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Nathaniel Hawthorne, Una Hawthorne, and *The Scarlet Letter*: Interactive Selfhoods and the Cultural Construction of Gender

In the months before Hawthorne began writing *The Scarlet Letter*, he was troubled by something in the character of his daughter Una that he had difficulty defining. He made a series of entries in his notebook during this period that record her daily activities, adding up to an extended meditation on the enigma that her personality presented to him. Here is one of several uneasy summaries:

[T]here is something that almost frightens me about the child—I know not whether elfish or angelic, but, at all events, supernatural. She steps so boldly into the midst of everything, shrinks from nothing, has such a comprehension of everything, seems at times to have but little delicacy, and anon shows that she possesses the finest essence of it; now so hard, now so tender; now so perfectly unreasonable, soon again so wise. In short, I now and then catch an aspect of her, in which I cannot believe her to be my own human child, but a spirit strangely mingled with good and evil, haunting the house where I dwell. (American 430-31)

Hawthorne's perplexity illustrates a leading feature of the cultural construction of gender, the way in which perceptions of human reality are concerted—and disconcerted—by the systems of meaning through which gender is construed. Hawthorne's mind was the arena, in this respect, of an unsolvable contest of significations. The conceptions of gender informing his consciousness proposed womanhood and manhood as complementary opposites, in keeping with the domestic ideal emerging in the early nineteenth century, which assigned to women the destiny of fulfilling themselves through tender self-sacrifice in the private roles of wife and mother. This womanly selfhood is now recognized as a derivative counterpart of the self-sufficing combative style of manhood then acquiring supremacy, as called forth by the competitive requirements of a capitalist democratic culture.

Prominent in Hawthorne's description of Una is the confounding of these gender categories: the child's masculine boldness and hardness and unshrinking "comprehension of everything" is amalgamated with tenderness, wisdom, and the finest essence of delicacy. The child appears to him an anomaly, neither male nor female and yet both. She strikes him as not human, in uncanny moments, because she does not conform to the definitions that organize his perceptions of the human. Yet Hawthorne seems incipiently aware of this: he places emphasis on the uneasy play of his perceptions, pointing to the connection between his shifting vision of Una and a disturbance internal to his mind. He attempts again and again to put on paper a description of the way she appears to him because her presence "seems to embarrass the springs of spiritual life and the movement of the soul" (American 414).

Hawthorne's anxieties were easily aroused on these issues because he felt his own character to be anomalous in relation to the prevailing standard of masterful public manhood. Hawthorne's painful shyness—to take the most obvious external marker—was a "feminine" trait; Henry Wadsworth Longfellow spoke for the commonplace response when he observed that "to converse with Hawthorne was like talking with a woman" (Lathrop 559). Hawthorne was aware, moreover, that the selfhood expressed in his writing is a tremulous connoisseur of emotion, subtly responsive to inward experience, who is preoccupied with keeping the "inmost Me behind its veil" (*Scarlet* 4) while establishing an intimate communion with the reader. In defense of this artistic character, Hawthorne covertly yet persistently resisted conventional definitions of manhood, and this rebellion gave him strong sympathies with the feminist protest against the restricted role assigned to women. Yet by the same token Hawthorne was profoundly disconcerted by women who displayed the forthright public assertiveness that he himself lacked, as he shows in his famous venomous assaults on women writers and in the postmortem denigration of his erstwhile friend Margaret Fuller. Hawthorne's unstable fusion of feminism and misogyny is one feature of the interference pattern set up by ceaselessly colliding self-appraisals, the convulsive uncertainties regarding his sexual identity that permanently characterized his emotional life.
Hawthorne's behavior on the day his daughter was born reflects his characteristic inward tension. He is hesitant to confront the child, even fearful: "I have not yet seen the baby, and am almost afraid to look at it," he writes to his sister. Hawthorne transcribes impressions of the newborn he has collected from the attending physician, Dr. Bartlett; his mother-in-law, Mrs. Peabody; the housekeeper, Mary O'Brien; and a neighbor, Mrs. Prescott. Yet even as he points out that he has formed no judgment of his own, his mind fixates on a detail sharply at odds with his concept of feminine delicacy. "Of my own personal knowledge I can say nothing, except that it already roars very lustily" (Letters 1843–1853 15).

Such moments of troubled response had a fateful import for Una Hawthorne. She was not a chance acquaintance or a literary rival or a sometime friend, like Margaret Fuller, to be given a temporary role in the ambivalent drama of Hawthorne's mind. She was his own human child, and her character—so uncanny and so alien—was shaped by the way she was reared in his household. It would be an oversimplification to say that Una became merely a creature of her father's imagination, no more than the embodiment of his gender conflicts, as projected onto her. Yet her character, like his, was a cultural construction, and it was one in which Hawthorne had a hand.

This is not the occasion for a detailed treatment of the pattern of solicitude and discipline that the Hawthornes organized about their baby daughter, but crucial issues of the selfhood they sought to impart are disclosed in their naming her Una, after Spenser's maiden of holiness. This decision provoked a controversy among family and friends that the polar tension between the derivative position of the domestic angel and the tormented assertion by women of the autonomy that men increasingly claimed for themselves. John Bell's statue of Una and the lion, for example, which was displayed at the Crystal Palace in 1851, celebrates the magical power of blameless feminine gentleness to subdue the brute ferocity of males (Gay 414–15), a theme that Nina Auerbach elaborates in Woman and the Demon.

Closer to home was the uneasy debate Margaret Fuller conducted with the ideal she found in Spenser's unearthly maiden. No American woman of the period struggled more vigorously than she to realize herself as an individual in her own right. She was also an intimate of the Hawthorne household before and after Una's birth, when the Hawthornes were reading Spenser together. The summer Una was born Fuller published "The Great Lawsuit," her preliminary draft of Woman in the Nineteenth Century, which discusses Una as occupying a notably limited place in the "range of female character in Spenser." So long as "Britomart and Belphoebe have as much room on the canvass as Florimel," Fuller observes, "... the haughtiest Amazon will not murmur that Una should be felt to be the highest type" (25). The restlessness audible in Fuller's carefully conditional "should be felt to be" is accentuated in the final version of this passage, published the following year, which demotes Una from the pinnacle of womanhood: no longer the "highest" type, she becomes merely the "fairest" (66).

Hawthorne's friend George Hillard, who had also published a discussion of Spenser's Faerie Queene (Hull 112), objected that the spiritual forces associated with Una should be kept within the boundaries of myth, not applied directly to human experience. The name was "too imaginative"; it should "rather be kept and hallowed in the holy
crypts of the mind, than brought into the garish light of common day” (J. Hawthorne 1: 276). Replying to Hillard, Hawthorne insists that in his own eyes the child perfectly incarnates what her name means and that its appropriateness will become generally apparent as she leads her life:

... the name has never before been warmed with human life, and therefore may not seem appropriate to real flesh and blood. But for us, our child has already given it a natural warmth; and when she has worn it through her lifetime, and perhaps transmitted it to descendants of her own, this beautiful name will have become naturalized on earth; —whereby we shall have done a good deed in first bringing it out of the realm of Faery.

(Letters 1843–1853 22)

Hawthorne depends here on a “naturalization” that will come about automatically simply because the child is female. The gender system that ascribed nurturant tenderness to women and combative individuality to males was conventionally regarded in Hawthorne’s time as a law of nature and of nature’s God, a matter of universal essences that were at once biological and ethereal—inherent and transcendent gender identities that would assert themselves no matter what deviations individual men or women might indulge in. Because he recognized that his own character was in some respects deeply at odds with these definitions of normality, Hawthorne persistently queried the natural foundation of manhood and womanhood. Yet he sought to quell his uneasiness about his lustily roaring newborn daughter by insisting that the natural properties of womanhood had already been secured and would emerge inevitably as the child grew up. There is “something so especially piquant,” he observes, “about having helped to create a future woman” (Letters 1843–1853 25).

In the five years that elapsed between his letter to Hillard and his writing The Scarlet Letter, Hawthorne lost his confidence that the child would naturalize the identity he had ascribed to her. Instead of displaying tender holiness suited to allaying masculine dread, her character now intensified his initial fears. Bringing Una out of “the realm of Faery” had also brought Duesa, and by a simultaneous reverse movement his own flesh and blood had slipped into fairyland and was now surrounded by an uncanny aura of the supernatural. The work of naturalization remained to be accomplished, both for himself and for her.

Una’s role as a source for Pearl has played a useful part in critical studies of The Scarlet Letter. One tradition—summarized by Barbara Garlitz—treats the text as a work of art whose self-contained wholeness fuses quotidian raw materials into a dynamic system of resolved stresses, so that the meaning of Una-Pearl takes form with reference to the other elements of the aesthetic totality. Or the imaginative life of the artist himself may be the focus of attention, as in Evan Carton’s acute and powerful recent essay, where Una and The Scarlet Letter both bear witness to the conflicted sexuality inherent in Hawthorne’s unfolding conception of Romance. It would also be possible, and instructive, to place the center of gravity in Una’s story. She is the only one of Hawthorne’s three children who has not inspired a book-length biography; her short, unhappy life has not seemed to have the requisite importance. As one who lives out the torment of Gilbert and Gubar’s Madwoman in the Attic, however, she merits intensive study, and her doom could well occasion a comprehensive summary judgment on her father’s life and work.

Instead of finding an autonomous sovereign significance in one of these three centers of interest, I treat them as interactive, as contingent and interdependent participants in a collective process. In the cultural construction of gender both the builders and the building materials are human beings who are at work on one another and whose intercourse is mysteriously conveyed and contained in works of art. Stephen Greenblatt has given the name cultural poetics to the study of this interdefining activity as a cultural process at large, and it is a study that—however broad its implications—requires the careful examination of local particulars, here the particulars of gender conflict interlinking Nathaniel Hawthorne, Una Hawthorne, and The Scarlet Letter.

Instead of reifying Hawthorne’s entangled brooding on Una’s character into transcendent aesthetic terms, The Scarlet Letter extends that brooding and complicates the entanglement. Little Pearl is made to enact the qualities that most troubled Hawthorne in his daughter, and she is eventually delivered from them. Hawthorne surrounds little Pearl, that is to say, with a therapeutic program, which includes a diagnosis of her difficulty and a prescription for cure, grounded on the gender categories that he considered natural and that defined a femininity he hoped his daughter would grow into.

Yet his ambivalence about gender issues leads
Hawthorne to subvert these categories even as he invokes them, so that to trace the process by which he restores Pearl to “normality” is to single out but one movement in a continuous scrimmage of meanings. As David Leverenz’s subtly nuanced discussion shows, unresolved emotional conflicts are at the heart of The Scarlet Letter’s magical power over its readers; a close reading of the text leads both inward, toward its reverberating interior resonances, and outward to social history. The thematic conflicts in Hawthorne’s text receive comment from the conflicts in his own experience, and they also receive comment from the discordant form Una’s life finally assumes. Far from attaining the natural womanhood Hawthorne wished for her, Una becomes a ravaged battleground where the opposing forces inherent in that ideal carry on their ceaseless warfare.

To investigate the contests of gender signification that take place within Nathaniel Hawthorne, Una Hawthorne, and The Scarlet Letter is to find that these three theaters of conflict are not sharply bounded entities. The differences among them are vivid—the difference among a man, a woman, and a book. Yet the cunningly interlinked differences within them give us access to their joint engagement in the cultural construction of gender and subvert any effort to view them as autonomous individualities. They play against each other in a cultural politics, such that the assertion of a total comprehensive vision always turns out to be rhetorical, and is delusory if taken to be final. They are not self-contained selfhoods shedding light, as solitary lighthouses might shed light, one on the other. Nor do they finally stand apart from ourselves, illuminating our own gender conflicts. They are moments in an interactive texture of semantic relations, the cultural metabolism of meanings by which gender is constructed in America, outside which there is no place to stand.

Pearl’s inhuman nature results from the sin of her parents, so the narrative manifestly asserts, and that sin is rooted in distortions of gender. In the story of Hester and Arthur a manly woman and a womanly man repair their aberrant characters; they reciprocally enable one another to attain “true” manhood and “true” womanhood, and this fulfillment redeems their child.

Hester is a vigorous and independent-minded woman who bitterly resents the oppression she has suffered and sees it as bearing on “the whole race of womanhood. Was existence worth accepting, even to the happiest among them?” Fundamental social changes, she recognizes, are necessary to remove the injustice women suffer:

As a first step, the whole system of society is to be torn down, and built up anew. Then, the very nature of the opposite sex, or its long hereditary habit, which has become like nature, is to be essentially modified, before woman can be allowed to assume what seems a fair and suitable position. Finally, all other difficulties being obviated, woman cannot take advantage of these preliminary reforms until she herself shall have undergone an even mightier change; in which, perhaps, the ethereal essence, wherein she has her truest life, will be found to have evaporated.

This passage illustrates Hawthorne’s restlessness with the definition of gender as a natural ethereal essence. Is it the “nature” of the male sex that must be changed or merely its “long hereditary habit”? Is it necessary for the “truest life” of woman to be sacrificed, or is that only a danger? Is the psychosocial revolution Hester contemplates a perversion, distorting the “ethereal essence” of woman, or is it simply very difficult?

Hester’s pursuit of such speculations is itself presented as an “exercise of thought” at odds with her feminine nature. In taking up this frustrating intellectual quest, she departs from the woman’s natural engagement with concerns of the heart and as a result creates a personal impression of “marble coldness”:

There seemed to be no longer any thing in Hester’s face for Love to dwell upon; nothing in Hester’s form, though majestic and statue-like, that Passion would ever dream of clasping in its embrace; nothing in Hester’s bosom, to make it ever again the pillow of Affection. Some attribute had departed from her, the permanence of which had been essential to keep her a woman. (163)

Yet Hester’s femininity has not been altogether destroyed. Looking forward to her meeting with Arthur in the forest, Hawthorne observes: “She who has once been woman, and ceased to be so, might at any moment become a woman, again, if there were only the magic touch to effect the transfiguration” (164).

Well before that climactic meeting, however, Hester gives evidence of an “innate womanliness” prevailing still among the circumstances tending to replace it with an “unnatural” masculinity. She is
preserved from the wilder excesses of rebellion by the devotion that she can pour into the rearing of Pearl; and in her relation to the community at large she displays the quality of compassionate self-sacrifice belonging to woman’s “ethereal essence.” Hawthorne speaks of her uncomplaining submission to the abuse she receives from the public, of the “blameless purity” of her life. He points out that she lives with extreme frugality, giving all her surplus to the poor. The scenes in which this distinctive “feminine” virtue most exercises itself are those of the sickbed and the deathbed, where “Hester’s nature showed itself warm and rich; a well-spring of human tenderness, unfailing to every real demand, and inexhaustible by the largest” (161).

The compelling reality of this “womanly” trait, Hawthorne affirms, is felt by the community at large, so that the townsfolk begin to say that the scarlet A “meant Able, so strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman’s strength” (161). Enacted in the forest, accordingly, is the reciprocal “magic touch,” in which Hester recovers her “womanhood” and, in the consummate exercise of her woman’s strength, makes a “man” out of Arthur Dimmesdale. As Hester sees Arthur approaching on the forest path, she observes his “nerveless despondency”; and his behavior throughout the scene reveals his loss of the ascribed masculine qualities of public initiative and self-possession, of rational judgment and resolute will. As Arthur begins to grasp the scale of his dilemma, he turns to Hester for guidance: “Think for me, Hester! Thou art strong. Resolve for me!” (196).

Hester, of course, has already contrived the plan that she now persuades Arthur to adopt, that of leaving the colony for a better life elsewhere, and in the course of advocating this plan, she asserts her psychological dominion over him. “‘Is the world then so narrow?’ exclaimed Hester Prynne, fixing her deep eyes on the minister’s, and instinctively exercising a magnetic power over a spirit so shattered and subdued, that it could hardly hold itself erect” (197).

The ultimate result of this encounter is not to bring Arthur into compliance with her plan but to empower him to conceive and execute a plan of his own, which is gauged to extend and indeed to culminate his public responsibilities. Hester is startled and dismayed when, after his Election Day sermon, Arthur approaches the scaffold to proclaim his guilt. Yet something within her compels her to acquiesce: “slowly, as if impelled by inevitable fate, and against her strongest will” (252), Hester joins him. The role of submission for which nature had framed her undermines the long-practiced assertion of her will, now that Arthur assumes command. She has rendered him capable of fulfilling his manhood, which includes taking charge of her.

He continues to depend at this final moment on her “woman’s strength,” now in its proper place, subordinated to the purpose he has chosen. As they mount the scaffold together, they form a tableau in which the complementarity of natural genders is triumphant; essential manhood and essential womanhood have been mutually re-created and are reciprocally confirmed. “Come hither now, and twine thy strength about me! Thy strength, Hester; but let it be guided by the will which God hath granted me!” (253).

Pearl’s redemption occurs at this moment of confession and expiation and fulfillment; and the conception of gender as a natural essence supports Pearl’s transformation here, even as it structures Hawthorne’s diagnosis of the aberration he saw in Una, which he elaborates in detail as Pearl goes through the therapeutic process Hawthorne envisions for her.

Pearl has inherited the defiance that climaxes in Hester’s bitterness at the lot of women, and the child seems to anticipate that she too will eventually be at odds with the world. Instead of playing with the children of the town, Pearl invents imaginary playmates, whom she regards with vehement hostility:

She never created a friend, but seems always to be sowing broadcast the dragon’s teeth, whence sprung a harvest of armed enemies, against whom she rushed to battle. It was inexpressibly sad—then what depth of sorrow to a mother, who felt in her own heart the cause! —to observe, in one so young, this constant recognition of an adverse world, and so fierce a training of the energies that were to make good her cause, in the contest that must ensue. (95–96)

Just as Hester’s rebellion brings on a conflict with her own “womanly” nature, so Pearl suffers from internal contradictions. On the one hand, she is an agent of Hester’s punishment, upholding the validity of the order that Hester violates. Pearl’s preoccupation with the scarlet letter, her persistent allusions to it, and her eerily apt questions to Hester about Arthur fill out her character as an enforcer of the lawful order of society. Yet she herself “could
not be made amenable to rules” (91).

This contradictory situation comes to a head in the forest, after Hester has removed the scarlet letter from her breast, and has also removed the severe cap from her head, so that her rich dark hair gushes voluptuously down over her shoulder, stirring Arthur to a resumption of his manhood. Having agreed to flee the colony, they call the child to join them, but instead of responding with sympathy, Pearl throws a tantrum that is at once commanding and uncontrolled. “Assuming a singular air of authority, Pearl stretched out her hand, with the small forefinger extended, and pointing evidently toward her mother’s breast.” When her mother seemed not to comprehend her meaning, “the child stamped her foot with a yet more imperious look and gesture.” And when Hester sternly repeated her demand that the child come to her, Pearl “suddenly burst into a fit of passion, gesticulating violently, and throwing her small figure into the most extravagant contortions. She accompanied this wild outbreak with piercing shrieks” (209-10), with the result that Hester was compelled to obey the child’s command.

Pearl’s domineering manner in this scene, as elsewhere, recapitulates Hawthorne’s uneasy observations of Una:

To-day Una is exceedingly ungracious in her mode of asking, or rather demanding favors. For instance, wishing to have a story read to her, she has just said, “Now I’m going to have some reading”; and she always seems to adopt the imperative mood, in this manner. She uses it to me, I think, more than to her mother, and, from what I observe of some of her collateral predecessors, I believe it to be an hereditary trait to assume the government of her father. (American 414)

Hawthorne’s “feminine” self-consciousness made him especially touchy about being dominated by “a future woman.”

The compounded paradox in which Pearl gains control of others by losing control of herself, enforcing a lawful decorum that she herself cannot observe, is markedly evident in Hawthorne’s descriptions of Una. He returns again and again to what he terms the “tempestuous” character of Una’s personality, which erupts when her will is crossed (American 411). Here is Hawthorne’s terse summary of a battle between them: “—she resists—father insists—there is a terrible struggle—and she gets into almost a frenzy; which is now gradually subsiding and sobbing itself away in her mother’s arms” (American 406). Sophia was often called on to mediate deadlocks between Una and her father, who found the child’s rages peculiarly disconcerting. While traveling in the summer of 1848, he writes home about how much he misses the children, wryly observing that he would even like to see “little Tornada in one of her tantrums” (Letters 1843–1853 231). If Hawthorne was psychologically vulnerable to Una’s fury, perhaps even overawed by it on occasion, we hear an echo of his response in Arthur’s words to Hester: “I know nothing that I would not sooner encounter than this passion in a child. In Pearl’s young beauty, as in the wrinkled witch, it has a preternatural effect. Pacify her, if thou loveth me” (210).

Una’s preternatural rage, Hawthorne’s language suggests, collapses the dichotomy that her name was meant to safeguard: her fury invokes the essential unity of the womanly qualities polarized in Spenser’s figures—the lovely innocence of the holy maiden and the ferocity of the wrinkled witch, Duessa. As Una shrieked and raged, she aroused in Hawthorne the terrors inherent in the manhood by which these versions of womanhood were produced, the dread manifestly projected onto the monster-woman but hidden within reverence for the woman as angel.

Yet Una herself had internalized this gender system, so that her response to her aggressive impulses—like Hawthorne’s—was shaped by the doctrine that pronounced them unnatural in a girl. As Hawthorne reflected on the manifold indelicacies in her conduct, it seemed to him that she was possessed by an “earthy monster, who lays his grasp on her spinal marrow, her brain, and other parts of her body that lie in closest contiguity to her soul” (American 420–21). Una too gives evidence of having experienced herself—or the “indelicate” part of herself—as monstrous.

Pearl, as noted, insists on the lawful order of things with hysterical passion, which takes on an eerie self-propelling quality—the scream of the bewitched at being bewitched. Una also asserts with lurid intensity a standard she herself violates, in a way that voices the terror within her own mind.

Once when her mother was reading her a children’s story called “The Bear and the Skrattel,” Sophia’s attempt to imitate the unearthly shrillness of the Skrattel’s voice filled Una with horror, conjuring up the “earthy monster” within her. “Little Una cries ‘No; no!’ with a kind of dread,” Haw-
Walter Herbert, JR. observes; and he specifies with unnerving serenity the chronic inner torment of which this outcry was an instance.

It is rather singular that she should so strongly oppose herself to whatever is unbeautiful or even unusual, while she is continually doing unbeautiful things in her own person. I think, if she were to see a little girl who behaved in all respects like herself, it would be a continual horror and misery to her, and would ultimately drive her mad. (American 419)

In Pearl these unearthly contradictions are resolved as Hester helps Arthur mount the scaffold:

The great scene of grief, in which the wild infant bore a part, had developed all her sympathies; and as her tears fell upon her father's cheek, they were the pledge that she would grow up amid human joy and sorrow, nor for ever do battle with the world, but be a woman in it. (256)

The “manlike” imperiousness gives way to tears of sympathy, and the “elflike” inhuman remoteness gives way to warm human relations. Like Pinnochio, Pearl is transformed from an unnatural creature, endowed with life but not truly human, into a “real little girl.” “Her wild, rich nature had been softened and subdued,” Hawthorne tells us, “and made capable of a woman's gentle happiness” (262).

Yet this moment of naturalization neither transcends the contest of gender definitions in The Scarlet Letter nor provides a stable vantage from which to view it. No reader attuned to Hawthorne's ambivalence toward Arthur's “feminine” traits and Hester's “masculine” traits would long believe that the conclusion of their amorous entanglement unambiguously celebrates self-reliant manhood and angelic womanly submission, even by implication. Instead of presenting a confident vision of domestic felicity organized around natural models of maleness and femaleness, the work emerges from a troubled conflict over those issues—a conflict in which apparent virtues are subverted and apparent vices feebly endorsed. Hawthorne's guilty admiration for Hester's “manfulness” and his uneasy identification with Arthur's languishing, introspective, and timorous nature are most evident in his intimate and detailed depiction of these ostensibly perverse traits.

As many critics have observed, moreover, Pearl's domestic felicity is not located in the United States or in any other clearly definable place. It is supported by the fabulous wealth that she inherits from Chillingworth, which makes her “the richest heiress of her day,” and Hawthorne is careful to point out that the armorial seals on the letters Hester receives have “bearings unknown to English heraldry” (261–62). Hawthorne's conclusion effectively exempts Pearl from the dilemmas that the book portrays, but it does not resolve them. Rescued momentarily from unreality, Pearl slips back into a fairy-tale world.

The work at large embodies, that is, a strong covert resistance to the gender system Hawthorne uses in analyzing Pearl's “unnatural” character and in dramatizing her redemption. This scheme of thematic conflicts, once recognized, unearths a tangled nest of kindred paradoxes involving Hawthorne, his daughter, and The Scarlet Letter. Prescribing a cure for the aberrations of Pearl-Una, Hawthorne invokes the complex of gender symbols that actually produced those aberrations: he proposes the source of the disease as a remedy for it. Yet he subverts that recommendation—and presumably aggravates the disease—by undermining the gender doctrines in question; he had reason to feel that in writing The Scarlet Letter he had indulged the very qualities in himself—his own unnatural feminine qualities—that gave rise to his daughter's miseries. It is well known that he looked upon his masterwork with guilt, as a “a h-11-fired story” that was not “natural” for him to write (Letters 1843–1853 312, 461). Far from offering The Scarlet Letter as a pattern for addressing Una's troubles, Hawthorne forbade his daughter to read the book and kept up the prohibition as late as her sixteenth year.3

Una's difficulties became acute when she was fourteen years old, when the physical developments of puberty were far enough advanced to force the issues about the sort of woman she would become. The Hawthornes were living in Rome at the time, where Una, like her father, became fascinated by the young American women who lived on their own studying art, enjoying a degree of personal freedom not available in the United States. Madame de Staël's Corinne: Or, Italy had made Rome famous as an environment fostering possibilities of womanhood sharply at odds with the conventions prevailing in England and America, a culture in which women of artistic talent could take roles of public consequence instead of being confined to the
domestic sphere. Margaret Fuller, nicknamed the “American Corinna,” was part of a steady migration of gifted and spirited women who saw in Italian society a more generous atmosphere than they could enjoy at home and larger horizons in which to find themselves. Hawthorne responded to Rome with his characteristic ambivalence, haunted by a sense of pervading moral disease, yet strongly intrigued. In Una the experience precipitated a psychic crisis, as Hawthorne notes in his journal:

Una has taken what seems to be a Roman fever by sitting down to sketch in the Coliseum. It is not a severe attack, yet attended with fits of exceeding discomfort, occasional comatoseness, and even delirium to the extent of making the poor child talk in rhythmical measure, like a tragic heroine.

(French 495)

The physicians concluded that Una’s illness was in part psychological, so that she was said to have a “nervous fever” as well as the “Roman fever.”

On 13 November 1858, eleven days after Una took to her bed, she wrote to her cousin Richard Manning in Salem:

My ideal of existence would be to live in Italy in a house built and furnished after my own taste, often paying long visits to England, and sometimes to America, & pursue my studies and other occupations unmolested by mankind in general. But people seldom, if ever, realize their ideal of life, and I fancy I shall never see the fulfillment of mine.

Una knew that her father was determined to have the family return to the United States, and in touching on this issue she discloses something of the guilt she felt in opposing his plan. “I don’t mind telling you,” she admits to Richard in the same letter, “what a high treasonable countryman you have, but I do as I please, (did you ever know such a wilful headstrong young woman as I am?) there is a certain little group of events, and some communication of Hawthorne’s own ambivalence, the very model of womanly fulfillment she had been enjoined to follow. Hawthorne’s remark that she sounded like a “tragic heroine” suggests his intuition that she was trapped in a predicament having eerily literary dimensions, including his authorship of what was unreadable, and was becoming unendurable, in her story.

Sophia watched incessantly by her daughter’s bedside, and in a letter to her sister Elizabeth P. Peabody, written 3 July 1859, she remarked on Una’s seeming withdrawal from life:

She looked at me once with particularly wide open eyes . . . & said in a natural voice—“I am going to die now. There is no use in living.” — “Goodbye,—dear—” As I did not reply to this she more earnestly repeated, “Goodbye,—dear” & deliberately turned with her face to the wall & lay perfectly still. . . . Sometimes she would lie on her back & stretch out her feet & lay her arms by her side, & with unwinking glassy eyes look straight at the bed’s foot with no speculation & as if already cold & lifeless.

As soon as Una could travel, the Hawthornes left Rome and, after a year in England, set sail for America. On 20 July 1860, shortly after their arrival at Concord, Una wrote to her cousin Richard about the difficulties produced by “my rebellious feelings,” informing him that she would soon come to stay in Salem. A physician had confirmed her expectation that she would suffer another attack of “brain fever” unless she could get away from her family. “He is going to talk to papa and tell him his mind, and then I shall be free as air! Think how happy I must be!” Looking forward to her trip to Salem, she exclaimed, “Oh, I long to be there, out of this killing place.”

The anticipated visit in Salem did not occur; and five days later Una again wrote to Richard: “I was very unwell from many causes, and I knew my only safety was in keeping my mind off myself. From having followed that wise course until now & keeping away from home (!) I have greatly improved.” Her further comment focuses attention on the “masculine” assertiveness at the heart of her conflict. “Though I appear, & am, perfectly well while I do as I please, (did you ever know such a wilful & headstrong young woman as I am?) there is a certain little group of events & sights & minds that in a minute by a most wonderful magic make me faint & sick & all over shooting pains.”

Una’s imprisonment within the family’s concep-
tion of proper young womanhood was dramatized in early September, when her younger brother, Julian, was enrolled in a school at Concord to prepare him for college. The school itself welcomed young women as students; yet, against the advice of friends, the Hawthornes steadfastly refused to permit Una to attend (Bassan 26). Within the month she became violent and had to be restrained by force.

The Hawthornes then turned for help to a practitioner of medical electricity, a therapy that viewed a wide variety of diseases—especially "nervous" diseases—as suitable for treatment with electric shocks (Beard and Rockwell; Shecut; Leithead; Luke). This method was developed in the nineteenth century to a high level of sophistication, with a formidable array of batteries, generators, and electrodes manufactured for complex uses in the two principal forms of therapy: "faradization," which involved shocking tissue directly, and "galvanization," which produced spasmodic muscular responses by running electricity down motor nerves. Advocates of electrotherapeutics held that the "nervous principle" in the body was linked to an electrical fluid pervading the universe, whose activities produced earthquakes as well as thunderstorms; they envisioned electricity as the physical substance of the individual soul in relation to the world soul. Patients were given multiple applications of the electrodes over a period of days, which cured them by restoring a natural equilibrium, attuned to the universal electrical harmony. Because women were viewed as naturally delicate, their "susceptibility" to electrical influence was thought to be "higher" than men's; medical electricians boasted that "many of the most delightful results of general faradization and central galvanization, have been obtained in neurasthenic, anemic, hysterical women" (Beard and Rockwell 292). The treatment was, in short, a lurid parody of the naturalization of natural womanhood that Hawthorne had counted on when Una was a baby, had envisioned in The Scarlet Letter, and had sought to bring about by getting her out of Rome.

At first Hawthorne took a skeptical tone toward the procedure, alluding to the "incantations of a certain electrical witch"—the "Doctoress" being a Mrs. Rollins of Cambridge (Letters 1857-1864 323). But as the days passed he began to believe the treatments had worked. "All the violent symptoms were allayed," Hawthorne wrote two weeks later, "by the first application of electricity, and within two days she was in such a condition as to require no further restraint. Since then, there has been no relapse, and now, for many days, she has seemed entirely well, in mind." "Her derangement," Rollins had informed them, "was the result of a liver-complaint and a slight affection of the heart, probably produced or strengthened by the Roman fever." These maladies being "perfectly within the control of medical electricity," Rollins had assured the Hawthornes "that we need have no apprehension of future mental disturbance" (Letters 1857-1864 327).

Hawthorne responded to Una's difficulties with severe anxiety. During the worst period of her illness in Rome he became so distraught, Sophia recalled, that he "expected every morning to find his hair turned to snow upon his head" (letter to Peabody, 3 July 1859). Unable to endure the alternations of hope and dread concerning Una's prognosis, Hawthorne had settled his mind on the prospect that his daughter would not survive. During Una's breakdown in Concord, he sought to relieve his torment by taking a turn on Mrs. Rollins's battery (Letters 1857-1864 325).

It is fair to say, and Sophia more than once did say, that Hawthorne himself never recovered from Una's illness, suffering as he did the declining health that ended with his death in 1864. In 1862 she wrote to Annie Fields:

I was quite alarmed when I returned that evening to find Mr. Hawthorne very ill. It was a Roman cold, with fever and utter restlessness, and it has hardly left him yet. . . . Alas the Roman days were melancholy days for him, and he thinks he shall never recover from them. Even when he looks at his Rose of Sharon so firm and strong now, I think he feels uncertain that she still lives and blooms, so deeply scored into his soul was the expectation of her death. It was his first acquaintance with suffering, and it seemed to rend him asunder.

Hawthorne's anticipation of continuing trouble for Una was quite accurate, in contrast to the medical electrician's confident words about future mental disturbances. After his death Una suffered further bouts of mental illness, in circumstances bespeaking her dilemma: she could neither live out nor repudiate the womanly role she had made her own, and her torment over this inward contradiction sometimes became overwhelming. When her younger sister, Rose, married George Lathrop in the fall of 1871, Una responded as though the event signaled her own failure to achieve this presumptive
sine qua non of womanly fulfillment. Her psychological disturbance on this occasion was so acute that those close to her, setting aside references to “nervous fever,” described her condition as “insanity” and placed her for a time in an asylum (Hull 105).

Una was twice engaged to be married, both times to notably unlikely prospects, as she both obeyed and disobeyed the imperative to take up the roles of wife and mother. The first engagement was to a young man named Storrow Higginson, who professed himself not to believe in marriage (and in the event displayed the courage of this conviction); and the second was to Albert Webster, a tubercular poet of modest means, who set off for the Sandwich Islands to regain his health and died on the voyage (Hull 101, 107-08). Una’s brother, Julian, describes her response to the news of Webster’s death: “‘Ah—yes!’ she said, slowly, with a slight sigh. She made no complaint, nor gave way to any passion of grief; but she seemed to become spiritualized,—to relinquish the world, along with her hopes of happiness in it” (2: 373). Within six months Una was dead, at the age of thirty-three.

The principals at the center of attention here—Una Hawthorne, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and The Scarlet Letter—take part in an ecology of signs: each has its distinctive identity amid the environment provided by the others. I do not mean that they form a natural ecosystem, as though a biological necessity ordained the gender arrangement of which Una was a victim and her father a tormented beneficiary, with The Scarlet Letter innocently mirroring the arrangement’s rich, ironic complexities. The very act of circumscribing the semantic interplay I have described emphasizes the historical contingency of the cultural construction of gender. It is a process whose boundaries cannot be brought clearly into focus.

It is apparent, first, that Una’s rage, grief, and madness were not a private affair. They formed her own version of a collective response to the domestic ideal shared by middle-class northeastern women right through the nineteenth century, particularly women of enterprise and cultural attainments, whose lives prominently featured dramas of thwarted strength. Charlotte Gilman’s story “The Yellow Wallpaper” provides a consummate articulation of the inward meaning of such misery, including the “rest cure,” a therapy often complemented with applications of medical electricity.

A more involuted enactment of the bitter dilemmas at stake here is provided in Jean Strouse’s and Ruth Bernard Yeazell’s accounts of Alice James, a brilliant and forceful woman who fashioned an identity from the experience of being incurable and spoke of the effort “to get myself dead” as the climax of her career (Yeazell 2). Catharine Beecher, it appears, took her own periodic collapses at face value—simply as illnesses of the sort women contract—and sought recourse to the “water cures” that proliferated during the early part of the century. But, as Kathryn Kish Sklar observes, the spas that Beecher frequented offered an environment in which women could share their sorrow and anger with one another and experience a collective validation of the anguished consciousness that seemed altogether aberrant in institutional settings dominated by male concerns. Hidden within this womanly suffering were the ingredients of liberation for women and the harbingers of its advent.

In the concluding passages of The Scarlet Letter, Hester’s cottage provides a locale in which a sisterhood of unresolved misery has an opportunity to take form:

People brought all their sorrows and perplexities, and sought her counsel, as one who had herself gone through a mighty trouble. Women, more especially, —in the continually recurring trials of wounded, wasted, wronged, misplaced, or erring and sinful passion,—or with the dreary burden of a heart unyielded, because unvalued and unsought,—came to Hester’s cottage, demanding why they were so wretched, and what the remedy! (263)

To these women Hester provides the hope of a future consummation, a new order of gender relations within which such troubles would be resolved:

She assured them . . . of her firm belief, that, at some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven’s own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation of man and woman of a surer ground of mutual happiness. (263)

Casting his romance in Puritan times, Hawthorne creates a rhetorical schema in which this scene of unresolved conflict—and the whole tormented story of Hester, Pearl, and Arthur—is seen as typical of an era safely in the past, to which nineteenth-century Americans might look back from the vantage point supplied by the “new truth” about women and men that they claimed for their own.
The agent of the coming revelation, Hester foresees, will be a woman who is also an angel, since this “mission of divine and mysterious truth” could never be confided to a sinful creature like herself (263). The divine woman to whom Hester looks forward from the dark confusions that beset her in the seventeenth century is in fact the domestic angel of the nineteenth century, the epiphany of ethereal womanhood ordained by nature and nature’s God, living happily in accordance with the inner truth of her being.

The angel and apostle of the coming revelation must be a woman, indeed, but lofty, pure, and beautiful; and wise, moreover, not through dusky grief, but the ethereal medium of joy; and showing how sacred love should make us happy, by the truest test of a life successful to such an end! (263)

Hawthorne looked upon his wife as just such an angel and apostle of domestic felicity as Hester’s vision describes, and in keeping with the interior dilemmas of this selfhood, she suffered throughout her adult life from nervous ailments, including episodes of complete prostration. When Hawthorne read her the conclusion of *The Scarlet Letter*, he observed, “it broke her heart and sent her to bed with a grievous headache” (*Letters 1843–1853* 311). Yet Sophia construed this headache, like her other sufferings, as evidence of the ethereal delicacy she considered inherent in her womanly nature.

*The Scarlet Letter* struck her like a jolt of medical electricity, confirming the absoluteness of this inward moral law. “I do not know what you will think of the Romance,” she wrote to her sister a few days later. “It is most powerful & contains a moral as terrific & stunning as a thunder bolt. It shows that the Law cannot be broken” (*Letters 1843–1853* 313). Sophia does not mean that the law cannot be broken with impunity but that—like a natural law—it cannot be broken at all. The overpowering shock transmitted by *The Scarlet Letter* restores her mind, so she affirms, to its own intrinsic order: disabling sickness and natural therapy here perfectly united.

I do not mean to parade Sophia’s response as a deplorable misreading—as though I had at hand a final correct reading against which to measure it—but as bespeaking her version of the thematic conflicts at work in her husband’s mind, her daughter’s mind, and in *The Scarlet Letter* itself. The sacred force locked up in the natural order of genders brought a measure of coherence to the troubles of her consciousness, even as it acted in Una’s disintegration.

To relate *The Scarlet Letter* to the cultural construction of gender is thus to examine the specific terms on which selfhoods were made and unmade in Hawthorne’s time within the patterns of meaning by which sexual identity was then coming to be defined. To acknowledge the power of such cultural processes, and of literary art within those processes, is to recognize that the problems we have explored cannot be sequestered in the early nineteenth century, as though we ourselves had at last attained the “surer ground of mutual happiness” that Hester foretold.

*The Scarlet Letter* is a powerful book not because it resolves our gender conflicts but because it draws us into them and forces us to deploy our own ways of seeking to manage them. The work becomes implicated in our predicaments, inviting us to recognize that we cannot read it unless we also read ourselves, without any guarantee of what outcomes will result, without any sure way to demarcate what we have seen from what we are, or are becoming, or are seeking no longer to be.7

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Notes

1 Douglas’s *Purity and Danger* describes the shaping of perception by culturally constituted systems of ordering reality. Literary studies like those of Greenblatt, Herbert, and Mullaney, making use of interpretive anthropology as pioneered in works by Douglas, Geertz, and Turner, are now converging as “cultural poetics” and “the new historicism.” Gender as a cultural construction is treated in Chodorow’s *Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* and in the anthologies *Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality*, edited by Ortner and Whitehead, and *Woman, Culture, and Society*, edited by Rosaldo and Lamphere. The definitions of womanhood and manhood emerging in early nineteenth-century America are discussed in the studies by Cott, Degler, Ryan, and Smith-Rosenberg.

2 In this respect Hawthorne’s relation to himself and his public is strongly analogous to that of the women writers Kelley dis-
cusses in Private Woman, Public Stage. Baym and Carton provide excellent discussions of Hawthorne's ambivalence about gender.

3 A discussion of Sophia Hawthorne's role in the formation of Una's mental life lies beyond the scope of this essay. Sophia's exceptional response to the emerging norms of gender, the marriage she made to Nathaniel, and her place in the constellation of family relations are complex subjects that bear on this question, which I will treat in a forthcoming book.

4 The Scarlet Letter has been the subject of vigorous discussions that adopt various understandings of familial relations as universals. Male asserts that Hawthorne deals in the "timeless abstractions" that inform the biblical narrative of Eve's transgression, so that Hester departs from her divinely ordained sexual role in seeking masculine knowledge (99-100). Whelan pursues this line so far as to claim that, after repenting her effort to usurp man's place, Hester will rejoin Arthur in Heaven, in "what is to be her Eternal Home and Fireside" (504). Ragussis, in quite a different vein, grounds his trenchant and compelling discussion on linguistic universals, the constitutive properties of "writing" and "fiction," as these define a "family discourse" in Hawthorne notably distinct from any particular time and locality.

5 Letter from Una Hawthorne to her aunt Elizabeth P. Peabody, 10 Apr. 1860.

6 On Storrow Higginson's view of marriage see the letter written by Nathaniel's sister Elizabeth to "My dear Maria [Manning?]") on 20 Feb. 1868 (30–31).

7 For helpful suggestions on this essay I am indebted to Warwick Wadlington, Joan Lidoff, David Leverenz, and Stephen Greenblatt, as well as to my colleagues in the Writer's Group at Southwestern University.

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