Impotence and Omnipotence in the Scarlet Letter

Author(s): Claudia Durst Johnson

Source: *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 66, No. 4 (Dec., 1993), pp. 594-612

Published by: The New England Quarterly, Inc.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/366035>

Accessed: 12-02-2018 21:17 UTC

REFERENCES

Linked references are available on JSTOR for this article:

http://www.jstor.org/stable/366035?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents

You may need to log in to JSTOR to access the linked references.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://about.jstor.org/terms>

JSTOR

The New England Quarterly, Inc. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The New England Quarterly*

Impotence and Omnipotence in *The Scarlet Letter*

CLAUDIA DURST JOHNSON

SANDRA GILBERT and Susan Gubar begin *The Madwoman in the Attic* with the words “Is a pen a metaphoric penis?” They then proceed to summarize the history of the connection between creative authorship and male sexual prowess, referencing, in the course of their discussion, Edward Said’s association of authoring and fathering.¹ In light of what would appear to be a commonplace metaphor for the literary act, it is odd, then, that the failure of the penis as a figure for the failure of the pen is a subject rarely discussed, almost as if it were taboo. Indeed, impotence in general is hardly ever mentioned, even in new men’s studies.² Yet as Marie-Louise von Franz writes in *Patterns of Creativity Mirrored in Creation Myths*, “Sex and creativeness,

¹Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 3–5.

²There is, of course, information on impotence in books of health and physiology, including William Hammond’s *Sexual Impotence in the Male* (New York: Birmingham and Co., 1883), but the subject has not received much attention in studies of nineteenth-century historical or literary sexuality. It is only mentioned briefly in such new men’s cultural studies as Myron Brenton’s *The American Male* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1966), Warren Farrell’s *The Liberated Man* (New York: Random House, 1974), David Leverenz’s *Manhood and the American Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), and *The Making of Masculinity: The New Men’s Studies*, ed. Harry Brod (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1987). The most useful sources for Puritan and colonial America are Edmund S. Morgan’s *The Puritan Family* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966) and “The Puritans and Sex,” *New England Quarterly* 15 (December 1942): 591–607, and Nancy Cott’s “Divorce and the Changing Status of Women in Eighteenth-Century Massachusetts,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 33 (October 1976): 586–614. For nineteenth-century America, see Charles Rosenberg’s “Sexuality, Class, and Role in Nineteenth-Century America,” *American Quarterly* 25 (May 1973): 131–53, and John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman’s *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988). Even in Rosenberg’s exhaustive study of nineteenth-century books on sexuality, he notes little reference to impotence except insofar as it is considered an outcome of sexual excess or masturbation.

especially in a man—though I would say also in a woman—are in a strange way linked; they are the two aspects of one pattern. . . . You see sometimes, quite concretely, that a man who does not use his creativeness properly can, for purely psychological reasons, become impotent.”³

My contention is that the subject of impotence is much more profoundly intrinsic to *The Scarlet Letter* than has previously been argued and that it amplifies and enriches the subjects of literary dysfunction and ontological disappointment in “The Custom-House.”⁴ “The dark necessity” of *The Scarlet Letter* proceeds, I would maintain, as much from impotence as it does from adultery, the impotent man being, surprisingly, the father of events. Paradoxically, the idea of inability enables both preface and novel, giving dimension not only to literary dysfunction but also to familial, literary, and ontological collapse as the narrator works through his contradictory endeavors to be a father (po-

³Marie-Louise von Franz, *Patterns of Creativity Mirrored in Creation Myths* (Zurich: Spring Publications, 1972), pp. 133–34.

⁴Although there is a general perception that Hawthorne scholars have exhausted impotence in *The Scarlet Letter*, the subject has actually received scant attention, most of the interest in sexuality having focused on sexual politics, incest, homoeroticism, and the compulsory attempt to suppress desire. The attempt to suppress desire is somewhat discrete from impotence, which is a want of power, not necessarily a want of desire, and that rarely results in impotence, desire and impotence often being in evidence at one and the same moment. See Nina Baym, *The Shape of Hawthorne's Career* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), and “Hawthorne's Women: The Tyranny of Social Myth,” *Centennial Review* 15 (1971): 250–72; Frederick Crews, “The Ruined Wall,” *New England Quarterly* 27 (September 1965): 312–30, and *The Sins of the Fathers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966); Edgar Dryden, *Melville's Thematics of Form* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966); Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (New York: Stein and Day, 1966); John T. Irwin, *American Hieroglyphics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980); and Eric Sundquist, *Home as Found* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977). Irwin's is closest to my approach; in *American Hieroglyphics* he posits that literary inability in “The Custom-House” is stated in sexual terms. While Irwin does not enlarge on the idea of impotence in “The Custom-House,” nor raise the point in *The Scarlet Letter*, he does indicate that manliness is a critical theme in “The Custom-House,” that the customhouse itself is a symbol of lost manhood, and that in the death/castration of his public self, the narrator “recovered from the creative impotence of the customhouse and wielded once more the phallic pen” (p. 280). Dryden makes a point similar to mine in his discussion of Melville's *Pierre*: “To discover the meaning of the fiction, therefore, is to discover a hidden content, the personal core concealed behind the substitutions and displacements that characterize the act of writing. This suggests that realms of lover and novelist—by extension the personal and social—may not be totally unrelated. . . . the relation between writer and reader may lead to an intimacy similar to that enjoyed by lovers” (p. 107).

tency) and to rest in the manly strength of both an earthly and a heavenly Father (Omnipotence).

A reading of the novel as a tale shaped by impotence is initially invited by Chillingworth, a character who fits the classic stereotype of the impotent man—an old man who marries a young wife, a husband who has been cuckolded. What may well lie behind the Victorian veil of the preface is that the tragedy of *The Scarlet Letter*—a tragedy carried forward by the guilt of the male adulterer, the vengeance of the cuckold, and the community's punishment of the female transgressor—proceeds not so much from Hester's adultery as it does from her arranged marriage with an impotent man. Chillingworth, ironically named Roger, is old even when he and Hester marry and he does not father a child by her. He admits from the first that he shoulders some blame for the whole tragedy. In the prison, just after Hester has been made to stand on the scaffold with the infant, Chillingworth speaks to her:

"Hester," he said, "I ask not wherefore, nor how, thou hast fallen into the pit. . . . The reason is not far to seek. It was my folly, and thy weakness. I,—a man of thought,—a man already in decay, having given my best years to feed the hungry dream of knowledge,—what had I to do with youth and beauty like thine own! . . . Nay, from the moment when we came down the old church-steps together, a married pair, I might have beheld the bale-fire of that scarlet letter blazing at the end of our path! . . . Mine was the first wrong, when I betrayed thy budding youth into a false and unnatural relation with my decay."⁵

The rightness of Chillingworth's suspicion is evident, for Hester "deemed it her crime most to be repented of, that she had ever endured, and reciprocated, the lukewarm grasp of his hand" (p. 270), a comment that prompts the narrator to pronounce:

Let men tremble to win the hand of woman, unless they win along with it the utmost passion of her heart! Else it may be their miserable for-

⁵Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, Centenary Edition, ed. William Charvat et al. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1965), p. 7. Further citations will appear in the text.

tune, as it was Roger Chillingworth's when some mightier touch than their own may have awakened all her sensibilities, to be reproached even for the calm content, the marble image of happiness, which they will have imposed upon her as the warm reality. [Pp. 176–77]

Nine years after their conversation in prison, Chillingworth may seem to have altered his earlier assessment of Hester's adultery; now telling her that all the unhappiness began when she "went awry," he nonetheless continues to acknowledge his culpability in forcing marriage upon her. Of his arrival in New England he says, "I was in the autumn of my days, nor was it the early autumn" (p. 172), and he admits, "Peradventure, hadst thou met earlier with a better love than mine, this evil had not been" (p. 173).

Old men, particularly those married to young wives, have been ridiculed throughout literature—mercilessly by Rabelais, Boccaccio, and Chaucer—as especially prone to impotence. Robert Burton reinforces the stereotype in his 1621 *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. He defines impotence as "a man, not able of himself to perform those dues which he ought unto his wife" and notes that the disorder "is most evident in old men, that are cold and dry by nature, and married *succi plenis*, to young wanton wives." Burton, quoting Nevisanus and Aeneas Sylvius, writes that women are especially unfaithful to old, sexually dysfunctional husbands.⁶

The history of attitudes toward impotence, as it was inevitably disclosed in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English and colonial materials with which Hawthorne was obviously familiar, also places the exchanges between Chillingworth and Hester in an interesting light. Even in the early Catholic church, impotence was one of the few grounds for annulling marriages, and the frequency with which the complaint was raised caused British law in a superstitious age to be fairly complicated on the issue. Though restricted to problems of witchcraft, lines from the *Malleus Maleficarum*, a 1489 guide to court trials concerning witches, suggest just how intricately and how pervasively the problem figured into legal questions:

⁶Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, 3 vols. (London: Dent Publishers, 1934), 3:266–67, 269.

Wherefore the Catholic Doctors make the following distinction, that impotence caused by witchcraft is either temporary or permanent. And if it is temporary, then it does not annul the marriage. Moreover, it is presumed to be temporary if they are able to be healed of the impediment within three years from their cohabitation. . . . But if they are not then cured by any remedy, from that time it is presumed to be permanent. And in that case it either precedes both the contract and the consummation of marriage, and then it prevents the contracting of a marriage, and annuls one that is not yet contracted; or else it follows the contract of marriage but precedes its consummation, and then also, according to some, it annuls the previous contract. (For it is said in Book XXXIII, quest. I, cap. I that the confirmation of a marriage consists in its carnal office.)⁷

In consulting early American records, Hawthorne would have discovered a similar legal tradition in Puritan America, a tradition reflecting a view of marriage different from the nineteenth century's. As he noted the harsh punishments exacted for sexual conduct outside of marriage in an earlier age, Hawthorne would also have recognized that sexuality *in* marriage was mandated and considered necessary. In seventeenth-century New England, failure to consummate marriage was a matter of grave concern. To illustrate the Puritan insistence on sex as a marital duty and pleasure, Edmund S. Morgan quotes from a manuscript of Edward Taylor's: failure to have sex "denies all reliefe in Wedlock unto Human necessity." From the records of the First Church of Boston, Morgan retrieves the case of James Mattock, who was expelled from that congregation for denying "Conjugall fellowship unto his wife for the space of two years together."⁸ Moreover, if

a man proved impotent, his bride was freed from her contract with him. . . . Massachusetts records show several cases in which marriages were annulled on account of the husband's impotency. Sexual union constituted the first obligation of married couples to each other, an obligation without the fulfillment of which no persons could be considered married.⁹

⁷*Malleus Malificarum*, trans. Montague Summers (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1970), p. 57.

⁸Morgan, "The Puritans and Sex," pp. 592, 593.

⁹Morgan, *The Puritan Family*, p. 34.

Indeed, Cotton Mather, quoting in *Magnalia Christi Americana* from the Cambridge Platform of 1648, reveals that of the six recognized grounds for annulment or divorce, the cause that heads the list is impotence: "incapacities, and insufficiencies, which utterly disappoint the confessed ends of marriage."¹⁰ Court cases from the eighteenth century reveal a shift in attitudes toward divorce, but impotence remained one of the few acceptable reasons for ending a marriage. In "Divorce and the Changing Status of Women in Eighteenth-Century Massachusetts," Nancy Cott indicates that women continued to sue for annulment on grounds of impotence but were evidently granted divorces less frequently than seventeenth-century women making similar cases. In one instance in 1780, however, in response to a complaint by Mercy Turner that her husband was impotent, the General Court annulled the marriage by legislative fiat.¹¹

In the text of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne makes an oblique reference to the issue of impotence when he alludes to the Overbury murder. In the chapter entitled "The Leech and His Patient," an old man in the community claims to have seen Chillingworth "under some other name . . . in the company with Doctor Forman, the famous old conjurer, who was implicated in the affair of Overbury" (p. 126). The association offers readers a possible motive for Chillingworth's departure from England as well as a hint that Chillingworth, if he is indeed a compatriot of Forman's, was not unacquainted with sorcery, for Overbury had died mysteriously after objecting to the divorce of the notorious Countess of Essex, who had been assisted by sorcerers, even by King James I, himself the author of a book on demonology. The point worth bearing in mind here, however, is that the Countess's grounds for divorce centered on her husband's impotence, a complicated charge that provoked theoretical arguments between the commission's judge and the king about witch-induced impotence and that rendered the case a textbook study in British family law as it involved sexual inadequacy.¹²

¹⁰Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, 2 vols. (Hartford: Silas Andrus and Son, 1853), 2:253.

¹¹Nancy Cott, "Divorce," pp. 597–98.

¹²John Johnson, *Disorders of Sexual Potency in the Male* (London: Pergamon Press, 1968), pp. 3, 4.

"Why," it is asked in the same chapter, the one entitled "The Leech," "Why, with such rank in the learned world, had he come hither? What could he, whose sphere was in great cities, be seeking in the wilderness?" (p. 121). There are numerous clues throughout *The Scarlet Letter*—for example, in his fascination with "herbs of potency" and his transactions with the Indians—that Chillingworth was not simply fleeing legal complications in England but pursuing fresh possibilities in America. Like Ponce de Leon, he has come to the New World not only in the broad sense to be a new man but in the narrow sense to be manly.

In the writings of contemporaries are clear indications that what Ferdinand of Spain had commissioned Ponce de Leon to find in Florida was something to help him resume "his manly exercises." Spanish writers unfailingly call Ponce de Leon's object not "the Fountain of Youth" but "the fountain which converts old men into youths."¹³ Edward W. Lawson's *The Discovery of Florida and Its Discoverer Juan Ponce de Leon* gathers together several such contemporary references. The waters of Bimini were understood by the Spanish historian Oviedo to "renovate, resprout and refresh the age and forces of he who drank or bathed in that fountain." Historian Antonia de Herrera, in his 1601 *Acts of the Castellians*, claimed that in bathing in the fountain, "old men were turned into youths." Another contemporary, Peter Martyr, wrote that the fountain "maketh old men young again." Martyr recounts further the story of an old man who, after bathing in the Fountain of Bimini, "brought home a manly strength, and to have used all manly exercises, and that he married again, and begat children."¹⁴ Present-day reference sources have been faithful to this interpretation of the fountain. The "function of this water was not to render man immortal, but to renew his vigour," states *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, and *The Encyclopedia of Religion* indicates that "Fountains of Youth manifest a forever self-renewing potentiality for cre-

¹³Garcilaso de la Vega, *The Florida of the Inca* (1605), trans. and ed. John Grier Varner and Jeannette Johnson Varner (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1951), p. 8.

¹⁴Edward W. Lawson, *The Discovery of Florida and Its Discoverer Juan Ponce de Leon* (St. Augustine, Fla.: Edward W. Lawson, 1946), p. 11.

ation.”¹⁵ The connection here between Chillingworth’s alchemy and Ponce de Leon’s fountain, I would argue, is not in the least far-fetched, for Hawthorne’s fiction is, from first to last, replete with fountains as figures of virility—resurrection and erection. Of particular pertinence, the town pump, which ends the impotency of “The Custom-House,” metaphorically plants the seed of *The Scarlet Letter*.

The interrelations among Chillingworth’s alchemy, the Fountain of Youth, and potency become clearer with reference to Hawthorne’s “Dr. Heidegger’s Experiment,” which has the explorer’s search at its center: “‘Did you ever hear of the “Fountain of Youth,”’ asked Dr. Heidegger, ‘which Ponce De Leon, the Spanish adventurer, went in search of, two or three centuries ago?’”¹⁶ The chief attraction of Dr. Heidegger’s potion lies in its ability to restore the sexual vigor which in youth is both pleasurable and violently destructive. That the three old men engaged in the experiment had in their youth been romantic rivals for the attention of the fourth participant, an old woman, begins to suggest that the elixir is intended largely as a sexual restorative. The report that a scandal has surrounded the old woman and that one of the old men had indulged in “sinful pleasures” intensifies readers’ expectations that the elixir will be used to restore sexual powers. Indeed, the readers’ attention is repeatedly drawn to the sexuality of the subjects: they enter the scene, looking “as if they had never known what youth or pleasure was” (p. 232); after drinking the elixir, the widow “felt almost like a woman again” (p. 233); eventually “the gush of young life shot through their veins” (p. 235); and the colonel’s eyes “wandered towards the buxom figure of the Widow Wycherly” (p. 234). The characters’ brief renewal ends in a violent display of sexual jealousy:

But they were young; their burning passions proved them so. Inflamed to madness by the coquetry of the girl-widow . . . the three rivals began

¹⁵*Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, 13 vols., ed. James Hastings (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1908–26), 6:115; *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 16 vols., ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan Company, 1987), 5:401–2.

¹⁶Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Twice-Told Tales*, Centenary Edition, ed. William Charvat et al. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1974), p. 231. Further citations will appear in the text.

to interchange threatening glances. Still keeping hold of the fair prize, they grappled fiercely at one another's throats. [P. 237]

At the end of the story, the four go off in search of Ponce de Leon's fountain.

Chillingworth, also on a journey to renew his manly exercises, seeks his restorative not in fountains but in herbs and roots.

In his Indian captivity . . . he had gained much knowledge of the properties of native herbs and roots; nor did he conceal from his patients, that these simple medicines, Nature's boon to the untutored savage, had quite as large a share of his own confidence as the European pharmacopoeia, which so many learned doctors had spent centuries in elaborating. [P. 119]

In the New World, Chillingworth is called "an apothecary" and "an alchemist," terms that seem to replace his Old World label of "scholar." References to Chillingworth as an herb and root gatherer are frequent, and herbs and roots, of course, the latter because of their phallic shape, were regarded as aphrodisiacs. More particularly, two of the weeds that Hester associates with Chillingworth—deadly nightshade and henbane—were regarded (along with many others, to be sure) as love philters and cures for sexual inadequacy.¹⁷ The suggestions are sufficiently compelling to support a rather literal reading of the narrator's description of the activity in Chillingworth's laboratory: "weeds were converted into drugs of potency" (p. 130).

Chillingworth is also reputed to have learned more than herbal medicine from his Indian captors.

Two or three individuals hinted that the man of skill, during his Indian captivity, had enlarged his medical attainments by joining in the incantations of the savage priests; who were universally acknowledged to be powerful enchanters, often performing seemingly miraculous cures by their skill in the black art. [P. 127]

¹⁷P. V. Yaberner, *Aphrodisiacs: The Science and the Myth* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), pp. 41–77, 257–62.

Suspensions that Chillingworth has more than a passing interest in sorcery abound: in whisperings about his associations with Dr. Forman, about his being an emissary of Satan, about his being the Black Man, about the similarity between his skills and those of witches. The primary mischief of witches or agents of the Black Man, according to the *Malleus Maleficarum*, was to obstruct "the venereal act." Witches are able to meddle in sex because "God allows them more power over this act, by which the first sin was disseminated, than over other human actions."¹⁸ Though witches could also cause love sickness, they preferred "obstructing generation" in men (even going so far as to make the penis disappear on occasion), a particularly malevolent joy, speculated the *Malleus Maleficarum*, for the women who dominated witchcraft.¹⁹

In working her magic, the witch may either "directly prevent the erection of that member which is adapted to fructification" or "prevent the flow of the vital essence to the members in which lies the motive power by closing as it were the seminary ducts." Chillingworth, repeatedly described, as his name suggests, as cold, would seem to suffer from the kind of powerlessness that is "a sign of frigidity of nature."²⁰ Impotence was caused by witches, and it could be cured by witches. Chillingworth, it would appear, has been attracted to witchcraft, as he has been to Indian medicine, as a means of addressing his own sexual problem.

Given the historical context of impotence, especially its role in annulment proceedings, given the author's allusions to medicine and magic in which the center of discussion and action was "venereal incapacity," given the cultural stereotypes of the impotent man and his adulterous wife embodied in the novel, the conversations between Chillingworth and Hester suggest that the plot is initiated by his impotence. Scattered among Hester's self-recriminations and Chillingworth's accusations are clear signals that neither character is completely convinced that "the first step awry" was Hester's.

¹⁸*Malleus Maleficarum*, pp. 57, 118.

¹⁹*Malleus Maleficarum*, p. 55.

²⁰*Malleus Maleficarum*, pp. 55, 56.

Although Chillingworth's impotence sets the tragedy in motion, the New England community's repudiation of passion propels the plot forward, a power to obstruct the sexuality and vigor of its citizens that makes the old function of witchcraft superfluous. That this society, into which Chillingworth so easily insinuates himself, values age and intellect over potency and creativity is clear from the first scene. The valued leaders in the community are old men, except for one young man who is old in spirit. The women in the marketplace outside the jail are, in the eyes of the narrator, devoid of sexual appeal, being true descendents of "the manlike Elizabeth." The only appealing figure other than Hester is a sympathetic young mother whom the author dispatches in her youth.

Although he had once attracted Hester, Dimmesdale is scarcely charming to the reader. His sexuality appears to ebb as his physical strength and moral vigor diminish. Aspiring to be a saint, fasting frequently "to keep the grossness of this earthly state from clogging and obscuring his spiritual lamp" (p. 120), he denies his role as lover and father. Eventually he moves into a home, not with a wife but with the impotent man Chillingworth. The walls of his house reflect the society that devalues sexuality: one of the stories told by the tapestry on the wall of his house is the passionate one of David and Bathsheba, but it "made the fair woman of the scene almost as grimly picturesque as the woe-denouncing seer" (p. 126).

Whether or not Dimmesdale has lost his sexual potency is a matter for speculation, but what can be asserted without equivocation is that he is impotent in all other ways. Hester, whom one might expect to be better able to recognize his symptoms than others, is shocked that "His moral force was abased into more than childish weakness. It groveled helpless on the ground" (p. 159). Later she seems to wail in frustration, "Wilt thou die for very weakness?" (p. 196). Few of the tale's lines describing Dimmesdale fail to underscore the waning of his vigor: "There was a listlessness in his gait; as if he saw no reason for taking one step farther, nor felt any desire to do so, but would have been glad, could he be glad of anything, to fling himself down at the root of the nearest tree, and lie there passive for evermore"

(p. 188). "But his character had been so much enfeebled by suffering, that even its lower energies were incapable of more than a temporary struggle" (p. 194). His spirit is "so shattered and subdued, that it could hardly hold itself erect" (p. 197).

Recognizing that Dimmesdale has long since been morally and physically debilitated, the vengeance Chillingworth wreaks upon the man who has cuckolded him is particularly ironic and complex. It is to be expected that Chillingworth would want to use his medicinal and occult lore, which for centuries had been used to thwart the venereal act, to render Dimmesdale, his once potent rival, impotent. But Chillingworth must realize that any sexual dysfunction visited upon Dimmesdale at this point would be somewhat irrelevant. The sexual encounter between Dimmesdale and Hester has already occurred, at least a year before Chillingworth arrives, and Reverend Dimmesdale has now deliberately chosen to conduct himself "as if priestly celibacy were one of his articles of church-discipline" (p. 125). How much more torturous to the man who has cuckolded him would be Chillingworth's application of his "drugs of potency," drugs with which he admits treating Dimmesdale, drugs designed to heighten Dimmesdale's sexual desire, mock his saintly intentions, and intensify his shame and guilt.²¹ The point is made by Frederick Crews that Dimmesdale continues to suffer a yearning, a passion for which he scourges himself in his closet, a need from which, try hard as he may, he can find no release.²²

While the idea of sexual impotence assists the novel's plot, the very fact of the tale marks an end to poetic dysfunction. The narrator of "The Custom-House," realizing that his imagination is incapacitated and, thus, that he cannot have union with his readers, blames his affliction on a similarly afflicted (and infectious) community ruled by a once venal patriarch. Attempts to cure his

²¹For another view of Chillingworth's uses of alchemical skill on Dimmesdale, see Jemshed A. Khan, "Atropine Poisoning in Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*," *New England Journal of Medicine*, 9 August 1984, pp. 414–16.

²²Crews, *Sins of the Fathers*, pp. 136–53.

dysfunction with various remedies have failed, but his unfortunate condition is sufficiently reversible that he can anticipate an opportunity to unite with his readers. The preface ends with his pump gushing, a far cruder and more explicitly suggestive image than the usual erotic fountain. The linkage of sexual and literary impotence in "The Custom-House" is everywhere present in its language: in the narrator's shame at being in an unmanly profession; the Platonic ideal of a momentary union of two selves that once were whole; the impotence of place; the references to the narrator's loss of manhood; and the concluding reference to the phallic town pump.

Literary publication is made analogous to propagation in the first paragraphs of the preface when the narrator contends that some biographical writers view reader and writer as male and female, separate parts of a divided egg that are attracted into a kind of wholeness. Such an author approaches the reader as if he or she were "the one heart and mind of perfect sympathy; as if the printed book, thrown at large on the wide world, were certain to find out the divided segment of the writer's own nature, and complete his circle of existence by bringing him into communion with it" (pp. 3, 4). The analogy to sexual union between writer and reader may explain why the narrator's very next words are, "It is scarcely decorous . . ." (p. 4). The narrator, perceiving writing as an invasion of the readers' rights, must keep the autobiographical urge "within . . . limits" (p. 4). The connection the narrator makes between sexual union and the confidentiality with which an author speaks to reader-listeners is also made by Coverdale in *The Blithedale Romance*, when he discourages Zenobia's confidences as if they bordered on sexual impropriety, and by Kenyon in *The Marble Faun*, who for the same reason expresses his reluctance to serve as Miriam's confidant.

Before the narrator of "The Custom-House" proceeds further, he reassures his lover-reader that he will keep his distance, "keep the inmost Me behind its veil," that he will keep "within these limits . . . without violating either the reader's rights or his own" (p. 4). In short, he curiously promises not to press an unseemly consummation upon his readers while at the same time indulging in some heavy courting. He will assume "a personal relation"

with them but maintain "a certain propriety" while still, he hopes, not dampening the excitement. His literary production once received by the reader is conceived in terms of biological offspring that can "complete his circle of existence" (p. 4). However, by "keeping the inmost Me behind the veil," by teasing his readers rather than leveling with them; he jeopardizes the enterprise, as does Dimmesdale with his incomplete and generalized confessions from the pulpit.

The narrator probably decides that keeping "the inmost Me" behind its veil is a particularly wise plan of action because the inmost Me is not as presentable as it might be. In all likelihood, it is drooping, just like the American flag: "From the loftiest point of its roof, during precisely three and a half hours of each afternoon, floats or droops, in breeze or calm, the banner of the republic" (p. 5). In writing of the failure of his vigor, the narrator chooses words to describe himself, and civil servants in his position, that in many cases carry sexual overtones. A faculty is "suspended and inanimate" within him; missing is "a sturdy force . . . that gives the emphasis to manly character"; "his tempered steel and elasticity are lost" (p. 39). Unlike the productive clerk, he has no "enchanter's wand" (p. 24). He speculates that "a gift, a faculty, if it had not departed, was suspended and inanimate within me" (p. 26). An employee like himself who remains in government will find that "his own proper strength departs from him" (p. 39). Finally, he writes, "I endeavored to calculate how much longer I could stay in the Custom House, and yet go forth a man" (pp. 39–40).

The narrator's vigor, because he has failed to use it, has in fact even repudiated it, is temporarily beyond his power to recapture. Reminiscent of seekers of powdered rhinoceros horn and monkey glands or of visitors to the chambers of Masters and Johnson, the narrator experiments with some romantic remedies for literary incapacity before he is thrust from the Custom House:

. . . I bestirred myself to seek that invigorating charm of Nature, which used to give me such freshness and activity of thought, the moment that I stepped across the threshold of the Old Manse [his honeymoon cottage]. The same torpor, as regarded the capacity for intellectual effort, accompanied me home, and weighed upon me in the chamber which I

most absurdly termed my study. Nor did it quiet me, when, late at night, I sat in the deserted parlour, lighted only by the flickering coal-fire and the moon, striving to picture forth imaginary scenes, which, the next day, might flow out on the brightening page in many-hued description. [P. 35]

The charms, however, fail him:

But, for myself, during the whole of my Custom-House experience, moonlight and sunshine, and the glow of fire light, were just alike in my regard; and neither of them was of one whit more avail than the twinkle of a tallow-candle. 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. [P. 36]

Looking back from the novel to its preface, one can see that the hero of “The Custom-House” plays out a convoluted drama of his own literary dysfunction through the sexuality of his fictional characters. Each of the three adults can be regarded as stages in the narrator’s experience with literary creativity and incapacity. Hester’s adultery, having occurred before the novel begins, is especially pertinent to that period before the narrator enters the customhouse when, during a fruitful period of his life (his creation of tales and of children), he believes himself isolated and censured for his conception, just as Hester is. In nineteenth-century Salem the creativity/sexuality of the young writer is sacrificed much as seventeenth-century Boston had sacrificed the creativity/sexuality of the young mother to old age and intellectuality. In the customhouse, run by old men, there are no women, and in Hester’s Boston even the children play games taught by old age, not by nature.

The author/narrator’s dilemma over sexuality in the novel mimics his problem with artistic creativity. In the novel’s ending he seems to pay heed to the nineteenth-century values earlier deplored by wishing that women were “quiet,” “pure,” “ethereal,” “spiritual,” “unstained,” or “unstainable” (p. 263). Likewise with his own talent: he has an eye for the world’s dark truths, a rich imagination and a sense of doom, passion, and existential

chaos represented by Hester and the "A," yet he seems to hope that what he creates, very much like the "good" woman, should be "spiritualized," "sunshiney," should have a moral that justifies the fiction.

Chillingworth's sexual impotence and the actions he takes as a result of his condition are most indicative of a middle period—the narrator's despair over his literary deadness in the custom-house and his tendency to blame others for his deficiencies. Chillingworth is bent on vengeance against the community and against the man who has cuckolded him; the narrator wants vengeance against the man (the real-life object will also be a minister—obliquely in "The Custom-House" and directly in *The House of the Seven Gables*) who has unmanned him. Both avengers take measures to remedy their dysfunction, Chillingworth motivated to experiment with herbs and magic and the narrator turning to moonlight and mirrors.

The most startling analogue to the narrator's creativity, however, is the morally reduced Dimmesdale, who, also a victim of a community that de-sexes its citizens, has felt compelled to deny his lover, his child, and his own generative nature. Moreover, while Hester at her needle and Chillingworth at his black art demonstrate the artistry so important to the narrator, it is Dimmesdale, master of verbal arts, whose vocation most nearly matches that of the narrator. And for both men writing and sex are linked. The conjunction of sexual and literary identities is evident in the final day of Dimmesdale's life, when he delivers the greatest of his sermons and acknowledges his fatherhood of Pearl, his union with Hester.

That day, just before he composes his sermon, is a sexually charged one for the cleric who has heretofore aspired to sainthood. He has spent the afternoon being reminded of his past love affair, privately encountering a sexually renewed Hester, and anticipating a reverse migration to a restorative Old World with his former lover. On the way home, "the minister felt potent to blight all the field of innocence" of a young adoring maiden, to "teach some very wicked words" to a group of children, and "to recreate himself with a few improper jests" with a "dissolute" sailor (p. 220). Comparable to the suggestive town pump in "The

Custom-House,” which marks the end of the narrator’s impotence and his anticipation of the composition of his novel, is an account, orgasmic and onanistic, of Dimmesdale’s composition of his sermon—a scene that closes with him holding his pen in his hand:

Left alone, the minister summoned a servant of the house, and requested food, which, being set before him, he ate with ravenous appetite. Then, flinging the already written pages of the Election Sermon into the fire, he forthwith began another, which he wrote with such an impulsive flow of thought and emotion, that he fancied himself inspired; and only wondered that Heaven should see fit to transmit the grand and solemn music of its oracles through so foul an organ-pipe as he. However, leaving that mystery to solve itself, or go unsolved for ever, he drove his task onward, with earnest haste and ecstasy. Thus the night fled away, as if it were a winged steed, and he careering on it; morning came, and peeped blushing through the curtains; and at last sunrise threw a golden beam into the study, and laid it right across the minister’s bedazzled eyes. There he was, with the pen still between his fingers, and a vast, immeasurable tract of written space behind him! [P. 225]

This, the scene that closes with fulfillment, the completion of Dimmesdale’s sermon, posits a startlingly suggestive correlation between sexuality and creativity in a novel where the sexuality and incapacity of each of the three characters amplifies and complicates the narrator’s temporary literary dysfunction. As Frederick Crews writes of these post-forest scenes, “the Election Sermon is written by the same man who wants to corrupt young girls in the street, and the same newly liberated sexuality ‘inspires’ him in both cases” (p. 325).

Chillingworth’s legacy, on the other hand, is the death not only of romance but of romanticism, the failure of an immediacy and intensity of feeling characterized by Thoreau in the loss of hound dog, turtle dove, and bay horse, by Emerson in the too strong cup of Lethe, and by the narrator of *The Scarlet Letter* as “a wretched numbness,” a “torpor,” “a dwindling away.” Yet out of impotence and loss, a certain independent strength emerges. In “The Custom-House” the narrator attributes the failure of his pen largely to his dependence on external sources of male vigor.

The writer, whose uncles had performed some of the duties expected of fathers, had turned to Uncle Sam, the super Uncle; “the strong arm of his Uncle,” he trusts, “will raise and support him” (p. 39). But in seeking the virility and power of a father, he finds instead disorder, decay—impotence—and all the Chillingworth-like destructiveness that comes in its wake.

Just as the narrator begins to recognize that his literary inability cannot be blamed solely on Salem and the customhouse, his creative juices begin to flow again. Eventually, he is brought to confess, “my brain wanted the insight and my hand the cunning to transcribe it” (p. 372). As the stick-figure characters he has created turn on him for selling his soul for gold, he reluctantly acknowledges that his own deliberate decision to suspend his creativity was the primary cause of the failure of his powers.

Only when his decapitation and dismissal from the customhouse make it impossible for him to remain a superannuated child can he anticipate rising from a lifeless torpor to engage his readers. The promise lies in the final reference to “the sites memorable in the town’s history” (p. 45). While the “venerable personages” who occupied the customhouse are now consigned to the town graveyard, or at least the shadows of memory, the narrator, he proclaims, can be found at “THE TOWN-PUMP!” (note Hawthorne’s capital letters, exclamation mark), the town pump being, of course, the title and subject of one of the author’s earlier creations.²³ 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.

The legacy passed down by the enervated and castrating communities of both preface and novel is an unsettled view of sexual and artistic power and incapacity, an ambivalence of post-lapsarian confusion and guilt, rebellion and need. The failure of the Omnipotent Father, which the narrator discovers reflected

²³In the last paragraph of “A Rill from the Town-Pump” (1835), the pump speaks these lines: “Here comes a pretty young girl of my acquaintance, with a large stone-pitcher for me to fill. May she draw a husband, while drawing her water, as Rachel did of old. Hold out your vessel, my dear! There it is, full to the brim” (Hawthorne, *Twice-Told Tales*, p. 148).

in the weak earthly patriarchs, blurs the single-minded clarity, the security, the fortitude represented by solid-gold manliness. As the old fathers fall away, self-potency is an anticipated replacement for Omnipotence, and the pen rises independently to the occasion of a literary work.

Claudia Durst Johnson, *Professor of English at the University of Alabama, is the author of books on Nathaniel Hawthorne, the nineteenth-century American theatre, and Harper Lee's TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD.*