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Divided Paternity: *The Scarlet Letter*'s Unstable American Father

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Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2011

Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to Martin Kevorkian for the time he spent considering various incarnations of this project, and to Phillip Barrish for his thoughtful recommendations.

Abstract

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2011

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This essay seeks to explore the various representations of fatherhood in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Although *The Scarlet Letter* is Hawthorne's most-studied text, very little critical attention has been paid to Hawthorne's rendering of paternity in the story. This essay attempts to fill that void by examining the roles of the many father figures in the novel. I argue that Hawthorne's anxiety about fatherhood, made manifest by his constant doubling and expunging of father figures, dominates the narratives of both *The Scarlet Letter* and "The Custom-House," binding the texts together and providing the framework of the novel. The structure of *The Scarlet Letter* relies on Hawthorne's continual introduction of potential fathers for Pearl, auditioning and discarding various paternal models – a process that carries implications both for Pearl, and for American fatherhood. I further contend that the figure of the absent father is a key thematic component of the American Renaissance as a whole, reflecting not only the authors' personal fears, but also their anxieties about England's paternal relationship to America – a concern that pervades the text of *The Scarlet Letter*.

Table of Contents

Text	1
Bibliography.....	23

Despite her crucial role in the story, Hawthorne's "elf-child" Pearl has remarkably little to say. Most of Pearl's remarks concern her provenance, as she ponders the various means by which she could have been created. Early in the novel, Pearl asserts that she "has no Heavenly Father," and two chapters further, that she was "plucked by her mother off the bush of wild roses."¹ She later queries her mother about the Black Man and whether Hester has gone "to meet him in the night-time," and finally, towards the novel's close, declares that "my father is the Prince of the Air!" (163, 216). Pearl's vacillations about paternity echo through the text of *The Scarlet Letter*, providing the novel's narrative framework and binding it to its preface, "The Custom-House," a text dominated and shaped by paternal uncertainty.

Paternalism weaves inexorably through the text of "The Custom-House." Over the course of the slim preface, Hawthorne tenders no fewer than seventeen iterations of various forms of patrilineage: "father," "forefather," "grandfather," "patriarch," "sire," "grandsire," "great-grandsire" (as well as three repetitions of the less familiarly specific "predecessor"). Initially, the narrative's fixation on familial succession merely seems to emphasize its setting, since the custom-house serves as a physical repository for heredity. But the exclusion of women from this sequence of ancestors is jarring, especially when contrasted with the novel to follow. Although the narrator claims that the records of family lineage lie "hidden away in [a] forgotten corner, never more to be glanced at by human eyes," in the text to come, Hawthorne will negate this statement by bringing the records of one particular family to the public's gaze, to be not merely glanced at, but

¹ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 1850. New York: Library of America, 1990, pp. 88 and 99. All further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically.

scrutinized and condemned (29). The reader of “The Custom-House,” however, anticipates no such familial narrative, since the scarlet letter that heralds the discovery of the tale is tied to only one character, Hester Prynne: “Prying farther into the manuscript, I found the record of other doings and sufferings of this *singular* woman, for most of which the reader is referred to the story entitled ‘THE SCARLET LETTER’” (32, emphasis mine). The reader is thus led to expect a story of one woman: the narrator’s adjective for Hester implies not only her uniqueness (as though she were the first literary adulteress), but also her solitude, as if she alone creates and sustains the plot of *The Scarlet Letter* without the aid of any such paternal figure as those dominating “The Custom-House.”

Aside from the promised Hester Prynne, only one maternal figure appears alongside the relentless parade of paternal possibilities in “The Custom-House”: Mother Nature. Yet even here, Hawthorne’s wording introduces the potential for masculinity: describing the custom-house Inspector, the narrator relates: “[he seemed] a kind of new contrivance of Mother Nature in the shape of man, whom age and infirmity had no business to touch” (19). The “shape of man” may refer to the “contrivance,” but it also may describe Mother Nature, a move that divests her of her femininity – and thus of her maternity. Hawthorne’s ardent emphasis on paternity in “The Custom-House” should strike us as an odd initiation to a novel that has been so scrutinized for its mother-daughter pairing. Hester and Pearl’s relationship has held critics’ attention for decades, inspiring varied readings on Hester’s maternity as well as on Hawthorne’s relationship

with his own mother, who died shortly before he began writing *The Scarlet Letter*.² Evan Carton claims that “ambivalent representations of women are the heart of Hawthorne’s fiction” (Carton 208). But the ambivalence that pervades “The Custom-House” throws the status of fathers, not mothers, into question, setting the stage for the action of *The Scarlet Letter*. The structure of the novel relies on Hawthorne’s continual introduction of potential fathers for Pearl, auditioning and discarding various paternal models – a process that carries implications not only for Pearl, but for American fatherhood.

Hawthorne and American Fatherhood (A is for Absent)

The absent father looms large over the American Renaissance. Hawthorne, Emerson, Poe, and Melville all lost their fathers at an early age, a coincidence that connects these authors not only personally, but thematically. Questions of American identity and American literary independence, key concerns of these writers’ texts, become still more complicated when considered through the lens of paternal loss. For Hawthorne, the premature death of his father had a profound impact on his work; as this essay attempts to show, the absent father forms the center of *The Scarlet Letter*. But several critics have argued that the nineteenth-century American father was undergoing a more general destabilization. According to Leland Person, “fatherhood became ‘part-time’ and a much less nurturing activity...the ideal of the father as sole ‘breadwinner’ imposed a ‘standard of performance that only a portion of fathers could expect to meet’” (Inscribing Paternity, 227, 229). Historian Stephen Frank makes a similar claim: “As

²Noteworthy treatments of the Hester/Pearl dynamic include Leland Person’s racialized reading of their relationship (“The Dark Labyrinth of Mind: Hawthorne, Hester, and the Ironies of Racial Mothering”) and James M. Mellard’s “Pearl and Hester: A Lacanian Reading.” In “Nathaniel Hawthorne and his Mother: A

men were drawn toward income-producing work, the separation of home and workplace imposed real constraints on nineteenth-century fathers” (3). Hawthorne was certainly not immune to such pressures, expressing considerable anxiety about the earning potential of his writing career: “It will never do for me to continue merely a writer of stories for the magazines – the most unprofitable business in the world. If I am to support myself by literature, it must be by what is called drudgery” (qtd in Person 229). Hawthorne began *The Scarlet Letter* within days of losing his job at the Salem custom house. For the first time in his life, his home was his sole workplace and writing his only job. The tension between his creative output and its monetary potential must have lingered over *The Scarlet Letter* as he wrote. Indeed, Michael Gilmore sees the novel as Hawthorne’s “attempt to come to terms with...apparently irreconcilable approaches toward writing for the marketplace” (72). And although Rose Hawthorne remembered her father as devoting himself “constantly to writing, whether it brought him money or not,” she allowed that “he did not write anything wholly for the pleasure of creative writing, but had moral motives and pure artistic harmony to consider” (Lathrop 439, 443). Whether or not his children realized it, those considerations were also financial.

Various critics have linked Hawthorne’s fatherhood to his authorship. Brenda Wineapple opens her biography of Hawthorne by summarizing the adult lives of Hawthorne’s three children, as though the offspring he fathered could provide the greatest insight into those he penned. But Leland Person claims that Hawthorne “had little interest in exerting patriarchal authority over either his actual or fictional progeny. If

Biographical Speculation,” Nina Baym argues that “The search for the lost *mother*, rather than the lost father, underlies much of the story patterning in [Hawthorne’s] mature fiction” (13).

anything, he identified creative power with women...and felt considerable unease about his own role in the creative process” (227). Hawthorne at various times equated motherhood and authorship: of his youngest daughter’s birth, he wrote, “Mrs. Hawthorne published a little work two months ago” (qtd in Sundquist 96). But Hawthorne grants himself equal childbearing potential by referring to early drafts of his writing as “unborn children” (qtd in Sundquist 96).

The paternal position of the author is complicated by the surveyor’s closing remarks that “the whole [of the novel] may be considered as the POSTHUMOUS PAPERS OF A DECAPITATED SURVEYOR; and the sketch which I am now bringing to a close...will readily be excused in a gentleman who writes from beyond the grave” (SL 42). By preemptively declaring the death of the author, the surveyor frames the ensuing novel as a fatherless text, negating the possibility of any communion between author and reader. But Eric Sundquist argues that, far from killing off the author, the Custom-House preface establishes Hawthorne as “birthing” the text, “yoking together as it does his confinement and his labor” (Sundquist 96). The creative properties of authorship complicate the narrator’s attempt to disengage the author from his text, instead merging authorship with paternity, and consequently with maternity and the capacity for creation. Hawthorne’s discomfort with the very act of authorship lingers throughout his text.

Hawthorne, however, remains consciously engaged as both father and author. He does not divorce himself from the texts he has produced, nor does he relinquish authority concerning their reception. He begins “The Custom-House” by imagining (and in so imagining, dictating) its “indulgent reader”: “when he casts his leaves forth upon the

wind, the author addresses...the few who will understand him, better than most of his schoolmates or lifemates” (SL 7). Continuing the parallel between authorship and childbearing, we must then consider whether there exists a corresponding “ideal reader” for one’s offspring. If, according to Hawthorne’s model, the father plays no role in the creative process of childbearing, does his role then become that of “ideal” recipient to the mother’s creative output? In that eventuality, *The Scarlet Letter*’s quest for a credible father becomes entangled in Hawthorne’s yearning for an responsive reader. Sundquist has argued that Hawthorne possesses a “wild fascination with doubles of himself...a constant sign of [his] fractured identity, whether personal or authorial” (Sundquist 93). By dividing Pearl’s sire among “seemingly opposed” paternal models, Hawthorne enacts his own destabilization as a father³ – or, to add still another possible signifier to the A on Hester’s breast, Hawthorne fixates on the absence of Pearl’s father as well as that of his own.⁴

Paternalism in “The Custom-House”

Both “The Custom-House” as a textual preface and the custom-house as a physical locale function as sites of destabilization. The narrator of “The Custom-House” prefigures the impossibility of identifying a single father/creator, instead introducing several possible paternal figures, including himself.⁵ As the overseer of the custom-house, he repeatedly emphasizes that his position towards his employees is “paternal and

³ Gloria Erlich also comments on Hawthorne’s doubling of parental figures in her discussion of “Wives of the Dead” (Erlich 108).

⁴See Dan McCall’s catalog of the various, “overly ingenious” meanings critics have attached to Hester’s A (McCall 47).

protective”(17). Yet the narrator is decades younger than the men he oversees, an incongruity that the narrator mocks: “It pained, and at the same time amused me, to see the terrors that attended my advent; to see a furrowed cheek, weather-beaten by half a century of storm, turn ashy pale at the sight of so harmless an individual as myself” (16). Here, “harmless” is understood to mean “young,” in contrast to the “furrowed” and “weather-beaten” men. The narrator represents an unstable father figure, technically holding the necessary authority, but lacking the social recognition of age. Immediately after introducing himself as the “paternal” overseer, the narrator proceeds to describe an elderly man whom he labels as the “father of the Custom-House—the patriarch” (18). The narrator appears to find no contradiction in their positions, yet his repeated use of “paternal” to describe himself and “patriarchal” to describe the old man reveals an underlying tension. Unlike the overseer, the old man possesses the necessary age for the role, but lacks any other paternal characteristics. He is described as animalistic, possessing “no power of thought, no depth of feeling, no troublesome sensibilities; nothing, in short, but a few commonplace instincts” (19). These instincts apparently do not include paternal protectiveness, since, of his twenty children, “most” are dead, “at every age of childhood or maturity,” proving him incapable of fulfilling the most fundamental requirement of fatherhood (19). Both potential fathers prove themselves inadequate: one through his age, one through his actions. The surveyor poses as a paternal figure to the men he oversees, but his youth renders him incongruous at best, and not a little presumptuous. The “patriarch” of the custom house, by contrast, is a “man of

⁵ Michael Gilmore argues for the presence of two Hawthornes in the text of “The Custom-House”: Hawthorne the “idler” and Hawthorne the “shrewd professional” (Gilmore 81). I believe that this process of

fourscore years,” yet he possesses “no power of thought, no depth of feeling, no troublesome sensibilities” (17). The paternal role is thus attenuated, split between two unfit candidates – a pattern that will recapitulate in the narrative of *The Scarlet Letter*.

The paternal relationships described in “The Custom-House” all presume a male heir, as in this comparison between merchant and clerk: “Here, likewise, -- the germ of the wrinkle-browed, grizzly-bearded, care-worn merchant, -- we have the smart young clerk” (10). That the clerk is the “germ” of the older man connotes not only the young man’s age and inexperience, but also suggests that within the clerk lies the potential to create the merchant, alluding to a cyclical relationship between father and son, a continuous circuit of male predecessors and progeny. But the relationship under paternal consideration in *The Scarlet Letter* is not father-son, but father-daughter, a pairing that lacks such continuous cyclical potential.

Naming Pearl’s Father

“I have no Heavenly Father” announces Pearl to her chagrined mother; and of course, the absence of any acknowledged father for Pearl, heavenly or corporeal, drives the narrative of *The Scarlet Letter* (88). But despite this fundamental plot point, little critical attention has been paid to the specter of Pearl’s absent father.⁶ Most critics have treated Hester and Pearl’s mother-daughter dynamic as devoid of a paternal presence.⁷ Lois Cuddy describes their situation as “a laboratory experiment of a mother-daughter

self-doubling reemerges in the bifurcated father figures.

⁶ Bethany Reid’s “Narrative of the Captivity and Redemption of Roger Prynne” acknowledges the existence of “numerous potential fathers” for Pearl, but focuses only on Chillingworth (Reid 247).

⁷ In her study “Hawthorne and Children,” Gillian Brown examines Hawthorne’s fictional father-daughter relationships in detail, but does not include Pearl in her analysis. Gloria Erlich’s chapter on Hawthornian

relationship uncomplicated by a father,” and Anke Brouwers declares, “In my reading of the novel Hawthorne places Hester’s relationship with Pearl as central” (Cuddy 103, Brouwers 257). Certainly, the first impression the reader gleans of Hester and Pearl is a one-sided scrutiny of motherhood, frozen in tableau. As Hester stands alone on the scaffold with Pearl in her arms, the narrator notes: “A Papist might have seen in this beautiful woman...an object to remind him of the image of Divine Maternity” (52). Associating Hester with the Madonna implies that she retained her virginity despite Pearl’s conception, negating the existence of any earthly sire. But this scene is presented not from the narrator’s perspective, but through the hypothetical eyes of a “Papist,” the epitome of a patriarchal figure. The mother-daughter relationship is from the beginning framed through paternal eyes. Despite the apparent holiness of the tableau, the narrator immediately contradicts its divinity, stating that “only by contrast” does Hester conjure the “sacred image of sinless motherhood.” Here, instead, the imagined Papist would find “the taint of deepest sin” – reinserting the menacing paternal promise contained in “The Custom-House” (52).

The split paternal role enacted by the surveyor and the “patriarch” of the custom-house recurs through the characters of Dimmesdale and Chillingworth. Like the dueling patriarchs of the custom-house, both Dimmesdale and Chillingworth hold some claim to paternity: Dimmesdale through genetics; Chillingworth through his marriage to Hester. To a twenty-first-century reader, Chillingworth’s claim seems feeble in comparison, and

fathers cites *The House of the Seven Gables*, “Wives of the Dead,” “Alice Doane’s Appeal,” and “Roger Malvin’s Burial,” but omits *The Scarlet Letter*.

many critics consider only Dimmesdale when discussing Pearl's father.⁸ But according to the law in colonial Massachusetts, the responsibility for Pearl's welfare would almost assuredly be split between the two men: Dimmesdale would most likely be required to pay reparations for her care, but physical custody would unquestionably belong to Chillingworth.⁹ As with the surveyor and patriarch, neither man is fit, legally or personally, to fill the paternal position alone. Moreover, both Chillingworth and Dimmesdale are required by the community to mediate the aftermath of Pearl's birth. Chillingworth's medical prowess is called upon to soothe the infant, while Dimmesdale's sermon is needed to "[bring] the listeners into one accord of sympathy" (61). Unlike the fathers of the custom-house, Dimmesdale and Chillingworth manage to combine their capabilities. As the narrative progresses, they become physically and psychologically amalgamated and begin to resemble two complementary sides of one man, occupying adjacent sides of the same home. Their relationship is nonetheless publicly defined in terms of paternity: the community sees Chillingworth as expressing a "paternal and reverential love for the young pastor" (111). But since neither man can claim paternal sovereignty over Pearl, they remain a nebulous, threatening paternal presence.

Since Pearl's father can be recognized neither by genetics nor by legality, the paternal figure therefore requires a mode of creation that circumvents such restrictive methods. Chillingworth himself identifies the need for the father to be *named*, recognized through performative speech. When Hester faces the public from her scaffolding, a series

⁸ David Leverenz, for example, sees Dimmesdale as "an extreme instance of the absent father" ("Mrs. Hawthorne's Headache," 570).

⁹ See Mary Ann Mason, *From Father's Property to Children's Rights: The History of Child Custody in the United States*, New York: Columbia UP, 1994, p. 22.

of voices implore her to “speak.” Dimmesdale first proclaims: “I charge thee to speak out the name of thy fellow-sinner and fellow-sufferer”; then Mr. Wilson repeats: “Speak out the name”; and finally “another voice...proceeding from the crowd” urges: “Speak! Speak and give your child a father!” (61-62). Though the voice is never identified, Hester’s reaction “to the voice she too surely recognized” reveals it to be Chillingworth (62). Chillingworth’s injunction changes the conditions of the demand: while Dimmesdale and Wilson are exhorting Hester to identify a specific name, Chillingworth is merely asking that she “speak,” and in doing so create a father for her child. The performative speech act will recognize a father where one had not previously existed, as opposed to naming a previously-established individual. Pearl later reinforces Hester’s sole authority in creating Pearl’s father when Hester asks Pearl, ““whence didst thou come?” ” and Pearl responds, ““Tell me! Tell me! ... It is *thou* that must tell me’ ” (88, italics mine).

Chillingworth and Dimmesdale continually reject Pearl as a daughter, but by doing so, they repeatedly renew their claim to her. When Chillingworth enters Hester’s prison cell in an attempt to assuage Pearl’s digestive symptoms, he immediately relinquishes any responsibility for the child: “Here, woman! The child is yours – she is none of mine – nor will she recognize my voice or aspect as a father’s” (65). Here, the onus falls on baby Pearl to “recognize” Chillingworth as *a* father (not necessarily *her* father), a condition that is of course impossible for an infant to fulfill. Moreover, Chillingworth has no more earned the social recognition of the title of physician than that of father: “My old studies in alchemy ... have made a better physician of me than many who claim the medical degree” (65). Yet after Chillingworth successfully ameliorates Pearl’s discomfort, the

narrator deems him “physician, as he had a fair right to be termed” (66). His right to the title of physician can be proven by his actions, while his access to the role of father can be granted only through recognition – but recognition by whom? Here, he identifies Pearl as holding the power of recognition. But Chillingworth has already tied such authority to speech, an act of which infant Pearl is incapable.

That Pearl experiences physical discomfort when she nurses at her mother’s breast represents something more sinister than the emotional trauma Hawthorne describes (“drawing its sustenance from the maternal bosom, [the child] seemed to have drank in with it all the turmoil, the anguish, the despair that pervaded its mother’s system” [64]). The breast milk that plagues Pearl’s fragile body offers not only nutritive sustenance, but also a legal reprieve. Children born out of wedlock to a single mother were usually taken away and apprenticed to a master, but were generally allowed to stay with their mothers until they weaned.¹⁰ Chillingworth’s ministrations thus take on greater import, since by soothing Pearl’s digestion, he provides Hester with the legal means to retain her child as long as she nurses, thereby supporting the family he rejects.

Like Chillingworth, Dimmesdale maintains his claim to paternity in the process of denying it. Standing on the scaffold with Hester and Pearl, he sees Chillingworth approach, and entreats them to reveal the identity of the man for whom he has a “nameless horror” (139). When Hester silently refuses, Dimmesdale turns to Pearl. By trying to convince Pearl to reveal Chillingworth’s identity, he reinvigorates Chillingworth’s injunction to baby Pearl – that only Pearl can name Chillingworth as her father. But Pearl, by now capable of speech, refuses, not out of loyalty to Chillingworth –

for she is in fact equally ignorant of his identity – but out of spite for Dimmesdale, who denies her request for a publicly-recognized family: “Thou wouldst not promise to take my hand, and mother’s hand, to-morrow noontide!”(139). When he urges Pearl to tell “Quickly! –and as low as thou canst whisper,” Dimmesdale cannot be expecting a lengthy explanation. Most likely, he seeks only a name to resolve his “nameless horror.” The name, if Pearl knew it, would of course be Prynne: Chillingworth’s true surname as well as that of Hester and, presumably, her daughter. Pearl barter (false) information in exchange for a father who will acknowledge her, while Dimmesdale has entered into Pearl’s confidence with the goal of deflecting his responsibility onto another man (139).¹¹

England, the Phantom Father

The Dimmesdale/Chillingworth split becomes yet more complex when a third father is added: the chimerical Master Prynne, Hester’s distant husband. Because none of the community members knows Chillingworth’s true identity, the figure of Master Prynne lingers in the public conversation. He is communally recognized as a “learned man” – a term that could encompass both Dimmesdale’s theological knowledge and Chillingworth’s medical proficiency (57). Bethany Reid argues that “when he exchanges his patronymic, Prynne, for a pseudonym, he undergoes a metamorphosis (apart from the freezing of his assets that “Chillingworth” implies)...Not stability but transformation is

¹⁰ See Mary Ann Mason, p. 2.

¹¹ Several critics have tied Dimmesdale’s actions in this chapter and those following to his eschewal of paternal responsibility. Elmer Kennedy-Andrews compares Dimmesdale’s apathy to the narrator’s: “Just as the narrator has difficulty acknowledging responsibility for the creation of his story, Dimmesdale has difficulty acknowledging what he has paternally engendered in defiance of Puritan constraint” (8). Leland Person observes that Hester only convinces Dimmesdale to act as Pearl’s father “by tacitly agreeing to let him remain – officially – not Pearl’s father” (*Aesthetic Headaches*, 129). And David Leverenz notices Dimmesdale’s impatience with Pearl’s antics and his plea to Hester to silence Pearl, arguing, “To demand

his hallmark, as it will become Pearl's" (Reid 252). Reid and others have overlooked, however, that nothing in the text indicates that Chillingworth actively chooses his alias, since all instances of his "naming" occur passively. Upon arriving at the prison, "[h]is name was announced as Roger Chillingworth"; several pages later, as he concludes his conversation with Hester, the narrative labels him "old Roger Chillingworth, as he was hereafter to be named" (64, 69). The declaration is a strange one, since he has already been publicly identified as Roger Chillingworth. The only new addition to the epithet is the adjective "old" – another conundrum, since, as various critics have noted, the narrator declares that the man "could hardly be termed aged" (55). The adjective conflates him with his former identity, implying that despite the new persona he has adopted, he will remain part of Hester's "old" life, lacking the potential to become part of the new family she has created.¹²

The figure of Master Prynne encompasses the possibility of legitimate paternity – if not for Pearl, then for Hester's future children – but the community knows a scant three "facts" about this illusory figure, all of them geographical: he is "English by birth," he had "long dwelt in Amsterdam," and now is "most likely... at the bottom of the sea" (56, 56, 57).¹³ The potential for sanctioned paternity therefore languishes between continents, having never approached American soil.

that Hester pacify Pearl if she loves him implies, most immediately, that Dimmesdale will continue to avoid the role of parent himself" ("Mrs. Hawthorne's Headache," 560).

¹² Robert Evans proposes an alternate reading of the nickname based on his observation that 'old Roger' is "a term often used for Satan himself," arguing that the name signals the beginning of Chillingworth's descent into sin. Evans' argument, however, rests on the same assumption of prior critics, that Chillingworth himself "adopted" his pseudonym (Evans 251).

¹³ Hawthorne's father was a sea captain, and Gloria Erlich has noted that Hawthorne "had reason to associate sea voyages with death. Entries in his notebook of 1838 suggest that in childhood he may have thought of his father as still lying at the bottom of a lake and susceptible to resurrection" (Erlich 109).

Yet another phantom father ghosts through the pages of *The Scarlet Letter*: Hester's father. Twenty-first-century readers may not automatically add Hester's father to the list of players in this adulterous drama, but Puritans would have considered him an injured party on the level of Chillingworth/Prynne. In one Massachusetts court case in the late 1600s, the putative father of an illegitimate child was forced to pay reparations not only to the woman's husband, but also to her father to compensate for having "seduced" his daughter (Mason 22). Like Roger Prynne, Hester's father is identified primarily by the country he inhabits. As Hester suffers on the scaffold, she reminisces about England: "she saw again her native village, in Old England, and her paternal home." She immediately follows this nationalistic image with one of her father: "She saw her father's face, with its bald brow, and reverend white beard, that flowed over the old-fashioned Elizabethan ruff" (*SL* 53). Hester's father stands in for an idealized, archaic England that is inaccessible to Hester, who is bound by American law and American shame. In still another reincarnation of the absent father motif, Hester is separated from her "paternal home" and her paternal figure. Her father seems to her haunt her thoughts, yet clearly is not a viable source of emotional or material support. The relationship between Hester and her father replicates, in miniature, the relationship between America and England in the text. England is America's ever-present, ever-absent father, their relationship under constant reevaluation.

For Hester, her "paternal home" contains not only her father, but also the potential for her own idyllic family. She reflects on "that village of rural England, where happy infancy and stainless maidenhood seemed yet to be in her mother's keeping" (72). Hawthorne repeatedly draws a connection between Hester's "fall" and her nationality; his

narrator declares: “her sin, her ignominy, were roots which she had struck into the soil” (72). Hester and Pearl are distinguished from the women of the town by a national – divide. Hawthorne writes of these vengeful citizens: “there was a coarser fibre in those wives and maidens of old English birth and breeding, than in their fair descendants ... The women, who were now standing outside the prison-door, stood within less than half a century of the period when the man-like Elizabeth had been the not altogether unsuitable representation of her sex” (47). The association between these women and Elizabeth – the “Virgin Queen” – heightens Hester’s estrangement both from her New England community and from her English predecessors. “Stainless motherhood,” after all, has been left in England, along with its “old-fashioned Elizabethan” patriarch.

The American Democratic Family

In the absence of a single father figure for Pearl, the townspeople undertake to create a communal paternity, a family model that appears in the text even before Hester steps out onto the scaffold. The beginning of the second chapter describes a whipping-post where an “undutiful child, whom his parents had given over to the civil authority, was to be corrected” (46). This brief description foregrounds the shift of authority from the private, parental sphere, to the communal discipline of the town.¹⁴ However, the narrative emphasizes that such parents are nonetheless responsible for the punishment, since they “give” their children over to communal judgment. Hester is allowed no such

¹⁴ Edmund Morgan’s *The Puritan Family* expands on the state’s authority over children, explaining that the laws of New England allowed the punishment of death for “rebellious sons and for any child who should smite and curse his parents ... but rather than apply this extreme penalty, the courts directed another law against parents whose affections blinded them to their children’s faults. When children were allowed to become ‘rude, stubborn, and unruly,’ the state might take them from their parents” (38). This, presumably, is the fate that Pearl escapes in chapter eight.

moment of willing transfer. Her child emerges from her womb into the prison: “[The baby] winked and turned aside its little face from the too vivid light of day; because its existence, heretofore, had brought it acquainted only with the gray twilight of a dungeon, or other darksome apartment of the prison” (49). Pearl is received quite literally into the public domain. The setting of her birth is symbolic of her legal status: as an adulteress, Hester has no legal claim over Pearl, and as a “bastard,” Pearl would legally belong to a public court. Simply by the nature of her birth, Pearl becomes that “undutiful child.”

The pastor of the town, Mr. Wilson, lectures Dimmesdale and Chillingworth that “every good Christian man hath a title to show a father’s kindness towards the poor deserted babe” (103); his injunction suggests, as Bethany Reid has noted, “a vaguely menacing multiplicity of fathers” (Reid 247). Wilson demonstrates this model of fatherhood by examining Pearl’s religious knowledge, questioning her, “Art thou a Christian child – ha? Dost know thy catechism?”, and continuing with his examination after Governor Bellingham urges him to probe further. The purported reason for the interrogation is to “see whether she has had such nurture as befits a child of her age”—that is, to determine whether or not Hester is a fit mother (98). But in Massachusetts, instructing one’s children in their catechism fell under the legal responsibilities of a *father*, one of the few absolute paternal requirements beyond financial support.¹⁵ By arranging and assuring Pearl’s scriptural education, Governor Bellingham and Mr. Wilson put themselves forth as surrogate father figures. Their action represents a melding of instructional models. In nineteenth-century American domestic manuals and children’s

¹⁵ See Edmund Morgan’s *The Puritan Family*, p. 54, and Stephen Frank, *Life with Father*, p. 11, for a fuller discussion of the legal responsibilities of Puritan fathers.

literature, critic Richard Brodhead finds a system he terms “disciplinary intimacy,” in which authority figures “make their authority as it were dissolve into their merely personal presences” (71). Brodhead further argues that “Hawthorne’s whole project in *The Scarlet Letter* could be thought of as an attempt to weigh the methods and powers of a newer against an older disciplinary order, by juxtaposing a world of corporal correction (embodied in the Puritans’ punishment of Hester) and a world of correction-by-interiority (embodied in Chillingworth and Dimmesdale)” (78). The governors present themselves not as a monolithic authority, but as emotionally invested family members – Mr. Wilson considers himself “a grandfatherly sort of personage, and usually a vast favorite with children” yet their sympathetic overtures have a specific motive (99). If they were to succeed in becoming “fathers” to Pearl, it would be not by joining her family, but by removing her from it. Although their examination of Pearl is kindhearted in comparison to the whipping of the boy in the town square – which, according to Brodhead’s theory, would belong to the “older mode of discipline Foucault describes in which the wrongs of the transgressor (and the power of the authority to correct such wrongs) are visited on his body in a publicly visible form” – it nonetheless carries with it the threat of public correction (Brodhead 69). The most likely result of the governors’ intervention is Pearl’s removal from her private home, renewing the public denunciation that Hester and Pearl were subjected to on the scaffold. The governors’ actions thus represent a melding of public and private paternity.

Pearl, “unaccustomed to the touch or familiarity of any but her mother,” rejects their overtures (98). Ostracized from their community, Pearl and Hester have formed a discrete family that will not open itself to interlopers. The scarlet letter, originally

intended to signify Hester's dismissal of marital bonds, is ironically transmuted into a signal of utmost maternity (later in the novel, Pearl refuses to recognize Hester as her mother without the letter on her breast). The mark works against those who gave it power; the stain of social transgression repels the governors' attempt at a socially-constructed family. Despite their political and social power, their authority cannot create a father for Pearl. David Leverenz's definition of paternalism observes that the term "inheres in any social structure that features inequality. [Paternalism] includes attitudes of benevolence as well as charitable or philanthropic acts" (*Paternalism* 3). The governors' actions might be construed as charitable, even democratic, yet the rejection by both mother and daughter problematizes the notion of a "national family."

The paternal impersonators are finally driven off by Dimmesdale, who intervenes not as the paternal victor, but as what has become the complete antithesis of the role: the spiritual advisor. He cites Hester's capability, God's will, and the "awful sacredness" of the mother-daughter relationship in order to designate Hester the ideal single mother (101). But the immediate reappearance of Chillingworth in the dialogue, along with his suggestion that they "analyze [the] child's nature, and, from its make and mold...give a shrewd guess at the father," drive the paternity search—and thus the narrative—forward, even as the scaffolding of the narrative begins to falter.

Fatherhood Destabilized

As the narrative progresses, Hester employs a method of rhetorical questioning that further blurs the statuses of both mothers and fathers. Hester first queries herself while exposed on the public scaffold, her child in her arms: "Could it be true?" Her immediate response ("Yes! – these were her realities!") quickly dissipates her incredulity;

but the mere fact that she requires a response to confirm her only-too-clear position indicates Hester's discomfort with her maternal status (54). Later in the text, Hester formulates and reiterates an urgent inquiry for which no answer is forthcoming: the question of Pearl's very conception and existence. Beginning with "what is this being which I have brought into the world?", Hester on the following page rephrases the question as an address to Pearl – "Child, what art thou?" – and the next moment demands, "Art thou my child, in very truth?" (86, 87, 87).¹⁶ Each repetition builds on the preceding text, but by the third incarnation, the question has shifted from examining Pearl's existence to challenging Hester's own maternal status. In questioning the one relationship that has been hitherto immune to scrutiny, Hester momentarily eliminates the entire question of paternity – for if the identity of the child's mother is uncertain, how could the father ever be discovered? By asking the reverse of the community's inexorable question, Hester thwarts the possibility of unearthing one true answer.

In subverting the characters' expectations, Hawthorne reclaims his early promise of "The Custom-House": that since the narrative is being received by "a kind and apprehensive [friend] ... we may prate of the circumstances that lie around us and even of ourself, but still keep the inmost Me behind its veil" (7). Hawthorne, ambivalent father/creator, foregrounds Hester's obviation of the paternal question. Her model of rhetorical questioning destabilizes the search for a single, individual father, further attenuating Chillingworth's and Dimmesdale's paternal statuses. Even Dimmesdale's

¹⁶ Hawthorne employed an identical pattern when speaking about his daughter Una, emphasizing the parental insecurity that drives the rhetorical model. Writing to Sophia, he questioned "Am I really a father? –the father of thy child? Sometimes the thought comes to me with such a mighty wonder that I cannot take it in" (qtd in "Inscribing Paternity" 230).

public confession, a moment that should be a decisive narrative climax, inspires only an unsatisfying regression to uncertainty as the townspeople deny that Dimmesdale's final moments revealed either a mark of shame or an admission of fatherhood: "certain persons...denied that there was any mark whatever on his breast...Neither had his dying word acknowledged, nor even remotely implied, any, the slightest connection, on his part, with the guilt for which Hester Prynne had so long worn the scarlet letter" (226-7). The performative speech that the reader has been anticipating since Hester first stood on the scaffold has proven impotent: Pearl still lacks a communally-recognized father.

Indeed, even before the last pages of the novel, both the narrative's interest in paternity and the construct itself seem to have collapsed. Hawthorne first casts doubt on the authenticity of his descriptions: "But we perhaps exaggerate the gray or sable tinge which undoubtedly characterized the mood and manners of the age," then links such authorial uncertainty to a chasm between fathers and sons: "The persons now in the marketplace had not been born to an inheritance of Puritanic gloom. They were native Englishmen, whose fathers had lived in the sunny richness of the Elizabethan epoch" (202). The contrast between the "gray or sable tinge" of America and the "sunny richness" of England highlights the stark identity that those in the marketplace have chosen, not inherited. It seems clear that Hawthorne is implying a break between nations, leaving America fatherless.

Eric Sundquist's Freudian reading of *The Scarlet Letter* concludes that in Oedipal terms, "the murder of the father is replaced by the shadowy and ambiguous concept of original sin" (90). Yet the continuous audition and dismissal of fathers for Pearl could be

seen as serving as a form of repetitive parricide, wherein far from replacing the act, Hawthorne fixates on it. Sundquist argues that original sin has “dispersed the American Eden” (90). But such a dispersal was never possible because within the confines of Hawthorne’s text, “American Eden” never existed. Whether Hester is paired with Dimmesdale, Chillingworth, or Prynne, there is no Adam and Eve equivalent: Pearl precludes the coupling in every incarnation. The American family model is characterized from the start by triangulation and instability.

The conclusion of the novel finds previously-sireless Pearl with a surfeit of absent fathers. Both Dimmesdale and Chillingworth have acknowledged her – Dimmesdale verbally, Chillingworth through his will – and both are dead. The establishment of dual paternity heralds the end of both the narrative and of Pearl’s life in America. Every paternal model – the biological father, the adoptive father, religious paternalism, communal paternity – has failed Pearl. Neither the English patriarch nor the American democratic family can support her – indeed, Bethany Reid concludes that Pearl “is no longer part of the American democratic project” (262). The result of Pearl’s newfound legitimacy is her removal from both paternal countries, England and America, to a third, unknown, location: “Letters came, with armorial seals upon them, though of bearings unknown to English heraldry” (229). Hawthorne’s paternal anxiety – perhaps in anticipation of his daughter’s eventual collapse – climaxes in the last pages of the novel. Hawthorne’s American fathers have failed their “undutiful” offspring; consequently, the child “acknowledged” by two such fathers cannot exist within a single fatherland.

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