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ONOMASTICS IN *THE SCARLET LETTER*

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Nathaniel Hawthorne's portrait of a fallen minister and an adultress, who refused to tell the name of the father of her child, features a plot ingeniously constructed around the mysterious scarlet letter "A." Undoubtedly, the precise title sets the tone of this opus. In the most literal meaning, the noun "letter" incorporates "A," the first letter of the alphabet, as well as the generally accepted written communication form—here, a prefatory letter very skillfully embodied in "The Custom-House" chapter. My aim in this paper is to determine if the title serves as the master key enabling us to decipher the connection between the title and the names of the main characters.

Traced back to the Greeks, "scarlet" refers to a mark left by the healing of a burn. The verb "scarify" stands for a small incision for drawing blood. "Scarlet" also alludes to whorish behavior marking a woman who has committed adultery. From an onomastics point of view, it is also an epithet, a nickname, perhaps used invectively here.

Some claim that "A" stands for "Alpha," for the conceit of sin, for "adultery," and for "abomination." Martin implies that "A" might mean "able," or even "angel." He also assumes that it might represent "Arthur," here obviously alluding to the first name of the minister.¹ Manley states that it stands for "admirable," "adultress," or "alienation."² Mellon claims that it might also refer to "art."³ For Schubert, the scarlet letter "A," mentioned nearly a hundred and fifty times throughout the romance, becomes the intricately interwoven leitmotif of the narrative.⁴

A detailed analysis of the name "Prynne" reveals that it is constructed of two lexical elements: "pry" and "nee." The noun "pry" derives from the corrupted French "prize," meaning a "lever" with which things can be extracted. The intransitive verb "pry" (M.E. *prien*) refers to an inquisitive person who seeks the truth. The adjective "nee" is commonly placed after the name of a married woman to introduce her maiden name. Thus, Hester's family name embodies the essential core of the romance. Prynne, depicted here as a secretly married woman but also as a symbolic "lever," enabling us to "extract" the truth.

However, the two historical models after which Hawthorne might have coined the title and the name of his heroine are perhaps of even greater importance. Kirby's biographical study of William Prynne (1600-1699) reveals that because of his activities as a Puritan

pamphleteer, he was imprisoned, shorn of his ears, and had to appear three times in the pillory. Moreover, "he was stigmatized in the cheeks with two letters 'S' and 'L' for 'Seditious Libeler.'"⁵ It should be noted that "S" and "L" are the very initials of Hawthorne's title. Furthermore, Hawthorne's notebook of 1844 refers to an adultress who, by the old colony law, was condemned to wear the letter "A" on her garment.⁶

"Hester" is constructed of two elements, too. "Hest" is of Anglo-Saxon origin, meaning "to command." Its archaic form is "behest." In early English law it also meant "pledge," or "guaranty." The suffix "-er," as in teacher or master, simply denotes a person. Here, it probably reinforces Hester's heroic strength: ultimately, she is in "command" of Arthur's fate. Waggoner sees in Hester's name a variation of Esther, the biblical heroine of the Old Testament, gifted with beauty, strength, and dignity.⁷ Throughout the romance, Hawthorne adorns Hester with real beauty and lets her gleam like sunshine in this otherwise gloomy environment.

Arthur Dimmesdale, the secret lover, and Roger Chillingworth, his rival and the secret husband of Hester, are perhaps the most transparently coined charactonyms of the romance. We deal here again with names constructed of two elements. "Dimmest" is the superlative that identifies the utmost degree of "dim." With this adjective Hawthorne describes the fallen clergyman's excessive character in a most striking, succinct manner. Lexically, "dim" alludes to dark, invisible, and murky. A second meaning of "dim" shows a manifold structure; it ranges from dubious, concealed, inconspicuous, weak, and ambiguous to mysterious, just to mention a few. All these characteristics would hold, particularly since Hawthorne attributes this tormented protagonist with "pale," "dark," and "dying" eyes. However, Dimmesdale could perhaps be best characterized as the "dimmer" of the narrative. That is, concealing his own sin, his incandescent light of life can be observed to flicker away.

"Dale" (A.S. *dael*) is merely a poetic expression of "val," meaning "valley," "depression," or "hollow" between hills. Outwardly, Dimmesdale is the perfect priest, the admired height of righteousness. Inwardly, however, his soul is hollow. Whereas Hester has accepted society's judgment and atones for her action, Arthur cannot redeem himself. On the contrary, he sinks even deeper into his own "dale" of darkness.

To counterbalance this despondent expression of dimness and to emphasize the amorous disposition, Hawthorne carefully selected "Arthur" as the most appropriate first name of the lover. Arthur,

assumed to be of Celtic origin, meaning “high” or “noble,” is usually connected with the name of the legendary king, as well as with the medieval knight. But in myriads of romances Arthur is primarily associated with chivalry. It must be stressed here that Hawthorne called himself a “romancer” and subtitled *The Scarlet Letter* “a romance.” Thus, no more fitting a name (encompassed also in the initial “A”) could have been chosen for the leading male character, torn between the ideal and the real world.

There is little disagreement about whether Chillingworth’s name is an advantage or disadvantage to the story. Here again, two lexical elements make up the name: “chill”(ing) and “worth.” As “chill” implies a physical state without warmth, so this character shows a numbed and a hardened attitude toward the minister’s hypocrisy and seemingly indifferent coolness. Possessed by a self-destructive quest, Chillingworth seeks revenge, whatever the price, the “worth” to be paid. He undergoes a metamorphosis by turning from an herb and plant specialist into a mad scientist, a monster, an evil sorcerer. Unable to forgive and to love, Chillingworth, the vengeful rival, develops into a cold-hearted oppressor measuring in cold blood the merit of the minister’s worthiness.

“Worth” (A.S. weart, wurth), here in the strictest sense of the word, appraises the value, the “worth” of the sin without the slightest trace of human compassion. “Chilling” also alludes to “killing,” stressed as an act of process by the suffix “-ing,” stretched over a purgatory of seven years, slowly scarifying and depleting Arthur toward a state of death. Moreover, the implied allusion to M.E. “wort,” meaning herb, root, or plant, cannot be overlooked. An expert herbalist and believer in botanical drugs, Chillingworth, indeed, does know the potency of drugs and their killing power.

“Roger” is another appropriate first name, precisely fitting the mold of the story. As already mentioned, Arthur is a name that occurs frequently in romances. Roger, too, is a famous name in ancient sagas; perhaps the best known is the hero of the *Nibelungenlied*. Roger is the Romanic form of Ruediger and can be traced back to the Old High German “hroud” (Ruhm), meaning “fame.” The German “ger” can be translated as “spear” or “lance.” In *The Scarlet Letter*, it is Chillingworth who, figuratively speaking, scarifies Arthur’s heart with his lance.

No other name could have been better chosen than “pearl” to encompass the professedly purer moral code and simpler form of puritanical worship. Waggoner notes that Pearl perhaps gets her name from the “pearl of great price” used in St. Matthew, suggesting the

incomparable value of the hope of heaven.⁸ Indeed, Hawthorne calls her “worthy of Eden.” Etymologically her name can be traced back to the Greek word “margaritas” (O.F. perle), meaning “pearl” or “precious.” She is, in fact, the most precious gem of the narrative; for “pearl” also denotes a highly lustrous concretion formed within the shells of mollusks. Pearl, as the younger heroine, entrusted with peculiar insight, mollifies the harshness of the New England society enforced upon her parents, and mitigates the chilling atmosphere created by the scientist. Pearl, as a Goethean “Urkind,” is able to hear the murmur of eternal life. Feidelson calls her the “prelapsarian child of Adam; a throwback to Eden before the fall.”⁹

Needless to say, “pearl” alludes also to “purl,” and as a stitching device that is of great significance to the story. It emphasizes the fancifully embroidered scarlet letter “A” as well as the elaborately ornamented needlework in Pearl’s dresses. Baym correctly sees in Pearl the embodiment of Hester’s sin—a variant of the embroidered scarlet letter.¹⁰ To emphasize her identity, Hawthorne dresses her carefully “in a crimson velvet tunic, of a peculiar cut, abundantly embroidered with fantasies and flourishes of gold thread....It was the scarlet letter in another form, the scarlet endowed with life!” But “purl” also means a clean swirling stream freely purling among dim valleys and sunny hills. Free of the social stigma, Pearl is the gentle murmur of a pure-water stream glowing in a free manner among man-made moral obstructions. Finally, Pearl is described by Hawthorne as “the living hieroglyphic of the sin,” containing all the obscure and hidden meanings encompassed in the central symbol, the scarlet letter “A.”

In summary, Hawthorne’s nomenclature in *The Scarlet Letter* reflects an artistic as well as an authentic picture of the colonial history of the 1640s. Combined, the Anglo-Saxon names of this romance stand as witnesses to the turbulent years of a new society struggling to accommodate the hopes, dreams, and efforts of newcomers but also bound to the rigid religious moral rules of colonial ancestors. By retelling a story based on a “letter,” that is, on a document found in the Custom House, Hawthorne shows a genuine fascination with the visions and expectations of a new life by underscoring the hidden symbolic meaning embodied in the intricate story of the letter “A.” However, the artistic phenomenon of Hawthorne’s romance lies in the unique concepts of the centrally placed symbolic scarlet letter which helps to decipher the connection between the title and the charactonyms. The sinner is overtly named, yet he remains helpless.

NOTES

¹Terence Martin, *Nathaniel Hawthorne* (New York, 1965), p. 122.

²Seon Manley, *Nathaniel Hawthorne: Captain of the Imagination* (New York, 1968), pp. 131-132.

³James R. Mellow, *Nathaniel Hawthorne in His Times* (Boston, 1980), p. 306.

⁴Leland Schubert, *Hawthorne the Artist: Fine-Art Devices in Fiction* (New York, 1944), p. 142.

⁵Ethyn Williams Kirby, *William Prynne: A Study in Puritanism* (New York, 1972), p. 42.

⁶Charles Ryskamp, "The New England Sources of *The Scarlet Letter*," *AL* 31 (1959), 257-272.

⁷Hyatt H. Waggoner, *Hawthorne: A Critical Study* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), p. 145.

⁸Waggoner, p. 145.

⁹Charles Feidelson, "The Scarlet Letter," *Hawthorne Centenary Essays*, ed. Roy Harvey Pearce (Columbus, Oh., 1964), p. 74.

¹⁰Nina Baym, *The Shape of Hawthorne's Career* (Ithaca, 1976), p. 131.