“It is Terrible to Possess Such Power!”

The Critique of Phrenology, Class, and Gender in Hawthorne’s “The Birth-mark”

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Especially when the social fabric is rent in fundamental ways, bodily and familial imagery will assume ascendancy ... [B]ecause of their primitive psychic and social functions, [sexuality and the family] serve as reservoirs of physical imagery through which individuals seek to express and rationalize their experiences of social change.

Carroll Smith-Rosenberg

The Context of “Alienated Desire” and the Social Crises of Early-Modernity: Class Mobility, “Self Help”, and the Reformist Impulses of Phrenology

The 1835 preface to Reverend John Todd’s best-selling Student’s Manual: Designed By Specific Directions to Aid in Forming and Strengthening the Intellectual and Moral Character and Habits of the Student addresses the “parent” about “to take leave of his child, after having carried him away from home to some public institution for the purpose of study” (5). Considered historically, this address announces one of the many dramatic shifts in early-modern American culture, as Todd pitches his text to an upwardly mobile yet nervous middle class seeking to
enhance their children’s social and educational graces without compromising their “moral character and habits” (5). The fact that this harrowing ascent up the social ladder involves both mass-produced advice manuals and costly schooling outside the home and local community indicates a culture that is becoming increasingly dependent on both commodities and institutions. Indeed, from roughly 1828 forwards, America undergoes a remarkable transformation from a predominantly rural, insular, and agrarian-based loose federation of highly autonomous states into an increasingly modern nation complete with mass political parties, a universal currency, a fledgling culture industry, a rapidly expanding network of industrial capitalism, and the first early stages of the professionalization and institutionalization of education, medicine, and psychiatry.

The rush towards modernity is not accomplished without its share of controversies, however, as each of the historical transformations noted above involves intense political, economic, and cultural battles regarding how to reconcile competing versions of democracy, capitalism, and the dramatic (and frequently blasphemous) claims of a host of newly popular forms of science. Preliminary moves toward the professionalization and institutionalization of medicine, for example, were challenged by a stridently anti-clerical folk movement based loosely around Samuel Thomson’s New Guide to Health (1822) and John Gunn’s Domestic Medicine (1830), both of which celebrated the still prevalent pre-modern belief that basic common sense and decent, hard work could combat any of life’s unwanted complexities, including both illness and over-priced, high-handed doctors. William Sweetser’s popular “medical” advice handbook, Mental Hygiene (1850), captures the widespread sense of unease and unsettling confusion of the period nicely when it warns that “the demon of unrest, the luckless offspring of ambition, haunts us all...racking us with the constant and wearing anxiety of what we call bettering our condition” (qtd. in Rothman 116).

One of the more popular responses to the widespread crises of authority following upon America’s transformation towards modernity – the demon of unrest – was to turn to the explanatory powers of the new science of phrenology. First popularized with a mass audience of Americans in 1828 via the publication of George Combe’s The Constitution of Man Considered in Relation to External Objects, and through a subsequent series of celebrated East Coast lecture tours by Combe and two of the most
famous European scientists of the era, Johann Gaspar Spurzheim and Louis Agassiz, phrenology became associated with the measurement of human faculties via the performance of essentially hermeneutic activities. More specifically, a phrenologist would perform interpretive readings of his subject’s “character” by appraising certain privileged physical characteristics of his or her head, including the nine “Propensities” and four “Sentiments” “common to Man with the Lower Animals”, and the eight “Sentiments Proper to Man” and his fourteen “Intellectual Faculties” (Combe 46-49). Phrenology needs to be understood as more than simply the measuring of heads, however, as it fostered a wide-ranging “self-help” industry that, utilizing the benefits of new means of mass-production and distribution, blanketed the nation with magazines and manifestoes intended to guide confused Americans through the multiple minefields of their rapidly changing culture.

For example, the 1842 preface to Orson Fowler’s Self-Culture begins with the claim that “Improvement is the practical watch-word of the age. Since the Revolution, men have probably made more numerous and valuable inventions and discoveries in machinery, agriculture, and the means of human comfort and luxury, than ever before since the Creation” (iii). This celebration of self-“improvement”, practicality, an enabling science that aids both industry and farming, and a world in which America’s “Revolution” becomes the most significant marker of human progress since the “Creation” encapsulates nicely the heady nationalist optimism of phrenology in early U.S. modernity. In fact, The American Phrenological Journal (published by Orson Fowler, his brother Lorenzo, and their business partner Samuel Wells), prophesied in 1849 that phrenology would “Reform the World” and “Perfect our Republic” (qtd. in Stern 35).

It seems clear then, based on these preliminary readings of Todd, Combe, and the Fowlers, that the historical transformations outlined above were leading many Americans not only to re-assess the roles of gender, class, medicine, sexuality, and schooling within their rapidly modernizing culture, but to turn to “scientific” self-help tracts as guidebooks for negotiating their responses to these confusing issues. Hawthorne’s ferociously sarcastic 1843 short story, “The Birth-mark”, provides an excellent opportunity for re-considering the cultural politics of this turn towards science – and especially to popular versions of phrenology – as it pursues the thesis that the world-changing reformist impulse of the era’s popular
sciences might be little more than sublimated projections of much deeper psychological insecurities regarding class status and gender positions. Indeed, a host of feminist scholars have explored the relationships among mid-Century modernization and new concepts of gender and sexuality, arguing that the construction of a new sense of the “self” via relations to the marketplace of commodities entails a form of desire strikingly similar to the desire one invests in generating a sense of the self as a gendered sexual being. This line of thinking suggests that the relation of a subject to both commodities and “others” of potential exchange (whether economic or sexual, or both) entails a fundamental projection of the perceived “self” onto and into the desired object or other of consumption. Laura Mulvey cogently describes this process of constructing a “self” via the projection of desire, as she notes that both 1) the scopophilic pleasure of projecting an other as an object of sexual fantasy, and 2) the narcissistic pleasure of projecting an ideal self onto an other, entail the “articulation of the ‘I’ of subjectivity” (365, 363).

One of the key assumptions structuring this essay, based on a combination of reading feminist-inspired critical theory and more traditional historical descriptions of early American modernity, is that the age of Late-Jacksonian Democracy marks a critical turning point in the history of how Americans created both “selves” and “others”. More specifically, the development of the capitalist world of commodities, the emergence of major urban centers, the decline of the traditional roles of the Church and the family, and the imperial expansion of the U.S. merge here, for the first time in American history, to form a highly fluid cultural milieu in which the “articulation of the I” becomes, to a large extent, a question of projecting one’s desires onto a rapidly expanding civil society increasingly structured by the capitalist marketplace. The crucial paradox of this new modern age of desire-projection, however, is that such desires can never be satisfied completely, as each projection of desire onto another person or thing entails an element of fantasy, of wish fulfillment, that obviously indicates more about the psychological needs of the desiring subject than the autonomous reality of the desired person or object. The desired person or object exists then, according to Mulvey, in a “matrix of the imaginary” in which desiring subjects apprehend things or persons not on their own terms, but rather, as the space for the projection of self-fulfilling fantasy. This imperial process of constructing a “self” via the projection of desire
onto some “other” is, as I will demonstrate in later pages, one of the primary targets of Hawthorne’s scathing critique in “The Birth-mark”.

What makes Hawthorne’s story and Mulvey’s critical theory so interesting is their shared realization that such imperial acts of “recognition” (which we want and expect to be satisfying) entail a fundamental “misrecognition” (which leaves us in a state of longing, of yearning), for the thing being desired is always seen through the distorting lens of projected desire (Mulvey 365). This endlessly spiraling dialectic of desire, recognition, misrecognition, and yearning applies equally well to sexual desire and consumerism (as capitalist advertisers have learned well!), which explains Kate Linker’s provocative claim that “wholeness persists only at the level of fantasy” (399). Hence, considering Mulvey’s and Linker’s arguments regarding the necessary yet unfulfillable yearning to project a “self” through commodities, sexual others, and fantasies, I argue below, via Hawthorne’s remarkable tale, that the social crises of mid-Century – following from dizzying new opportunities for class mobility, a confusing wave of consumerist “self help” manuals, and wide-ranging debates regarding the reformist impulses of various popular sciences in general, and phrenology in particular – amounts to the production of what I will hereafter refer to as alienated desire.

Hawthorne’s “The Birth-mark”:
“Deep Science” as Class and Gender Battleground

Hawthorne’s 1843 story “The Birth-mark” provides a remarkably cogent critique of the political-economy of alienated desire within mid-Century America, as it addresses the complex psychological workings of class and gender while simultaneously questioning the use of dubious “deep science” for self-serving political ends. Reading “The Birth-mark” as an historically-situated critique of mid-Century cultural politics is of course difficult due to Hawthorne’s infamous drive towards allegory. Indeed, “The Birth-mark” is a particularly slippery tale for consideration precisely because the specifics of the story indicate a critique not so much of phrenology itself, as of phrenology when exaggerated, heightened, and carried to the most extreme, hyperbolic, and even horrific ends. On the
one hand, then, Hawthorne’s tale may be read as both politically astute and historically prophetic, for while analyzing the cultural politics of the mid-Century’s fascination with the world-changing promises of popular sciences, the tale simultaneously foretells the horrors that befall a culture that applies “sciences” while blinded by pre-existing gender and class stereotypes. On the other hand, however, the fact that “The Birth-mark”’s critique is so historically slippery (in terms of the specifics of the sciences of the day) suggests that Hawthorne – much like the readers of the Fowlers’ *American Phrenological Journal* – was engaged in his own complicated forms of cultural evasion and projection. There can be little doubt, however, despite these apparently contradictory claims, that Hawthorne’s tale repeatedly portrays early-modern science as a battleground where competing notions of class and gender vie for power.

For example, the “Birth-mark”’s first sentence tells us that Aylmer, the story’s mad-scientist, had

recently made experience of a spiritual affinity, more attractive than any chemical one. He had left his laboratory to the care of an assistant, cleaned his fine countenance from the furnace-smoke, washed the stain of acids from his fingers, and persuaded a beautiful woman to become his wife. (259)

Thus Hawthorne begins the story with a narrative of upward social mobility, as Aylmer escapes the drudgery of the pre-modern labors associated with mere “chemicals”, “furnace-smoke”, and the hands-on work that leaves “acid” on his fingers, initially by symbolically “cleansing” and “washing” himself of the tangible markers of physical labor, and then by ascending into a more “spiritual affinity” indicated by his taking a beautiful bride. Furthermore, Aylmer’s upward social mobility is marked by his hiring an assistant, thus reproducing the new capitalist division of labor and its attendant hierarchies of power. Hence the stage is set – after but one sentence – for Hawthorne’s engagement in “science” as productive terrain for exploring the role of phrenology in a nascent capitalist world structured increasingly by the projection of “alienated desire” in class and gender conflict.

Before proceeding to read Hawthorne’s tale in detail, it is important to observe that the curious social crises discussed above, in which the socio-economic fallout from early-modernity prompts a series of attempts
to retrench cultural authority – particularly regarding issues of sexual and economic activity – has been characterized by G. J. Barker-Benfield as a “spermatic economy”. More specifically, Barker-Benfield writes that “the interpretive confusion of sexual and economic terms represented the two overriding preoccupations of Nineteenth-Century Western man: sex and money” (349). M. Jimmie Killingsworth furthers our understanding of the “spermatic” political-economy of early-modernity by noting that

Economic metaphor came to be associated in the middle class with the physiology of male sexuality: careful finance became the metaphor for careful love... The Victorian age was above all else a mercantile and mechanistic era, and thus it was quite natural that man should think of his own body as a bank or a machine. (146)

The reciprocal relationships among “science”, economics, and gender/sexuality within this “spermatic” economy are emphasized in the opening paragraph of “The Birth-mark”, as Hawthorne tells us that for Aylmer, “it was not unusual for the love of science to rival the love of woman”. Furthermore, Aylmer conflates “the love of a woman” with his scientific project, which he conceptualizes as the pursuit of “man’s ultimate control over nature”. Thus Aylmer’s “science” is portrayed specifically as an act of sublimation, as the projection of conquering sexual energy in which “higher intellect, the imagination, the spirit, and even the heart, might all find their congenial aliment... [when] the philosopher should lay his hand on the secret of creative force, and perhaps make new worlds for himself” (259). Based on this appeal to “the secret of creative force”, numerous critics have pursued the thesis that Aylmer’s chief literary function is to highlight the tenuous border between pre-modern alchemy/magic and modern science/technique. I argue in the following pages, however, for a much more culturally and politically-charged reading of the tale, in which Aylmer may be read as a critique of the class and gender tensions that lurk beneath the alienated desire triggering the phrenology fad within the spermatic economy of mid-Century America.

Before moving further into this argument, it seems prudent to demonstrate that Hawthorne was fully aware of the contemporary excitement surrounding phrenology. His first contact with the subject was most likely while studying at Bowdoin, where in 1825 he took a senior lecture with Dr. John Doane Wells, a physiologist who had attended one of Gall’s
celebrated lectures in Europe in 1823 and returned to Bowdoin as a phrenology enthusiast. The second documented point of convergence between Hawthorne and phrenology occurred in 1836, when Hawthorne was asked, as editor of The American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge, to write a brief essay accompanying an engraving of a head plotted according to phrenological principles. Hawthorne’s cheeky responses indicate a young man that saw phrenology as dubious at best (Stoehr 69-70). The third documented intersection of Hawthorne and phrenology also occurred in 1836, when Hawthorne’s short story, “The Minister’s Black Veil”, was published in the same issue of The Token as John Neil’s satire, “The Young Phrenologist” (Pfister 46-49). The fourth documented incidence followed in July of 1838. George Combe was in the midst of a sold-out East Coast speaking tour (consisting of 158 two-hour lectures in an eighteen-month period) in support of phrenology in general and his celebrated text, The Constitution of Man, in particular, when Hawthorne noted in his journal that he had had a conversation specifically regarding phrenology with “a disagreeable figure” named Haynes (qtd. in Stoehr 64-65). These four examples clearly demonstrate that Hawthorne was fully aware of (and even perturbed by) his fellow Americans’ frantic excitement regarding phrenology.

“The Birth-mark”

In broad strokes, the story unfolds as follows: Aylmer (whose first name is never given, and who is called by his wife either “my husband” or simply “Aylmer”) is a scientist; his wife, Georgiana, is thought to be beautiful except for a lone hand-shaped birth-mark on her left cheek, which glows deeply when Georgiana worries about its presence. The narrative-generating “problem” is that Aylmer wishes to remove this birth-mark and thus render his young wife “absolutely perfect”. One of the curious twists of this plot is the extent to which Aylmer’s concern over the birth-mark translates into Georgiana’s concern: that is, she internalizes Aylmer’s desire that the mark be gone, and in so doing prompts the mark to glow an ever-more-noticeable crimson. Thus Aylmer’s obsession with physical “perfection” produces an increasingly noticeable lack of such
perfection in the woman he supposedly loves. Georgiana unfortunately succumbs to this disempowering projection of Aylmer’s desire and pleading “Either remove this dreadful hand, or take my wretched life! You have deep science!” (264, emphasis added). And so Aylmer goes to work in his strange laboratory, which is full of a mish-mash of industrial imagery such as “the furnace” and “naked walls and brick pavement”, alchemical tools such as “a distilling apparatus”, and more modern “science”-like kinds of objects such as “retorts, tubes, cylinders, and crucibles”, etc., with the air itself “tainted with gaseous odors which had been tormented forth by the process of science” (272-273). Aylmer’s plan, in order to “torment forth” a scientific cure for Georgiana’s earthly shortcoming, is to either concoct a “cure” or perform surgery on his wife’s defect. In keeping with the satirical tone of the tale, Hawthorne provides a faux-gothic climax in which Georgiana dies, but not before momentarily waking (after the operation) to hear Aylmer exclaim “My peerless bride, it is successful! You are perfect!” (277).

As noted earlier, one of the story’s curious twists is its repeated references to power categories that clearly signify class divisions; the central figure here is Aylmer’s brutish assistant, Aminadab, whose first words in the story are the complaint: “if she were my wife, I’d never part with that birth-mark” (266, emphasis added). This is a telling statement, for Aminadab is described as being “incapable of comprehending a single principle”, as possessing “vast strength, shaggy hair, a smoky aspect”, and as being “encrusted in indescribable earthiness” (266). Aminadab is thus portrayed as an archetypal immigrant worker (strong, stupid, filthy, bound to the earth) who, while knowing full well that his boss’s “science” is mad, is nonetheless chained by economic necessity to the scientist’s employment. The curious fact that the socially-powerless Aminadab feels confident enough to protest Aylmer’s surgical efforts – if she were his wife he would leave her alone – might be read then neither as part of an informed discourse regarding “scientific” method, nor as signifying Aminadab’s enlightened respect or concern for Georgiana, but rather, as indicative of the fact that he, the archetypal immigrant worker, finds her, the bourgeois wife, a perfectly acceptable object – regardless of any birthmark – of upwardly mobile desire. Aminadab is apparently not alone in desiring Georgiana, as Hawthorne tells us that “Many a desperate swain would have risked his life for the privilege of pressing his lips to the mysterious
hand” [her birth-mark] (261). My point then, is that Georgiana is portrayed not only as an object of male desire, but as a site of class antagonism. More specifically, the apparent debate between Aylmer and Aminadab regarding the proper course of action to take on Georgiana’s body enacts, via the rhetoric of science, what amounts to a class-war over whose desire will reap the fruits of the patriarchal domination of women. The Aylmer-Georgiana-Aminadab triangle thus depicts a familiar early-modern scenario in which machismo-laden class competition between men is expressed in debates regarding the grounds of science, yet with woman serving as the topos across which the battle proceeds.

The class implications of the relationship between Aylmer and Aminadab become even more pronounced when Aylmer begins his surgery on Georgiana, for while Aylmer describes his work in terms that are ethereal, spiritual, and transcendent, Hawthorne notes that Aminadab’s responses are but “harsh, uncouth, misshapen tones... more like the grunt or growl of a brute than human speech” (269). Such obvious references to the class-based differences in their communicative skills might even suggest that Aminadab himself may very well become the next test subject for Aylmer’s experiments. Hawthorne extends this possibility to comic proportions when Aylmer, in the midst of concocting one of his strange potions, shouts at Aminadab: “Carefully, thou human machine! Carefully, thou man of clay!” (273). These passages make it clear that Aminadab is, if not already a scientific creation of Aylmer, an American version of Frankenstein’s creature, then at the very least a subhuman clod; in either case it is obvious that a large part of Aylmer’s sense of “self” is predicated on his unchallenged mastery of this “human machine”/man-beast

Having established that the story is fundamentally concerned with examining the use of science as a weapon in both class and gender-based power struggles, I now reprise my notion of a “spermatic economy” in order to analyze further the processes by which science and sexual desire are metonymically conflated as markers of what I referred to above as “alienated desire”. The first instance of this metonymy occurs when Georgiana, in capitulating to Aylmer’s discourse of science, prompts Aylmer to equate her recognition of her powerlessness in the face of science with a declaration of profound love. Indeed, after bombarding Georgiana with arguments regarding the horror of the birth-mark (he exclaims: “it shocks me, as being the visible mark of earthly imperfection” [260]), she accedes to his wishes with the painfully disempowering plea:
Either remove this dreadful Hand, or take my wretched life! You have deep science!... You have achieved great wonders!... Is this beyond your power, for the sake of your own peace, and to save your poor wife from madness? (264)

This is an important passage in terms of demonstrating Hawthorne’s critique of the use of “science” to pathologize and thus disempower women, for Georgiana not only identifies with her own lack of agency while glorifying her husband’s magnificent achievements, but she explicitly begs him to “save” her from her own imminent madness. This remarkable image, which amounts to nothing less than an archetype for male fantasies of domination, prompts Aylmer to gush: “Noblest – dearest – tenderest wife!... You have led me deeper than ever into the heart of science” (264, emphasis added). Hawthorne thus makes it almost comically obvious that the discourse of “science” is fundamentally engaged in legitimizing male fantasies of dominating prostrate women who beg for salvation from their god-like masters. Indeed, Hawthorne’s portrayal of the God-like powers of “deep science”, and of the pleasures of penetrating “deeper than ever” into the inner core of the “heart of science”, clearly indicates that he sees the project of science as a metonym for the patriarchal domination of the spermatic economy.

It may sound peculiar to read Hawthorne in these essentially postmodern terms, yet historians of mid-Century American culture present a picture of the early stages of modern medicine that corroborates the basic premises of what I am calling Hawthorne’s critique of the spermatic economy. For example, Barker-Benfield notes that the early stages of the professionalization and institutionalization of medical practices, particularly concerning the nascent field of gynecology, were fueled by doctors who “exhibited mad impatience, addiction to chance, ferocious competitiveness with other men, and a paradoxical dependence upon them for judgment of success in self-making” (Half-Known Life 120). Granting the efficacy of Barker-Benfield’s meticulously researched characterization of the typical behavior of early-modern doctors, Hawthorne’s Aylmer begins to appear not so much as a mad science-fiction hyperbole, but rather, as a striking critique of the excesses of the accepted “medical” and “scientific” practices of his period.

Indeed, Hawthorne’s critique of the manipulation of science to leverage sexual power is so crucial to the purpose of the tale that the scenario
described above – in which Georgiana’s acceptance of her disempowerment at the hands of science prompts an outpouring of Aylmer’s love – is reprised eight pages later in the story. This second example occurs when Georgiana, after sneaking into Aylmer’s laboratory, browses through “an engrossing folio” containing Aylmer’s notes and observations from previous (mostly failed!) experiments. Aylmer, who is busily preparing his laboratory for the surgical removal of the birth-mark, is shocked when he finds Georgiana violating the secrecy of his scientific world and scolds her with the patronizing claim: “It is dangerous to read in a sorcerer’s books” (272). Georgiana then responds “It has made me worship you more than ever”, to which Aylmer rejoins: “Ah! Then worship me if you will. I shall deem myself hardly unworthy of it”. He then asks Georgiana to sing for him, which she does, with the scene ending with Aylmer “taking his leave, with a boyish exuberance of gaiety” (272). It therefore seems clear that Aylmer’s “boyish exuberance and gaiety” – emotions that might reasonably be assumed to stand at odds with the commanding seriousness of his imminent engagement in life-threatening surgery – indicate his equating domination-via-science with the act of lovemaking. Indeed, in the spermatic economy of alienated desire, scientific domination (“you have deep science!”) and sexual domination (“it makes me worship you”!) appear as synchronous moments. Hawthorne clearly finds this dialectic troubling, as he pushes the story to a ferociously hyperbolic ending in which Aylmer not only uses Georgiana as the complacent plot space for the projection of his heroic desire, but Georgiana then turns around and thanks her husband/surgeon for his generous (and ultimately murderous) attentions.

I am arguing then, that Aylmer’s “desire” does not indicate the mature longing to share another human’s partnership, but rather, the patriarchal desire to possess the female body, to erase its “imperfections”, to contain its differences, and thus to re-create the female body in the image of what man thinks it should be. Considering this claim within the context of social crisis elaborated earlier in this essay in turn suggests that Hawthorne’s story is crucially concerned with the larger historical question of how his fellow Americans are adapting to the frenetic pace of change attendant upon the rise of early-modernity. For while the story’s obvious categorical confusions (is it a romance or a nightmare? science-fiction or domestic narrative?) demonstrate the giddy possibilities of a rapidly modernizing world in which traditional boundaries are dissolving,
they simultaneously signify the breakdown of stability that prompted a conservative backlash of not inconsiderable force. That Hawthorne appears to stand a bit bewildered between these possibilities suggests that “The Birth-mark” exemplifies what Sacvan Bercovitch refers to as “An anxiety about the openness of the story of America” (179).

This anxiety is plainly obvious in Hawthorne’s previously mentioned free-wheeling revision of the history of science. Indeed, Limon writes that

Though he seems to posit the story in modern times, at the end of the Eighteenth Century, its historical allusion is to the beginning of the Seventeenth, before the end of the potency of magic yet after the revolution of modern science. (128)

On this reading, Hawthorne constructs an historically inaccurate montage of decontextualized forms of “science” that functions as a sort of cultural bazaar from which to sell Aylmer’s historically-specific anxieties regarding social mobility, his control of his wife’s body, and his relationship to his hired labor, Aminadab, thus enabling Hawthorne to indulge his own early-modern anxieties while appearing to fly confidently in the face of the onslaught of science. As Limon argues, this historical subterfuge allows Hawthorne to “nullify modernity” while freeing him “to play the modern at the same time” (130). “The Birth-mark” may be read productively then as a critique of the evasive cultural fictions prompted by the bewildering socio-political contradictions discussed earlier as part of mid-Century America’s head-first plunge into modernity. More specifically, in the face of the jarring social dislocations and alienated desire attendant upon the transition towards modernity, Hawthorne engages his world by relocating the sources of crisis to a mythical past/present that hints at an engaged historical critique of the rise of modernity (and particularly the force of science to structure notions of class and gender) while nonetheless fading into allegory.

The narrative structure of Hawthorne’s “The Birth-mark” therefore enacts a familiar pattern most cogently analyzed by Teresa de Lauretis, who describes the kind of narrative resolutions and evasions cited above in terms of a conflict of agency:

the mythical subject is constructed as human being and as male; he is the active
principle of culture, the establisher of distinction, the creator of differences. Female is not susceptible to transformation, to life or death; she (it) is an element of plot space, a topos, a resistance, matrix and matter. (119)

In a similar vein, Nancy Armstrong observes that one of the fundamental tasks of Nineteenth-Century British fiction was to provide a “re-definition of desire” in which “the female was the figure, above all else, on whom depended the outcome of the struggle among competing ideologies” (5). The fundamental assumption here, underlying the analyses provided by both de Lauretis and Armstrong, is that discourses of power (and particularly those regarding sexuality and the bodies of women) require an objectified other on which heroic men write their narratives. On this reading, Hawthorne – despite what I am arguing is his scalding critical intentions – is complicit in the logic of constructing narrative trajectories in which women characters are but the plot-space for the male projection of desire (both scopophilic and narcissistic)\textsuperscript{16}. Furthermore, it is obvious that Hawthorne, in spite of his critical intentions, mirrors the period’s fascination and even obsession – as expressed in the proliferation of advice manuals and pseudo-scientific manifestoes discussed earlier – with describing the functions, analyzing the motivations, and controlling the sexuality of the female body\textsuperscript{17}.

It is crucially important to remember, however, that Hawthorne’s fictional critique of men obsessed with the control (sexually, politically, and even scientifically) of women’s bodies was written within a period in which the attitudes and assumptions he was attacking were widely accepted as “common sense”. Indeed, as I demonstrated earlier via discussion of The Reverend John Todd, George Combe, the Fowler brothers, and William Sweetser, what appears to the postmodern reader as Aylmer’s mad-science in fact demonstrates a set of practices and assumptions that are very much representative of common medical and scientific practices of the period. Indeed, Ann Douglas Wood reminds us that mid-Century “Physicians tended to stress a certain moral depravity inherent in feminine nervous disorders and to waver significantly between labeling it a result and analyzing it as the cause of the physical symptoms involved” (34). There is even considerable evidence pointing to the fact that Hawthorne’s Aylmer is based on the real life scientific disasters produced by Sir Kenelm Digby, who, in 1633 (while a member of Britain’s renowned
Royal Society!), was accused of killing his wife during a hauntingly familiar “Birth-mark” scenario in which “viper wine” turned out not to be restorative, but rather, deadly.

Furthermore, while phrenology may strike us today as little more than a consumerist fad popularized by crafty publishing and creative hucksterism, Hawthorne’s Boston of 1843 – when he first published “The Birth-mark” – was awash in frenzied energy surrounding a series of forty phrenology lectures that the entrepreneurial Fowler brothers, Orson and Lorenzo, were delivering to capacity crowds of over 3,000 mesmerized devotees (Davies 31-34). Hence, when Georgiana asks Aylmer “are you in earnest?”, and then, “looking at him with amazement and fear”, blurts out “it is terrible to possess such power, or even to dream of possessing it!” (269, my emphasis), we can only imagine that the mid-Nineteenth Century male reader would hear such a charge as yet another pathetic “women’s complaint” against a heady scientific practice that was all the rage. To our late-Twentieth Century ears, however, primed with the intervening observations of both feminist-inspired critical theory and an increasingly sophisticated understanding of the historical contours of what I have been calling the “spermatic economy” of early-modernity, Georgiana’s “complaint” sounds nothing short of prophetic.

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Note, Notes, Anmerkungen

1 The classic exposition of this modernization thesis is R. Brown. Regarding modernity’s impact on gender, see Coontz, Pease, Rosenberg, Ryan, and Stansell. In terms of class formation, see Archer, Blumin, Halftunen, and Ryan.

2 For discussion of the political, economic, and cultural battles over medicine in ante-bellum America, particularly regarding Gunn and Thomson, see Starr 3-78.

3 In addition to the texts by Armstrong, Berlant, G. Brown, Coontz.
Davidson, Halttunen, Pease, Ryan, Smith-Rosenberg, and Stansell cited elsewhere in this essay, see Grotz 27-61, Linker, and Mulvey.

Mulvey's important theory regarding the pleasures of looking and watching may be applied to the projection of desire involved in reading as well. Thus the relationship between reading, gender, and class becomes an important example of how individual readers/subjects negotiate their way through a culture. For three studies of the complex and contradictory role of the novel within such processes of historical negotiation, see (on British fiction) Armstrong, and (on American fiction) Davidson and Jehlen.

For helpful introductory sources on Jacksonian Democracy not cited later in this essay, see Pessen's "The Egalitarian Myth" and Jacksonian America, and Rogin.

On the contradictions embedded within the search for a stable "I" within an infinitely expanding economic marketplace and geographic nation-state, see Fisher, and, concerning gender, Berlant.

"The Birth-mark" was first published in March 1843 in the literary journal Pioneer; its first appearance in book form was in Hawthorne's 1846 collection of short stories, Mosses from an Old Manse. For further discussion of the publishing history of the tale, see Newman.

Among the many sources, the best examples are Burns, Limon, and Van Leer.

See the discussion of Dr. John D. Wells' influential lectures in Stoehr. As a side note, it is amusing to remember that Hawthorne's tuition for one year at Bowdoin was $24, while boarding fees for one year were $9; not a bad price for a university that also produced Hawthorne's friends Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and the fourteenth President, Franklin Pierce. Regarding Hawthorne's Bowdoin experiences, see Reed & O'Hern.

While touring America in 1838, Combe began gathering observations that were later published as Notes on the United States of North America. This remarkable project, part travel log, part early anthropology, part scientific survey, part sheer quackery, records Combe's 1838 lecture dates in Boston for October 10, 12, 16, 17, 19, 23, 24, 26, 29, and 31, and November 1, 5, 7, 8, 12, and 14, and claims an average attendance of 303 p/night (Volume I, Table III, 363).

Tracking readings of Aminadab serves as an interesting marker of the
many stages of literary scholarship. Contemporary views may be found in the essays by Bromell, Pfister, Stohr, Van Leer, and Weinstein cited above; for earlier views, see Thompson and Van Winkle.

Critics have suggested that Hawthorne’s frequently twisted portrayals of science and “domestic” life function as sublimations of his own anxieties regarding sexuality and madness. For example, Rosenberg notes that “The Birth-mark” was Hawthorne’s “first work of fiction following his own marriage to Sophia” (145). This would seem to suggest that the story represents a literary dumping ground for the darker emotions associated with his new marriage, yet Rozenberg manages to read the story in a surprisingly positive light. Along these same lines, see Knadler and Zanger.

For an example of how reading Hawthorne’s tale in the traditional, allegorical mode leads to trouble regarding questions of gender politics, see Rucker, who writes that “Georgiana calmly and knowingly accepts her husband’s point of view. Doing so, she endorses Aylmer’s and the narrator’s original protest against existence” (452).

The most literal version of this thesis is offered by Fetterly, who seethes that “‘The Birth-mark’ is really a demonstration of how to murder your wife and get away with it” (22). Also see Weinstein.

This strategy of displacement is clearly one of the central habits of Hawthorne’s fiction. His perky wrapping up of The House of Seven Gables is perhaps the most well known (and disappointing) example (see Michaels). The Scarlet Letter shares this same narrative strategy. For example, Leverenz notes that much of the dramatic energy of the novel shifts in its later stages from Hester to Dimmesdale; thus, “a fascination with male dominance and humiliation displaces a potentially feminist vision of patriarchy” (272).

Hawthorne’s paradoxical critique of a culture in which women function as objects for the male gaze is even more crucial to The Blithedale Romance (1852); for a remarkable analysis of this issue, see G. Brown.

For analyses of the cultural context of these advice manuals and the damage done by such patriarchal attempts to control women’s bodies, see Degler, Simmons, and Vicinus.

Digby (who, strangely enough, returns in The Scarlet Letter as an associate of Chillingworth) is even rumored to have said, in the process of defending himself against the charges, that his wife frequently imbibed
such “physicke” potions, and that “of late she looked better and fresher than she had done in seven years before... Indeed, both living and dead she was the loveliest creature that I ever saw.” See the wonderful discussion of the Digby case and its influence on Hawthorne in Reid.

**Opere citate, Works Cited**

**Zitierte Literatur**


