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Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Closet Feminist: A Post-Feminist Response to "The Birthmark"*

Much has been said by the feminist community regarding Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Birthmark", most of it accusatory and angry. Hawthorne has been branded a bitter misogynist, with the clear implication of at least one feminist writer that he channeled his frustration at his female competition in the mid-nineteenth century writers' market into fantastic diatribes against the female gender, as depicted by his senseless and heartless destruction of the hapless Georgiana (Frederick, 231-232; Wineapple, 36). However, a closer (and perhaps slightly skewed) look at Hawthorne's background, his possible motivations and, especially at the characters and the plot line in "The Birthmark", lends a different interpretation to the story and to the author himself.

Aylmer is presented as a "man's man": immersed in his career, having neither the time nor the inclination for thoughts of love, he is more interested in the pursuit of knowledge. Georgiana, by contrast, is not at all times portrayed as the stereotypically subservient woman. While it is true that Aylmer is a person of considerable education and self-confidence, he is never characterized as having any marked superiority over Georgiana in intelligence, nor is he shown to possess a deeper ability to understand the implications of the decisions the two make regarding Georgiana's participation in their experiment. Yes, it is Aylmer's obsession which begins the tragic course of events, and it is Aylmer's megalomania which propels it down the path to its inevitable conclusion, but never is Georgiana proven to be anything other than a willing participant

in her own demise. A true feminist perspective on this story, then – one which accepts the actual power and intelligence inherent in womankind, would acknowledge Georgiana as the strong, self-possessed woman she is, capable of making her own decisions after rationally processing all of the information available to her, rather than considering her the powerless victim of a cruel and controlling patriarch.

In fact, of the two main characters, it is Aylmer who is the most flawed and the least heroic. Incapable of human attachment, he is obsessed with science and “man’s ultimate control over nature” (Hawthorne 10). His goal, and his ultimate downfall, is to possess the God-like ability to maintain power over life and death in his laboratory. This is a recurring theme in literature, man as self-creationist, and it is seldom, if ever, portrayed positively, though some feminists refuse to acknowledge this point. Take, for example, the musings of one journalist:

“In numerous texts, male reproduction or self-replication: splitting or cloning, as in Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde; reincarnation, as in Rider Haggard's *She*; transfusion, as in *Dracula*; aesthetic duplication, as in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*; or vivisection, as in *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. These enterprises are celibate, yet procreative metaphors for male self-begetting. They reject natural paternity for fantastic versions of fatherhood.” (Fellows 495)

But what is left unstated by Ms. Fellows is the obvious thread which binds all of these characters: they all meet disastrous ends for their presumed assumption of nature’s powers. It is therefore not a denigration of women, at least not in these examples, to apply womankind’s most unique feature, the ability to create life, to a man, but rather a celebration of the fact that man can never possess such ability, and an acknowledgement that all attempts on man’s part to usurp nature’s power will, finally, lead to disaster. Hawthorne, in showing Aylmer to be a dismal fail-

ure, is actually praising women's unique gift. It's not as easy as it appears, this creation of life, and Hawthorne is paying homage to this fact, not belittling it as has been implied.

Another of Aylmer's stereotypical male traits, his inability to value emotion on par with purely rational thought (though it can be argued that Aylmer's thoughts are often far from rational), is factored into his downfall as well. Although he is warned in a dream that to proceed with his folly of removing the birthmark might lead to disaster, he is unable or unwilling to listen to what his heart is trying to tell him (Hawthorne 13). He denies any emotional factors and proceeds on what he considers a "rational" course. Again, this typically male response to the situation is not presented as a particularly admirable quality. The average reader is not applauding Aylmer for his pure, emotionless, scientific approach to life. Of course, Hawthorne is not unaware of this expected reader-response, it is what he plans. He is showing his audience that some characteristics thought to be typically male – a preference for head over heart thinking, a desire to control nature, what Fellows calls "self-replication" – are not desirable traits at all and, on the contrary, will eventually lead to ruin. In case the point is too subtle, he even spells it out in the last paragraph of his story: "Yet, had Aylmer reached a profounder wisdom, he need not thus have flung away the happiness which would have woven his mortal life of the self-same texture with the celestial" (Hawthorne 23). And who is it that possessed that "profounder wisdom" to which Hawthorne refers? That would be Georgiana, the very character to whom feminist critics point as the subjugated, derided, helpless victim of Aylmer's and, by extension, Hawthorne's, misogyny.

Upon the reader's first introduction, Georgiana is described as beautiful...and not much more. Understandably, this spare description lends some credence to feminist concerns regarding an imbalance of male and female value. It is argued that whereas Aylmer is multi-dimensional,

all one needs to know about Georgiana, from Hawthorne's male chauvinistic perspective, is that she is beautiful (Gregory 688). While this is often a valid argument when used in reference to the disparity in depth of development between male and female characters, particularly, it seems, by male authors, it is not quite so valid here. This is not Georgiana's story and, truthfully, the one key fact about Georgiana that *is* necessary to the furtherance of the plotline, is that she is beautiful. The reader does not need to know whether or not she is educated, whether she is a strong or weak woman, whether she comes from a wealthy or poor background, what her position is on the political issues of the time or any of the myriad of facts which Hawthorne could have chosen to insert – all of which would only have served to have clouded the plot. What we need to learn about Georgiana is parceled out to us more subtly; perhaps too subtly for many feminist critics. We are not told specifically of Georgiana's inner strength, we are shown this through her actions. In the same way, we gradually come to see her love and compassion for her deeply disturbed husband.

The early feminist movement gave a bad name to the selfless notion of placing one's partner's happiness over one's own. Perhaps due to the fact that many women were routinely giving and not quite so routinely receiving of this particular principle for so long, feminists started promoting the idea that to put another's happiness before one's own was to become a victim, and in some cases this may have been true. But true freedom is found in allowing women (and, in fact, all people) the choice to make this decision for themselves, while acknowledging that sometimes sacrifice may still be the more noble course of action. It should not be assumed, therefore, that Georgiana's desire for Aylmer's happiness is simply subjugation. By all accounts, Georgiana has a backbone and she knows how to use it; to assume that she is being victimized into submission by Aylmer is to ignore all evidence to the contrary.

For example, though Aylmer is initially negligent in his duty to inform her of the dangers inherent in removing the birthmark, Georgiana is not completely unaware of the risks. Though it is Aylmer who first mentions its removal, it is only in passing. It is actually Georgiana who gives the first real, practical voice to the idea of actually removing the birthmark: “Again: do we know that there is a possibility, on any terms, of unclasping the firm gripe of this little hand which was laid upon me before I came into the world?” (Hawthorne, 13). Far from being a miserable puppet, Georgiana is on her way toward making an informed decision regarding her own health and well-being. A true feminist would applaud her initiative. Reassured by her husband, a noted authority and a man whose opinion she can be reasonably respect, it is Georgiana, not Aylmer, who serenely decides to proceed: “It is resolved, then’, said Georgiana, faintly smiling” (Hawthorne 14).

Later, left alone in her room at Aylmer’s laboratory, Georgiana is not satisfied to pass her time idly, as Aylmer wishes; as a vapid girl might do. No, Hawthorne has Georgiana perusing the volumes of Aylmer’s scientific library. Hawthorne’s Georgiana is no dope, she obviously possesses a keen intellect if she can find solace in the works of Magnus, Agrippa and Paracelsus. She then proceeds to not only read but to interpret Aylmer’s own experimental records, ranking herself, at least in this venue, as her husband’s intellectual equal. It is here that feminist criticism truly breaks down. If it is honestly Hawthorne’s intention to portray Georgiana as a manipulated, dim-witted pawn, how does this passage hold up to scrutiny? The fact is, it does not, and it is therefore ignored by feminist critics such as Brenda Wineapple in her journal article “Hawthorne” (Wineapple 33-56). Her understanding of Aylmer’s experimental failures gives Georgiana a different perspective on her husband, but rather than turn her away from him, it has the opposite effect: “It has made me worship you more than ever’, she said” (Hawthorne 19). Again,

this is not the type of language that feminists traditionally like to hear from female characters, but it is not inherently subjugating for Georgiana to declare deep and abiding love for her partner. This is less an anti-feminist declaration than a pro-humanist affirmation. Georgiana is revealing her capacity to accept Aylmer despite his imperfections – which is more than he can do for her.

Finally, while she has honored Aylmer's wish for her to stay in one room and not to follow him into the laboratory itself, when Georgiana finds that she has a practical reason to go to Aylmer in the lab, she does not hesitate to do so. Upon finding Aylmer unreasonably angry and verbally abusive, she neither cowers nor bends, but stands firm:

“Why do you come hither? Have you no trust in your husband?” cried he, impetuously. ‘Would you throw the blight of that fatal birthmark over my labors? It is not well done. Go, prying woman! Go!’

‘Nay, Aylmer,’ said Georgiana with the firmness of which she possessed no stinted endowment, ‘it is not you that have a right to complain. You mistrust your wife; you have concealed the anxiety with which you watch the development of this experiment. Think not so unworthily of me, my husband. Tell me all the risk we run, and fear not that I shall shrink...’

These are not the words of an intimidated woman. She stands toe-to-toe with this irrational, angry man and does not back down. Eventually, she wins the battle, and is given the information she rightfully demands. Aylmer informs her that to continue with the experiment may well mean her death. With full knowledge and apparently in full control of her faculties (given her calmly lucid argument), she decides to proceed. Her final words do not reflect even a hint of regret; she is content in her decision regardless of the outcome.

Hawthorne's *Aylmer* is a self-important, cold-hearted failure. There is nothing to be admired or honored in his character – he is someone to be pitied at best; more likely, scorned. In *Georgiana*, however, Hawthorne has created a remarkable woman: intelligent, self-assured, strong yet calm, loving, generous and kind. Unfortunately, the fact that she was developed at about the same time as the writing of his infamous “Scribbling Women” letter, and the fact that she comes to a bad end, is often misinterpreted by feminists as proof of Hawthorne's misogyny. This seems to be more a case of seeing what one wants or expects to see in the text. As with reading “The Birthmark”, if one reads the “Scribbling Women” letter only superficially, it can be taken as a male chauvinistic indictment of the female gender. And one of the enduring and regrettable legacies of the feminist movement is the vilification of anyone who dares to criticize women, no matter how justified that criticism might be. In 1855, Hawthorne wrote to his publisher (and friend) of his frustration at the state of American readers' tastes in literature – at what he considered to be the trashy novels of his time (Frederick 231). Coincidentally, or possibly not so coincidentally, these novels at which he railed, were written by women. As Hawthorne so colorfully noted: “America is now wholly given over to a damned mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash – and should be ashamed of myself if I did succeed” (231). The feminists have been out to get him ever since. One source even uses this reference to back up her contention regarding “Hawthorne's deeply felt anxiety about the place of women,” broadening his criticism of American cultural tastes and a few female author's sub-par output into an over-arching anxiety with respect to the entire female gender. (Wineapple, 37).

But what is portrayed by feminist partisans as simple jealous grousing by a man incapable of getting his work published while women passed him by, appears upon closer inspection to

be a very valid criticism of the dumbing down of American culture – and we can see where *that* trend has led. By more than one count, the books that Hawthorne railed against, and their “scribbling” authors, were not deserving of the praise and acclaim heaped on them by an over-eager public. Though some (and by no means all) might disagree with the idea that Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* belongs on this list, the others Hawthorne refers to – *The Lamp-lighter*, *The Wide, Wide World*, *The Curse of Clifton*, *Tempest and Sunshine* – seem to be minor, shallow works by forgettable authors (Frederick 232-233; Wallace 203-205). It is not their gender that makes them forgettable, it is their inferior work. In our post-feminist world, we should all be capable of making this distinction. Hawthorne was making this distinction over one hundred and fifty years ago, but no one was listening.

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