

The Market Place of *The Scarlet Letter*: Hawthorne and Hester as Artist Objects

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Like many of Nathaniel Hawthorne's fictional writings, *The Scarlet Letter* and its introduction "The Custom House" consider the identity of the artist within both the public world of production and the private interior of the artist's self perception. However, this most celebrated text casts the artist uniquely, doubling the artist character in a purely fictional Hester Prynne and a fictionalized form of Hawthorne himself, the author-narrator of "The Custom House," which Hawthorne calls an "autobiographical impulse" (1) with "a few extra touches" (2). In "The Custom House," Hawthorne constructs himself, entering fully into the artistic process as both the creator guiding the pen across the page and the character object written beneath that pen. Paralleling this in *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne constructs Hester Prynne, reflecting in her his own duality of action and impotence within the literary world. While both Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth also function as artist figures in the text, Hester becomes the most literal artistic and creative force in Hawthorne's fictional Boston world. As such one could read her character as an admired and empowered fictional representation of Hawthorne himself; however, Hester's force as an artist is limited within the text. She remains an object of Hawthorne's art held open by his authorial hand to be gazed upon. One could emphasize Hawthorne's significant authorial shadow as overt male control over the female form of Hester Prynne; thus the union of the two artists is allegedly sacrificed to Hawthorne's personal benefit as the dominant creator. However, few have considered the possibility of a union between Hawthorne and Hester not only as artists, but also as objects. Perhaps the same shadow that hovers over Hester's form hovers over Hawthorne himself. As an artist and a man in crisis, the Hawthorne of "The Custom House" writes himself as an authorial object; he fixes himself as a commodity in the marketplace of his own text to be sold alongside Hester to the same "thousand unrelenting eyes" of the public gaze (50). While Hawthorne carefully avoids an equalizing between the

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female character and the male author-narrator, both Hester and Hawthorne demonstrate the problematic objectification of the artist as a commodity to be sold, the artist who becomes the art object under the scrutiny of the public's probing – even sexual – and market driven eye.

I. Hawthorne as Artist: A Conflict of the Public and the Private

Hawthorne biographer Brenda Wineapple discusses “The Custom House” chronologically as a text concerned with Hawthorne’s “professional uncertainties” following the termination of his political employment in the Salem Custom House (210). As a simple vindictive response to a “murdered” career (Hawthorne 37), this introductory essay reads like a self righteous rhetorical catharsis; however, as Hawthorne attempts to reconstruct himself in “The Custom House,” the professional uncertainty of his political career—one grounded pragmatically in financial productivity—falls to a larger question: uncertainty about his vocation as an artist of both public and private definition.

In “The Custom House,” Hawthorne laments his precarious quandary as an American artist who is caught between public expectations for the concrete merchandise of his art and private beliefs for the meaning and aesthetics of his art. Despite Wineapple’s emphasis on Hawthorne’s anger at the public institutions and their treatment of him as an artist, “The Custom House” seems to attribute Hawthorne’s current artistic crisis to the public and the private mutually. In Stephen Railton’s words, “His career was hardly free from the anxieties and ambivalences of performing, and it too was shaped by the private needs he brought to his public ambitions as a writer” (108). At the time of “The Custom House,” Hawthorne situates himself in a place of confusion; his career has become a battle between feelings of authenticity and performance, to continue Railton’s discussion, that threaten Hawthorne’s understanding and treatment of himself as a possible artist. He gives life to these deeply internal fears, evoking them within “The Custom House” quite literally as a chorus of taunting voices Hawthorne has created to berate himself, voices he conjures from both the public exterior and the private interior worlds. The taunts begin in the voices of ancestors long banished to the grave but living still in Hawthorne’s own doubting imagination: “No aim that I have ever cherished would they recognize as laudable...” “What is he?” murmurs one gray shadow of my forefathers to the other. “A writer of storybooks! What kind of a business in life—what mode of glorifying God, or being serviceable

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to mankind in his day and generation—may that be?” (7). These demeaning voices speak not only for the past public, but also the present public as they demean him as only a “writer of storybooks” to be served up with other mainstream scribblings and not a culturally significant artist. The voices from the grave quiet through the course of the introduction but reappear as even more frightening voices from the grave of Hawthorne’s own imagination:

My imagination was a tarnished mirror. It would not reflect, or only with miserable dimness, the figures with which I did my best to people it....They would take neither the glow of passion nor the tenderness of sentiment, but retained all the rigidity of dead corpses, and stared me in the face with a fixed a ghastly grin of contemptuous defiance. “What have you to do with us?” that expression seemed to say. “The little power you might once have possessed over the tribe of unrealities is gone!” (30)

The only living forms Hawthorne can imagine here are those that taunt his power as an artist of substance, and he pines the loss of an ability to turn the “dull and commonplace” into “letters...[of] gold upon the page” (33). For Hawthorne, as this chorus of real yet imagined voices shows, the loss of his art has been both public in his disconnection from the audience of his concrete art and private in his disconnection from his own creative abilities.

In torment, Hawthorne feels the pull of both spheres and obligation to both compartments of the literary world. As such he imagines a mystical, even sentimental, scene of reconciliation between the two, using the moonlight’s effect on his parlor to manifest the union of his public and private demands. Staring at this “familiar room” and rattling off a catalogue of its familiar, domestic items—“the chairs...centre-table...work-basket...lamp...sofa...bookcase...picture”—Hawthorne admits its unfamiliarity: “all these details, so completely [and ordinarily] seen, are so spiritualized by the unusual light” (31). In the scene, Hawthorne suggests the perfect moment for an artist when the concrete nature of his art and the imagined spirit of his art meet: “Thus, therefore, the floor of our familiar room has become a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and the fairyland, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other” (31). Hawthorne longs for this “neutral territory” that allows the union of “the Actual and the Imaginary”—even suggesting

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he has known it before and will know it again—but he admits his current inabilities very frankly: “But, for myself, during the whole of my Custom House experience...An entire class of susceptibilities, and a gift connected with them—of no great richness or value, but the best I had—was gone from me” (32). In “The Custom House” he cannot seem to construct an union between the concrete and imagined, the public and private; rather, he bemoans the need and inability for both to coexist. As he expresses, the public work lasted “long enough to rest a weary brain; long enough to break off old intellectual habits, and make room for new ones; long enough, and too long...withholding myself from toil that would, at least, have stilled an unquiet impulse within me” (37). In these contradictory terms, “long enough, and too long,” Hawthorne’s dilemma as a public artist and a private creator becomes clear.

Hawthorne aligns the conception of his art with the position of his body, noting the relationship between the dried up and lifeless space of the Custom House and his own dried up and lifeless imagination, but as the doubts about his concrete product blend with doubts about his own meaning as an artist, “The Custom House” becomes less a rhetorical attack on the politics of the Custom House and his dismissal from it and more an intimate confession of perceived artistic failure. However, Hawthorne’s well known personal admonition—“My imagination was a tarnished mirror”—remains in the past tense, and he identifies his following novel *The Scarlet Letter* as a resurrection for himself and his art. Within the pages of the story he renews his imagination, staring into that once tarnished mirror and at last finding a living breathing reflection to stare back: Hester Prynne, at the same time Hawthorne’s mirrored opposite (a woman) and his equal (a tortured artist).

II. Hester Prynne as Artist: An Ideal Reflection of Hawthorne

Within the text of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester mimics Hawthorne’s own blended identity as a creator of a public commodity and private self meaning; she creates both a concrete product—the artistry of her stitches and design on the textile canvas of the scarlet “A”—and an abstract product—the evolved and reclaimed interpretation of meaning for that scarlet “A” and thus for herself, not as the adulteress intended by her punishers but as an able artist. However, just like Hawthorne, Hester struggles with the seemingly irreconcilable relationship between her public product and private meaning; just like Hawthorne, her attempts

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at self understanding and an evolving artistic identity are often interrupted by her product.

This tension is emphasized at the end of her first scene within the novel's action as she imagines another self to escape the reality before her atop the punitive scaffold in the Puritan market place. Standing beneath the condemning gaze of the Boston public, Hester leaves for a moment her reality and becomes immersed in the journeys of her mind, which take her far from this wooden scaffold, back to her childhood village across the ocean, over her parents' faces, and past her husband's repulsive character. For a moment she steps into the moonlit scene of "The Custom House;" she reconstructs herself apart from the actual and enters a redefined self in the imagined realm, leaving the fallen woman to the angry gaze of the crowd and becoming again the innocent child, the beloved daughter, the mistreated wife. However, this imagined other world ends abruptly when she is reminded of her public role by the movements of the market place and the "stern regards" of the crowd's gaze:

...in lieu of these shifting scenes [of her past], came back the rude market place...Could it be true? She clutched the child so fiercely to her breast that it sent forth a cry; she turned her eyes downward at the scarlet letter, and even touched it with her finger, to assure herself that the infant and the same were real. Yes!—these were her realities—all else had vanished! (Hawthorne 52)

With her hand upon the concrete art she has offered to the public gaze—a tangible moment between body and art reminiscent of Hawthorne's similar touch in "The Custom House"—Hester's imagination freezes; in that moment, she becomes the submissive object upon the public scaffold and the personal reflections of meaning and place dissolve because the two are in conflict for her just as they were for Hawthorne.

However, while Hester's imaginative abilities fail her here, other critics read her transformative journey throughout the novel as an ultimate victory. Critic Craig Milliman argues that Hester's artistic identity is a process, one that begins with simplistic and concrete literality in the dark shadows of the prison even before the novel's narrative opening with her first "fantastic flourishes of gold thread" upon the scarlet letter (Hawthorne 46) but becomes complex figurative

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construction of that same letter not as a mere emblem of adultery but a sign of ability and place: “Hester embraces her role as an artist by choosing symbol over emblem, multiplicity over singularity, the figurative over the literal” (Milliman 83). This ability to construct the public commodity of her stitches, so rare and valued in Hester’s Boston public, while using that commodity to reconstruct herself from an adulteress outcast to an able and independent woman, are Hawthorne’s own imagined reconciliation of public and private creation. Hester is able to do the idealized thing Hawthorne only laments in “The Custom House:” unify the artist’s construction of the public commodity and the private self conception.

III. Hester as Object: Prioritizing Hawthorne as Artist

Gender driven readings have emphasized this paralleling of Hester as a female artist and Hawthorne as a male artist. While some have praised Hawthorne’s construction of the female artistic will—Erika M. Kreger positions the “worthiness” (335) of this will, and its self-discipline, contextually alongside the domestic novel tradition of the nineteenth-century while Monika M. Elbert reads Hester’s will more contemporarily as a passive but powerful creation of the “hidden strengths and intelligence” of an independent female self (257)—others like Nina Tassi and Sandra Tomc have deplored the subordination of the female will to Hawthorne’s as male author. Tassi suggests that Hester’s “unusual qualities of mind and body lead her into a series of prisons from which her creator struggles to free her—and perhaps himself as well” (23). Tomc expresses it even more overtly: “As many readers of *The Scarlet Letter* have noted, Hester Prynne—ruined, abandoned, and forced to live out her life on the negligible edges of her society—is manifestly offered as an analog to the Hawthorne of the preface, his illegitimacy as an artist commensurate with hers as a fallen woman” (471). For both critics the union between Hawthorne and Hester is actually an imprisonment of the female character by the male author. The union, which exists tangibly as both wear and feel the sting of the scarlet letter and more emotively as both are in some form—either overt or imagined—judged, ridiculed, and condemned by the world, allows Hawthorne to construct his own strength through Hester’s strength, but as Tomc points out, only Hawthorne survives by the novel’s resolution; to develop his true role as artist—in Tomc’s words “a newly masculinized American artist” (473)—he must sever the union with Hester and confine her in the novel as an artist object of his own

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creation, a confinement found in the construction of her submission within the plot's conclusion. The once independent woman who rewrote herself for the Puritan public becomes rewritten by Hawthorne's authorial presence. When she submits to Dimmesdale in the final scaffold scene and chooses to return to the scarlet letter and her isolated cottage in the woods, she is in Wineapple's words "allow[ing] Hawthorne to reassert control over his book" (216). While these readings accurately interpret Hawthorne's abandonment of artistic connection with Hester in the final chapters of the novel, they identify this subordination too late. Hawthorne's objectification of Hester's character should be read through the subtle wording and physical staging that define Hester's very entrance into the market place of the novel's opening not only her departure from it. Ultimately, Hawthorne offers Hester's form as his own literary commodity, selling her as an object to the public of his readership, in order to reconstitute his own self conception. In other words, he designs Hester from the very beginning to be his own means towards the reconciliation of his public and private artistic worlds.¹

The narrative offers Hester up to the gaze of the Boston crowd by opening the prison door—a parallel to Hawthorne's offering of Hester to the gaze of his readers as they open the text of the novel—and placing Hester firmly in the market place. For the first moment of Hester's life as a character, her defiance and action seem to explode from the text:

Stretching forth the official staff in his left hand, [the beadle] laid his right upon the shoulder of a young woman, whom he thus drew forward; until on the threshold of the prison door she repelled him, by an action marked with natural dignity and force of character, and stepped into the open air, as if by her own free will. (Hawthorne 46)

Most readers emphasize Hester's first action in the novel for its defiance, emphasizing in Tomc's words the "strength, fecundity, and wholeness" (474) of

¹ In her book *The Scarlet Mob of Scribblers: Rereading Hester Prynne*, Jamie Barlowe contends that *The Scarlet Letter* still remains a commodity owned by the male sphere, not only the male author of Nathaniel Hawthorne, but also a male critical sphere that has successfully and somewhat systematically limited readings of Hester Prynne to those that view her through the male lens.

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the mother in the doorway of the prison, holding her young infant yet emphatically repelling the male hand outstretched to both help and lead her. Hawthorne entices readers with this first description that suggests there exists in this novel a rare woman defined even within her disgrace by “action,” “force” and “free will,” but with two words he positions Hester’s strength as a product of his own skill as an author: “...she repelled him, by an action marked with natural dignity and force of character, and stepped into the open air, *as if* by her own free will” (emphasis mine). This narrative choice—the inclusion of two small words written in a large narrative voice—refocuses the rest of the novel. While Hawthorne does want readers to see Hester’s strong identity as a woman and a mother—the beadle’s subordination to her is evident here—his own presence hangs overhead not only as the omnipresent author of all texts but the one Hawthorne wants to ensure his readers recognize and remember. Everything Hawthorne creates after is qualified by these two words; Hester’s “haughty smile” (46), “desperate recklessness” (47), and even “good skill at her needle” (47), which erect this woman’s active strength amidst her stark Puritan judges, are not hers at all; they belong to Hawthorne alone. Within the novel Hester is merely a portrait of what this new world could allow a young, vibrant, and active woman to be, but Hawthorne insists readers know from their first glance that he is this woman’s creator.

Hawthorne literalizes this conceptual view of Hester Prynne as portrait when he walks her from the prison door to the space determined for her public punishment: the scaffold. As “she ascended a flight of wooden steps,...[she] was thus displayed to the surrounding multitude” on a kind of stage (Hawthorne 49), but Hawthorne strategically positions her on this stage to actually eliminate her as actor and paint her as framed object. Though Hawthorne saves Hester in the plot from physical restraint in the “framework...so fashioned as to confine the human head in its tight grasp, and thus hold it up to the public gaze” (49), by including the physical description of this penal device he clearly wants Hester to be seen—by those in the gaping crowd and the crowds of gaping readers—within this “framework.” Her stance on stage becomes a literally framed “picturesque” object worthy of capture by the “illustrious painters” who search for such ideal forms (49), a group Hawthorne may now imagine himself to join with his own rendition of Hester Prynne as posited here.

Within this frame, Hester is created to be looked upon openly under “the heavy weight of a thousand unrelenting eyes” (Hawthorne 50). The Boston crowd of the

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novel and the outside reader devour Hester fully with looks of silent hate and condemnation fixed in a kind of sexualized gaze that looks at the forbidden, staring openly at the fantastic crimson letter fastened to the bodice of Hester's dress and by connection at the female body held within the bodice of that dress. This public gaze emits a kind of group titillation stemming from Hester's physical being, which T. Walter Herbert calls an "emotional rape" founded in the pornographic gaze of the viewers:

The story begins with the eroticized punishment of Hester, exposed to public view as the living emblem of sexual sin....Hester attempts to resist the communal attack, but her gestures of defiance are taken as a provocation, and have the effect of magnifying the gratification that the spectacle provides to those who have gathered to view her punishment. The book opens, that is, with a scene of pornographic excitement... ("Pornographic Manhood" 117)

Hester's form not only as a pornographic object, but a pornographic commodity, is evident in Hawthorne's title choice for the chapter of Hester's entrance and stance on the scaffold; the gaze is one of marketplace value. Hester's role in the novel is bound by her entrance here as a sexually defined object that is sold to the gaze of onlookers; significantly—and at least somewhat ironically considering the male voyeuristic perspective given by Hawthorne and taken by the crowd of both Puritans and readers—Hester's stance on the scaffold as this sexual commodity is one Hawthorne also envisions for himself in "The Custom House" introduction. While critics like Sandra Tomc want to condemn Hawthorne for language and staging that place him as the ultimate artist of the text, one empowered by his male position, and Hester as the subordinated object of the text, one confined for her female form, Hawthorne himself seems blind to such a hierarchy. He instead seems to envision Hester as a mirror reflection not only of his artistry but also of his objectification as an artist. He writes the scaffold in the market place scene to display Hester as object, but through his words in "The Custom House," he seems to see himself right next to Hester as another object on that scaffold before the marketplace of the literary world.

IV. Hawthorne as Object: The Artist as a Sexualized Commodity

Hawthorne's struggle with his art as a commodified product to be sold has been thoroughly discussed and documented. However, the commodification of his identity as an artist has only been rarely addressed. In her essay, "Letters Turned to Gold: Hawthorne, Authorship, and Slavery," Teresa A. Goddu prioritizes Hawthorne's conflicted role as artist and commodified author. Goddu writes, "...Hawthorne characterizes the author in *The Scarlet Letter* not as a secluded artist but as a commodified object who must sell his soul to the trade," specifically the slave trade, which is Goddu's contextual angle within her reading (62). It is not just the physical text of *The Scarlet Letter* that is up for sale—"the letters turn[ed] to gold upon the page" (Hawthorne 33)—but it is his soul, his identity, his being that has become a commodity as well. In his discussions within "The Custom House," Hawthorne identifies the text of his name as the closest literal sign to "a knowledge of [his] existence" (23), describing with disgust the commodity that his name has become when he writes,

No longer seeking nor caring that my name should be blazoned abroad on title pages, I smiled to think that it had now another kind of vogue. The Custom House marker imprinted it with a stencil and black paint, on pepper-bags, and baskets of anatto, and cigar boxes, and bales of all kinds of dutiable merchandise, in testimony that these commodities had paid the impost, and gone regularly through the office. Borne on such queer vehicle of fame, a knowledge of my existence, so far as a name conveys it, was carried where it had never been before, and, I hope, will never go again. (23)

This language of trade mimics the trade Hawthorne has come to feel in his own authorial identity. While doing some less than ambitious editorial work a few years before the publication of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne began to feel the role of his name in the reception of his work. In trying to remove his name from a text as editor, an uncomfortable but financially necessary role he had assumed in place of the preferable position as author, the publishing company insisted on the inclusion of his name, making Hawthorne "well aware of how [the literary world] *trades* on his authorial name" (Goddu 59, emphasis mine). With the publication of a text, he not only suffers from the offering of his imagination, his words as an object to be sold; he suffers from the offering of his name, his position as artist-

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author as an object to be sold as well. Less blatantly but just as tellingly as the literal trade of his name, Hawthorne recognizes his status as artist object in his self introduction within “The Custom House.” He chooses with this introduction to insert himself into the text as a version of his true self affected by fiction. He writes and rewrites himself in “The Custom House” as the fusion of “the Actual and the Imaginary” (31), simultaneously acting as the artist and the art: “In accomplishing the main purpose, it has appeared allowable, by a few extra touches, to give a faint representation of a mode of life not heretofore described, together with some of the characters that move in it, among whom the author happened to make one” (2). Identifying himself as one of the many characters of this text, albeit one of a somewhat “autobiographical impulse” (1), Hawthorne subtly reveals his personal sense of objectification, alluding to his own placement as an artist constructed within and by his own art.

While Goddu situates her reading in light of the slave trade and its affect on literary publication at the time of Hawthorne’s writing, positioning Hawthorne beside Hester on the scaffold of his own construction links him to her position as a gendered commodity, evaluated by and for her sexuality. Hawthorne seems to see his own object value as an artist to at least some degree within this same sexual evaluation, a position implied by critics such as Brenda Wineapple who describes Hawthorne’s experience of “writing as a kind of exhibitionism” (85), a term perfectly applicable to Hawthorne’s possible perception of himself as a man on display.

Within “The Custom House” Hawthorne’s language at times emits a tone of male bravado. He makes a point to assert the masculine construction of his public world by specifying the Salem Custom House as “a [male] sanctuary into which womankind, with her tools of magic, the broom and mop, has very infrequent access” (5). However, he then collapses this male sanctuary as a destructive force against masculinity, which requires of him passive dependence—on both the group of men and the government association that groups those men—rather than the assertion of independence, a foundational aspect of the male identity: “...while he leans on the mighty arm of the Republic, his own proper strength departs from him....its sturdy force, its courage and constancy, its truth, its self-reliance, and all that gives the emphasis to manly character” (33-34). In this sense, Hawthorne seems only to establish his sexual identity in relationship to his government work, but T. Walter Herbert establishes Hawthorne’s sexual self explicitly in relationship

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to his art.

In his work on Una Hawthorne, Hawthorne's first and most unsettling child, Herbert describes Hawthorne's problematic sexual identity as a male artist. According to Herbert, Hawthorne viewed the self offered through his emotional and internally derived writings as "anomalous in relation to the prevailing standard of masterful public manhood" ("Nathaniel Hawthorne" 285). As an artist, he views himself inherently as a sexual being, but one threatened by impotence, who must find a way to produce art and "yet go forth a man" into the world (Hawthorne 35). In her essay "Impotence and Omnipotence in *The Scarlet Letter*," Claudia Durst Johnson claims that male impotence is as central to the novel's plot as female adultery, even beginning the plot as the first action, or non action, towards Hester's ultimate infidelity. While she discusses Chillingworth's sexual impotence as a plot device, Johnson acknowledges Hawthorne's literary impotence "everywhere present" in the language of "The Custom House," including most explicitly in the metaphoric image of the revived and potent town pump Hawthorne chooses as the final image of the essay (606). Johnson reads Hawthorne's closing for "The Custom House" his longing—"O, transporting and triumphant thought!—that the great-grandchildren of the present race may sometimes think kindly of the scribbler of bygone days, when the antiquary of days to come...shall point out the locality of the town pump!" (Hawthorne 39)—as a metaphor for his artistic fecundity: "The erect penis, the pump that he appropriates to himself at the end of 'The Custom House,' is the independent creativity through which the author can now anticipate pumping vengeance and love" (611). However, while Johnson prioritizes the implied action of the town pump, the object of the pump seems equally important. While Johnson reads action in this image, it is important to note that Hawthorne did not actually give this image action within his text. The pump is an object Hawthorne places not in motion, but rather at the end of a very distant gaze that follows the pointed finger back through multiple generations to the object of Hawthorne's sexualized and commodified placement as an artist object. Perhaps the lack of action, the stagnant feeling of the pump, is more significant than the implication Johnson wants to create.

Although early reaction to *The Scarlet Letter* wanted to dismiss "The Custom House" introduction as a trivial and mundane indulgence of a personal sense of injustice, this preface text, with its skillful blending of fiction and nonfiction, should be read as the prerequisite foundation on which the novel tale of Hester

Prynne stands. Through “The Custom House,” Hawthorne indulges not only his political identity, but much more importantly his complex artistic identity. Struggling between his complicated, contradictory, yet necessary perspectives of the public world of literary production and private world of literary aesthetic meaning, he admits his confusing stance as an artist creator and artist object, a stance he shares with his great protagonist, Hester Prynne. In light of Hawthorne’s complex view of gender, one that seemed to fluctuate between his private considerations and public demands, Hester Prynne does not seem to be a fictionalized female sacrifice to the male construction of power; rather, she seems like Hawthorne’s most true reflection. She shares in his action and his impotence, his creation and his objectification, reflecting in both her strengths and her limitations, Hawthorne as he understood himself: a powerful construction by some other.

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