Dimmesdale, Hester, and Pearl back to the Old World, Chillingworth suggests—once more—that the four principal characters form a family unit.

A Family "at last"

One important result of The Scarlet Letter's infamous ambiguity resides in how critics persist in choosing and rechoosing Pearl's "real" father. They persist despite Hawthorne's explicit revelation to the reader of the relationships between Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth and despite Hawthorne's explicit refusal to favor one father over the other. Most favor Dimmesdale: Myra Jehlen says of "the minister, the adulteress and their child" that they are "at last a family"; Bercovitch proclaims Dimmesdale to be "now openly [Pearl's] father at last" (p. 202). Budick seems to claim just the opposite when she asserts that "fathers may be official ancestors rather than genetic ones" (p. 19). She adds, "The confrontation with illegitimacy and doubt does not mean that the son ought now to divest himself of his parents. On the contrary, he has to acknowledge and affirm both of them."

I find Hawthorne invoking neither an official nor a genetic father. Not choosing reiterates Hawthorne's childhood drama, in a sense affirms it, by leaving Pearl unfathered. With this humanizing kiss, Dimmesdale does claim Pearl and acknowledge her as a daughter—"at last" in the words of Jehlen and Bercovitch. I find it interesting that the language and imagery of the final
scaffold scene manipulate our impression of Pearl’s fate even when subsequent events contradict it. It’s an iconic scene, heavily freighted as if with religious imagery. Like a painted tile bearing a saint’s image, the moment makes a powerful impression on observers: “Pearl kissed his lips. A spell was broken. The great scene of grief, in which the wild infant bore a part, had developed all her sympathies: and as her tears fell upon her father’s cheek, they were the pledge that she would grow up amid human joy and sorrow, nor for ever do battle with the world, but be a woman in it” (p. 173)

Like an icon, however, what transpires here is frangible. Despite his ownership of “her father’s cheek,” and the passive extraction of Pearl’s “pledge,” Dimmesdale’s confession is penultimate to Chillingworth’s final word, the willing of a “very considerable amount of property, both here and in England” to Pearl (p. 176). Dimmesdale may claim Pearl, but the aftermath, his death, orphans her. He leaves Pearl no estate, physical or spiritual. He leaves her even less than Hawthorne’s father left him (a ship’s log and a gun, remember, but also a family beyond his mother). Regardless of its attempt to resonate. Chillingworth’s legacy shatters the image communicated through Dimmesdale’s reception of Pearl’s kiss. The kiss may have enabled Pearl to grow up to “be a woman” (p. 173), but she is not fully human until she receives Chillingworth’s legacy: “So Pearl—the elf-child,—the demon offspring, as some people, up to that epoch [i.e., beyond the scaffold scene], persisted in considering her—became the richest heiress of her day, in the New World” (p. 176). More important. Chillingworth’s estate effects “a material change” so that, “little Pearl, at a marriageable period of life, might have mingled her wild blood with the lineage of the devoutest Puritan among them all.” Dimmesdale’s kiss fails to confer such legitimacy as this.

Only Chillingworth can turn wild Pearl into “Pearl Prynne.” In death, he becomes her social father, the father who endows her, the father society recognizes. What change does he effect on his own behalf? A final, usually ignored difficulty with the inheritance he leaves Pearl is the paper trail that must accompany it. (And one function of “The Custom-House” is to emphasize that paper trails existed in the seventeenth century.) Has Chillingworth been steadily amassing his fortune in land while also pursuing his revenge? Or has he managed to alter his name from “Prynne” to “Chillingworth” on previously held deeds? His legal executors, Governor Bellingham and Reverend Wilson (p. 176), are booked for surprising discoveries. Legitimacy for Chillingworth has far-reaching consequences. for a reassessment of his status must undo the motive and inspiration of how we have understood Hester’s self-imposed, nun-like devotion to the Puritan community. Noticing Chillingworth’s late-won legitimacy also shatters our faith in the apparent legitimating effect of Dimmesdale’s confession.

Although its effects on Hester and Dimmesdale often slip by without comment, Chillingworth’s final action, when we pay attention to it, begets an
alteration of identity deeply upsetting to our understanding of Pearl’s character. Harry Levin transports her to a new aesthetic altogether, suggesting that when we learn “that [Pearl] grew up an heiress and traveled abroad, we realize that we can pursue her further adventures through the novels of Henry James.” and Edwin Haviland Miller calls this a “happy suggestion”: however, those familiar with James’s Daisy Miller, Isabel Archer, or Catherine Sloper know only too well the reasons why a Jamesian father sends a daughter to Europe, and what happens to her there. Europe is anticipated as a civilizing adventure, a way to cultivate class in a young woman ostensibly from a class-less society. It is also a way to break her spirit. James’s Daisy, for instance, becomes too well contained, bounded by “the little Protestant cemetery, in an angle of the wall of imperial Rome.” Catherine Sloper’s fate seems no better. James’s only literally illegitimate female figure, Pansy Osmond in Portrait of a Lady (even called “Pearl” at some point), is similarly contained—locked up in a convent because she will not agree to make the sort of brilliant, financially advantageous marriage her father prefers for her. Budick writes of Isabel Archer, whom she calls James’s “latter-day Pearl,” that she “comes back to the land of her fathers” (Europe?) and makes a marriage that “characterizes Hester’s own marriage to Chillingworth [and] anticipates elements of Freud’s family romance” (p. 22).

Speculation about Pearl’s life can, unfortunately, go no further than do any of James’s unfortunate young women. The bequest may return her to a “fatherland,” but Pearl returns neither to England, nor to Chillingworth’s specific property which is unambiguously located “here and in England” (p. 176). Nor does she return to Hester’s “paternal home” in “Old England” (p. 42). Whether she is “gone untimely to a maiden grave,” or “still in life” (with Hawthorne as with James, to be “still” is not an attractive alternative to the maiden grave), we can say for certain only that Pearl has lost her attractive mutability (the flip side of Chillingworth’s unattractive mutability) and is no longer part of the American democratic project. Looked at in this way, the previous, nearly tacit assumption that Roger Chillingworth’s legacy enables Pearl to escape Puritan America becomes problematic. Hawthorne’s conception of Pearl’s inheritance is ambiguous. Like the shipmaster’s chain, it destroys her autonomy. In the context of Hawthorne’s personal history as well (the denial of his father’s body and a Salem gravesite), it matters that Pearl’s body does not return home to New England.

Hawthorne’s imaginative construct of America is so pervasive throughout the novel that Pearl’s exemption, merely of itself, is troubling. How can we imagine in The Scarlet Letter any resolution outside America, or indeed—in Richard Poirier’s phrase—any “world elsewhere”? Scholars quibble about why Hester returns to New England, but to my mind, she can no more escape Puritan America than can Milton’s Satan escape Hell. Yet Pearl, we are asked to believe, escapes—even transcends—the lessons her peculiar culture has
inculcated in her. The impact of Pearl's absence is attenuated via Hester's return, but as surely as the name of the father was withheld at the outset, the body of the new mother—for whose infant, the narrator suggests, Hester "embroider[s] a baby-garment, with . . . a lavish richness of golden fancy" (p. 177)—is also withheld. Banished. Pearl continues to dramatize the crisis that the presence of two fathers implies: she belongs nowhere. As Herbert notes, "Hawthorne's conclusion exempts Pearl from the dilemmas that the book portrays but fails to resolve them" (p. 204). Under scrutiny, her exemption only heightens those dilemmas.

As I have said, few readers are willing to long entertain the thought that Chillingworth could claim Pearl. Nonetheless, Hawthorne (unlike Hester) seems to me careful never to completely disallow his potential. And the limits of Hawthorne's refusal to turn completely against his fiendish villain reach to the novel's closing words. Here he further "resolves" the plot of The Scarlet Letter by laying his heroine to rest beside a grave, "an old and sunken one," "but set apart—'with a space between as though [the graves] had no right to touch'" (p. 178), and beneath a single tombstone engraved with the letter A. More than one scholar has noted that with this conclusion Hawthorne imaginatively reconstructs his mother's death and reunites his parents. But whose grave is this?

Our refusal to credit Chillingworth with human potential causes us to look away as Hawthorne's ambivalence unfolds into the final image of the grave. Although generations of readers have assumed that she shares the A with Dimmesdale, should we assume that Puritan Boston would lay to rest even their able, angelic adulteress beside their late, beloved pastor? That we persist in choosing this option for Hester is a credit to Hawthorne's ambivalence—and craft. Warning us that "the curious investigator may still discern and perplex himself with the purport," Hawthorne describes the "engraved escutcheon" bearing the legend, "ON A FIELD, SABLE. THE LETTER A. GULES" (p. 178). Readers are not willing to be perplexed. For instance, in an otherwise excellent psychoanalytic reading of The Scarlet Letter, Joanne Feit Diehl assumes that in the graves "the two lovers [rest] . . . side by side." \(^2\)

Via this closing image, Diehl writes, "Hawthorne reiterates the resilience of what the A symbolizes: the desire for contract and reunion with the forbidden" (p. 250). But wouldn't Puritan Boston more likely bury Hester beside the man who—in endowing her daughter—has named himself "husband." and named himself "Roger Prymce"? The A would then symbolize the importance of the letter of the law. I find insufficient evidence to make this claim any stronger. However, rather than affirming the A's resilience, as Diehl argues, the now apparent ambivalence of the graves may challenge us to rethink our assumptions. Perhaps Surveyor Pue's exhumed body in "The Custom-House" is meant to suggest the necessity and utility of another exhumation?
Like the sexualized motif of the grave marker, Hawthorne’s ambivalence toward Chillingworth’s character fosters not resolution but increased ambiguity. The idea of Chillingworth reunited with his lawful wife is, after all, thoroughly ambiguous and thoroughly pessimistic: “Prynne” does not appear on the tombstone any more than it graces the names of Pearl’s legitimate descendents (who will bear her husband’s name). Neither can we settle (or unsettle) the question in favor of Chillingworth’s body over Dimmesdale’s. Hawthorne doesn’t say which man’s body lies beside Hester’s. Perhaps it doesn’t matter.

Finally, I find resting in the mystery of this moment a more satisfying alternative than the false critical resolution usually ascribed. I find it so because it bears more psychological truth in regard to Hawthorne’s identity theme than does a clearly unambiguous reunion of the lovers’ bodies. Was Hawthorne’s “father” the never present sea-captain whose genetic material he shared, or was it a father figure such as Robert Manning, his paternalistic, intrusive uncle? Once realized, the seemingly perverse sleight of hand in the King’s Chapel burying ground, and in The Scarlet Letter’s closing idea, compels us to reexamine the biography while insisting that we will find no answers there. Via this refusal to name, Hawthorne inscribes not a father so much, or fathers, as his own inconquerable ambivalence toward them.

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NOTES

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2 As is well known in Hawthorne studies, Hawthorne added the W sometime in the 1820s. The W either restored the name to its British and thus more aristocratic spelling (perhaps enhancing the correct pronunciation), or it repudiated his father’s identity along with that of Hawthorne’s severely Puritan paternal ancestors depicted though not named in “The Custom-House.” In small, then, the drama of Hawthorne’s name reflects his life-long struggle with being the male scion of his family while feeling a pervasive sense of alienation from both houses.


12 Lauren Berlant. In *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1991), argues that all of Hawthorne’s heroines are “uncanny, paradoxical, politically unintelligible” (p. 9), and David S. Reynolds, in *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1988), asserts that Hester has “no absolute meaning or distinct authorial attitude” but is instead a “multifaceted heroine in whom [numerous] types [are] artistically fused” (p. 375). I find these interpretations useful, but in comparison to Pearl, Hester seems to tend toward stasis, becoming rigid in her beliefs and statue-like in her appearance as a result of wearing the scarlet letter. Her eventual return to Puritan America confirms this interpretation.

13 One assumes, at least, that Captain Hathorne did not react with repulsion to his infant son, but this is only an assumption. One possible conclusion of Baym’s bridging pregnancy hypothesis is to infer that Elizabeth’s husband came to share his family’s coolness toward her. To view the situation from another direction, as Hathorne’s employment was inadequate to support a family, he may have been distressed to discover that they had produced a second child. Such conjectures, though tentative, suggest further possibilities for the deep ambivalence inherent in Hawthorne’s fictional father figures.

Not so far-fetched a thought. In his 1972 film adaptation of the novel, Der Schwallachote Buchstabe, Wim Wenders does cast Chillingworth as a frontiersman.

Reynolds, p. 178.

See for instance Bigsby’s Hester, in which Hester indeed comes to America to escape from Chillingworth.


Coverture, a concept borrowed in America from English common law, means simply that a husband’s identity incorporated that of the wife, making them one legal body.


Elaborating on yet another non-biological family—Joseph, Mary, and Jesus—Budick further corroborates my view of Chillingworth: “By seeing Chillingworth in Pearl, Hester [repaired] her broken marriage to Chillingworth. Hester would reestablish the child’s legitimacy by fantasizing a new law of reproduction” (p. 27).


I should credit Adam Bede for provoking my thoughts on this subject. When Eliot’s Hester, Hetty Sorrel, unwittingly causes the death of her premature, illegitimate child, Eliot first condemns her to death then banishes her for life to Australia. When her sentence is commuted seven years later (a number of years significant to the plot of The Scarlet Letter), Hetty attempts to return but dies in a shipwreck. As a conflation of Hester and Pearl, Hetty underscores the significance of Hester’s return to America and Pearl’s failure to return.

In which case, Chillingworth's gravestone with "Prynne" prominently displayed is one detail Demi Moore's 1997 movie almost got right.

Having once looked at the grave site in this way, I have difficulty seeing it in any other. I have in mind a Wuthering Heights, Heathcliff-like contention of the dead Chillingworth for proximity to his wife's body.