The Persistence of Theocracy
Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter

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Abstract: This article argues that Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter can provide insight into the persistent appeal of the moral and political certitudes that theocracy offers and that can serve as a corrective to liberal secularism’s often myopic tendency to downplay the continuing moral and political appeal of religious belief and authority. Focusing on three puzzles raised in the structure and narrative of The Scarlet Letter, the article explores Hawthorne’s consideration of theocracy as a foundation in the past, as an antidote to the modern tendency toward materialism, and as a persistent alternative that deserves continued reflection.

Keywords: Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter, secularism, theocracy

In his recent book The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West, Mark Lilla argues that contemporary secular thinkers have overlooked the continuing appeal and tenacious persistence of political theology in the modern world. In Lilla’s view, the contemporary appeal of political theology exposes the limited and fragile character of the modern political experiment of separating church and state, revelation and secular law. Indeed, one need not look far to find examples of the striking incongruity between the secular principles that inform liberal democracies and the moral horizon that characterizes significant parts of the rest of the world. In a recent New York Times article, “Executions Are Under Way in Iran for Adultery and Other Violations,” Nazila Fathi reports the public stoning of an adulterer in Iran, with twenty more executions planned for adultery and other crimes against morality. One may be tempted to dismiss the theocratic morality that supports such harsh punishment as an aberrant remnant of premodern attitudes. However, such a cavalier dismissal ignores a paradox: these revolutionary theocratic political movements developed at the same time as some were arguing that modern secular political principles had eclipsed all other political alternatives.

The resurgence of theocratic regimes in the contemporary world defies the logic of the modernization and secularization arguments that dominated social science discourse in the mid-twentieth century. These arguments suggest that the emergence of contemporary theocratic regimes must be seen in the context of economic and cultural conditions where modernity never really took hold in the first place. In this view, the turn to theocracy should be understood as a backlash against the threat that liberal modernity’s rationalism and moral relativism pose to such premodern societies. This analysis of the return of theocracy assumes that economic and social conditions account for the persistent appeal of theocratic regimes. This assumption in turn reflects our own rarely examined secular biases.

In order to remind us of the theocratic position’s intrinsic force, Lilla reexamines the arguments of early modern political philosophers who explicitly engaged with revelation as a powerful and persistent source of moral and political authority. In his view, these early modern thinkers had a better understanding of the strength of theocracy and the challenge it poses to liberal democratic principles and practices than we do today. Just as Lilla argues that reexamining the views of early modern political philosophers can remind contemporary readers of the roots of the struggle between theocracy and liberal democracy, I argue in this article that Nathaniel Hawthorne’s The Scarlet Letter can provide us with insight into the persistent force of the moral and political certitudes that theocracy offers. An examination of The Scarlet Letter in the light of this theme can serve as a corrective to liberal secularism’s myopic tendency to downplay

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the continuing moral and political appeal of religious belief and authority. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne portrays the seventeenth-century Puritan settlers of New England as seeking liberation from religious persecution in Europe only in order to establish their own rigorous moral and religious strictures in the New World. Hawthorne suggests that the Puritans’ understanding of liberation cannot be separated from strict adherence to their own dogmatically certain moral code.

Hawthorne’s consideration of the persistence of theocracity in *The Scarlet Letter* focuses in particular on the Puritan theocratic state’s attempt to regulate erotic behavior. In their article “The True Clash of Civilizations,” Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris respond to Samuel P. Huntington’s clash of civilizations thesis and cast a contemporary light on the theme of regulating sexual mores. On the basis of data from the World Values Surveys, they argue that Huntington was wrong about the “clash of civilizations.” The clash is not about democracy or political values than the social and political status of women, sexual liberation, and state regulation of sexual behavior.

A comparison of the data yielded by these surveys [World Values Surveys, 1995–96 and 1999–2001] in Muslim and non-Muslim societies around the globe confirms the first claim in Huntington’s thesis: Culture does matter—indeed, it matters a lot. Historical religious traditions have left an enduring imprint on contemporary values. However, Huntington is mistaken in assuming that the core clash between the West and Islam is over political values. At this point in history, societies throughout the world (Muslim and Judeo-Christian alike) see democracy as the best form of government. Instead, the real fault line between the West and Islam, which Huntington’s theory completely overlooks, concerns gender equality and sexual liberation. In other words, the values separating the two cultures have much more to do with *erōs* than *demōs.*

Strikingly, these same issues of the clash of cultures and the role of gender are central themes for Hawthorne in his early nineteenth-century novels and short stories. For Hawthorne, the legacy of the past, particularly America’s Puritan theocratic past, persists in his present. In his fiction, Hawthorne frequently looks back on earlier generations of English settlement in America as a mirror that reflects the dilemmas facing post-Jacksonian America. Among the dilemmas that most preoccupy Hawthorne is the elusive promise of human perfection inherent in American culture. He sees this perfectionism expressed in his own time, both in Americans’ embrace of modern natural science’s promise of technological progress and in utopian political projects sustained by this promise. He does not, however, see the promise of human perfectibility as unique to his contemporary situation or solely as a response to the idea of scientific progress. In his writings, Hawthorne calls attention to the perfectionism inherent in the earlier Puritan experiment of creating a closed, dogmatically certain, moral community. *The Scarlet Letter* addresses both the moral ambiguity of this Puritan legacy and its persistence in his present.

Given the prominence of Hawthorne’s work in American letters, as well as the critical controversy it has generated, his writings have been the subject of extensive study and critical commentary. Such authors as Herman Melville, Henry James, William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor, and John Updike, to name only a few, have acknowledged Hawthorne as an inspiration and literary source. Literary theorists have also produced a wide range of critical responses to his work. However, only a few political theorists have seriously examined Hawthorne’s works. The more notable of these theorists, Wilson Carey McWilliams, Catherine Zuckert, and Judith Shklar, agree that Hawthorne’s novels and short stories address political dilemmas at the core of American public life and that an examination of his work is both justified and necessary.

McWilliams focuses on Hawthorne’s nuanced understanding of the nature and limits of fraternity as part of a broader study of the idea of fraternity in American life. McWilliams argues against the view that the development of the American republic can be understood solely in terms of the secular ideal of liberal individualism. He finds evidence in American religious and social movements—and in the work of writers such as Hawthorne—of a distinctively American tradition of fraternalism, which both complement and remedy what McWilliams regards as the excesses of liberal individualism. Whereas McWilliams situates Hawthorne’s work in a countertradition within American letters, Zuckert places greater weight on the evidence in his work of the liberal, natural right tradition. Zuckert turns to Hawthorne as part of a larger project exploring the role of the idea of natural right in American literature. She summarizes the political implications of his account of human nature in the following passage:

Hawthorne’s own romances have a clearly psychological focus. But there is a generally neglected political thrust as well. If human beings are selfish and contentious by nature, the question arises: How can they best organize civil society to overcome their natural faults? Like McWilliams and Zuckert, Shklar is impressed by Hawthorne’s nuanced political judgment. Shklar’s essay on Hawthorne is connected to both her critical examination of modern utopian movements and her aspiration to articulate a new basis for American political thought. She finds Hawthorne’s profound skepticism about all forms of extreme social and political arrangements admirable. In her words, “[Hawthorne] illuminated both the ambiguity of utopia and the fault of its foes.” In Shklar’s view, although Hawthorne does not regard the Puritan colonial era as a utopia, he portrays it as an in many respects admirable, if rather grim, society of piety, resolve, and dignity.

This article builds on the pioneering work of these political theorists. However the main focus of this article concentrates on a theme—the persistence of theocracity—that has not been explicitly examined in their writings.

**THE SCARLET LETTER**

The publication of *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850 immediately provoked considerable controversy. On one hand, its autobiographical introduction gave rise to charges of political partisanship. On the other hand, its central narrative provoked moral outrage. The book’s title has become
synonymous with the stigma of public disgrace. For readers today, however, new obstacles stand in the way of understanding the novel’s controversial character. For the most part, the novel has been relegated to high school curricula, where it is taught as both a heavy-handed morality tale and a dated history lesson. Neither the morality nor the history is particularly appealing to students, nor does either reflect an especially accurate reading of the novel. Such formulaic and one-dimensional interpretations, which gloss over the novel's profound moral and political ambiguities, put off reflective readers. However, if one can overcome the prejudice and over-familiar interpretation that the novel is a one-dimensional morality tale, one will find that Hawthorne neither reduces the novel’s dilemmas to a simple moral dichotomy nor forces his readers into a hasty, simplistic interpretation of its intentions. Rather, *The Scarlet Letter* poses fundamental questions that encourage readers to reach their own conclusions. To explore Hawthorne’s understanding of the persistence of theocracy, this article examines three significant puzzles in the text: first, the relationship between the introduction, “The Custom-House,” and the main narrative of the novel; second, the puzzle of Dimmesdale’s behavior; and third, the question of why Hester Prynne returns to Puritan Boston at the conclusion of the novel, rather than remaining in Europe with her daughter, Pearl.

**"THE CUSTOM-HOUSE"**

Hawthorne begins *The Scarlet Letter* with an introductory section, “The Custom-House.” This introduction is chronologically out of place in the context of the work as a whole. There are indications in the main narrative of *The Scarlet Letter* that suggest the events in the novel take place in Boston during the early years of the Puritan settlement, around 1642–49. 14 “The Custom-House,” however, is set during the author’s lifetime in the late 1840s. Hawthorne presents “The Custom-House” as an autobiographical reflection on his unhappy three-year sojourn in public life prior to his return to full-time professional writing. The two parts of the book seem at first glance to have little to do with each other. The introduction is set in the present and appears factual. The main narrative is fictional, although presented as historical fact, and set two centuries prior to the period of the introduction. The juxtaposition of these two parts does, however, draw attention to the contrast between Hawthorne’s contemporary world and the Puritan past, in which the main narrative takes place. The introduction depicts a world in which preoccupation with commerce and materialism has diminished the scope of human aspiration and the variety of human character. Its critical tone suggests that it would be a mistake to read Hawthorne’s portrayal of Puritan New England as simply negative. Although he acknowledges the harshness of the Puritan past, Hawthorne does not regard his contemporary world as self-evidently superior.

That the introduction was not merely added haphazardly to the main text is made clear by the fact that Hawthorne retained “The Custom-House” in later editions of the work, although he had a strong incentive not to do so. The author was sharply criticized for his critical sketches of certain political appointees in the real Custom House after the publication of the first edition of *The Scarlet Letter*. He added a brief but pointed “Preface to the Second Edition,” in which he responds to suggestions that he temper, or even omit, these depictions of contemporary figures. In this preface, which he retained in subsequent editions, Hawthorne writes:

Much to the author’s surprise, and (if he may say so without additional offence) considerably to his amusement, he finds that his sketch of official life, introductory to *The Scarlet Letter*, has created an unprecedented excitement in the respectable community immediately around him. It could hardly have been more violent, indeed, had he burned down the Custom House, and quenched its last smoking ember in the blood of a certain venerable personage, against whom he is supposed to cherish a peculiar malevolence. As the public disapprobation would weigh very heavily on him, were he to deserve it, the author begs leave to say that he carefully read over the introductory pages, with the purpose to expunge whatever might be found amiss, and to make the best reparation in his power for the atrocities of which he has been adjudged guilty. But it appears to him, that the only remarkable features of the sketch are its frank and genuine good-humor, and the general accuracy with which he has conveyed his sincere impressions of the characters therein described.

The author is constrained, therefore, to republish his introductory sketch without the change of a word.15

In this passage, Hawthorne adamantly defends retaining “The Custom-House” as an integral part of *The Scarlet Letter*, in spite of its apparent incongruity with the main body of the text and the public criticism to which its publication exposed him. Hawthorne’s decision to retain the introduction raises the question, to which I have already alluded, of how to understand the relationship between the two parts of the book. Hawthorne deliberately mixes past and present throughout the introduction. He juxtaposes reflections on his ancestral Salem family with character sketches of his contemporaries in the Salem Custom House.

Beginning in 1846, Hawthorne, a beneficiary of the political spoils system, served for three years as the Surveyor of the Revenue in the Salem Custom House.16 Hawthorne begins his autobiographical reflections with a genealogy of his ancestral ties to Salem. According to Hawthorne, his first American ancestor arrived in America with the Puritan settlement in 1630. He “came so early, with his Bible and his sword... He was a soldier, legislator, judge; he was a ruler in the Church.”17 Although Hawthorne depicts him as dignified and stately, this ancestor persecuted the Quakers. That ancestor’s son then served as one of three judges in the Salem witch trials, guaranteeing Hawthorne’s early ancestors a certain degree of fame, or notoriety. For Hawthorne, however, what most characterized his Salem ancestors was their “persecuting spirit.”18

In the introduction, Hawthorne describes an imagined dialogue in which his ancestors dismiss his literary profession as sheer idleness and “disgraceful.”19 Nonetheless, Hawthorne claims that he was drawn to the position in the Custom House precisely because of its location in his ancestral home, Salem, to which he has, in his words, an
"unjoyous attachment." He is drawn back to Salem in order better to understand himself by making sense of his own past. Both drawn to and ashamed of his ancestry, Hawthorne’s reflections on these years in Salem are an attempt to confront the legacy of the past and the moral contradictions in his heritage. Hawthorne is preoccupied with understanding the relationship between his Puritan ancestors’ moral seriousness and their persecuting spirit. On one hand, their serious moral purpose emboldened the Puritans to seek a New World where they would be able to practice their religion freely. On the other hand, the zeal inherent in their moral seriousness led them to persecute non-Puritans. With this tension in mind, Hawthorne refers to “the Puritanic traits, both good and evil.” As the offspring of such morally ambiguous founders, Hawthorne must wrestle with the contradictory legacy of Salem and Puritan New England as a whole in his autobiographical reflections.

In the introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne contrasts the moral seriousness of his Puritan forefathers with the crass materialism of his contemporaries in the Custom House. Whereas the moral purpose of his Puritan forefathers had a fierce determination, his contemporaries lack moral strength. Hawthorne describes one of the characters in the Custom House as so completely desensitized by his environment that he cannot even respond emotionally to the tragic loss of his children and wives. He ironically portrays another character in the Custom House as a “man of business”; when he encounters someone confused by a business transaction,

with an easy condescension, and kind forbearance towards our stupidity,—which to his order of mind, must have seemed little short of crime,—would he forthwith, by the merest touch of his finger, make the incomprehensible as clear as daylight.

The man of business thrives within the confines of the Custom House, but he appears to have neither a personal history nor any connection to his community. Hawthorne portrays him as a purely anonymous being. The man of business lives in a perpetual present. He possesses business acumen and has no patience for those who lack it. Compared with the earnestness and energy of Hawthorne’s ancestors, the character of his contemporaries appears frivolous and enervated.

Hawthorne’s fictive discovery of the “Scarlet Letter” and his very real ouster from office with the victory of the Whig presidential candidate, Zachary Taylor, save his character from the destructive effects of the Custom House. He describes his dismissal from office as being politically “guillotined.” However, only when he is cut off from the demoralizing effect of dependency on political patronage can Hawthorne’s sense of inquiry and powers of perception finally reawaken. The purported discovery of the scarlet letter both compels and allows Hawthorne to reimmerse himself in the Puritan theocratic past.

In the introduction, Hawthorne claims to find the actual remnant of the scarlet letter in a neglected corner of the Custom House, along with an account of the events depicted in the manuscript pieced together a century later by a previous occupant of the Custom House, Surveyor Pue. Hawthorne imagines the character of Pue as a ghost exhorting him to take up the story of Hester Prynne.

With his own ghostly voice he had exhorted me, . . . —who might reasonably regard himself as my official ancestor,—to bring his mouldy and moth-eaten lucubrations before the public. “Do this,” said the ghost of Surveyor Pue, emphatically nodding the head that looked so imposing within its memorable wig,—“do this, and the profit shall be all your own!” And I said to the ghost of Mr. Surveyor Pue, “I will.”

Through this autobiographical fiction, Hawthorne not only finds the inspiration for his novel but also discovers his true intellectual ancestor. He identifies this true ancestor on the basis not of blood ties but of a shared intellectual temperament and desire to understand the Puritan theocratic past. This ancestor, Hawthorne imagines, commands him to return to writing. Paradoxically, his “unjoyous attachment” to Salem yields an unexpected source of inspiration.

In “The Custom-House,” Hawthorne is drawn to the moral seriousness of his ancestors’ Puritan theocracy, but he is also acutely aware of the harsh vindictiveness inherent in their moral absolutism. At the same time, Hawthorne recognizes that the materialistic life of the Custom House corrupts the weaker characters who work there and fails to sustain even the stronger ones. The focus on commercial affairs fosters the development of an anonymous and impatient type of human being. Similar concerns that the focus on commercial affairs would foster the development of an anonymous and impatient type of human being had also been raised by Tocqueville and others in the early nineteenth century. Hawthorne’s discovery of the scarlet letter allows him to focus his contemporary imagination on the much more compelling theocratic past. Hawthorne’s insistence on retaining “The Custom-House” as an introduction to *The Scarlet Letter* sharpens the contrast between the superficiality of commercial life and the dignified, if harsh, society of believers. In this way, Hawthorne alerts any reader who reflects seriously about society and human potential to consider the persistence of theocracy in the story of Hester Prynne.

**DIMMESDALE’S SILENCE AND REVELATION**

Reverend Dimmesdale’s public silence about his relationship to Hester Prynne, which reaches its paradoxical culmination when he finally reveals his paternity just before his death, poses a dilemma similar to that of the relationship between “The Custom-House” and the novel as a whole. Hawthorne supplies clues throughout the course of the novel before revealing explicitly at the conclusion that the eloquent, Oxford-educated minister Arthur Dimmesdale is the father of Hester’s daughter, Pearl. Unlike readers of the novel, the citizens of Boston are completely unaware until the conclusion that Dimmesdale is the father of Hester’s child. Even after this revelation, some members of the community still cannot believe that their beloved and esteemed minister was guilty of adultery—even though Dimmesdale has obliquely suggested as much throughout the course of the novel. In his sermons, Dimmesdale repeatedly emphasizes his sinfulness.
and unworthiness to serve as minister to his flock. However, he never openly admits or takes explicit responsibility for his illicit affair with Hester. He hides his specific sin behind a rhetorical invocation of the intrinsic sinfulness that the Puritans ascribed to all mankind. The first mention of Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter* plays on this fusion of the individual’s particular sinfulness with a conception of the fallen state of human nature as such. When Hester first appears on the scaffold as part of her public penance, one of the women in the crowd remarks: “People say . . . that the Reverend Master Dimmesdale, her godly pastor, takes it very grievously to heart that such a scandal should have come upon his congregation.” Hawthorne here indicates that Dimmesdale’s situation should be interpreted in this double sense: the intertwining of the particular and the universal, the private and the public, within a community of believers.

This fusion, or confusion, required by the Puritan theocracy, is at the heart of Dimmesdale’s tragedy. He cannot openly acknowledge his private guilt without undermining his public position in the community. Initially, it seems as if he has deluded himself into thinking that his heartfelt public sermons can serve as a kind of private penance. However, the reader discovers midway through the novel that Dimmesdale has been privately punishing himself by engaging in self-flagellation, mutilation, fasting, and sleep deprivation. His public reticence is a mask concealing his self-inflicted torture and extreme asceticism. Ignorant of these private mortifications, the community members perceive Dimmesdale’s increasing physical weakness merely as a sign of failing health. They encourage Roger Chillingworth to provide medical care. Their care and affection grow as Dimmesdale’s physical state weakens and his sermons become ever more elevated in their rhetorical invocation of human sinfulness and the righteousness of divine punishment. Dimmesdale’s guilty conscience indirectly, by inspiring his public display of suffering, enhances his standing in the community. He knows, however, that revealing the true cause of his display of guilt would destroy his public authority.

More than once, he had cleared his throat, and drawn in the long, deep, and tremulous breath, which when sent forth again would come burdened with the black secret of his soul. . . . But how? He had told his hearers that he was vile, the worst of sinners, an abomination, a thing of unimaginable iniquity. . . . They little guessed what deadly purport lurked in those self-condemning words. . . . The minister well knew—subtle, but remorseful hypocrite that he was!—the light in which his vague confession would be viewed.

Dimmesdale’s hypocrisy goes to the very heart of the inner tension within the Puritan theocracy between belief in original sin, its corollary that the individual can only be saved by God’s grace, and a social and political order intolerant of human beings’ imperfect and fallen nature. Consequently, the pursuit of moral perfectionism at the political and social level requires that individuals conceal their private imperfections. What appears to be Dimmesdale’s personal hypocrisy is, in fact, consonant with the tenets of his faith and the moral norms of his community. Given the tenets of Puritan faith, the moral perfectionism sought in this life can only be hoped for in the next.

Dimmesdale finally reveals his paternity of Hester’s child on the scaffold in the marketplace before the crowd gathered for the Election Day celebration. Before his revelation, Dimmesdale delivers an especially elevated and otherworldly sermon. Pale and exhausted after the sermon, he summons Hester and Pearl to join him on the scaffold. He tells the crowd that he should have stood with Hester seven years earlier. Speaking of himself, Dimmesdale cries out,

“He bids you look at Hester’s scarlet letter! He tells you that with all its mysterious horror, it is but the shadow of what he bears on his own breast, and even this, his own red stigma, is no more than the type of what has seared his inmost heart! Stand any here that question God’s judgment on a sinner! Behold! Behold a dreadful witness of it.”

With a convulsive motion he tore away the ministerial band from his breast. It was revealed!

Hawthorne never precisely describes what appeared on Dimmesdale’s breast but suggests that an “A” has been inscribed in Dimmesdale’s flesh. In the final moment before his death on the scaffold, Dimmesdale says,

God knows; and He is merciful! He hath proved his mercy most of all by my affliction. By giving me this burning torture to bear upon my breast! . . . By bringing me hither, to die this death of triumphant ignominy before the people! Had either of these agonies been wanting, I had been lost for ever! Praised be his name! His will be done! Farewell!

Is there a stigma on Dimmesdale’s breast? Hawthorne neither confirms nor denies the presence of a genuine stigma. Rather, he suggests a range of interpretations based on the crowd’s reactions to Dimmesdale’s revelation. The narrator depicts four different accounts of what was seen on Dimmesdale’s breast. The first account is that there is indeed a scarlet letter etched into the minister’s breast by his own hand. The second ascribes the stigma to “magic and poisonous drugs,” which a vengeful Chillingworth had administered to Dimmesdale. A third account ascribes the mark to the influence of “Heaven” and the “ever active tooth of remorse.” In the final account, there is nothing on his breast. Rather, Dimmesdale intends his death to be a parable for the fallen nature of human beings, evidence that “we are all sinners alike.”

Hawthorne suggests that all four explanations convey different aspects of the truth. Dimmesdale did harm himself, Chillingworth did procure life-threatening ministrations, Dimmesdale did suffer from an excruciating sense of guilt, and his faithful parishioners could take his flawed life as a parable for the fallen state of mankind. For Dimmesdale, there is no earthly escape from the troubled condition of his body and soul. His sin and guilt cannot be absolved in this life. His faith requires submission to the ultimate consequences of his belief.

In Dimmesdale, one finds a powerful example of Hawthorne’s reflection on the seriousness of the persistence of theocracy. From the point of view of the believer, which Dimmesdale clearly is, belief requires subordinating the self to the strictures of faith in the divine order. What I earlier labeled Dimmesdale’s tragedy is only a tragedy from the point of view of those outside his faith. From the point of
view of Dimmesdale and those who share his faith, his tortured ordeal, which brings together his private suffering and his public pronouncement, is not a tragic tale but, rather, an example of redemption. From the modern, secular perspective, Dimmesdale’s “triumphant ignominy” is the epitome of irrational hypocrisy. From the point of view of the believer in Christian redemption, Dimmesdale’s private suffering and public confession are consonant with the fallen character of humanity that only God’s mercy can relieve.

Hawthorne’s portrayal of Dimmesdale’s character sharpens the contrast between the untroubled, muted spirits of the occupants of the Custom House and the moral seriousness of Puritan Boston and reminds us of the frailty of human nature. The Puritan theocracy concerns itself deeply with this frailty, whereas the commercial regime tends to flatten and dull concern about it. Although Hawthorne did not regard a return to the harshness of the Puritan regime as either possible or desirable, he nevertheless acknowledges the depth of its understanding of human weakness.

HESTER’S RETURN

In the final chapter of the novel, which follows Dimmesdale’s revelation, the narrator reports that Chillingworth dies less than a year after Dimmesdale’s death, leaving his considerable fortune to Pearl. This inheritance gives Pearl both paternal legitimacy and wealth. She and Hester then leave Boston for Europe. Hawthorne suggests that Pearl eventually marries into an aristocratic family and has children of her own. Yet shortly after Pearl’s marriage, Hester returns to Boston. She reoccupies her isolated cottage and voluntarily replaces the embroidered letter “A” on her breast. Hawthorne suggests a motive for this perplexing behavior in the following passage:

But there was more real life for Hester Prynne, here, in New England, than in that unknown region where Pearl had found a home. Here had been her sin; her sorrow; and here was yet to be her penitence . . . the scarlet letter ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world’s scorn and bitterness, and became a type of something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, yet with reverence, too . . . people . . . besought her counsel.37

What does Hawthorne mean when he writes that there is “more real life” for Hester in Boston? Why does she not remain with her daughter, for whose sake she endured public shame and humiliation? Suggestions about this puzzle can be found earlier in the novel.

In the middle of the novel, in the chapter “Another View of Hester,” Hawthorne pauses to consider the effect of seven long years of ostracism on Hester. The narrator comments that Hester seems to have accepted her punishment dutifully and with humility. She remains nearly invisible within the community, never drawing attention to herself and devoting herself to the care of the sick and poor. She appears to have accepted her penance with such grace that many in the community change their view of her. She no longer seems the epitome of sinfulness and erotic transgression but, rather, a humble servant of the community. They no longer see the “A” on her breast as a symbol of adultery but as signifying “Able.”38 Even Hester’s physical appearance has changed. She conceals her beauty beneath austere clothing that she assumes with the wearing of the scarlet letter. Hawthorne indicates, however, that the public perception of Hester’s transformation does not capture the truth about her inner life. Although by all external measures Hester has fully accepted her punishment, she remains inwardly unrepentant. As Hawthorne puts it, “The scarlet letter had not done its office.”39

Hawthorne suggests that the reason for Hester’s external conformity to the moral conventions of her community is her attachment to her daughter and the fear that she might be taken from her. Hidden beneath her solemn exterior, Hester’s mind remained free:

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 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 the ancient principle. Hester Prynne imbibed this spirit. She assumed a freedom of speculation, then common enough on the other side of the Atlantic, but which our forefathers, had they known of it, would have held to be a deadlier crime than that stigmatized by the scarlet letter.40

The chapter title points to the double sense of another view of Hester. From the public point of view, she is penitent and reformed. From the point of view of her inner life, however, she is more independent and rebellious than at the start of her punishment.

This other view of Hester makes her return to Boston at the end of the novel even more puzzling. When she no longer has the responsibility of parenting and has the freedom to live wherever she wills, she chooses to return to Boston and replace the scarlet letter on her chest. Why doesn’t her sense of inquiry and freedom of thought keep her in what Hawthorne describes as the more liberal social and political environment of Europe? Hawthorne suggests three possible interpretations of Hester’s return. The first emphasizes the moral and political motives for her return, the second the romantic ones, and the third her sense of penitence.

According to the first interpretation, Hester returns to Boston to continue caring for the dispossessed in the community. She regards it as her moral obligation and duty to provide shelter, comfort, and counsel for those who have suffered under the Puritan community’s harsh moral strictures, particularly its strictures on the erotic. In particular, women seek Hester out because they find her a reliable advisor regarding the burdens that fall on women in the Puritan community. The public persecution that she suffered and the courage she shows in returning give her the authority to help these women. She attempts to comfort them with her belief that the relation between men and women will ultimately move toward a greater degree of complementarity and equality between the sexes. As Hawthorne writes,

[At some brighter period, when the world should have grown ripe for it, in Heaven’s own time, a new truth would be revealed, in order to establish the whole relation between man and woman on a surer ground of mutual happiness.31]
Hester seems to base this hope on her judgment that someone who, like herself, takes seriously the habits of the heart and the longing for genuine erotic completion, will lead a political reform that transforms domestic relations in the community and allows for the possibility of a common purpose between men and women.

Some analysts of this section view Hawthorne’s suggestive remarks on the equality of the sexes as anticipating later liberal democratic reforms based on an extension of the idea of natural right to both sexes. Hawthorne suggests that greater equality between the sexes and women’s freedom to choose their own spouses may provide “the surer ground of mutual happiness” he speaks of. These remarks also evoke Tocqueville’s discussion of the centrality of the education of girls and of women to the health and wellbeing of a liberal democracy. However, these hopeful remarks are wishes, not certainties. Hawthorne’s skepticism leaves open the question of whether this hopeful prognosis will ever be fulfilled.

The second interpretation of Hester’s return to Boston emphasizes its romantic component. She returns to be united with Dimmesdale, if only in death. Hawthorne suggests this motive very obliquely. When Hester dies, she is buried near an older grave, and one tombstone serves for both graves. Hawthorne implies that the older grave is Dimmesdale’s. If this interpretation is correct, Hester’s motive in returning to Boston is to find the communion with her lover in death that she could not find in life.

The third interpretation of Hester’s return is that she understands that her penitence is unfinished. The community no longer imposes this penitence; she chooses it for herself. Her decision suggests that her self-understanding is deeply connected with Puritan Boston. The anonymity of exile does not provide her with the conditions in which to live the purposeful life she intended for herself. Her spiritedness and independence of mind, which contributed to her erotic rebellion, are displaced, and in many respects irrelevant, away from this specific moral community of faith. She returns older and, it seems, less ambitious about those who live under it. Rather, the Puritan regime encourages in age and circumstance to some of his fellow officers in the Custom House. Of the older man, Hawthorne writes, “[N]ever was there a more beautiful example of how the majority of age and wisdom may comport with obeisance and respect enjoined upon it.” This description contrasts markedly with Hawthorne’s account of the enfeebled and lethargic old General in the Custom House. Of the older woman, Hawthorne writes that her “heart [was] full of reminiscences of her dead husband and children. . . . Yet with all this, which would have been such a heavy sorrow, was made almost a solemn joy to her devout old soul by religious consolations and the truths of the Scripture.” This portrait of dignified grief contrasts strikingly with Hawthorne’s portrayal of the character in the Custom House who was incapable feeling any grief for his dead children and wives. In Hawthorne’s presentation the Puritan theocracy, despite its harsh intolerance, does not dehumanize those who live under it. Rather, the Puritan regime encourages moral purpose and dignity. It does not slight the old or discount the sentiments of attachment and grief. Illustrating this contrast—not merely denouncing the Puritan regime for its hypocrisy—is surely part of the author’s intention in choosing to write about the Puritan past.

However, Hawthorne’s presentation of Dimmesdale’s character emphasizes another, less attractive aspect of a theocratic society based on the acceptance of revealed truth. Dimmesdale’s moral and intellectual self-understanding cannot be detached from his Puritan faith. His ecclesiastical status in the community, as well as his sex, which allows him to conceal his paternity of Pearl, compel him to pursue a path of hypocrisy and self-contradiction. As I have argued in this article, Dimmesdale’s behavior as an individual is consistent with the ideology of Puritan theocracy. The premise that human beings are born with original sin conflicts with the pursuit of moral perfection in this life, creating tension. Dimmesdale’s inner conflict mirrors the internal contradiction in Puritan theocracy. His struggle is that of a believer who, afflicted with all the weaknesses of an ordinary mortal,
attempts the impossible task of living up to his community’s extreme moral demands. From the believer’s point of view, Dimmesdale appears less a hypocrite than an exemplary case of man’s fallen nature and hope for redemption.

Hawthorne’s presentation of Hester’s character underscores a much more unsettling aspect of theocracy. Unlike Dimmesdale’s subservience to the norms of his community, Hester’s understanding of herself is not dominated by faith in revealed religion. Moreover, her inability as a woman to hide her maternity forces Hester, unlike Dimmesdale, to engage the conflict between moral perfectionism and individual fallibility in an immediate and public way. In doing so, she develops a far greater independence of mind and moral autonomy than Dimmesdale. Despite her independence, however, Hester chooses in the end to return to Boston and the strictures of living in a community of faith and moral seriousness. Her return indicates both a sense of moral duty and a desire for erotic completion. Hawthorne’s choice of setting for his novel suggests that both of these motives can be more clearly understood within the constraints of a morally rigorous community.

Hawthorne’s view of the persistent appeal of theocracy appears similar to Hester’s motives for returning to Boston. In his words, there is “more real life” in Puritan Boston than in the modern commercial world of the Custom House. At the very least, Hawthorne takes theocracy seriously as an object of reflection and inquiry. Serious inquiry requires serious subject matter, and the Puritan theocracy, despite its manifest shortcomings, is worthy of such inquiry. Hawthorne’s account in The Scarlet Letter of the complex relation between the Puritan past and the commercial present is consonant with Lilla’s suggestion:

The argument over religion and politics did not end with the dawn of the modern age, or the Enlightenment, or the American and French revolutions, or the birth of modern science, or any other crypto-messianic moment. It did not end because it could not, because it concerns an enduring question that all societies implicitly face: whether to order their political affairs in light of divine revelation, or to make their way alone.45

NOTES
6. Samuel P. Huntington, The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996). Huntington argues that cultural and religious identities, which at the broadest level are civilization identities, will shape the patterns of cohesion and conflict in the post-Cold War, multipolar world. Sources of conflict in this multipolar world will not be primarily ideological or economic; rather, the clash of civilizations will dominate global politics.
12. Zuckert, Natural Right and the American Imagination, 64.
16. Hawthorne had previously served an appointment in the Boston Custom House from 1839 to 1840.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., 127.
20. Ibid., 128.
21. Ibid., 126.
23. “Hawthorne reports in his ironic introduction that associating with people who were devoted primarily to eating their animal desires was killing his own imagination.” Zuckert, Natural Right and the American Imagination, 66.
25. “The Customs House is a relic of the American Revolution. . . . These were the spiritual leftovers from the Revolutionary, republican soldiers gone to seed. . . . Its [America’s] house of customs, its habits and aspirations, were petty and commercial now, and likely to remain so.” Shklar, Redeeming American Political Thought, 38.
27. Ibid., 147.
28. “Materialism is a dangerous malady of the human mind in all nations; but one must dread it most particularly in a democratic people . . . Democracy favors the taste for material enjoyments. This taste, if it becomes excessive, soon disposes men to believe that all is nothing but matter; and materialism in its turn serves to carry them toward these enjoyments with an insane ardor.” Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Deliba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), vol. 2, part 2, 519. See also vol. 2, part 2, chapters 10–16.
29. “[W]hile the conception of original sin is made vivid by inward knowledge of a man’s self, it is reinforced by what a man observes of humanity in general.” Miller, The New England Mind, 24. “Puritan thought incarnerates a double-edged paradox: the abasement of man points to a supreme ideal of perfection, and the sense of possible perfection makes man appear by contrast immeasurably abused.” Ibid., 45.
31. Ibid., 242.
32. “[T]he Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale so perfectly embodies the Puritan regime: He is—until the very end—the complete hypocrite.” Ibid., 45.
33. In keeping with the ambiguous dating of Hawthorne’s novel, it is unclear in the text whose election it is. Bradstreet, Endicott, Dudley, and Bellingham are all mentioned in the procession of magistrates.
35. Ibid., 339.
36. Ibid., 340–41.
37. Ibid., 344.
38. Ibid., 257.
39. Ibid., 261.
40. Ibid., 259.
41. Ibid., 344.
42. “Americans, . . . have therefore elevated her [woman] with all their power to the level of man in the intellectual and moral world; and in this they appear to me to have admirably understood the true notion of democratic progress.” Tocqueville, Democracy in America, vol. 2, part 3, 576. See also vol. 2, part 3, chapters 9–12.
44. Ibid., 307.