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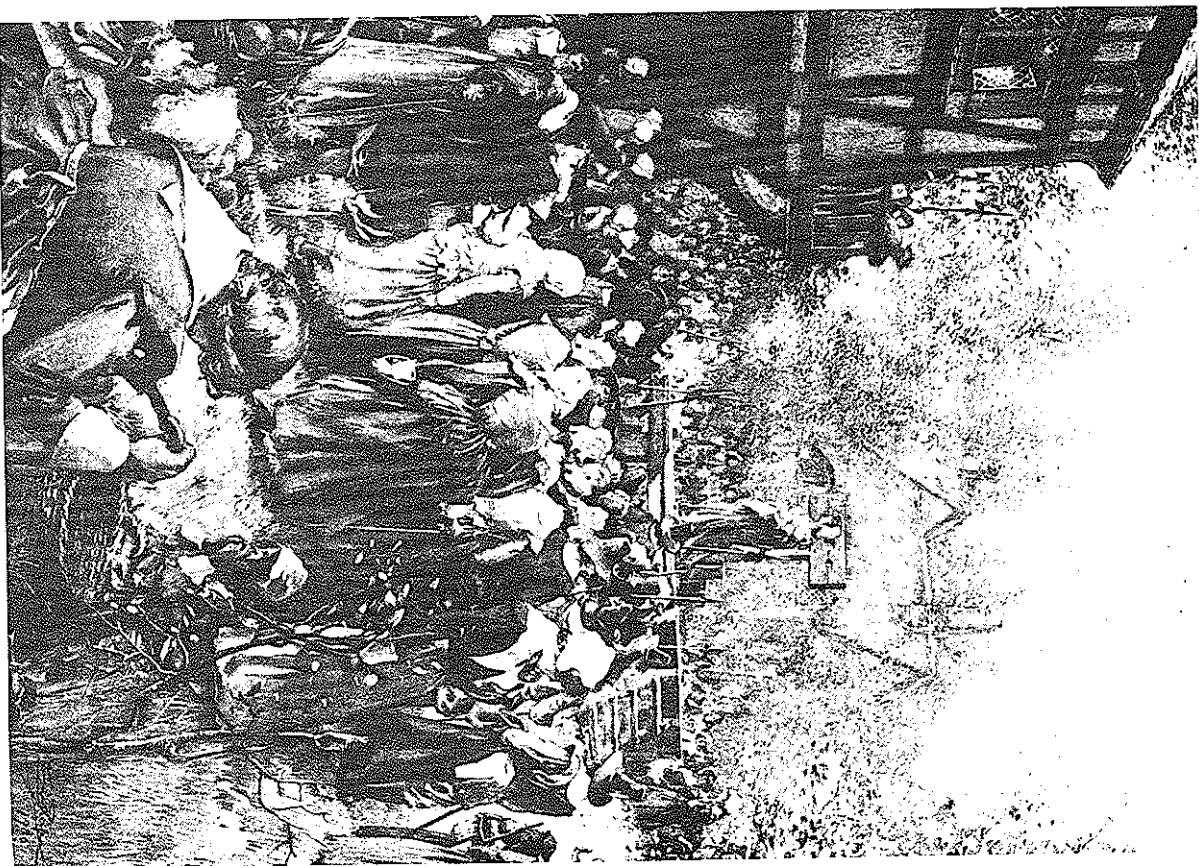


Illustration of Hester in the marketplace, by Eric Pape in *The Scarlet Letter*, vol. 6 of *The Complete Writings of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, Large-Paper Edition (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1900). Courtesy of Special Collections and Archives, University of Idaho Library.

## Hester's Maternity: Stigma or Weapon?

Monika M. Elbert

"Her matronly fame was trodden under all men's feet. Infamy was babbling around her in the public market-place."<sup>1</sup>

Although much has been made of the opening scaffold scene in *The Scarlet Letter*, one striking "subscene" that focuses on Hester's relationship to the women in the community has been neglected. The scene I am referring to is in the first marketplace chapter where Hester stands upon the scaffold receiving her punishment, public ostracism, most vehemently from the women in the crowd. Here we witness a group of matrifobic women putting Hester on trial through their venomous, patriarchal judgments. What is on trial here is Hester's maternity, which is in conflict with maternity as defined by the patriarchal lawmakers of Hester's Puritan society. It is surprising that this group of women in their fifties, whom Hawthorne calls "self-constituted judges" (51) and "iron-visaged" matrons (54), have no maternal softness about them that will protect Hester. Surely they have gone through the experience of mothering and understand the love and tolerance necessary for communal harmony that accompanies motherhood.

Instead, we hear the leader of the crowd, the instigator, "a hard-featured dame of fifty," scolding Hester far more severely than any of the patriarchs in the crowd: "If the hussy stood up for judgment before us five, that are now here in a knot together, would she come off with such a sentence as the worshipful magistrates have awarded? Marry, I trow not!" (51). This is an odd form of female bonding, one far removed from Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's account of female friendships in nineteenth-century America.<sup>2</sup> Instead, these antagonistic women see Hester's sexuality in the way men conventionally have viewed it, as a threat: another "autumnal maiden" chastises her, "she,—the naughty

baggage,—little will she care what they put upon the bodice of her gown!" (51). In emphasizing Hester's Eve-like sexuality, these women deny her motherhood, and thus, their own past.

Indeed, these scolding women are simply mirror-images of the governors and ministers who surround them; as one hardened matron says, there are laws one should appeal to: "This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die. Is there not law for it? Truly there is, both in the Scripture and the statute-book" (51–52). This latter verdict is pronounced by the "ugliest as well as the most pitiless of these self-constituted judges" (51), one who would feel most threatened by Hester's beauty and freedom. Ironically, in reaching her conclusion, she relies on the same patriarchal texts that have imprisoned her. These women, depicted by the narrator as harsh, rheumatic, and beyond the age of childbearing, have lost their mothering function and know no other way of gaining power in this closed society than to be as critical as their men in the persecution of one of their sisters; they take "a peculiar interest in whatever penal infliction might be expected to ensue" (50). In trying to come to terms with the powerlessness of woman in patriarchy, they have denied their gender differences, including the maternal privilege, and tried to outstrip the sternest Puritan judge and minister by becoming more male, more hard, than the toughest patriarch.

One might want to accuse the narrator, or Hawthorne, of being matrophobic in this stereotypical male depiction of women as caty rivals, especially in light of the historical reality. Women were indeed bonding together in very intense relationships, as described by Smith-Rosenberg, with the maternal home being a focal point and childbirth a female ritual.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, woman's domestic and maternal role, so central to the cult of true womanhood, fostered bonding between women: women met in maternal associations to discuss techniques of childrearing, or they found a sisterhood through shared readership in the domestic literature and mother's manuals so widespread at the time.<sup>4</sup> Is Hawthorne purposely distorting history then? I would suggest not; rather, he is merely being psychologically astute. As one feminist theorist has shown, in a male-dominant world, women express their rage, their sense of powerlessness, "directly in distrust and disrespect toward other women; and indirectly by offering [themselves] up to male vindictiveness."<sup>5</sup> While I

do not want to make a case for Hawthorne as a feminist sympathizer—which would be an exercise in futility, as Hawthorne lacks a political dimension—I do not mean to suggest he is matrophobic.<sup>6</sup> He is aware of the pressures of patriarchy and its marketplace psychology upon the creative spirit. Thus, when he puts on Hester's badge in the "Custom-House" introduction, he projects his own feelings of anxiety about authorship on Hester and her problems in coming to terms with her maternity outside of patriarchal constructs.<sup>7</sup>

#### A "Trial of Difference"

There is only one young woman in the matrophobic crowd of the marketplace scene, a young mother herself, who watches the spectacle "holding a child by the hand" (51). She is the only woman who defends Hester and empathizes with her suffering: in soft whispers, she tries to silence the scolding women, "O, peace, neighbors, peace! . . . Do not let her hear you! Not a stitch in that embroidered letter, but she has felt it in her heart" (54). The young woman's child, a counterpart to Pearl, creates a bond, the only one of its kind in the scene, between Hester and the young mother. Although the narrator says that little Pearl is "a symbol, and the connecting link" between Dimmesdale and Hester in the second scaffold scene (154), no such family structure is created, as Dimmesdale merely feigns fatherhood. The link that is formed between Hester and the sympathetic anonymous mother of the crowd through the symbol of Pearl is more meaningful than the "electric chain" (153) that holds Hester, Pearl, and Dimmesdale together in the darkness (appropriately) of the second scaffold scene. Their fates are intertwined through this bond of common sympathy, the child. However, although the young woman ventures a faint plea of protest, she is finally hushed by her own death, a death that is in keeping with the antimothering sentiment expressed throughout the narrative. In chapter 22, "The Procession," shortly before Hawthorne's version of the pieta scene, with Hester as the glorified but suffering mother of Dimmesdale, we hear that Hester is once again, as at the start of the novel, surrounded by "the self-same faces of that group of matrons, who had awaited her forthcoming from

the prison-door, seven years ago." That is, all except one are present—"the youngest and only compassionate among them, whose burial-robe she [Hester] had since made" (246).

Significantly, the crucial scene of motherhood on trial is in "The Market-Place" chapter, where maternity is seen as a commodity. In the marketplace, women are valuable so long as they can produce children, and the way they produce children should be in accordance with the male sense of propriety (a euphemism for middle-class capitalist economics). Thus, these women depicted as old hags and crones, ugly and stern in their exaggerated similarities to men, are deemed worthless because, as menopausal women, they can no longer produce children. They have no recourse but to take on the scornful attitude and envy men themselves feel for not having the gift of maternity.

But *The Scarlet Letter* is about more than reproductive maternity; it is about emotional mothering, a quality that is not circumscribed by hormones, age, or, ultimately, even by sex. The maternal attitude is more important than the physical offspring:

... the way of the mother may be judged either solely in terms of its fruit—children—or more broadly as a particular way of being in the world. But understood narrowly, as a means to the single end of producing children, the way of the mother ceases to be the model for a certain way of being in the world. When that happens, in effect, it ceases to be. A woman may have children yet refuse to become a mother in any but the most superficial manner.<sup>8</sup>

In the marketplace world that Hawthorne describes, women are valued for their ability to produce children, yet they are despised and feared for the same reason because men cannot fathom the mother's mysterious source of creation. Because the patriarchs see women in material terms, they view the women who are counterproductive or nonproductive askance (those on the periphery, the menopausal women, the witches, the widows). However, these same men who appreciate the biological power of maternity are blind to the spiritual value of mothering, and so this latter quality becomes a liability. Nancy J. Chodorow discusses the problems of the public-domestic split in a capitalist system: "Women's work in the home and the maternal role are devalued because they are outside of the sphere of monetary exchange and unmeasurable in mon-

etary terms, and because love, though supposedly valued, is valued only within a devalued and powerless realm, a realm separate from and not equal to profits and achievement."<sup>9</sup> The soft, tender mother gets killed off, as we see in the example of the young mother who comes to Hester's defense; she is "done in" because she lives within the framework of manmade rules for motherhood, the "iron framework" that despises maternal softness and erases the feminine. There is a parable here: woman counts in society only insofar as she contributes to the marketplace, by perpetuating the race; if she hazards a protest, she's dead. There is tremendous pressure to be only an external/superficial mother. As the Hawthorne narrator so strikingly puts it, if woman "be all tenderness, she will die" (163).

How then does Hester succeed, even thrive? By living as a mother on her own terms, by making her maternity emotional as well as physical, by not being someone's wife, she can determine her maternal attitude.<sup>10</sup> There are two things that the early "Market-Place" scene shows: men define woman's sexuality and her maternity. According to historian Stephanie Coontz, the cult of domesticity fostered the redefinition of women "in terms of their reproductive properties."<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, Hester is able to resist both categories: she's neither the saint nor the sinner, not a hussy nor the "Divine Maternity" (56), though the crowd feels something of both in their attitude towards her. What she does is to feminize maternity in the marketplace of male dictates. In a world where practicality should flourish, especially in the family structure, she goes against all male codes, religious, political, and economic. She bears and raises a child on her own, and by denying the need for a husband, certainly when she refuses to reveal the identity of the father in the "Market-Place" scene, she shows her feeling that men are not indispensable. The worst sin against patriarchy is to bear a child and not disclose the identity of the father. Hester's single motherhood is one of those peculiar feminine mysteries that men have made taboo because it robs them of their power; it denies them the access to definite answers, the realm of male knowledge. Hester's silence is victorious over her male judges. Ultimately, she erases the male presence by not acknowledging or desiring it and by undermining the family structure as males have perceived it. While the matrons try to hide their motherly traits behind disparaging comments, Hester chooses to emphasize her (m)otherness,

indeed, to flaunt it in the marketplace.

Recent feminist theory has focused upon this phenomenon of woman trying to accentuate or celebrate "la différence," on the one hand, or, on the other, to minimize or deny the maternal nature, to become more equal with males. Julia Kristeva and other French feminists emphasize and glorify "la différence" and examine woman as mother. Kristeva discusses feminists' inability to remove themselves from the "phallographic attitude of 'idealized contempt'" for motherhood and their failure to view "in the maternal the ultimate love for another."<sup>12</sup> Luce Irigaray believes that as women we are always mothers,<sup>13</sup> and Hélène Cixous celebrates the feminine as the maternal sex; indeed, in Cixous's eyes, motherhood is an aspect of femininity that constitutes a "trial of difference."<sup>14</sup> This emphasis on the symbolic or metaphorical reconstruction of the meaning of motherhood is in contrast with that of the American feminist perspective that, working within the confines of patriarchal thought, seeks a more political, institutional reading of motherhood. Thus, Adrienne Rich, in her ground-breaking work on motherhood, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, says that she is against the institution of motherhood, not maternity itself; and Chodorow, in a recent essay, says that "feminist theories and feminist inquiry based on the notion of essential difference, or focused on demonstrating difference, are doing feminism a disservice" primarily because they are selling out to male definitions of the difference.<sup>15</sup> The problem then is whether to engender, or to degender.

Various Hawthorne scholars take up this question indirectly, but many have ignored the politics of mothering in this novel and the myriad possibilities that maternal thinking opens up, thus discounting the feminist insight and challenge that "the personal is political."<sup>16</sup> Joanne Feit Diehl, for example, sees Hester's marginalization as less positive than I see it. She fails to celebrate the feminine difference, which sets Hester off from the likes of Dimmesdale and Chillingworth. While Diehl concedes that Hester is "empowered" rather than "defeated" by her mothering experience, she feels that Hester's marginalization "subdues her even as it becomes the source of her strength."<sup>17</sup> Motherhood makes Hester a compassionate person, according to Diehl, but it also "blocks her full intellectual development."<sup>18</sup> She concludes that Hester's mater-

nal identity "protects" and "imprisons" her at the same time. While David Leverenz attempts to be sympathetic to Hester, his maleness shows throughout. For example, when he says of Hester, "She avoids any struggle for public power except to preserve her conventional role as mother,"<sup>19</sup> he seems to suggest that Hester, by not participating in the male arena of power and politics, is weak, and he trivializes her maternity by labeling it "her conventional role as mother." Not only do I see Hester's maternity as anything but conventional, but I also see her mothering qualities as far superior to the aggressive traits in Dimmesdale and Chillingworth, who struggle for public power and ultimately destroy each other by cancelling out each other's vindictiveness or competitiveness. In suggesting that Hester settles for motherhood by "conflating all the traditional female roles: nurse, seamstress, mother, helpmeet, confidante, and tender heart,"<sup>20</sup> Leverenz refuses to celebrate "la différence." In many ways, like the booming male voice of the androgynous narrator (with his alternately female subjective, sympathetic commentary and male authoritative judgments) who would like to erase Hester's sexuality by freezing her into a pale and statue-like posture as the narrative progresses, both Leverenz and Leland S. Person seem to want Hester to become a man to show her power, to force her to enter the competitive arena of men. Leverenz fantasizes about a woman who is liberated, who will "struggle for public power," and Person makes his Hester a woman who can beat men at their own game of revenge.<sup>21</sup> In essence, like the patriarchs who condemn Hester and the magistrates who threaten to take Pearl out of Hester's custody ("The Governor's Hall"), Leverenz and Person attempt to rob Hester of her distinctive "brand" of maternity.<sup>22</sup>

#### Hester's "Magic Circle" of Maternity

Like the French feminists, Hester resists patriarchal pressure by choosing to emphasize her difference. Her identity resides not in her initial temptress sexuality (more of a male myth or desire than reality),<sup>23</sup> which becomes less and less significant until she appears statue-like and sexless in the Election sermon scene (244), but in her maternity, represented by

Pearl and in the emblem "A" itself, which extends beyond the normal mother-daughter relationship in her role as communal mother at the end of the novel. According to Kristeva, the maternal has been expressed in two different ways of art throughout history: one conception is embodied in the "père-version" of Leonardo's paintings of the madonna,<sup>24</sup> and the other quality, more in keeping with the feminine unnameable, comes through in "the luminous serenity of the unrepresentable" of Bellini's madonnas.<sup>25</sup> One suggests connectedness, or the *pere* politics of motherly communal support, while the other suggests being contained in one's womblike splendor and existing in solitude, the *mère* version of maternal exhilaration, a definition apart from male meaning.

In the most remarkable manner Hawthorne captures both nuances of the mother figure, a paradoxical *pere/mère* rendition, in his description of Hester in her "Divine Maternity." In the oft-quoted passage of a Papist's view of Hester on the scaffold, Hester's elusive maternal nature is explored: hers is "the image of Divine Maternity, which so many illustrious painters have vied with one another to represent" (56). But one is immediately reminded of a counterimage, of a woman in her human and glorious sensual maternity: there is "something" (the "unnameable") about Hester that reminds the viewer "indeed, but only by contrast, of that sacred image of sinless motherhood" (56). Here is the threat to the Christian male vision of maternity, the merging of flesh and spirit. Whereas the Puritan ministers judging Hester would like to create a sharp differentiation between the two realms, between physical and spiritual mothering (between sexual and ethereal being), Hester's essence eludes, indeed smashes, categories, by occupying two contradictory categories. What is necessary in a society glutted with male concepts and metaphors is a counterreaction or a counterdefinition, which Hester so aptly achieves through her redefinition of motherhood, especially by taking on single parenthood.

Although Donna Stanton says that women can neither deny their "maternal" otherness, nor dwell upon it so completely as to make it a stereotypical definition, she argues that this maternity certainly does offer a starting point: "This is not to deny the importance of an initial countervalorization of the maternal-feminine as a negation/subversion of paternal hierarchies, a heuristic tool for reworking images and meanings,

above all, an enabling mythology."<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the traditional male quest for authority has its parallel female quest—that of the mother. Kathryn Allen Rabuzzi argues for the "way of the mother" as "the counterpart of the familiar quest of the hero,"<sup>27</sup> and Joseph Campbell argues for the case of the "mother as hero."<sup>28</sup> If a woman appreciates her "motherhood," she need not worry about the meaning of "normal" and "deviant" as "promulgated in androcentric cultures."<sup>29</sup> Thus, Hester takes whatever is traditional and explodes the myth through a reweaving of symbols in society: the ornate embroidery on the punitive "A"; the fanciful clothing she sews for little Pearl; her needlework, which is seen even "on the ruff of the Governor," the scarves of military men, and the band of the minister (83); the home she establishes in a "no-man's-land" on the border between civilization and wilderness, between land and sea, town and forest. Indeed, she is subtly ubiquitous, her handiwork appearing on baby linen as well as on the winding sheets of the dead; in essence, Hester becomes the Great Mother (of life and death) to the community and is akin to "the sympathy of Nature—that wild, heathen Nature of the forest, never subjugated by human law" (203).

Hester's maternal sublanguage could be construed as a threat to the empty male rhetoric of the pulpit (Dimmesdale's jargon) and of the laboratory (Chillingworth's scientific language). We know that there are two seemingly paradoxical discourses at work here: in the narrative voice, which is at once authoritatively judgmental and sympathetically subjective, male and female, and in the setting, between town and forest.<sup>30</sup> Hester has access to both languages, whereas Dimmesdale and Chillingworth become confused by the multiple layers of language. For example, Hester knows that there are two ways to express oneself, and that one discourse seems inappropriate to the other: as she warns Pearl, "We must not always talk in the market-place of what happens to us in the forest" (240). Though Dimmesdale hovers on the brink of lunacy (a healthy female discourse that allows multiple possibilities) after his final encounter with Hester in the forest, his reentry into the marketplace forces him to deny the encounter with his feminine side, to reassert his manhood, which he does by returning to his desk and with ever more vehemence writing an Old Testament fire-and-brimstone sermon to dazzle the crowd with his masculine bombast at the Election Day ceremony. It is Hester's "brand" of maternity that allows her access to the language of the forest



and the sea as well as to the marketplace. According to the narrator, she "assumed a freedom of speculation . . . which our forefathers, had they known of it, would have held to be a deadlier crime than that stigmatized by the scarlet letter" (164).

Hester's experience with Pearl has made her think like a mother and thus has liberated her from the constraints that Dimmesdale faces. Sara Ruddick suggests that woman's thinking "refuses closure" and is "holistic" and "open-ended" and attributes this quality to mothering.<sup>31</sup>

It seems a plausible working hypothesis that children's minds would call for an open-ended reflective cognitive style in those who try to understand them. A child's acts are irregular, unpredictable, often mysterious. A child herself might be thought of as an "open structure," changing, growing, reinterpreting what has come before. Neither a child nor, therefore, the mother understanding her can sharply distinguish reality from fantasy, body from mind, self from other. . . . A mother who took one day's conclusions to be permanent or invented sharp distinctions to describe her child's choices would be left floundering.<sup>32</sup>

Hester's sense of frustration, which comes from raising an unruly Pearl, is ultimately liberating for her, causing her to become more tolerant and open-minded. Indeed, Hawthorne was very much concerned with his paternal role (as evidenced in his journals), and his understanding of a child's psychology, similar to Ruddick's description above, comes through in his description of the untamable Pearl: "Pearl's aspect was imbued with a spell of infinite variety; in this one child there were many children" (90).<sup>33</sup> She creates a "visionary throng" of playmates out of the "unlikeliest materials" (95). Like Hester, Pearl travels through the realms of the unconscious as she creates her own world: "a stick, a bunch of rags, a flower, were the puppets of Pearl's witchcraft, and, without undergoing any outward change, became spiritually adapted to whatever drama occupied the stage of her inner world" (95). Hester must accommodate herself to Pearl's moods, and this involves learning a new language, the maternal/creative language: at times "the mother felt like one who has evoked a spirit, but, by some irregularity in the process of conjuration, has failed to win the master-word that should control this new and incomprehensible intelligence" (93). Hester's "magic circle" (202, 234, 246), the separate sphere that she inhabits, is associated with her power to "conjure" the "master-word," one foreign to Dimmesdale, one that

will appease Pearl. In so doing, she learns the meaning of flexibility, of an "open structure," one at variance with the rigid disciplinary code of her father(s): "Mother and daughter stood together in the same circle of seclusion from human society" (94). This is the same type of creative mothering that Hester uses to pacify the childlike and winning Dimmesdale in the forest, when she is forced to consider options for his future (to go West or to return to Europe, to go forwards or backwards in time).

Moreover, Hester subverts the (m)other tongue throughout, by her ability to hush the community, which initially attempts to hush her, through her silences and gestures, the realm of the "non-dit," as Kristeva would put it. In a world where men are demanding that Hester not be silent, where Dimmesdale begs to be revealed to the crowd as he charges Hester with the task of speaking for him ("I charge thee to speak out the name of thy fellow-sinner and fellow-sufferer! Be not silent from any mistaken pity and tenderness for him . . ." [67]) and Chillingworth demands to know the name of Hester's lover in the prison scene, Hester's silence resounds with victory; it is more an act of defiance than deference or diffidence. Although Mary Jacobus, speaking of Tess of the D'Urbervilles, another silenced woman, says that the "female mouth can't utter, only receive and confirm the male,"<sup>34</sup> this is not the case with Hester, whose silence is doing the exact opposite: denying the male, while retaining her "magic circle" of otherness.<sup>35</sup> Recently, feminist linguists have suggested that women, who are left outside the experience of male discourse, find themselves mute or alienated when they attempt to internalize the male meanings.<sup>36</sup> However, I see Hester's silence as her refusal to participate in male discourse and thus as a sign of triumph over the male reality. My reading of Hester's silence as a sign of defiance is in keeping with Person's basic premise about the power of Hester's silence in a loud male world, but I disagree with his notion that Hester is being manipulative or vindictive in maintaining silence. His statement that her "vengeful silence" has "the effect of action" is a typically male-biased one that cannot embrace the maternity of silent language, a maternity that is far removed from male power dynamics of revenge.<sup>37</sup>

Carolyn Burke suggests that feminine meaning resides in "gaps in meaning, pauses, and silences" and that what is female or "unsayable" in society, what is "long repressed into the unconscious, includes the language of the maternal, as it does the languages of sexuality, madness, and death."<sup>38</sup> It comes as no surprise, then, that Hester is acquainted with all of these sublanguages; we have already seen her language of sexuality as displayed in the first scaffold scene. Through the course of the novel, Hester becomes acquainted with the language of "madness" and "death." She becomes a "rightful inmate, into the household that was darkened by trouble. . . . elsewhere the token of sin," and her embroidered letter is transformed into "the taper of the sick-chamber" (161). She is often seen in the company of the "ugly-tempered lady, old Mistress Hibbins" (185), who is deemed mad because of her own subversive feminine discourse (the "bitter-tempered widow of the magistrate" in an intolerant society [49]) and who is the only person who converses with her throughout the narrative (in the public arena, such as the scenes at the governor's mansion and at the Election sermon). Hester's maternal language is allied with that of Mistress Hibbins; as Jacobus theorizes, "Marginalized, the language of feeling can only ally itself with insanity."<sup>39</sup> And at times Hester, not being able to accommodate herself to male discourse, finds herself on the brink of lunacy: because "the world's law was no law for her mind" (164), she wanders "without a clew in the dark labyrinth of mind" (166). This distress on her part allows her to fathom the depths of those around her, to empathize with others who are burdened by the father's laws. Early on in the novel Hester senses the threat of madness twice: under scrutiny in the first scaffold scene (she felt she must shriek or "else go mad at once" [57]) and when faced with losing Pearl, her last link to humanity, through the governor's injunction ("Hester Prynne's situation had provoked her to little less than madness" [113]). Once secure in her position as a mother, she becomes self-reliant.

Not only does Hester comfort and understand the dying and deranged, but she also mothers those in dire need, whether that need be of spiritual or material nature:

Her breast, with its badge of shame, was but the softer pillow for the head that needed one. She was self-ordained a Sister of Mercy; or,

we may rather say, the world's heavy hand had so ordained her, when neither the world nor she looked forward to this result. The letter was the symbol of her calling. Such helpfulness was found in her,—so much power to do, and power to sympathize,—that many people refused to interpret the scarlet A by its original signification. They said that it meant Able; so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman's strength. (161)

This rather long passage shows the paradoxical nature of Hester's motherhood. On the one hand she is a "self-ordained" sister of mercy, a position she holds to the end of the narrative, when she is ministering to wayward, heartbroken girls who have tried to derive strength from patriarchs, as she had earlier; on the other hand, the town tries to affix one arbitrary definition on her.

Yet Hester is above those community members who attempt to claim her as their own and hence define her. These townspeople say proudly to strangers, "Do you see that woman with the embroidered badge? . . . It is our Hester,—the town's own Hester,—who is so kind to the poor, so helpful to the sick, so comfortable to the afflicted!" (162). Hester has broken the patriarchal code by becoming all woman/mother, but at this point (as Burke has warned above), her identity seems to be threatened by the new meaning she has tried to invest into her letter "A"; she is beginning to be stereotyped with her maternal qualities. The community begins to see her in traditional terms of good, and they transform the badge of shame into a holy badge: "the scarlet letter had the effect of the cross on a nun's bosom" (163). By making her into another safe stereotype, now the nun instead of the adulteress, they refuse to acknowledge the many faces of mothering. However, Hester is victorious, wearing another meaning into her badge, her contempt for patriarchal approbation. She refuses to remove her emblem, even when the community has "forgiven" her, and she refuses to participate in the community, both through her life on the outskirts of society and through her silence. In one of the most profoundly moving scenes in the novel, Hester refuses to be assimilated into this matrophobic society. When sympathetic or grateful townspeople approach her, she hushes them: "she never raised her head to receive their greeting. If they were resolute to accost her, she laid her finger on the scarlet letter, and passed on" (161). Having accentuated "la différence," she does not want it to

be taken away; she forges her maternal identity on her own terms.

Indeed, Hester's special status in society, in a "sphere by herself" (54), allows her access to other subcultures that are freed from patriarchal restraint: Indians, sailors, and lunatics (madness being another language assigned to the female realm); she weaves a "magic circle" around herself and seems to share this position with other untouchables. Thus, as mentioned above, Mistress Hibbins, who has all the makings of another rebel in society, is often in Hester's proximity at communal gatherings, as, for example, during Dimmesdale's Election Day sermon. The people gathered around the marketplace avoid Hibbins, apparent sister to Hester with her fanciful clothing; as if she had the powers of "necromancy": "the crowd gave way before her, and seemed to fear the touch of her garment, as if it carried the plague among its gorgeous folds" (241). Certainly the two are sisters in their use of an "other" language (their extravagant dress, which the crowd believes is invested with magic), and both possess a highly evolved sense of intuition, which can detect sin and hypocrisy in the townspeople's breasts. Hester's badge gives her a "sympathetic knowledge of the hidden sin in other hearts" (86), and she is united with others through this mystical bond. Mistress Hibbins, reputed to be of "infirm mind" (241), knows of the parishioners who have been to the forest and communed with the devil. But Mistress Hibbins is far from the maternal other embodied in Hester. In fact, if she could have achieved maternal independence and power, rather than living imprisoned in her brother's house, the governor's mansion, she and Hester might have been true sisters/mothers in arms on the periphery of society.

However, Hibbins sells out, as much as the "iron-visaged" women of the first marketplace scene do; in fact, with her "sour and discontented face" (149), she seems to ape the scolding women of the first scaffold scene. Indeed, she is acquainted with "the clamor of the fiends and night-hags," with whom she makes "excursions into the forest" (149), the unknown territory of femaleness/madness, or perhaps menopausal hysteria (in the narrator's eyes). These are various ways in which the patriarchs can keep women down—by labeling them spinsterish, witch-like, or menopausal ("mad" in their differences), or a combination (the "night-hags"). Mistress Hibbins is probably no more than an outcast

widow or moody, aging woman, but she is later hanged as a witch, as the narrator reports (implying that it was due to her "bitter temper" [49]). These three related negative stereotypes (the spinster, the menopausal woman, and the hag) are the products of the patriarchal imagination, and they are all contrasted with the fertile mother image of Hester, who resists categorization by refusing to join any party (matron, widow/spinster, or witch) and so wields some power over the category-makers.

Still, we forgive Hibbins's shrieking histrionics as much as we do the matrophobic crowd's dour scolding since we know that both are oppressed by the iron language of men. Hibbins, after all, appears peeking out from the window of her brother's, the governor's, mansion (a variation of the "maddwoman in the attic"), imprisoned as much as the matrons are burdened by the "ponderous iron-work" (47) of man's laws. Mistress Hibbins denies her femaleness and, as Nina Baym asserts, replaces one patriarchal system with another. The counterculture of witches and wizards is merely an offshoot of the patriarchal system that Dimmesdale represents; the repressed outsiders are still in the same power struggle between demons and angels, only they seek power in exploring forbidden underworld forces. Baym describes the situation appropriately: "The witches are rebels, but their rebellion arises from accepting the Puritan world view and defining themselves as evil. . . . Because they view themselves as society views them, the witches indirectly validate the social structure."<sup>40</sup> Although one might argue that Mistress Hibbins is Hester's grotesque double, her rebellious distortion of the paternal social structure puts her out of league with Hester, who, as a maternal separatist, refuses to conform to any culture or counterculture engendered by males.

This is not to say that Hibbins's salvation would have come about through maternity of the flesh, but rather through maternity of the mind. As the author of *Motherself* theorizes, woman need not be a mother literally to share in the quest of the mother, to have positive maternal qualities: "Just because the pattern needed to acquire motherhood is called the way of the mother does not mean, however, that it applies only to women who are literally mothers. . . . In its metaphoric sense, it should be as readily applicable to nonmothers . . . as to mothers."<sup>41</sup> Hibbins's potential to be a mother is seen in her concern for Pearl and Hester

during the procession scene, where she warns Hester of Chillingworth's impending duplicity and Dimmesdale's weakness. Telling Pearl that these two men will be boarding the ship back to Europe, Hibbins allies herself with Hester in advising maternal self-reliance and ignoring the males of this unhappy family romance: "So let thy mother take no thought, save for herself and thee. Wilt thou tell her this, thou witch-baby?" (245).

#### The Longing for the (M)other

In this novel, where we have the crowds seeking to destroy or diminish the possibility of maternity, we also have individuals, specifically the males, who paradoxically crave and seek the soft bosom of maternity, while at the same time they disdain it. This paradox becomes evident in the "Custom-House" introduction where Hawthorne the narrator views the federal government as a feminine entity, more precisely as a transformed national eagle that is viewed as "vixenly," a bad-tempered woman bereft of her maternity. Moreover, though the narrator craves "that her bosom has all the softness and snugness of an eider-down pillow" (5); not unlike Hester's breast as soft pillow [161], the reality he perceives is that she is "apt to fling off her nestlings with a scratch of her claw, a dab of her beak, or a ranking wound from her barbed arrows" (5). This is a most convoluted, subversive way of viewing the federal eagle, which is generally regarded as male. Hawthorne transforms this eagle into a maternal emblem, and then finds, to his dismay, that the eagle has been robbed of her maternity. The desire and need for maternity, however, is suggested by its absence. A great yearning for maternal energies is indicated: the narrator feels much like the nestling who is neglected by the mother, indeed, even flung off by her. On a biographical level, Hawthorne's relationship with his mother seems tense because of her inaccessibility.<sup>42</sup> This longing for a more personal mother becomes "what is most desired and what must be repressed."<sup>43</sup> Hawthorne's emptiness, resulting from a craving for a mother on a personal level, is transferred to the cultural level, as the narrator looks, futilely, for the great American mother in the shape of the national eagle. As Jung claimed, if one's individual

mother lacks one aspect or another, the need for a collective mother image emerges.<sup>44</sup> Paradoxically, though, nineteenth-century cultural ideology, which "idealiz[ed] possible maternal perfection,"<sup>45</sup> also conspired to destroy that which it was seeking, by defining and appropriating the terms of maternity (as object, product).

The image of the failed eagle leads to this question: What does one do in a patriarchal society that has made maternity powerless? In the remainder of the paper, I will discuss this question as it relates to Dimmesdale, to Hester, to Pearl, and to the crowd of matrifobic women.

Dimmesdale, the character who has become most enchain'd in patriarchal definitions of manhood, is looking for a mother. In this unresolved Oedipal conflict, he resembles Hawthorne, the narrator of the "Custom-House," not looking for a father figure, but rather for a mother figure. Throughout the narrative, Dimmesdale appears as a motherless child: our first glimpse of him is as a pale young man who seems "simple and childlike" (66). In one of his masochistic vigils, Dimmesdale's mind regresses into a flashback sequence of the past, in which the absent or pale mother is reproached as her essence is obscured by the father's frown: he imagines "his white-bearded father, with a saint-like frown, and his mother, turning her face away as she passed by. Ghost of a mother,—thinnest fantasy of a mother,—methinks she might yet have thrown a pitying glance towards her son!" (145). Dimmesdale's dilemma can be traced to this feeling of abandonment by the mother, a position Hester fulfills as surrogate. After the dead mother glides through Dimmesdale's vision, he imagines Hester Prynne gliding along with little Pearl pointing her forefinger at him (145); one mother has replaced the other, and their scolding attitude is seen in the child who will become mother.

Indeed, through the course of the novel, Hester is seen mothering, even infantilizing Dimmesdale. In the forest encounter she is forced to make decisions for him, and he seems jealous of Pearl's desire for Hester's attention in a type of uncontrolled behavior bordering on sibling rivalry. Dimmesdale retreats from children because he himself is a child who needs maternal nurturing. He tells Hester, "I have long shrunk from children, because they often show a distrust,—a backwardness to be familiar with me. I have even been afraid of little Pearl!" (203). When

Pearl throws a temper tantrum in the forest and refuses to recognize his authority, Dimmesdale helplessly looks on and invokes Hester's aid to pacify the child: "I know nothing that I would not sooner encounter than this passion in a child. . . . Pacify her, if thou lovest me!" (210). He is afraid of Pearl's bouts of passion because they reflect his own needy outbursts (especially when provoked by Chillingworth's tormenting), and he has no way to control them, hence his need for a kind but disciplining mother. When Dimmesdale is no longer the sole object of Hester's affections, with the arrival of little Pearl into the world, he allows himself to be mothered by another maternal figure who lives on the periphery of society, the widow who owns the house where he boards.

In the final scene, Hester "partly rais[es] him, and support[s] his head against her bosom" (255) in the manner of the Mater Dolorosa. Dimmesdale clings to Hester and invokes her aid, ". . . twine thy strength about me! . . . Support me up yonder scaffold" (253; a variation of Dimmesdale's plea in the forest, "Think for me, Hester! Thou art strong. Resolve for me!" [196]). And his final tottering walk to the scaffold reveals his lifelong quest for a mother: "He still walked onward, if that movement could be so described, which rather resembled the wavering effort of an infant, with its mother's arms in view, outstretched to tempt him forward" (251). Dimmesdale ultimately cannot reconcile his own feminine behavior (at one point a fellow minister accuses him of having "a young man's oversoftness" [65]) with the demands of patriarchy; searching for a mother outside himself, he remains a child to the end. What bodes ominously for Dimmesdale is his final decision to put faith in an Old Testament patriarchal version of God. The last words of his confession seem to damn him, to exclude the mother in himself and in Hester: "His will be done! Farewell!" (257). And so he has failed to recognize the feminine and nurturing component of God, the good news of the New Testament, the arrival of Christ.<sup>46</sup>

Although Hester has experienced the same type of disillusionment in her family dynamics as Dimmesdale, she finds a more satisfactory and creative solution to the absence of the mother. In the phantasmagoric vision she experiences in the first scaffold scene, she, too, imagines a scolding father and an absent or pale mother, who follows the father's lead blindly. She imagines a severe, white-bearded father and a gently

remonstrating mother, whose love is "heedful and anxious" (58), as it is eclipsed by the father. To be liberated from the world of the fathers, she must kill off the father figures (figuratively speaking) and repossess the mother. Hester does this by first leaving her father behind in England and then by abandoning another father figure, her husband, Chillingworth, in favor of a child, Dimmesdale, whom she can mother. (Indeed, Chillingworth's constant lament to Hester that he had hoped to find warmth and a "home" in her heart shows that her maternal grasp extends even to him; she has the potential to "mother" even this father.) Hester ultimately repossesses the mother within her by the act of birthing/mothering, by bearing a child, Pearl. By achieving motherhood on her own terms, in single parenthood, she escapes the limitations her own mother experienced; she has escaped the severity of the patriarchal Puritan code.

In fact, Hester erases her mother's frowns and furrows, brought on by her father's stern rule, by creating a new type of child discipline, quite different from the rigidity of the Puritan fathers, or, for that matter, of the mid-nineteenth-century patriarchs who imposed their will upon the child to show their control within the family structure in an ever-changing industrialized world that was dissolving family ties. The father's pivotal role within the family was gradually becoming displaced as the marketplace world beckoned him and as the cult of domesticity was making "the mother the principal overseer of the home, the 'ark of the nation.'"<sup>47</sup> Hawthorne's description of Puritan childrearing is not that far removed from the practice, so prevalent in his own time, of breaking the child's will:

The frown, the harsh rebuke, the frequent application of the rod, enjoined by Scriptural authority, were used, not merely in the way of punishment for actual offences, but as a wholesome regimen for the growth and promotion of all childish virtues. Hester Prynne, nevertheless, the lonely mother of this one child, ran little risk of erring on the side of undue severity. (91)

Like the Puritan child, "the child of 1850 existed to become an adult," which entailed becoming "a model citizen, and a pious, observant Christian."<sup>48</sup> Though a more gentle form of childrearing was advocated by some contemporary child-nurture literature and popular do-

mestic novels (such as Lydia M. Child's *The Mother's Book* [1831] and Catharine Sedgwick's novel *Home* [1835]), it was still a time that condoned corporal punishment, as the courts of the 1840s "often justified . . . fathers who beat wives and children."<sup>49</sup>

Hester, however, is a mother removed from patriarchal constructs of disciplinary behavior, and, indeed, she reflects the trend of Hawthorne's times, which saw the mother replacing the father in the disciplinarian role, albeit in the mode of "gentle nurture."<sup>50</sup> She attempts to "impose a tender, but strict, control over the infant" (91) with "an ever-ready smile and nonsense-words" (93). Discovering soon that she cannot break the child's will, Hester resists taking the course of action that her parents had taken with her and the punishment the Puritan magistrates had inflicted upon her; she permits, instead, "the child to be swayed by her own impulses" (92). When Hester wins custody, so to speak, of Pearl, during her second trial in "The Governor's Hall," she wins a major battle, beating the governor at his game of governing, by showing him that she is the true governor of Pearl and that his powers are insignificant in childrearing. A primary nineteenth-century concern was "subduing the will of the child and 'governing' it properly."<sup>51</sup> Like the new type of gentle disciplinarian mother, Hester resorts to "affectionate persuasion" rather than whipping to control Pearl, to the heart rather than to authority.<sup>52</sup> Indeed, when the governor attacks Hester for being a bad mother, because Pearl—refusing to recite her catechism properly—has not been socialized according to patriarchal dictates, Hester wins the day by appealing to her "mother's rights" (113). Dimmesdale further defends her maternal rights by appealing to the sacred relation between mother and child: she has a God-given "instinctive knowledge of [the child's] nature and requirements,—both seemingly so peculiar,—which no other mortal being can possess" (114). Ultimately, single motherhood, a realm outside that of the patriarch's power, allows Hester the opportunity to create her own authority, to break from an interfering father figure.

Indeed, it is through single parenting that Hester achieves the self-reliance of motherhood. Considering that the nineteenth century abounded with mother's manuals and mother's magazines, which authoritatively told women how to mother, this is no small feat. Although the mother's advice literature catered ostensibly to women, the narra-

tive voice behind the guidance insisted on authority being outside the mother's self, so that she would lose faith in her own maternal ways. This paradox of the mother's manuals is characteristic of the male conspiracy to empower women as mothers while at the same time denying them power. Thus, women were empowered simply to promote good capitalist values in the children, so that the male-dominant capitalist system would thrive, with bread-winners supported and male truths upheld: "The women who adopted and expanded the roles of wife and mother accommodated two generations of Americans, their husbands and sons, to the occupational exigencies of the capitalist system."<sup>53</sup> Moreover, men's public world of business infiltrated the home:

Women were expected to shield the home from the market and impart traditional values, unsullied by commercial life, but increasingly women learned such skills and values from commercial, mass-circulation books and sermons. Women, supposedly protected from the ravages of the marketplace, became particularly susceptible to the influence of mass-produced sentiments.<sup>54</sup>

Hester, because she follows no one's counsel but her own, does not fall prey to this marketplace conspiracy to mold the child. In this way, Hester is a sister to nineteenth-century feminists who rejected the advice of experts and relied upon their own maternal instincts.<sup>55</sup>

Moreover, childbearing and childrearing enable Hester to reconcile the male (or symbolic) realm with the female (or semiotic) realm and thus to achieve her creative potential. The narrator is able to conjoin these two conflicting realms, the male verbal and the female pre-verbal, in the meaning of the letter "A." Abstractly, punitively, in the male sense the letter ostensibly stands for "adultery." However, the narrator toys with the emotive meaning of the letter throughout (Able, Angel), and Pearl best recognizes the "A" as standing for Hester's maternity. The original sexual transgression, as males have perceived it, has given way to the focus of the narrative, maternity. Indeed, as Baym points out, Pearl cannot and will not recognize Hester as her mother once she has let her hair down for the minister in the forest and removed the emblem of her maternity: "Imperiously she [Pearl] requires that Hester reassume motherhood as her sole reality before she will return to her. The 'A' at this point means only maternity."<sup>56</sup> To the community the

letter appears as a "stigma" (202 and throughout), whereas in the forest, Hester's maternal landscape, it "glitter[s] like a lost jewel" (202).

Hester's relationship with Pearl then is the vehicle to her discovery of maternal strength. Kristeva believes that "the daughter, for whom the mother is not the other but the same. . . . has the artistic function of articulating the repressed maternal experience."<sup>57</sup> Thus, Pearl, in her extravagant and colorful garb, reveals the innermost, repressed Hester; she personifies and duplicates Hester's "wild, desperate, defiant mood" and "the flightiness of her temper" (91). From the beginning, Pearl seems an extension of the mother: we see her first as an infant at Hester's breast, receiving sustenance and, with that, Hester's wildness of spirit. The pre-verbal moment, the interchange between mother and child, when Hester's spirit of rebellion and creativity is on display in the first scaffold scene, infuses Pearl's life with meaning and later allows her to mock the governors and ministers and to appropriate "the archaic, instinctual and maternal territory."<sup>58</sup>

As Kristeva and Chodorow point out, this primary bond of the daughter's attachment to the mother lasts a lifetime, but there are moments of tension in which the child experiences the mother's powerlessness and becomes unmanageable.<sup>59</sup> Lois Cuddy in her essay on Hester and Pearl has noted that Pearl responds to her mother's "sense of anxiety and uncertainty by rejecting her impotent mother on the one hand and, on the other hand, taking on her mother's role and speaking for her."<sup>60</sup> Ruddick has described the maternal dilemma in a similar way: where mothers are denied power, "children will feel angry, confused, and 'wildly unmothered.'"<sup>61</sup> The frequent mood swings within Pearl typify this conflict, yet, ultimately, Hester's single parenthood saves mother and child. As Ruddick asserts, "Single parents . . . provide children with examples of caring, which do not incorporate sexual inequalities of power and privilege."<sup>62</sup> In the end, Pearl is no longer an implike creature who is frustrated with Hester's seeming impotence; rather, she comes to terms with Hester as a mother and with her own maternity. The bond is not shattered, as Pearl herself becomes a mother in a distant land (presumably Europe). Hester, a "grand" mother, is seen "embroidering a baby-garment, with such a lavish richness of golden fancy as would have raised a public tumult, had any infant thus appalled, been shown

to our sombre-hued community" (262).<sup>63</sup> The "non-dit" of the (m)other tongue is perpetuated as Hester passes on her gift.

We come back full cycle to the matrophobic, angry women at the start of the novel: Why, as daughters of mothers and mothers to daughters, do they remain so distant and vituperative in the face of Hester's quandary? Feminist critics have pointed out that in a society that empowers men, women feel the need to belittle and denounce other women even as they put men on a pedestal. As Jane Flax puts it, "The daughter must give up her own preoedipal tie to the mother, and often take on the father's devaluation of and contemptuous attitude for the mother, and, by extension, for women as a group."<sup>64</sup> A child's uneasy relationship with the mother will be replicated from one generation to the next: "A child's rageful disappointment in its powerless mother, combined with resentment and fear of her powerful will, may account for the matrophobia so widespread in our society as to seem normal."<sup>65</sup> Thus, the matrophobic women at the start of the novel can be understood as denying and devaluing Hester's maternity in an attempt to forget their own experience of maternal powerlessness. Pearl is saved because she never knows a father; indeed, she even rejects a patriarchal vision of the Heavenly Father as she exclaims to Hester, "I have no Heavenly Father!" (98), and she witnesses the destruction of her earthly father in the last scaffold scene. The conclusion of the novel sees her perpetuating the cycle of motherhood. Pearl has reconciled herself with her mother and with the mother within her and no longer needs to find a father. In Rabuzzi's eyes, the "atonement with the Mother" is precipitated by the woman's acceptance that "she and the Mother are one—that she is the Mother."<sup>66</sup>

Hawthorne envisages a new age, "some brighter period, when . . . a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness" (263). Perhaps the time to which he looks forward entails the feminization or maternalization of society—when the federal eagle would truly take on qualities of the (m)other. The narrator suggests that "the whole system of society" be "torn down, and built up anew" (165). Indeed, what Hawthorne envisions is not so different from what his contemporary, Margaret Fuller, hoped for: a redefinition of gender relations through

