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Analysis #2

The Priority of Secrecy in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*

In 1850, Nathanial Hawthorne wrote *The Scarlet Letter*, whichtells the story of a young woman by the name of Hester Prynne, sent by her husband to set up a life for them in America, who has an affair with the local clergyman Arthur Dimmesdale. While being scorned for her actions, she refuses to divulge the secret of the father of her child and the knowledge that her husband has arrived and is conscious of her predicament. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester prioritizes her secrets that are revealed in the first four chapters of the novel as being more important to the safety of those that she loves when kept to herself, rather than shared with others to alleviate her condemnation.

An important aspect of the beginning of the novel manifests when Hester is placed on the pillory for everyone to see as part of her punishment. Hester is friendless, husbandless, and shunned by the townspeople. Dimmesdale makes it obvious pretty quickly that he would like for Hester to confess that he is her lover. He pleads with her to “speak out the name of [her] fellow-sinner and fellow-sufferer” and that she should “be not silent from any mistaken pity and tenderness for him” (Hawthorne 640). He then ends by entreating her to give up the name of her lover because he “hath not the courage” to come forward (641). Dimmesdale is wary about the position he is in as her judge and accomplice. Hester, however, loves Dimmesdale too much to add his torture to her own. When the name of her lover is demanded, she replies “Never! […] It is too deeply branded. Ye cannot take it off. And would that I might endure his agony, as well as mine!” (641). Hester is willing to live her life in social exile and take this secret to her grave rather than give up the man she loves. She proves that the secret she shares with Dimmesdale is worth keeping if it means letting him live a long and happy life, unstained from their misdeeds.

Hester’s husband Roger Chillingworth, on the other hand, has a secret that Hester wishes she could share but cannot. Hester is, for all intents and purposes, separated from her husband (who takes his own sweet time getting to America); however, in the eyes of the people, she is a married woman who has cheated on her husband. This leads to shame and ridicule from the townspeople for the sin she has committed. It is at this time that she becomes aware of the company of her husband in the crowd: “When he found the eyes of Hester Prynne fastened on his own, and saw that she appeared to recognize him, he slowly and calmly raised his finger, made a gesture with it in the air, and laid it on his lips” (636). Hester is sworn to secrecy by her husband not to give away his identity so that he can investigate Hester’s adultery, because Hester will “not reveal [her lover’s] name” (646). Hester has two options: If she keeps his secret, then he will continue his investigation, find out her lover was Dimmesdale, and attempt to have him arrested or killed; this would devastate Hester, who keeps Dimmesdale’s secret out of love. If, however, Hester makes Chillingworth’s identity known, then he would be pulled down in shame with her. Hester chooses to keep her husband’s secret.

Hester and Dimmesdale’s story is similar to that of Guinevere and Sir Lancelot, whose illicit romance nearly destroyed the kingdom of Great Britain. Guinevere, like Hester, was already married to someone who was intelligent and powerful and cheated on him with someone who was younger and more passionate.