Hester's Revenge:
The Power of Silence
in *The Scarlet Letter*

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Although Hawthorne devotes much attention to the importance of speech and public speaking in *The Scarlet Letter*, he is also interested in the effects of silence. Terence Martin has observed, for example, that the novel develops "amid the dry regions of silence," depending "for its form on the silence of the actors," and Michael Ragussis has argued that a "ban of silence lies on everyone" in the novel, that the "act of speech" is "suppressed from without and repressed from within" in order to keep true family relationships hidden. The many silences and half-truths in *The Scarlet Letter* signal more than repression or evasion, however. The novel shows Hawthorne experimenting with the power of silence, with the active, political power of passive resistance. Although certainly no proto-Marxist, Hawthorne anticipates Terry Eagleton's observation that "it is in the significant silences of a text, in its gaps and absences, that the presence of ideology can be most positively

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felt.” Hester’s silence, in particular, can be viewed as a strategy, a presence in the text, as well as in the fictional world of the novel, that forms the plot and determines the fates of the other characters. Indeed, to recognize the interplay of speech acts and strategic silences in *The Scarlet Letter* is to appreciate the way Hawthorne shifts power among his major characters. At one remove, furthermore, Hester’s silent power becomes Hawthorne’s. Identifying with Hester and with the effects of her silence, Hawthorne sublimates his own desire to enact revenge upon his political enemies, the Salem Whigs (especially the Reverend Charles Upham) who had forced his removal from his job as customhouse surveyor.

As everyone familiar with his life is aware, Hawthorne had compelling reasons for thinking about revenge at the time he wrote *The Scarlet Letter*. He had just been fired from the job he held for over three years as Surveyor of the Salem Custom House. Of course, in “The Custom-House,” he got some measure of revenge on the Whigs who conspired against him, but the preface was written when the novel itself was nearly completed (and thus at least six months after his firing). Although James R. Mellow argues that Hawthorne did not “mar his book” with his “urge for revenge,” it seems unlikely that Hawthorne would have postponed gratification of that “urge” until he came to write “The Custom-House.” Hawthorne himself admitted in the short preface to the second edition of the novel that the sketch might have been “wholly omitted” without “detriment to the book,” and given his anger and expressed desire to gain revenge upon his “enemies” in the immediate aftermath of his firing, it is reasonable to

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4 See John E. Becker, *Hawthorne’s Historical Allegory: An Examination of the American Conscience* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1971). Becker argues that “just as Hester is able to turn the tables on her punishers by making the scarlet letter signify angel rather than adulteress without herself repenting; so Hawthorne, by his seemingly harmless and irrelevant skill as a writer is able to make the impervious world of Custom-House veterans wince with pain” (p. 75).

examine the novel itself for traces of revenge.\textsuperscript{6} Chillingworth's plot against Dimmesdale is an obvious example; for Mellow, in fact, it is only in Chillingworth that Hawthorne plays the "secret avenger."\textsuperscript{7} But in view of the closer parallels between Hester's experience and Hawthorne's own, it is also reasonable to explore the ways her actions fulfill Hawthorne's own designs. As Stephen Nissenbaum points out, "the parallel between Hawthorne's public humiliation in the summer of 1849 and Hester Prynne's experience in the opening scene of \textit{The Scarlet Letter} is too plain to be ignored, and it suggests a possible source of Hawthorne's newly recovered creative energies."\textsuperscript{8}

As Hawthorne's letters attest, the novel was conceived during a time when vengeance was clearly on his mind. Even before his official firing, he told Longfellow, "if they succeed in getting me out of office, I will surely immolate one or two of them" (XVI, 269). "I may perhaps select a victim," he went on, "and let fall one little drop of venom on his heart, that shall make him writhe before the grin of the multitude for a considerable time to come." Although admitting that he had never before enjoyed this "peculiar source of pleasure," he said he almost hoped to be fired "so as to have an opportunity of trying it" (XVI, 270). Even a year afterward, he recalled that, in writing the novel, he "went to work


\textsuperscript{7}Mellow, \textit{Hawthorne in His Times}, p. 307. In fact, Hawthorne was identified with Chillingworth as early as the first review in the Salem \textit{Register}, only five days after publication. That reviewer, who could not "suffer" Hawthorne's preface to "pass in silence," likened Hawthorne's treatment of the aging Inspector (William Lee) to "the fell purpose with which old Roger Chillingworth sets about wreaking his vengeance on Arthur Dimmesdale" (quoted in Benjamin Lease, "Salem vs. Hawthorne: An Early Review of \textit{The Scarlet Letter}," \textit{New England Quarterly}, 44 [1971], 113, 116).

\textsuperscript{8}"The Firing of Nathaniel Hawthorne," \textit{Essex Institute Historical Collections}, 114 (1978), 59. Like Hester, Hawthorne lost his position in society (the Custom House) and found himself stigmatized and accused of a "crime." Like Hester, he found himself in some sense betrayed by a minister—Reverend Upham (cf. Reverend Dimmesdale)—and was forced to fall back upon his art to support himself and his family. There is something analogous, furthermore, in the way Hester spares Dimmesdale's life (only to subject him to seven years' torment) and the way Hawthorne reports sparing the "old corps" at the Custom House from the "axe of the guillotine" (I, 13, 14) only to subject them to a thorough roasting in the sketch.
as if the devil were in [him], if it were only to put [his] enemies to the blush” (XVI, 345). Most important, Hawthorne felt especially betrayed by the Reverend Upham. Less than a month before he apparently began writing The Scarlet Letter, Hawthorne vowed to Horace Mann (8 August 1849), “I shall do my best to kill and scalp him [Upham] in the public prints; and I think I shall succeed” (XVI, 293). Despite intriguing parallels between the Reverends Upham and Dimmesdale, it would be reductive to argue that Hawthorne used the “public prints” of The Scarlet Letter simply to revenge himself upon the likes of the Whig minister. Nevertheless, Hawthorne’s comments about the composition of the novel support the contention that the novel was a symbolic act of revenge. In a 15 January 1850 letter to James Fields (in which he noted that he had three chapters of the novel yet to write) he commented, “in the process of writing, all political and official turmoil has subsided within me, so that I have not felt inclined to execute justice on any of my enemies” (XVI, 305).

Enacting and fulfilling Hawthorne’s desire for a “peculiar source of pleasure” (revenge), the plot of The Scarlet Letter depends upon a conspiracy of silence among Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth. Hester refuses to identify Pearl’s father in the opening scene and then takes an oath of silence when Chillingworth asks her not to reveal his identity. In fact, when she recognizes her husband on the outskirts of the crowd during the opening scene, his first gesture to her is to lay his finger to his lips and thus warn her not to give him away. Silently encouraging her complicity in the plot to discover Pearl’s father, Chillingworth possesses the “lock and key of her silence” (I, 118). He also possesses the key to Dimmesdale’s, for Hawthorne attributes to him a “power . . . to bring his mind into such affinity with his patient’s, that this last shall unawares have spoken what he imagines himself only to have thought.” Indeed, the key to eliciting “such revelations” is to acknowledge them “not so often by an uttered sympathy, as by silence, an inarticulate breath, and here and there a word, to indicate that all is understood” (I, 124). For his part, Dimmesdale believes himself impervious to such probings—a mas-
ter of his own silence. Answering Chillingworth’s pointed question about the need of making manifest an “unspoken crime,” he argues that there can be “no power, short of the Divine mercy, to disclose, whether by uttered words, or by type or emblem, the secrets that may be buried with a human heart.” It is only on the Day of Judgment that such secrets can be revealed or “spoken” (I, 131). Silence, he implies, confers a power only slightly less than divine. Little does he realize how the power of silence can and will be used against him.

Hester’s silence, for example, simultaneously aids and frustrates Chillingworth’s plot. By keeping this “second secret,” she tacitly helps him torment Dimmesdale and might even be accused of conspiring to kill his patient. By keeping Dimmesdale’s secret, she frustrates Chillingworth’s efforts, but in the process she prolongs Dimmesdale’s pain. Similarly, although Ragussis argues that silence deprives Pearl of a father, a name, and thereby an identity, Hester’s refusal to tell Pearl her father’s name also causes her to seek her father. And from the opening scene, where she holds out her arms at the sound of Dimmesdale’s voice, Pearl centers her attention on him. (At one point, she even throws a prickly burr at the minister.) Given her remarkable sensitivity to others’ appearances and moods, it might even be argued that Pearl’s perversity toward Dimmesdale (her repeated demands that he stand with her and her mother in town in the daylight, her washing off of the kiss he gives her in the forest) has been imbibed from Hester, the “warfare” of whose “spirit” has been “perpetuated” in her (I, 91). Indeed, while Hester keeps silent, Pearl does not. As a living reproach to her father’s silence, she keeps repeating and juxtaposing the questions, “What does the scarlet letter mean?” and “Why does the minister keep his hand over his heart?” In


effect her mother’s voice, Pearl also becomes an agent of her revenge.

It is both fitting and ironic that Hester’s revenge should take a “silent” form: fitting because of Dimmesdale’s own silence; ironic because, as feminist critics have argued, women are customarily “silenced” in male-authored texts in order to be rendered powerless. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out in *The Madwoman in the Attic* that, “in the same way an author both generates and imprisons his fictive creatures, he silences them by depriving them of autonomy (that is, of the power of independent speech) even as he gives them life.” Such “silent” images of themselves encourage women to become submissive, fearful of being silenced for rebellious speech or action. Choosing either alternative, speech or silence, women lose; while a “life of feminine submission” is a “life of silence,” a “life of female rebellion” is a “life that must be silenced” for the dangerous possibilities it suggests. In *The Scarlet Letter*, however, Hawthorne effectively collapses or conjoins these alternatives. Silence—the silencing of a woman—has a paradoxical effect. The danger for Hester is that in assuming a “freedom of speculation” that the townspeople, Hawthorne says, “would have held to be a deadlier crime than that stigmatized by the scarlet letter” (I, 164), she will also accept the social marginality and the loss of political influence that make such freedom possible. Although Hélène Cixous argues that it is only “by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence,” Hester, it seems to me, discovers a third alternative to speech or the silence of the symbolic: a vengeful silence that has the effect of action. Hester’s “life of

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12 Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1980), p. 251. See also Barbara Bellow Watson, “On Power and the Literary Text,” *Signs*, 1 (1975), 111–18. Watson argues that the “most essential form of accommodation for the weak is to conceal what power they do have and to avoid anything that looks like threat or competition.” She concludes, therefore, that “we must not expect either the literature written by women or that written by men based on their observations of women to tell us
feminine submission,” her “life of silence,” in Gilbert and Gubar’s terms, is more apparent than real, for it assumes the form of “female rebellion.” And that rebellion “must be silenced,” not to be suppressed but to be effective—must be silenced, in other words, not by others but by herself. Michel Foucault has argued in a different context that “there is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses.”__13__ Given her circumstances, a strategic silence is the most appropriate form for Hester’s exercise of power to take.__14__

Admittedly, because Hester exercises her freedom in private—speculatively—she seems to have little effect on the Puritan community. Through her good works she may cause people to alter the meaning of the scarlet letter from Adultress to Able (and thus may achieve a “symbolic” victory, in Cixous’s term), but she does not change Puritan values, nor does she alter the balance of power between herself and Puritan authority.__15__ Indeed, it can be argued that, even in modifying the meaning of the letter, Hester has conformed to community expectations. As Hawthorne remarks, “persons who speculate the most boldly often conform with the most perfect quietude to the external regulations of society. The thought suffices them, without investing itself in the flesh and

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__14__Hawthorne would depict a woman’s revenge more overtly—but still silently—in The Marble Faun, when a look from Miriam causes Donatello to push the model off the precipice. Just before the model appears, Hawthorne notes Miriam’s awareness of the “silence that had followed upon the cheerful talk and laughter of a few moments before” (IV, 170), and just afterward he notes the “silence” that follows the model’s “loud, fearful cry” (IV, 171).

__15__Nina Baym makes the best case for Hester’s symbolic achievement by embroidering the scarlet letter. By “bringing the community to accept that letter on her terms rather than its own,” Baym argues, “Hester has in fact brought about a modest social change. Society expands to accept her with the letter—the private life carves out a small place for itself in the community’s awareness. This is a small, but real, triumph for the heroine.” See The Shape of Hawthorne’s Career (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1976), p. 130.
blood of action” (I, 164). Although Hester remains, in Nina Baym’s words, an “artist of the private,” her power is more than symbolic and extends beyond denying the literal meaning of the scarlet letter and “thereby subverting the intention of the magistrates who condemn her to wear it.” Her silence, or “perfect quietude,” does have one tangible, essentially political effect; indeed, thought can “suffice” her precisely because it can have the effect of action. In particular, remaining silent enables her to revenge herself upon the man who cannot or will not acknowledge his relationship to her. Whether or not she intends it, by refusing to name him as her lover she ensures that Dimmesdale will go through seven years of inner torment. Best of all, Dimmesdale actually gives her the idea.

Called upon by the Reverend Wilson to convince Hester to reveal her lover’s name (ironically, because as her minister he knows her “natural temper” better than anyone else [I, 65]), Dimmesdale faces the first of many conflicts between his private self and his public role. His solution to the problem, however, is as ingenious as it is dangerous: feeling divided in himself, he divides his discourse and speaks with a deliberately “forked tongue” by insinuating a private message to Hester into his public speech. Although Hawthorne notes, ironically to be sure, that Dimmesdale’s speech “seemed” so powerful that people expected either Hester to “speak out the guilty name” or her lover to feel “compelled to ascend the scaffold” (I, 67–68), close attention to Dimmesdale’s words by “listening,” as it were, from Hester’s point of view makes obvious why neither occurs. At the outset, for example, Dimmesdale carefully alerts Hester to the “accountability” under which he labors, tacitly inviting her to discount what he says because of the external pressures on him to say it. Furthermore, he carefully designs the appeal itself to give her several reasons not to talk. As Darrel Abel and Michel Small have argued, for example, by making his “charge” conditional, Dimmesdale thwarts its ostensible purpose. “If thou feelest it to be for thy soul’s peace, and that thy earthly punishment will thereby be made

16Shape of Hawthorne's Career, p. 132.
more effectual to salvation,” he tells her, “I charge thee to speak out the name of thy fellow-sinner and fellow-sufferer!” (I, 67).

However, having subtly encouraged Hester not to speak (on his account), Dimmesdale shifts his ground and speaks, arguably with sincerity, about the effect her silence will have on him. “What can thy silence do for him,” he cautions her, “except it tempt him—yea, compel him, as it were—to add hypocrisy to sin?” (I, 67). From one point of view, Dimmesdale is terribly unfair, even irrational; he would shift responsibility to Hester for his own cowardice. From another point of view, however, he is quite right. If his cowardice can be taken for granted (and, three months after Pearl’s birth, surely Hester must expect him to continue his silence), Hester’s silence will have the effect of compelling him to add hypocrisy to sin and, therefore, will compel him to suffer in silence for his silence.

Dimmesdale not only gives Hester the idea to keep silent, but clearly alerts her to the consequences of her doing so. If she truly understands Dimmesdale’s speech, then she understands the effect her silence will have on him. If she believes what he says, then she recognizes that letting him remain unnamed is to ensure a punishment worse, at least in his view, than the “extremity” of the Puritans’ “righteous law” (I, 63)—death. Hester does not remain silent, therefore, “from any mistaken pity and tenderness for him,” because she clearly understands that for him to “hide a guilty heart through life” is worse than to “step down from a high place” and stand with her on her “pedestal of shame”—which he calls the “better” alternative (I, 67). Though it is what part of Dimmesdale obviously wants, her silence will have the effect of compelling him to “add hypocrisy to sin” and thereby endure seven years of torment. Hester, then, sees a way to serve and punish Dimmesdale at the same time, to fulfill his request and make him pay for the privilege of making it. In this respect, she is a passive rather than active rebel (and feminist); acquiescing in the political status quo, she discovers a safe way to exercise power.18 She relies implicitly on the Puritan ideology that Dim-

18Hawthorne implicitly characterizes Hester’s feminism as passive by having her consider a more active feminism to be “hopeless”: “As a first step, the whole system of society is to be torn down, and built up anew. Then, the very nature of the
mesdale has internalized to hoist him on his own petard. After all, by keeping silent she enables him to work out his destiny—to fulfill himself—in his own Puritan terms: to become a Puritan hypocrite. In that respect, she and her silence do “deniest to him” the “better” experience (albeit one that Dimmesdale himself is loathe to endure)—do indeed “compel” him to endure the moral agony of adding hypocrisy to sin.¹⁹

While Chillingworth swears Hester to silence, compelling her, as it were, to add hypocrisy to sin, it is as accurate to say that Hester’s own purposes are also served. Although John Caldwell Stubbs considers Chillingworth Hester’s “ultimate adversary” because he “embodies the severest aspects of the hard justice of the Puritans to which Hester stands irrevocably opposed,” the two characters effectively work together.²⁰ Chillingworth becomes her accomplice as much as she becomes his—indeed, the agent of her revenge, who makes Dimmesdale pay the price, the “hard justice,” for her silence. Here, too, Hester finds a way to manipulate the system, simply by allowing the system to manipulate itself. Branded a cuckold (at least in his own mind) by the stigma she wears, Chillingworth will plot to discover his enemy—his actions determined by a system that gives husbands proprietary rather than emotional interests in women as wives (both Hester and Chillingworth admit there was no love between them). In his long description of his plan, moreover, Chillingworth makes sure that Hester understands the likely consequences of his action and thus of her own—the power of her silence—before she commits herself. He threatens, should she give away his identity, to blast Dim-

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¹⁹Dimmesdale’s true feelings, the sub-text of his official “charge,” are made clear in his reaction to her refusal. Though he has seemed to give her a choice, his relief clearly—and ironically—reflects his preference for silence over speech. “Wondrous strength and generosity of a woman’s heart!” he exclaims. “She will not speak!” (I, 68).

mesdale's reputation, even to kill him. While Hester takes Chillingworth's oath of silence partly to protect Dimmesdale, her oath serves another, compelling purpose: it has the effect of subjecting Dimmesdale to the plan Chillingworth has outlined. As Chillingworth maliciously remarks, when Hester wonders if he has tempted her into a bond that will "prove the ruin" of her soul, "Not thy soul . . . No, not thine" (I, 77). Terence Martin is right that "Chillingworth wreaks a terrible revenge upon Dimmesdale: seven years of consummate torture; seven years of willful, malicious, treacherous vengeance." But even though Hester does not actively encourage that vengeance, she must recognize that her silence makes it possible. Based on what both Dimmesdale and Chillingworth tell her, she must understand the likely consequences of her husband's plot, and, as subsequent events demonstrate, she can at any time frustrate its "consummate torture." Instead, she remains silent—for seven years.

To be sure, Hester's feelings are mixed. Although she keeps her motives secret, she remains in Boston partly out of love for Dimmesdale, partly out of some expectation that she and Dimmesdale will enjoy an otherworldly reunion, and partly out of a sense of fatality. In the scene at the Governor's hall, however, Hester actively tries to influence her relationship to the Puritan community; she breaks her silence and speaks in her own behalf. Because of her marginal status, of course, her pleas to the magistrates fall upon deaf ears, and because her speech is powerless, she must quickly change her strategy and rely on Dimmesdale's. Despite his inner torment (or perhaps because of it), Dimmesdale has enjoyed popular success; so in demanding that he speak for her and convince the magistrates to give up their designs on Pearl, Hester must realize that he cannot afford to sacrifice his public stature. By keeping silent in the opening scene, in other words, Hester has gained power over Dimmesdale; she can pressure him into using his political authority (in which she has silently acquiesced) in her behalf.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, p. 124.
“Speak thou for me!” cried she. “Thou wast my pastor, and hast charge of my soul, and knowest me better than these men can. I will not lose the child! Speak for me! Thou knowest,—for thou has sympathies which these men lack!—thou knowest what is in my heart, and what are a mother’s rights, and how much the stronger they are, when that mother has but her child and the scarlet letter! Look thou to it! I will not lose the child! Look to it!” (I, 113)

This speech, the only public speech of any length she makes in the novel, like Dimmesdale’s own double-edged speech in the first scaffold scene, contains a secret message—an implicit threat of exposure. Three times Hester stresses how well Dimmesdale “knowest” her; she emphasizes that he “hadst charge” of her soul (when they “sinned”), that he has “sympathies” which the others lack, and once she pointedly reminds him that she has only Pearl and the scarlet letter—no husband—to defend her. A remarkable example of covert or veiled discourse, Hester’s speech is no less compelling than her silence.22

Dimmesdale obviously recognizes the implicit threat, for he quickly leaps to his task, lending his authority to Hester’s spoken plea by echoing her speech. Where she had acknowledged Pearl’s twofold effect (as her “happiness” and “torture”), Dimmesdale begins by remarking, “there is truth in what she says” (I, 113) and then confirms Pearl’s twofold effect as a “blessing” and a “torture” (I, 113, 114). Yet he cannot help adding, as he had done in the earlier scene, a remark about his own condition—a private message to Hester that has the ironic effect, from the point of view of this essay, of assuring her that her silence is working its vengeful effect. In having the responsibility of this “infant immortality,” he informs his listeners, the “sinful mother” is “happier than the sinful father” (I, 115).

Dimmesdale’s statement, of course, could be strategic, as if he would encourage Hester not to expose him by letting her know that he is suffering (as he and she had foreseen). Now, it may seem farfetched to argue that Hester wants Dimmesdale to suffer

22Gloria C. Erlich analyzes Hester’s speech as another example of Hester’s and Dimmesdale’s communication in “double language.” Hester’s “thou knowest,” she points out, “apparently referring to pastoral familiarity,” also means “carnal knowledge.” See Family Themes and Hawthorne’s Fiction: The Tenacious Web (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1984), p. 28.
at all, and admittedly the evidence presented so far has been entirely circumstantial. Hester's motives have been inferred from her actions and their consequences. Harder evidence, however, is provided by the scene that nearly all critics consider the turning point of the novel: the scene of Dimmesdale's midnight confession on the scaffold. For here, in recognizing the minister's tortured condition (seeing clearly just how compelling her silence has been), Hester has the opportunity to break her vow of silence—and chooses not to.

Seeing Chillingworth lurking in the shadows, Dimmesdale is "overcome with terror" and desperately asks Hester's help. "Who is that man," he gasps. "I shiver at him! Dost thou know the man? I hate him, Hester!" Despite the torment that Dimmesdale is obviously suffering, Hester will not help him. "She remembered her oath, and was silent"—so silent that Hawthorne does not even report any response or reaction when Dimmesdale repeats his plea for help: "Who is he? Who is he? Canst thou do nothing for me?" (I, 156). Despite Dimmesdale's desperation, Hester clearly thinks more of her oath to her husband than of her lover's suffering, even though she can have little doubt of her contribution to it.

It is only in the aftermath of this scene, after all, that she decides to seek Chillingworth's release from her oath, and even here Hawthorne suggests the subtle mixture of her motives. Her "whole soul was moved by the shuddering terror with which he [Dimmesdale] had appealed to her," he notes; she "saw—or seemed to see—that there lay a responsibility upon her, in reference to the clergyman, which she owed to no other" (I, 159). Hawthorne thus seems to absolve her of any guilt for intentionally causing Dimmesdale to suffer. Although she asks herself "whether there had not originally been a defect of truth, courage, and loyalty, on her own part," Hawthorne points out that she had been unable to see any other way of "rescuing him from a blacker ruin than had overwhelmed herself" (I, 166). Dimmesdale's suffering, he implies, was an unforeseen consequence of her silence: "she had made her choice, and had chosen, as it now appeared, the more wretched alternative of the two" (I, 167; italics added). But we have already seen that Hester must have had a clear idea of what Dimmesdale was likely to suffer. He had told her, both in
the opening scene and at the Governor’s mansion, that he would be “compelled” to suffer and was suffering; Chillingworth, too, had clearly laid out his plan of discovery and torture.

In fact, when Hester actually speaks with Chillingworth, Hawthorne is not so easy on her as he had been in the earlier passage. She admits that, because Dimmesdale’s “life and good fame” were in Chillingworth’s hands, she saw no choice but to accede to his request—despite “heavy misgivings.” She also admits that she was not entirely unaware of the potential consequences of her action; “something whispered me,” she says, “that I was betraying it [duty to Dimmesdale], in pledging myself to keep your counsel” (I, 170). Further, in letting Chillingworth work his way so close to Dimmesdale, she is convinced that she “surely acted a false part”; it would have been better, she says (twice), had she told the truth. This is not to say, however, that she regrets the “compelling” effect of her silence—only that speaking out would have caused vengeance to take another, swifter form. Telling the truth at the outset, she recognizes, undoubtedly would have meant Dimmesdale’s death (I, 171).

Although it can be argued that in alerting Dimmesdale to Chillingworth’s identity, Hester is trying to enable their escape from Boston, Hawthorne makes clear that this is not her original motive. In fact, to Chillingworth she expresses her despair at any good resulting from her sudden honesty. She is even willing for Dimmesdale to die: “nor do I perceive such advantage in his living any longer a life of ghastly emptiness,” she tells Chillingworth. “Do with him as thou wilt!” (I, 173). In other words, if Hester originally thought to save Dimmesdale from immediate death at the hands of Chillingworth (and thereby, wittingly or unwittingly, “compel” him to suffer the more), she no longer sees any advantage to that option. Whatever her reasons, and one of them certainly is to spare Dimmesdale further suffering, she does not act because she wants to save Dimmesdale’s life. Indeed, if Frederick C. Crews is right that the “only possible result” of Dimmesdale’s resolution to flee with Hester to Europe “will be a counter-revolution so violent that it will slay [him],” then his death after confession cannot come as much of a surprise to her.\(^{23}\) Indirectly, and

\(^{23}\) *The Sins of the Fathers: Hawthorne’s Psychological Themes* (New York: Oxford
undoubtedly with no legal responsibility, she enhances the likelihood of his dying.

Furthermore, in a remarkable reversal of roles, given her seven years' silence, Hester temporarily takes charge of the plot with her speech during her forest interview with Dimmesdale. Indeed, the minister begs her to do so. "Think for me, Hester!" he says. "Resolve for me!" "Be thou strong for me!" "Advise me what to do" (I, 196). Despite feeling a "kind of horror at her boldness, who had spoken what he vaguely hinted at, but dared not speak" (I, 199), he does agree to leave with her, apparently allowing her to plan his future. Released from her vow of silence, in other words, Hester speaks at length not only to Dimmesdale but for him—compelling him with her speech, as she had once compelled him with her silence, to "add hypocrisy to sin."

Whether or not she intends it, Dimmesdale's death should culminate Hester's revenge. Dimmesdale, however, seems to outwit Hester, suggesting that in agreeing to flee with her he may have unconsciously wanted to provoke the very "counter-revolution" that will "slay" him. In addition, as Terence Martin has demonstrated, Dimmesdale is careful to note the date of their passage before he commits himself to going in order to ensure that he can preach the Election Sermon that will culminate his public office.24 So in compelling Hester to speak for him, Dimmesdale effectively switches places with her, adopting a strategic silence of his own about his motives.25 Then, having assured himself of the

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Univ. Press, 1966), p. 143. Darrel Abel argues that Chillingworth does not hesitate to release Hester from her oath because he "probably foresees that Hester's interference at this point is likely to complete the minister's ruin" ("Hawthorne's Dimmesdale," p. 96).


25Chillingworth, too, maintains a strategic silence, surreptitiously booking passage on the ship. When Hester learns of his plot from the shipmaster, she beholds Chillingworth across the town square smiling in a way that "conveyed secret and fearful meaning" (I, 235). This apparent shift in the power of silence toward the end of the novel may be explained by Hawthorne's stage of composition. When he commented to James Fields in the 15 January letter that "all political and official turmoil" had "subsided" within him during the writing process, he noted that he still had three chapters of the novel to write. Without that "turmoil," he may have had less reason to pursue Hester's "silent" advantage over Dimmesdale in those final chapters.
opportunity with his silence, Dimmesdale reclaims the power of
speech in both his sermon and his confession. While the words of
his sermon are effectively silenced for Hester because of her dis-
tance (outside the church), she catches the “low undertone,” a
“deep strain of pathos” that sighs “amid a desolate silence” (I,
243). And almost perversely, given the power of silence she has
enjoyed, Hawthorne notes that “it was this profound and contin-
ual undertone that gave the clergyman his most appropriate
power” (I, 244). If Dimmesdale has truly “appropriated” Hester’s
power by hiding his message “under” the words of his sermon,
he goes a step further in his confession—silencing Hester so that
he can speak in her place.

As Louise Barnett and Dennis Foster have shown, Dimmes-
dale carefully words his “confession” to encourage alternative in-
terpretations. But he also expresses his confidence that he has
made the best of his situation, that by suffering for seven years
and now by confessing he has earned God’s mercy and is on his
way to heaven. Ironically prefacing that speech with an injunction
to Hester to “Hush,” he suggests that her silence now serves his
purpose more than her own. Indeed, if Dimmesdale’s view of his
fate can be credited, her silence has served his purpose all along:
“By giving me this burning torture to bear upon my breast! By
sending yonder dark and terrible old man, to keep the torture
always at red-heat! By bringing me hither, to die this death of
triumphant ignominy before the people!” Without those “ago-
nies,” he assures her, he should have been “lost for ever” (I,
256–57). Once a source of power, Hester’s silence now seems ineffec-
tual. Perversely, by “hushing” Hester, pointing out the vanity of
any hope for their otherworldly reunion, and then voicing his
faith in the operation of God’s mercy for himself alone, Dim-
mesdale seems to have his revenge.

As every reader is aware, of course, Haw-
thorne coyly suggests several different interpretations of Dim-

150–51.
mesdale's confession. Virtually nothing is what it seems in *The Scarlet Letter*; Dimmesdale's final speech is not necessarily an accurate account of his own story, nor is it the final word on Hester's. Although David Leverenz argues that Hester is “pacified” by Dimmesdale's speech, her story does not end with his death, and neither do the effects of her silence. The minister's death, for example, does not prevent her from going on with the plan they conceived in the forest—without him. Indeed, because it leads directly, Hawthorne suggests, to Chillingworth's, Dimmesdale's death also makes it possible for Pearl to escape from Boston and to become the “richest heiress of her day, in the New World” (I, 261). Although the Boston to which Hester eventually returns is certainly no feminist utopia, despite her personal freedom from men, in effect if not in intention Hester successfully revenges herself upon both men who had forsaken her. Keeping Dimmesdale's secret from Chillingworth and Chillingworth's from Dimmesdale, she tacitly encourages the two of them to develop a love-hate relationship that climaxes in their deaths. “Mutual victims,” as Hawthorne puts it (I, 261), in effect they kill each other. Best of all, perhaps, with the money that may well have motivated her marriage to Roger Prynne in the first place (Hawthorne notes her “decayed” and “poverty-stricken” paternal home [I, 58]), she and Pearl sail for Europe, leaving both men in their graves.

In the end, moreover, Hester's silence and Hawthorne's are congruent. Hester's silence is a strategy on Hawthorne's part, Hes-

28Serving Hester's purpose by torturing Dimmesdale, Chillingworth feels the effects of her revenge even as he masks it. He falls into a “blackber” sin than the minister's, thereby ensuring his own damnation, while as the agent of Dimmesdale's torment he obscures Hester's complicity in his scheme. Although Dimmesdale's first impulse is to hold Hester “accountable” for his suffering (I, 194), he finally accedes to her demand that he forgive her and shifts all blame to Chillingworth, the perfect “fall guy.” In accepting Dimmesdale's judgment of Chillingworth as the prime villain of the novel, critics have ignored Hester's role in Dimmesdale's suffering.
29As Allan Lefcowitz argues, Hester rather than Chillingworth might be considered “the one who enters the marriage cold-heartedly. Whether she married him for his protection, wealth, or prestige,” she clearly did not love him, so “her action was, in fact, exactly the same one for which Chillingworth is traditionally condemned; it was from the head not the heart.” See “Apologia pro Roger Prynne: A Psychological Study,” *Literature and Psychology*, 24 (1974), 36.
ter's silent forbearance in the long aftermath of the novel a "cover" for his own after the smoke had cleared from "The Custom-House"—precisely because the novel causes and enacts the subsiding of "political turmoil" in his imagination. Stephen Nissenbaum has shown that Hawthorne spent the summer of 1849, the immediate aftermath of his firing from the customhouse, trying to get his job back; by the time he actually sat down to begin *The Scarlet Letter* in the early fall, on the other hand, he had resigned himself to the loss.30 But whether or not Hawthorne retained any hope of returning to his position, the elaborate veiling of meaning in *The Scarlet Letter*, including the silencing of Hester's revenge, suggests that he was still intent upon covering his motives and thus enjoying his own satisfaction in revenge, that "peculiar source of pleasure," in private. Nissenbaum, furthermore, identifies Hawthorne with Dimmesdale and Chillingworth with the Reverend Upham; from that point of view, the novel recounts Hawthorne's victimization, as both ministers make it their "purpose in life to bring about the destruction of a sensitive young man."31 Similarly, even though Hawthorne was apparently determined to take his gloves off when he wrote "The Custom-House" (after the novel was nearly completed), even the sketch serves another purpose. Much like Chillingworth's obvious persecution of Dimmesdale, it deflects attention from the more subtle power of Hester's silent plot against the minister who has betrayed her. When Hawthorne is identified with Hester and Upham with Dimmesdale, on the other hand, the tables abruptly turn, as Hester and Hawthorne both can exact revenge and cover it up with silence.

Hawthorne's revenge may have been all the sweeter, furthermore, if he recalled Reverend Upham's characterization of Ann Hutchinson (arguably, a model for Hester) in his biography of Sir Henry Vane, a work that Hawthorne knew well.32 Criticizing

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32 In an 18 January 1838 letter to Joseph B. Boyd, an autograph seeker from Cincinnati, Hawthorne advised Boyd to seek Upham's autograph and identified Upham as "the author of the Life of Sir Henry Vane, in Mr. Sparkes' [sic] American Biography, and of several other works, principally historical, which have been received with distinguished approbation here and in England. No collection of
Hutchinson's "deportment" in conducting weekly religious meetings for women, Upham had written: "Her course, which, however well intended, was from the beginning rather unbecoming that sex upon whose lips, however eloquent and persuasive, the great Apostle has imposed silence in public, and whose influence may be more legitimately exerted in retired and quiet methods, and, when thus exerted, defies the control of either magistrates, priests, or apostles themselves." Much as Dimmesdale encouraged Hester to keep silent in the opening scaffold scene, Upham may have given Hawthorne the idea of how to exploit an "imposed silence in public" and yet, with "retired and quiet methods," defy the control of the magistrates and exact revenge upon the "priest" who had injured him.

Asked by George Hillard to write Secretary of the Treasury William Meredith on Hawthorne's behalf, Rufus Choate praised Hawthorne as a "young man of the finest genius—a writer of rare beauty, & merit & fame, a person of the purest character." But in politics, he assured the administration, Hawthorne was "perfectly quiet & silent." Considering the power of silence Hawthorne insinuates into The Scarlet Letter, it is not surprising that Choate's letter failed to get him back his job. Silencing Hester's voice, silencing his own by identifying with Hester's "perfect quietude," Hawthorne had his revenge—quietly, silently, perfectly.

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American autographs can be considered complete, without a specimen from him" (XV, 260). Hawthorne also mentioned Upham's biography of Vane in "Grandfather's Chair" (VI, 29). For treatment of the Hester Prynne-Ann Hutchinson parallels, see Michael J. Colacurcio, "Footsteps of Ann Hutchinson: The Context of The Scarlet Letter," ELH, 39 (1972), 459–94.
