THE closing paragraph of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and particularly the final sentence of that paragraph reveal a problem which deserves attention. A number of Hawthorne scholars have read the final sentence of *The Scarlet Letter* ("On a Field, Sable, the Letter A, Gules")\(^1\) as if it were an epitaph on Hester Prynne's tombstone. Such a reading is not only widespread, but also unsupported by textual evidence. A close textual study of the final paragraph, as well as foreshadowings from earlier chapters, reveals that no such motto appears on the tombstone. The last paragraph further suggests that the tombstone, along with its curious "device," is actually for Arthur Dimmesdale, and only incidentally for Hester Prynne.

As evidence that a number of critics have accepted the heraldic motto as an epitaph on Hester Prynne's tombstone, a few examples of the conventional reading will suffice to make the point.

In April, 1904, Theodore Munger, in "Notes on *The Scarlet Letter,*" wrote:

Strangers in Boston still search the burial ground of King's Chapel for the grave of Hester Prynne: so true a story, they think, must be true in fact. If it had been found they might have asked, What does the armorial device mean?

"On a Field, Sable, the Letter A, Gules"

... Is the epitaph a word of despair or of hope? In what direction did Hawthorne intend to lead our thought?\(^2\)

It is clear that Professor Munger sees Hawthorne's final sentence as the "device" on the tombstone. Sharing Munger's view, Leland Schubert remarked in "Structured Prefiguration: Motif and Symbol," "Hawthorne describes Dimmesdale and Hester as both

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\(^1\) Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter,* edited by William Charvat, Roy Harvey Pearce, *et al.* (Columbus, Ohio, 1962), 264. All quotations from Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* are taken from *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne,* Vol. I; and, unless followed by page number in the text, all quotations come from the last paragraph of the novel, p. 264.

\(^2\) *Atlantic Monthly,* xciii, 535.
buried under the same tombstone on which is inscribed: ‘On a Field, Sable, the Letter, A, Gules.’” Again, Richard H. Fogle, in dismissing the more “cheerful readings” of *The Scarlet Letter*, quotes Hawthorne’s sentence in support of his position, but errs, perhaps, in asserting that it is “the heraldic device on the common tombstone of Hester and Dimmesdale.” Harry Levin, quoting Hawthorne’s sentence, concludes that this “final phrase of his [Hawthorne’s] book . . . has become a heraldic escutcheon.” John C. Stubbs, in “A Note on the Source of Hawthorne’s Heraldic Device in ‘The Scarlet Letter,’” says, “‘On field, sable, the Letter A gules’ is the striking heraldic device on the tombstone of Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale.” Even the undergraduate devotee of the Monarch Notes series finds the view perpetuated there, in Charles Leavitt’s baffling sentence:

One tombstone serves for both the lovers. How very suitable it is that the inscription (concerning a scarlet letter on a black background) should at last bring the two lovers together.

Other scholars who have read the final sentence of *The Scarlet Letter* in the manner of Levin, Schubert, Fogle, and others could be cited, but these examples reveal the conventional trend.

A close reading of the final paragraph calls for a reevaluation of the conventional view of that final sentence, suggesting, in fact, that it is not an inscription on the tombstone at all. Hawthorne does say that “one tombstone served for both [Hester and Dimmesdale],” and that all around their tombstone were “monuments” in King’s Chapel graveyard (perhaps of the Boston aristocracy), “carved with armorial bearings.” Therefore, it was not uncommon, apparently, for tombstones to bear coats of arms and family mottos. But the common tombstone of Hester and Dimmesdale was a “sim-

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5 *Hawthorne, the Artist* (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1944), 141.
4 *Hawthorne’s Fiction: The Light and the Dark* (Oklahoma, 1952), 104.
6 *Notes and Queries* (NS), cccxiii, 175 (May, 1968). Mr. Stubbs cites Sir Walter Scott’s *Waverley* as Hawthorne’s source of the motto, quoting the 1814 Edinburgh edition (1,10): “The wrath of our ancestors, for example, was coloured gules; it broke forth in acts of open and sanguinary violence against the objects of its fury: our malignant feelings, which must seek gratification through more indirect channels, and undermine the obstacle which they cannot openly bear down, may be said to be tinctured sable.” The letters of Hawthorne to his sister Louisa of 1819 and 1820 verify his having read *Waverley*.
ple slab of slate.” Hawthorne further states that the “curious investigator,” looking at their “simple slab of slate,” might “perplex himself with the purport” of something he would see on it; for on the headstone “appeared the semblance of an engraved escutcheon,” which, according to Gough and Parker’s *Heraldry*, is the “shield itself whereon arms are emblazoned.” So far, nothing to perplex the “curious investigator.” But the escutcheon “bore a device,” and it is that device (“the emblem or mark” on the shield, according to Gough and Parker, p. 201) which the conventional reading takes to be Hawthorne’s sentence “On a Field, Sable . . . ,” but which more likely is simply the capital letter A. It is this A, on the escutcheon, which would perplex the investigator; he would wonder at its meaning on the tombstone just as visitors to the town of Boston had wondered and were perplexed at its meaning when they saw it on Hester’s breast.

Although the “curious investigator” might be perplexed as he viewed the A on the tombstone’s escutcheon, Hawthorne says that if a herald (“one trained in the Art of deciphering . . . coats of arms,” Gough and Parker, p. 322) were to pass through the King’s Chapel graveyard and, one must assume, were given the legend relating to the shield and letter, he would then be able to render into full heraldic language a motto, suitably fitted to tell in the language of arms the legend behind the simple escutcheon with its single device, the capital letter A. And, since there are presently only six heralds in all of England (according to Gough and Parker, p. 322), it is not likely Puritan Boston would have had one of its own, strolling among the graves of King’s Chapel. The final sentence is Hawthorne’s sentence, not a herald’s, and, above all, not a device springing full blown from the head of any one of the Puritans who buried Hester and Dimmesdale. What would a sable field have meant to Hester’s contemporaries, in terms of an appropriate motto for her legend?

As a further point, Hawthorne himself foreshadows my reading twice in the novel. In “Hester at Her Needle,” he says that the “young and pure would be taught to look at her, with the scarlet letter flaming on her breast. . . . And over her grave, the infamy that she must carry thither would be her only monument” (p. 79). Earlier, in “The Recognition,” Chillingworth foreshadows when,

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commenting on Hester's having to wear the scarlet letter, he remarks, "A wise sentence! . . . Thus she will be a living sermon against sin, until the ignominious letter be engraved upon her tombstone" (p. 63).

Having established that the stone bears only the letter $A$ as its device, it is further suggested that the $A$ is originally intended for Dimmesdale and only secondarily for Hester Prynne.

We know that Dimmesdale died when Pearl was about six years old. By the time Hester dies, Pearl is a grown woman, apparently married and with a child of her own. Hawthorne wrote, "And, after many, many years, a new grave was delved [Hester's], near an old and sunken one [Dimmesdale's]." If both Hester and Dimmesdale share a common tombstone, that tombstone must have been erected "many, many years" ago, and for Dimmesdale instead of Hester. The letter $A$ could have been added to the stone after those "many, many years," but it seems unlikely that Dimmesdale's grave could have been unmarked for all those years before Hester's death. The shield and $A$ must have been meant for Dimmesdale, not Hester, though serving as a fitting symbol for both. If, therefore, we assume, as I think we must, that the tombstone is as old as the old sunken grave over which it stands, the $A$ carries the symbolic significance of Dimmesdale's death (quite as easily as it could have, and does, carry significance also for Hester's death).

Recalling that many of the Puritans thought the red letter $A$ in the night sky stood for Angel (at Governor Winthrop's death), one might infer that the $A$ on the tombstone of Dimmesdale had the same meaning; for Dimmesdale, even after his confession on the scaffold, retained, in the esteem of many, his former angelic standing; and those friends (assuredly, prominent and influential friends, prejudiced in his favor, and the most likely ones to superintend his burial) looked upon his confession as a parable of the holy life he had lived, a parable to teach, even in death, that man at his best on earth is as vile as the vilest sinner in the sight of God:

According to these highly respectable witnesses, the minister, conscious that he was dying,—conscious, also, that the reverence of the multitude placed him already among the saints and angels,—had desired, by yielding up his breath in the arms of that fallen woman, to express to the world how utterly nugatory is the choicest of man's own righteousness . . . ; he had made the manner of his death a
parable, in order to impress on his admirers the mighty and mournful lesson, that, in the view of Infinite Purity, we are sinners all alike (p. 259).

In conclusion, textual evidence indicates that the letter A, alone, and not the heraldic last sentence, appears on Dimmesdale and Hester's "simple slab of slate" and conjunctively that the heraldic sentence is the author's description of the escutcheon's device and not the device itself. Furthermore, the text implies that the tombstone, as well as its curious device, is originally intended for Arthur Dimmesdale and that the A implies Angel and is a symbol only incidentally, or secondarily, for Hester and her Adultery and Ability. Hence, the common stone with its single A, which stands as a fitting symbol for both Hester and Dimmesdale, allows—if not their dusts—at least their histories at last to mingle.

THE MAGNA MATER ARCHETYPE IN
THE SCARLET LETTER

ROBERT E. TODD

DUALITY or ambivalence, as some critics have noted, is an essential attribute of The Scarlet Letter. No other book in American fiction, Male believes, is "so dual";1 and Martin declares that the special quality of Hawthorne's masterpiece inheres in its "essential duality or ambivalence."2 Much of this duality is expressed through the central figure of Hester Prynne, who has often been interpreted divergently in terms of either saint or sinner.3 Each of these opposing points of view, held by critics of ability and acumen, is altogether valid in spite of the paradox their polarity presents. For Hester, as Male has said, "is the woman, wedded to guilt yet offering eventual beatitude" to Dimmesdale.4 Her duality

2 Terrence Martin, Hawthorne (New York, 1965), 119.
4 Male, 12.