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Hester's Private Religion of the Heart: Theocracy and Secularism in *The Scarlet Letter* (1851)

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The Scarlet Letter, Hawthorne's highly political *magnum opus*, is concerned with the struggle of its heroine against the overarching Puritan patriarchy, and it relates her resistance, denial and, finally, her reconciliation to the society that had cast her out and defamed her. This paper examines religious transformation in *The Scarlet Letter*, particularly in terms of its protagonist, Hester Prynne, according to the dialectic of subversion and containment. While Puritan society condemns her acts, Hester subverts aspects of this religious theocracy, throwing new light on their interpretation in order to contain them. These points of subversion and containment, as espoused by new historicist Stephen Greenblatt and cultural materialist Jonathan Dollimore, are the critical focus of this study. Hester's subversions include her resilience against the presumption that she has committed a sin, her consecration of her actions and her criticism of predestination and the doctrine of grace. Alternatively, her containments present the reader with an alternative political vision that embraces freedom of conscience and the individual religion of the heart. Ultimately, this essay argues that Hester, by the end of the tale, displaces the Puritan theocracy and envisions a secular society in which a privatized sphere of activity is granted to individuals in order for them to exercise their political and religious liberties.

Keywords: Hester; Puritans; theocracy; subversion; containment; secular; sanctity of hearts

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La religión privada del corazón de Hester: Teocracia y secularización en *The Scarlet Letter* (1851)

The Scarlet Letter, la obra maestra de contenido altamente político de Hawthorne, se ocupa de la lucha de su heroína contra el dominante patriarcado puritano y relata su resistencia,

negación y finalmente su reconciliación con la sociedad que la había expulsado y difamado. Este artículo examina la transformación religiosa en *The Scarlet Letter*, particularmente en términos de su protagonista, Hester Prynne, según la dialéctica de subversión y contención. Mientras la sociedad puritana condena sus actos, Hester subvierte aspectos de esta teocracia religiosa, arrojando nueva luz sobre su interpretación con el fin de dominarlos. Estos puntos de subversión y contención, tal como los defienden el nuevo historicista Stephen Greenblatt y el materialista cultural Jonathan Dollimore, constituyen los enfoques críticos de este estudio. Las subversiones de Hester incluyen su resistencia a la presunción de que ha cometido un pecado, la consagración de sus acciones y su crítica de la predestinación y a la doctrina de la gracia. Alternativamente, sus actitudes de contención presentan al lector una visión política alternativa que abarca la libertad de conciencia y la religión individual del corazón. En última instancia, este ensayo sostiene que Hester, al final de la narración, desplaza a la teocracia puritana y visualiza una sociedad laica en la que se otorga a los individuos una esfera de actividad privada donde puedan ejercer sus libertades políticas y religiosas.

Palabras clave: Hester; puritanos; teocracia; subversión; laico; santidad de corazones

A revolution, or anything, that interrupts social order, may
afford opportunities for the individual display of eminent virtue;
but, its effects are pernicious to general morality.
— Hawthorne, "Old News"

1. Hester and her Critics (Religious and Otherwise)

The Scarlet Letter (1850) provides one of the most significant sketches of Puritan theocracy and its political tensions. The Puritan world of sin, predestination and immutable law is continually challenged by Hester Prynne—the heroine—who, despite being marked as an infamous adulterer, refuses to accept the evilness of her action and seeks to re-evaluate her values utilizing her own free will rather than leaning on the dark stricture of seventeenth-century Puritan authority. This radical attempt to subvert the law, which involves challenging the prevailing theological-political authority itself, leads her to adopt a more humane religion in the form of the privatized and individuated religion of the heart, repudiate the Puritan ethos and contain it within a secular framework. However, her need for radical upheaval is finally contained by her love for Dimmesdale. Subsequently, her reconciliation with society through a morality of kindness and sympathetic love prophecies a new social order, producing the non-political and private sphere of activity necessary for establishing secular liberalism.[1]

[1] There are various formulations of the term "liberalism." Its political definitions, in particular, have caused contentious debate in recent decades. However, since both Hester and Hawthorne himself fit quite well into a classical liberal framework, only the classical theories of liberalism are used for the analysis of the novel. The

The novel is perhaps among the most controversial works of fiction Hawthorne ever wrote, which won him fame among American readers as well as ill-repute among some of his fellow Christians and moralists. *The Scarlet Letter* has been the subject of various interpretations, commentaries, slanderous criticisms and moral accusations. One of the earliest critics of the book was the stern Orestes Brownson, who didactically stated in October 1850 that "Mr. Hawthorne [...] seeks to excuse Hester Prynne, a married woman, for loving the Puritan minister, on the ground that she had no love for her husband" (quoted in Crowley 1970, 176). Similar to this view, and shocked by the moral he thought he found in the text, Arthur Cleveland Coxe—an Episcopal bishop—argued that Hester's "frailty is philosophized into a natural and necessary result of the Scriptural law of marriage" (1970, 183). The good bishop was particularly distressed by what he called the "provoking concealment of the author's motive, from the beginning to the end of the story," as a consequence of which "we wonder what he would be at; whether he is making fun of all religion, or only giving a fair hint of the essential sensualism of enthusiasm" (182). Both of these moralistic critics maintained, with differing degrees of certainty, that Hawthorne endorsed Hester's immorality and challenged the biblical prohibition of adultery.

Aside from the religious figures who took issue with the book, some fiction writers gave more positive responses to *The Scarlet Letter.* Henry James commended the novel as the best of Hawthorne's romances and believed that it "has the inexhaustible charm and mystery of great works of art" (1880, 80; 116). George Eliot called it, along with H. W. Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855), one of the "two most indigenous and masterly productions in American literature" (quoted in Davidson 1973, 162). For D. H. Lawrence, it was "the most perfect American work of art" largely because of its "marvelous under-meaning [...] its perfect duplicity" (1973, 147). Many modern writers and literary critics have likewise praised the book for its vivacity, moral courage, and staunch resistance against authority. Interestingly, *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) was deemed a sunnier text than *The Scarlet Letter*. Hawthorne himself also felt that his first romance was darker and more tragic: "to tell you the truth," he wrote to his friend Horatio Bridge, "it is [...] positively a hell-fired story, into which I found it almost impossible to throw any cheering light" (quoted in Bridge 1893, 111-12).

In the twentieth century, academic critics interpreted the story in widely contrastive ways. Sometimes, they assumed that Hawthorne disapproved of Hester's immorality and sometimes maintained that Hawthorne vouchsafed moral change by letting

classic definition of liberalism is posited by Judith Shklar (1989) as being a political doctrine with "only one overriding aim: to secure the political conditions that are necessary for the exercise of political freedom" (3). In *On Liberty* (1859), John Stuart Mill argues that "the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his [sic] will, is to prevent harm to others" (2007, 3). In classical liberal theory, there is a non-political sphere of activity that is assigned to individuals to pursue their own interest and ends. This leads to individuals with widely different and sometimes contradictory beliefs, which endlessly demands compromise as well. A liberal government does not interfere in faith-related debates and often remain aloof from metaphysical complication.

Hester subvert the moral rigidity of Puritans and establish a radical reform in terms of moral and political standards. The former interpretation is upheld by critics like Abel (1952) and Cronin (1954). Abel stated that "although we are expected to love and pity Hester, we are not invited to condone her fault or to construe it as a virtue [...] she is nevertheless to be held morally responsible" (1952, 309). Among those who took the second opinion of the novel is Nina Baym (1970), who proposes that *The Scarlet Letter* reveals Hawthorne's complex involvement with what we now know as sexual politics. Baym considers Hester a deeply radical female figure in a male-dominated society. Her commitment to Pearl, to the art of her needlework, and innovative speculation all testify to some "ultimately unshakeable belief in the goodness" of her own private, individual self; a woman who refuses to "believe herself as evil" (1970, 221). Baym's Hawthorne is thus a romantic writer who is ready to subvert the worn structure of Puritan patriarchs, embodied in the figures of Arthur Dimmesdale and Roger Chillingworth. In *Hawthorne's Histories, Hawthorne's World* (2022), Michael Culacurcio argues that Hester walks in the footsteps of Ann Hutchinson[2] and refuses the predicted sexual rhetoric that the Puritan patriarchy presents (2022, 7).

Some critics, particularly those inclined toward Marxist and political readings of the text, have pointed out the unresolved tensions and ambiguities, along with the narrator's equivocations as a form of concession to the dominant system of society, which ultimately signifies Hester's departure from her former radicalism. For instance, Jonathan Arac argues that since Hawthorne supported the *status quo* in the 1850s by campaigning for President Franklin Pierce (1986, 260), the novel's famous ambiguity needs to be understood in relation to the politics of inaction on the issue of slavery. Focusing on the love story of Hester and Dimmesdale, Sacvan Bercovitch asserts that this scene of the lovers' reunion is best understood as a turn away from political change to a completely isolated and individual transformation for Hester (1991, 122). Hester's love story, along with her decision to return to Boston after her condemnation and banishment marks her movement away from a radical vision of change. According to Lauren Berlant, after the forest scene with Dimmesdale, Hester's final resolution is considered a departure from her earlier radical speculations, and she becomes subject to "moral and literary laws" (1991, 154). Her call for the transformation of the foundation of justice has been displaced by a concern for "mutual happiness" (Hawthorne 2007, 154). Berlant considers Hester, by the end of the novel, as a figure who "no longer convenes collective identity within the public sphere of discourse and exchange (the marketplace), but rather convenes in the home's safe space" (1991, 156), leading to an isolated and apolitical sphere of activity. Her reconciliation with society, then, Berlant believes, becomes a force "to preserve the idea of law, to repress the potential eruption of

[2] Ann Hutchinson (ca. 1591-1643) is a Puritan spiritual figure in colonial Massachusetts, who challenged the male authority in preaching and the religious interpretation of the Bible. She was placed on trial and later excommunicated from the Puritan colony.

female antinomian energy"[3] (156). This view, as will be shown, fits well in Greenblatt's subversion-and-containment formula, whereby Hester's subversion is contained by an appeal to the power of providence rather than active measures by individuals.

This paper argues that Hester, whose initial aspirations make her a true anti-Puritan figure, subverts the Puritans' supposedly immutable, moral canon, as set down by John Winthrop, the first governor of Massachusetts colony. This critical stance that Hester has toward Puritan theology also involves a criticism of their political system as well, since Puritans founded their political laws on the divine law of scripture. The moral law stems from an authoritative interpretation of religion, which Hester refuses to accept. Although Hester is often completely defiant and subversive to any laws but her own, she is far from a revolutionary figure for radical change. Instead, she chooses to redeem her sinful state by amending her relationship with Dimmesdale and nursing the people around her. This marks her new containment of morality.

This new containment of morality that Hester advocates is more inclined toward an indeterminate formulation of Jonathan Dollimore. In this case, Hester's containment brings about a reformation within the colony which shuns dogmatic supernaturalism and its rigid authority of Puritan patriarchs. As a prophetic figure, Hester embodies a morality founded not on religious authority but on the free conscience of individuals with a strong belief in humanitarian love and the antinomian freedom of religion, celebrating the sanctity of the human heart. In Hester's theology, only God is capable of punishing the damned or forgiving wrongdoings. No human or political institution can punish an individual for a breach of divine law since it is not an offense against the state, nor are the authorities in a position to act out God's will. As such, Hester denies the right of the state to punish her actions, which, she maintains, belong to the non-political sphere of activity.

Hawthorne depicts Hester as a female figure whose religion, like Ann Hutchinson's, is founded on love and the moral purity of the inner self rather than external, patriarchal authority. Ann Hutchinson, like Hester, rebelled against Puritan authority and defied the spiritual and moral standards set by John Winthrop. Her antinomianism led her to believe that a justified person only inwardly hears the voice of God through the Holy Ghost. In other words, she believed that God could speak directly to her soul, and thereby no mediators or interpreters were required for the relationship between God and individual human beings, particularly when the interpreters are male advocates for female submission to patriarchy. As Margaret Fuller stated in *Dial* (1843), if there is to be an interpreter of divine law, he must come "not as man, or son of man [...] but as a son of God" (IV: 14). Thus, for Hester and Hutchinson, state law is not divinely inspired but man-made and open to change and revision. Although contained by her

[3] Antinomianism is a doctrine according to which Christians are freed by grace from the necessity of obeying the Mosaic Law. Part of the Protestant controversy in the seventeenth century, the antinomians rejected the divine nature of statute law and felt themselves to not be bound by the law, since they did not consider it a sin to break it. In their views, sins are inward, spiritual, and only committed against God.

love for Dimmesdale and ultimately submitting to some version of patriarchal law by the end of the story, Hester's radical energies have brought about a change in society through creating the non-political, privatized sphere of activity essential for a secular democracy. While not much of a revolutionary, Hester does problematize the civil and natural distinction so dear to the Puritan political system.

2. *Aufhebung*: Dialectic of Subversion and Containment

According to *Merriam-Webster*, "subversion" refers to "a systematic attempt to overthrow or undermine a government or political system by persons working secretly from within," and "containment" refers to "the act, process, or means of keeping something within limits." These two dialectic terms are often used in the cultural materialist and new historicist modes of literary criticism, starting with Greenblatt's "The Invisible Bullets" (1988). John Brannigan contends that "literary texts have specific functions within a network of power relations in a society" (2001, 172). Stephen Greenblatt defines "subversiveness" as not only an attempt to gain control of the existing authority but also as a stumbling block to the very foundation underlying power relations (1981, 41). Moreover, "subversion disrupts the order of the dominant discourse by undermining structures or consolidating its marginalized elements" (Hassanpour Darbandi and Rezaei 2022, 149). Louise Montrose adds that after the process of subversion, the dialectic creates a temporary halt via the process of containment. This containment internalizes and controls the subversion produced within the very structure of the power relations and makes the subversion manageable for the dominant structure (1989, 8).

However, the cultural materialist Jonathan Dollimore takes on a less pessimistic view of the dialectic, which can be used here. He maintains that the rearrangement of containment can also "generate an instability which can [also] be the undoing" of authoritative discourse (1985, 12). This can lead to the conclusion that subversion and containment, apart from the affirmation of power, can also negate and criticize the dominant discourses. Thus, the contingency of power relations, embodied in different discursive practices of societies, can produce subversion that simultaneously reinterprets and contains these dominant and often public social relations in a new light. This new synthesis can both work to maintain the dominant, hegemonic discourses in society, as well as wittingly or unwittingly undermine some other aspects of the very same discourses it has reproduced. Therefore, subversion can to some extent reform hegemonic metanarratives such as industrial capitalism or religion so that they continue to play their roles in society, while the persistence of that very (contained) discourse is simultaneously accompanied by a critical stance toward it. Thus, the subversion/containment debate is given a sharp Hegelian twist in terms of negation and preservation (*Aufhebung*) in order to avoid the simplified binary of a powerful authority that merely produces a subversion with the aim of controlling society to an even greater extent.

3. Puritan Law: Civil and Natural Liberties

To make sense of Hester's subversion and her relationship with Puritan theocracy, an overview of the Puritan political system will be helpful. Puritan authorities developed their political philosophy relying on John Winthrop's distinction between natural and civil liberties. Natural liberty is the liberty bestowed by God on all living creatures, including human beings: such liberty is "common to man with beasts and other creatures. By this, man, as he stands in relation to man simply, hath liberty to do what he lists; it is a liberty to evil as well as to good" (Winthrop 1908, II: 83). In contrast, civil liberty is assigned to human beings exclusively, and is related to "the covenant between God and man, in the moral law, and the political covenants and constitutions, amongst men themselves. This liberty is the proper end and object of authority, and cannot subsist without it; and it is a liberty to that only which is good, just, and honest" (1908, II: 84). Civil liberty, then, is the foundation upon which the political institution of Puritans was constructed. The Puritan political system derives its laws from the immutable covenant of God with human beings rather than on the secular laws founded on contracts and negotiations among individuals. The civil law, legitimized by God, must be sanctioned according to Winthrop's "covenant between God and man, in the moral law." As he sees it, this liberty needs to be brought into being by mediators and interpreters of God's Words (i.e., Puritan governors and theologians) and cannot exist without the proper authority acting on God's behalf. Thus, Winthrop puts forward the main tenets of Puritan theocracy whereby individuals can achieve true liberty only through total submission to Christ and, consequently, religious authority. In such a society, political and civil laws are naturally derived from religious precepts, as interpreted by Puritan leaders. Alternatively, religious commandments are, in practice, the equivalent of civil laws; when the civil law is abrogated, it is not only a wrong against the state, but also against God. In addition, since God's laws derived from the Bible are deemed nothing short of immutable, eternal verities, it follows that the civil law derived from them must also be unchangeable and not open to any discussion and modification.

The Puritan political theocracy is governed by this moral law and needs God's witness to be properly legitimate. In contrast to the persistent secular tendency to separate religion and state in the ensuing centuries of American history, seventeenth-century Puritans founded their state on the strict and often unbending covenant of religious morality in Boston. Winthrop's analogy for political covenant is marriage, which is pertinent to the marital crisis at the heart of *The Scarlet Letter*. Winthrop compares a woman's subjection in marriage to the subjection of political members to the magistrates who govern the political covenant: "The woman's own choice makes such a man her husband; yet being so chosen, he is her lord, and she is to be subject to him, yet in a way of liberty, not of bondage; and a true wife accounts her subjection her honor and her freedom [...]. Even so brethren, it will be between you and your magistrates" (238-39). As soon as the woman enters into the marriage covenant, she

has to submit to the family's patriarch (i.e., her husband); thus magistrates and all other people should submit unquestioningly to the governor's will. As the father figure of this hierarchical family, the governor demands absolute loyalty from others and determines their moral and spiritual values. Thus, Winthrop presents a sexualized theory of covenant (Colacurcio 2022, 7). Assuming for themselves the moral position of God, Puritans could be very unbending and dogmatic rulers, and since they demanded moral infallibility of themselves, governors had to appear seamlessly perfect. Often falling short of this perfection, they can be then seen as hypocrites, preaching moral perfection while doing little in the way of pursuing this themselves, which in turn owes something to John Cotton's theory of "the usefulness of hypocrites" (quoted in Colacurcio 1972, 489). Imbuing their political covenant with a divine stamp, Puritans often governed as if they were surrogates for God's authority. Winthrop thus grants civil authority a divine sanction which also bestows on magistrates an infallible status, though they, like Arthur Dimmesdale, might do poorly in terms of achieving their prescribed roles.

4. Dimmesdale: A Puritan Sufferer

Arthur Dimmesdale, the young minister who fathered Pearl and Hester's secret lover, is both a hidden sinner and a victim of the oppresive laws of Puritans. Nevertheless, he remains contained within the Puritan theology and desires to continue with his ministry in order to earn repentance through his good works. His "position as a minister indeed invests the crime [*i.e.*, adultery] with the religious character so dear to Gothic romance" (Lundblad 1946, 54), although he does not possess any subversive capacity for challenging Puritans. He sometimes leans toward the heretical doctrine of works[4] and tries to appear "pious" to his community, but the hidden letter *A* on his chest torments him until he publically confesses his sin on the scaffold beside Hester. Much like Chillingworth, Dimmesdale is involved in moral hypocrisy through hiding his sin from the public eye and appearing as the pious minister that the whole town believes him to be. However, the hidden guilt torments him, especially when it is demanded of him to be perfectly upstanding. The more people honor him, the more he feels the torture: "it is inconceivable, the agony with which this public veneration tortured him" (2007, 113). Dimmesdale's suffering stems not from being oppressed by Puritan society but from failing to live up to its ambitious standards, and the fear of the scandal continually haunts him.

[4] The doctrine of work states that humans can achieve salvation by merely doing good deeds and following Mosaic Law. Many Christians believe this was actually the case for Adam and Eve in Garden of Eden before the Fall. After the Fall, when Adam and Eve were inflicted with Original Sin, they could not be saved by their actions alone. Respectively, all human beings as their descendants, burdened with Original Sin, cannot save themselves by good deeds; rather they need the grace of God through Jesus Christ to be saved (doctrine of grace).

Thus, Dimmesdale is a man who is both by temperament and profession "trammeled by [Puritan] regulations, its principles, and even its prejudices. As a priest, the framework of his order inevitably hemmed him in" (156). Dimmesdale is entirely incorporated, mind and body, into this theocratic community, and the narrator is right to assert that his sin—his act of adultery—is not a "sin of principle" rather a "sin of passion" (156). Chillingworth, elsewhere, also suspects that Dimmesdale has "done a wild thing" in "the heat of his heart" (108). Entirely approving of the civil liberty of the theocratic community, Dimmesdale "is a thoroughly submissive member of the Puritan community and depends on received laws" of Puritans (Harding 1990, xxii). The difference, however, between Chillingworth and Dimmesdale is that the latter is also a victim of harsh Puritan laws. Puritan religious ideology demands Dimmesdale to be morally infallible. In this regard, Kilborne maintains that "since he has betrayed his ideal of himself, represented externally by his profession as a clergyman and by the respect in which he is held by his congregation" (2005, 474), Dimmesdale feels overburdened by his sin and hypocrisy, as a result of which he ultimately succumbs to death. In marked contrast to him, Hester denies the encroachment of Puritan theocracy into what she believes is a matter for her own conscience.

5. Hester's Subversions: In the Footsteps of Ann Hutchinson

Hester subverts the Puritan's civil liberty in various ways. Her acts undermine Puritanism and its theological concepts, particularly the attribution of divinity to civil law. In this section, the focus will be on her subversion of Puritan laws. From the beginning, when Hester, who is charged with adultery, is about to get out of the prison gate, the narrator mentions that she will walk in the footsteps of the antinomian figure of Ann Hutchinson: "there is fair authority for believing, it had sprung up under the footsteps of the sainted Ann Hutchinson, as she entered the prison-door" (Hawthorne 2007, 40). Ann Hutchinson was a dissident figure who immigrated to New England in 1634. While she started out as a Puritan, she became an antinomian dissident, joined the familists, and preached a religion of love and individual inspiration. She maintained that God's law should be unmediated by any human figure or (male) interpreters and could only be revealed through the Holy Spirit to the justified person. Thus, for her and all other antinomians, civil law was nothing but a contract between individuals. Like her, Hester's self-reliance on her spiritual laws rather than those imposed by the state marks her most fundamental subversion. She likewise refuses to accept the divine nature of civil law and shows her antinomian tendencies by claiming that "the world's law was no law for her mind" (129). The Puritans cannot contain her light in their system of beliefs—she refuses to be a victim of an order she does not believe in. Thus, it is safe to say that she does not subvert the system of political governance so as to be incorporated by it more fully. In other words, Greenblatt's subversion-and-containtment cannot be fully applied to Hester, whose ultimate subversion goes beyond the boundaries of the dominant structure of Puritan authority.

Despite their differences and the fact that Hester is no theologian and her wrong is sexual in nature, she and Ann Hutchinson are both women who "fall afoul of a theocratic and male-dominated society" (Colacurcio 1972, 461). Each is in a special relationship with some of the intellectual and spiritual leaders of their times, Hutchinson having an ambiguous relationship with the high Calvinistic theologian John Cotton (463). In addition, Hutchinson began her career as a nurse, while Hester moved in this direction as a result of her punishment. More emphatically, however, is the fact that both these figures effectively subvert what the majority of their contemporaries take to be the inviolable moral law.

5.1. Silence as Civil Disobedience

Neither in her trial nor in her condemnation does Hester's will bend with respect to the Puritan authorities. Although sometimes she feels the guilt and trouble that her wrong has caused, she does not consider that the Puritans can judge her actions. When she is ordered to reveal her lover's name, she refuses and remains silent throughout the first chapter, "The Market Place." Her silence is also subversive in terms of Puritan civil law, since she does not accept state law as a legitimate setting within which to judge her for a personal wrong between herself and God. Michael Pringle identifies Hester's silence and resilience against the Puritans as "civil disobedience" and asserts that "silence is a part of Hester's strategy for resistance" (2007, 41) against the power relations that she cannot radically change. Monica Elbert—who sees the conflict in this scene in terms of matriarchy and patriarchy—claims that "Hester's silence is victorious over her male judges" (1990, 179). Hester, indeed, uses her silent strategy several times as a form of rebellion, when all other forms of protest are closed to her. While Hester is in prison, she is repeatedly told that she is a sinner, and not until she repents and reveals her lover's name can she be saved. This deeply traumatizes her, resulting in her being "in a state of nervous excitement that demanded constant watchfulness, lest she should perpetrate violence on herself or do some half-frenzied mischief on to the poor babe" (Hawthorne 2007, 57). Although she is certainly affected by this dark atmosphere, she never gives in to the Puritan civil law and rallies back to resume her revolt. Up until her return to Boston, Hester's thoughts and actions are not contained. Hester's refusal to admit her action as wrong can be understood in subversive terms. Interestingly, her inaction is also subversive in the eyes of the authorities because it signifies her total lack of belief in the civil law of Puritan authority.

5.2. Hester's Humanitarian Theology: Worshipping a Female God

While in the city, Hester also subverts two theological concepts central to Puritans through her actions: predestination and the doctrine of grace. Since Puritans do not distinguish between politics and religious law and consider civil law to be a form of religious covenant, Hester's revolt against theology undermines the very foundation of

Puritan establishment. Rather than surrendering herself to theocracy or hiding in her cottage, Hester persists in increasing her activity within the community in a bid to earn her own individual salvation through good deeds. Unlike Dimmesdale, who relies on the Puritan doctrine of grace for salvation, Hester subverts this external form of salvation (often too dependent on magistrates) and contains it within her individualistic version. Hester's containment of theology no longer serves the dominant political structure and has instead generated an instability that can rock its very core (Dollimore 1985, 12). This is the point to which Hester takes it upon herself to preach a religion of love, tolerance and liberal salvation through her acts.

In addition, Hester's belief in her own good works and the possibility of individual salvation places her in opposition to the idea of predestination. When she meets Dimmesdale in the wilderness, she asks him to abandon his dogmatic belief in predestination by following her alternative religion of the heart:

> You wrong yourself in this [...]. You have deeply and sorely repented. Your sin is left behind you, in the days long past. Your present life is not less holy, in very truth, than it seems in people's eyes. Is there no reality in the penitence thus sealed and witnessed by good works? And wherefore should it not bring you peace? (Hawthorne 2007, 150)

However, Dimmesdale is unable to alter his theology and in fact falls prey to it. Hester, in contrast, rejects the theological framework that has little to do with her rational stance toward faith. Hers is the kind of piety that Hawthorne has stripped away from the dark and oppressive Puritan theocracy. Predestination for her has been subverted in favor of her own conscience and inner spiritual light. In *Hawthorne as Political Philosopher*, John Alvis characterizes Hester's religion as a model for "moral purity but cultivated altogether privately with no reliance upon the civil powers Winthrop and Endicott had thought necessary to uphold their Puritan doctrine, worship, and corresponding personal decorum" (2011, 219). Thus, through the subversion of these theological concepts, Hester has stepped beyond Puritan theocracy and, in effect, demands the separation of her heart's concerns from political structures.

It is not until the final chapter that readers can understand why Hawthorne has named Hester after the biblical Esther. Just as Esther rescued her people from a law decreed by a Persian ruler, Hester "contributes to the relief of her countrymen from what Hawthorne regards as impediments to free consciences" (Alvis 2011, 219). Hester's religion has distanced itself from the traditional religion and is founded on human sentiment and charity—a new revivalist religion of the heart. Hester's theology is non-denominational and probably not even specified as Christian. Her devotion to her loved ones and the people around her makes much of charity but nothing of traditional dogma. She seems to prophesy the kind of faith that reduces traditional Christianity to its moral foundation and teaches that love and kindness are above any indoctrination imposed by authority. She embraces "a feminized version of God" (Elbert 1990, 198),

prioritizing the heart and motherly compassion over the head-strong fatherly rod. This religion of the heart paves the way for her reconciliation with society and the containment of her radical energies, which replaces radical upheaval with reform. In addition, this also demonstrates that Dollimore's formulation is more applicable to Hester's situation, where "containment is a contingent outcome of some subversion" (Grady 2008, 37). Hester's resistance is not in vain. Her subversion can make limited changes, though by being somewhat contained, it also marks her departure from her revolutionary ideals about tearing down the entire society and building it up anew. Her modified view can, however, still substantially cut back the role of religious leaders and priests in society and, more decisively, declare the separation of church from state. Thus, Hester's religion is founded on the humanitarian principle of kindness, tolerance, and forgiveness—a new Ann Hutchinson is revived.

5.3. "Another View of Hester": A Secret Radicalism

After her condemnation, Hester implements her doctrine of work for seven years and finally triumphs over the society that had once chastised her with the letter A. Now, even "the rulers, and the wise and learned men of the community" acknowledge her positive influence and good qualities (Hawthorne 2007, 127). Hester has been able to change her relationship with her community so that "the scarlet letter had not done its office" (130). In "Another View of Hester," the narrator gives the readers a glimpse of Hester's secret radicalism, which is part of her true self revealing itself after those tormenting years:

> She cast away the fragments of a broken chain. *The world's law was no law for her mind*. It was an age in which the human intellect, newly emancipated, had taken a more active and a wider range than for many centuries before. Men of the sword had overthrown nobles and kings. Men bolder than these had overthrown and rearranged—not actually, but within the sphere of theory, which was their most real abode—the whole system of ancient prejudice, wherewith was linked much of ancient principle. Hester Prynne imbibed this spirit. She assumed a *freedom of speculation* (129; emphasis added).

This is perhaps one of the most radical characterizations of Hester, a woman who defies the oppressive law of the Puritan magistrates. In other words, she reveals her antinomian attitude toward the civil liberty espoused by the "men of the sword," while also wishing for "the whole system of society [...] to be torn down and built up anew" (130). Hester can be seen here as an independent enlightened soul whose spiritual and religious morality cannot be contained by external forces. This vision of freedom leads to a recognition of Hester as an individual with a free mind that can shed off ancient prejudices of dogmatic theocracy. The speculation of freedom in her mind allows her to adopt a more humane and rational view of morality, which, similar to Ann Hutchinson, is legitimized as a privatized sphere of activity unobserved by authorities.

5.4. Hester at the Forest

Perhaps the most subversive of Hester's statements are uttered in the forest meeting with Arthur Dimmesdale. There, in "the mystery of primeval forest" (Hawthorne 2007, 143), she gives voice to several of her radical positions regarding Puritan society and marriage. Wilderness is often assumed as a Gothic territory in American literature (Crow 2009, 23), and in *The Scarlet Letter*, the forest acts as a wild territory representing pre-Christian values that are beyond the scope of Puritan law. The forest is also a place where the Indians dwell—the pagans who live outside of Christian law. Hester's association with the wilderness links her, therefore, with paganism. Indeed, Hester proves herself nothing less than a pagan in regard to Puritan civil liberty when she meets with Dimmesdale in the forest. She defies her sinfulness, stating that "what we did had a consecration of its own" (Hawthorne 2007, 152) and in this way subverts the Puritan covenant of civil law according to Winthrop. For her, "the sanctity of heart" is above any law legislated by man, even though it is attributed to God. Although her defiant cry is only proclaimed in the secret space of the forest, Hester's greatest revolt is, then, not her adultery but her ability to transcend the moral stricture of her society. Hester's statement to Dimmesdale is indeed very sinful, if not sacrilegious, in the context of Puritan morality "because it implies that Hester's and Dimmesdale's love is a self-contained act, not one in need of God's sanction" (Thomas 2004, 165). Hester's speculation is so radical that one might be tempted to suppose that she is preaching a completely secular morality based on the sanctity of the human heart,[5] and only loosely connected to Christian values.

Another example of Hester's subversive capacity toward the system is when she asks Dimmesdale to leave the country and flee to England and other European countries with her. After seven years of hardship, she believes that saving herself, Dimmesdale and Pearl depends on the radical and total negation of the Puritan system of governance and attaining a new life beyond its reach. If this had been carried out, there would have been no containment at all, and the process of subversion would have been left unfinished. Her advice to Dimmesdale is similar to her own resolution in "Another View of Hester," with the difference that the radical change has been turned into leaving "this wreck and ruin" of New England. Hester transfers her radicalism from an idealistic societal change to her privatized sphere of loved ones. Her message to Dimmesdale is the same: "begin all anew" and "leave it all behind thee" (Hawthorne 2007, 134).

Hester's revolutionary position resembles Holgrave's radicalism in *The House of the Seven Gables,* where he also demands that the entire rotten past be torn down and built up anew. Reechoing Thomas Jefferson's radical thesis that "the earth belongs always to

[5] Repeated several times in the course of the narrative, the sanctity of the human heart is taken as Hawthorne's humanistic term for equality between all individuals as moral agents who are essentially free to improve their own characters. One can equate this term with Kant's second moral maxim, which states that all beings should be treated as an end in themselves, not a means to an end.

the living generation" (1789, 395), both Hester and Holgrave endeavor to negate the whole structure of society and its overarching rules and laws. However, like Holgrave, whose radical impulses are mollified by his love for Phoebe, Hester's love and sympathy for Dimmesdale and the "mutual happiness between men and women" (Hawthorne 2007, 154) mark her departure from radicalism. Hester's revolutionary energies are thus contained by her love for Dimmesdale, and she returns to Boston and reconciles her position within the civil order against which she once rebelled.

6. The Return of Hester: Compromise or Reform?

The final chapter of the novel marks Hester's return to her hometown—the place where she has earlier been publicly shamed and made an example of. Her decision to return to a place she had radically opposed and wished for the total demise of (chapter 13) has been taken as the containment of her radical and revolutionary energies—a conservative act of preserving the *status quo*. This particular interpretation fits Greenblatt's notion of subversion-and-containment, whereby subversive forces are produced to maintain and preserve the dominant order. This is the view endorsed by both Jonathan Arac (1986) and Sacvan Bercovitch (1991). Necessary for any evaluation of Hester is her final belief that "in Heaven's own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness" (Hawthorne 2007, 204). For Arac, Hester's faith in providence reveals Hawthorne's politics of inaction because it leaves the matter of political and social upheaval in the hands of time rather than the active agency of revolutionary forces. This, Arac argues, is part of Hawthorne's anti-revolutionary tendencies to ward off any serious consideration of revolution prevalent in Europe of 1848. Instead, Hawthorne's response to Hester's call for social change is to have "patient trust in the future" (1986, 252), which interestingly is close to the answer that Hawthorne gave in *The Life of Franklin Pierce* (1852) to those demanding that the new president abolish slavery: "one of those evils which divine Providence does not leave to be remedied by human contrivances, but which, in its own good time, by some means impossible to be anticipated, but of the simplest and easiest operation, when all of its uses shall have been fulfilled, it causes to vanish like a dream" (1962, III:417). Thus, for Arac, Hester's new containment serves the present political power by neutralizing any revolutionary changes and leaving them in the hands of providence. By only providing the reader with a "fantasy of evanescence," *The Scarlet Letter* becomes a work of propaganda for political quietism, a call "not to change your life" (1986, 251).

Similar to Arac, Bercovitch also argues that *The Scarlet Letter* is propaganda for the American secular ideology of liberalism. Hester's choice to return to Boston and submit to the civil order against which she once rebelled demonstrates a kind of subversion produced only to be contained in a liberal framework. Liberalism, according to Bercovitch, works through what he calls "a logic of consent," whereby radical dissent is channeled into a form of social cohesion. In other words, Hester's subversion can be taken as a form of dissent

that maintains social order by projecting the image of an alternative, better future that can accommodate many—sometimes conflicting—individual visions. Secular liberalism is thus a compromise between different radical dissents which are tamed into reconciliation and accommodation. In this way, Hawthorne avoids any radical subversion by containing them as part of liberalism's alleged hypothesis of all-inclusivity, while leaving things as they are, untouched (Bercovitch 1991, 88-89). Both of the above scenarios can be framed according to Greenblatt's interpretation of subversion/containment since both Arac and Bercovitch maintain that Hester's subversion is produced only to be contained within the existing political order and radical change avoided. In the end, her containment contributes to Hawthorne's conservative attitude for maintaining the present structure of society. The ideology of liberalism thus contains all the opposing parties by forcing them into reconciliation.

However, the containment of Hester's radical energies against the dark and oppressive Puritan theocracy society is not left completely unchanged. Although her decision to return to society marks her departure from radicalism, she does bring about a change in society by introducing a privatized, non-political religious commitment. Until the final chapter, Puritan theocracy tries to control and dominate all activities of life, "in theory," as Berlant (1991) puts it, allowing "neither a private part to which the state is not privy, nor a thought outside of the state's affairs" (98). However, when Hester returns to her cottage at the end of the narrative, she does so in a different circumstance. She is no longer watched by suspicious magistrates; having instead earned their tolerance and even their admiration for her good works. Thus, her Dollimorian containment within society is not merely an attempt to neutralize her radical impulses; there is also an assertive side to the novel's ending: the creation of a relatively independent civil society in which politics does not encroach upon the private and personal. Hester's subversive force is not completely contained by society and still manages to negate aspects of political power that intervene in her private sphere of activity.

As Michael Walzer puts it, one function of liberal democracies is to protect a space for a civil society that incorporates "many of the associations and identities that we value outside of, and perhaps prior to, or in the shadow of state and citizenship" (1995, 1). In underpinning the significance of this private sphere of activities, Hester's return to Boston indicates the kind of non-political transformation that Hawthorne deemed necessary in order for a democratic society to emerge from authoritative Puritan theocracy. A significant part of this non-political sphere of activity for Hester is her transformation of theology, where works of charity have replaced indoctrination, and the supposed sinner can always make amends for her ways by doing good deeds (the doctrine of good work). Like Ann Hutchinson, Hester can be identified as a figure whose inward religion falls into the category of non-political pursuits. However, Hester's religion also recognizes human beings' fallen nature and their susceptibility to evil. Thus, Hester's transformation may herald a secular state in which religious laws are recognized as non-political and a matter of personal choice.

7. Conclusion

Hester's religion of the heart provides a gateway for political secularism that guarantees a private sphere of freedom critical for a democratic society. Hester's transformation of religious discourse in New England allows us to see a more optimistic horizon by the end of the story, where one's guarantee of prosperity and happiness does not depend solely on commitment to doctrine. Hester's critical outlook toward doctrine and tradition, prioritizing reason over dictated revelation by male interpreters and her persistent refusal of dogmatism make her the harbinger of an enlightenment thesis of primacy, and the independence of morality and politics from the sphere of religion and metaphysics. Hester's more critical observation of her society and her setting herself apart from patriarchal theocracy may embody a future for New England—and perhaps all of America—in which freedom of conscience and of religion are truly recognized, and the genuine Christians are those who intermingle their religious commitment with a degree of healthy skepticism toward the masculine God with a rod in His hand.

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