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## The Home and the Asylum : Antebellum Representations of True Womanhood in Nathaniel Hawthornes "The House of Seven Gables"

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In 1840, Elizabeth T. Stone was tricked by her brother Stephen S. Stone to accompany him on a ride, not knowing that her brother was leading her straight into the McLean Asylum in Charlestown, Massachusetts after having hired a doctor to declare her insane. She would remain at McLean for more than sixteen months, suffering from isolation and maltreatment, all the while proclaiming her sanity. Her crime consisted of following a different religious denomination than her family (6).

On July 13, 1857, Adriana P. Brinckle was placed at the Harrisburg State Hospital for the Insane in Pennsylvania. Committed by her father because of her “extravagance”, she would remain at the mental institution for 28 years, being released only after a new law was passed by the State Committee on Lunacy in 1884 (5).

By orders of her husband, Elizabeth Packard was kidnapped and carried off to the Jacksonville Insane Asylum in Illinois on June 18<sup>th</sup>, 1860. She had “defended some religious opinions which conflicted with the Creed of the Presbyterian Church” which gave her husband grounds to claim that her mind was unbalanced (3). Elizabeth Packard was released after three years in the asylum.

What these three women experienced was a fate they shared with countless other women but not all of those eventually escaped the institution, and fewer still would write exposés detailing their harrowing experience at the asylum as Packard, Brinckle, and Stone did. These exposés show a common narrative of women who were – obviously wrongfully – accused of insanity and committed to a mental institution – by brothers, fathers, and husbands – because they deviated from the ways in which ideal womanhood was defined in nineteenth-century America. In the following, the exposés will serve as a starting point to explore antebellum ideals of femininity as represented by both psychiatry and fiction.

The first-person accounts position themselves as a counternarrative to the one positing the asylum as a humanitarian, philanthropic institution – which, indeed, was its original intent. A co-product of various antebellum utopian movements aimed to better the condition of the disenfranchised, the asylum and the therapeutic practice of moral treatment it adapted were designed to reform and cure the bodies and minds of the insane – not as a convenient way to get rid of one’s inconvenient wife, sister, or daughter, although the shared plot of the “captivity narratives”, predominantly written by women, would suggest so.

The asylum exposés, emerging as a unique genre of nineteenth-century literature, join a long line of accounts that link madness with femininity. Seminal studies by feminist critics Elaine Showalter (1985), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979), and Phyllis Chesler (1972) have amply demonstrated that the convention of associating insanity and womanhood has an impressive tradition, both in fictional representations and medical theories. Thus, it is not surprising that antebellum America boasts of a variety of texts all engaging in the construction of an ideal of womanhood and the potentially perilous consequences of its compromising. Sentimental novels, women’s magazines and domestic literature are well known to have contributed to the establishment of the ideology of True Womanhood and its domestic agenda. An often under-rated amount of contributions to this ideology, however, must be ascribed to the adherents of a newly emerging branch of medical science preoccupied with maintaining and regaining mental health or rather, preventing and curing insanity. The nineteenth-century terms of this first-wave-psychiatry were asylum

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medicine or mental hygiene, its practitioners were known under the designation of asylum physician or – if they were lucky – even asylum superintendent.

Most of these early psychiatrists were educated men of science, socially active reformers, bourgeois gentlemen highly concerned with morality, and prolific writers on the subject of mental hygiene, which asylum superintendent Isaac Ray, pioneering author of *The Medical Jurisprudence of Insanity* (1838), defines as “the art of preserving the mind against all incidents and influences calculated to deteriorate its qualities, impair its energies, or derange its movements” (163). Asylum physicians offered commentary on many related subjects, ranging from “the management of the bodily powers in regard to exercise, rest, food, clothing and climate, the laws of breeding, the government of the passions, the sympathy with current emotions and opinions, the discipline of the intellect” and many more, always keeping an eye on the surest strategies to promote their medical expertise (163). The growing concern over allegedly rising numbers of insanity especially in the United States led not only to the rapid construction of asylums throughout the country but also to an increased visibility and influence of psychiatry on the antebellum political and cultural stage. Above all, this can be seen in the characteristics of the emerging bourgeois middle class; the separation of gender spheres and the erection of the non-productive woman “into a symbol of bourgeois class hegemony” were supported by the antebellum psychiatric community with bio-medical arguments (Smith-Rosenberg, 13). These self-assumed experts claimed that men were naturally guided by will and reason, whereas women were dominated by their reproductive organs and a weaker nervous system, successfully supporting men’s assignment to the public sphere and women’s assumed place in the private sphere. Every attempt to step out of the prescribed role was deemed unnatural and inevitably led to physical and mental disease.

Unsurprisingly, the mental hygiene experts also paid considerable interest to women’s bodily and mental constitution and their peculiar susceptibility to certain kinds of insanity. Every distinct female body part – the ovaries, the fallopian tubes, the uterus – was regarded as a potential predisposing locus of insanity, every distinct moment of female “crisis” – menstruation, marriage and sex, pregnancy, child birth – was regarded as a potential precipitating cause (Goodell, 295). This put women in an awkward position, since the fulfilment of her allocated role saw her as a menstruating married mother of many. The unexpected demands of marriage might well cause exhaustion and despair in a young girl, hitherto unexperienced with the company of men; however, the statistics might not consider that it was the young husband who felt the marriage to have been a mistake and sought to undo the marriage by removing his bride to an asylum. It is also ironic that “mothering”, so essential to the female ideal, was stressed as one of the leading causes of female insanity. Still, “puerperal insanity”, as it was termed by psychiatrists, was the type and cause of insanity of one in eleven insane women, as assistant asylum physician Richard Gundry reports (295). Either during gestation, child-birth or lactation the woman suffered a nervous breakdown (or refused to take care of her appearance) and was removed to the asylum (Theriot, 73). Additionally, women were “more under the influence of feelings and emotions” and prone to go mad through the loss of a loved one or a disappointment of affections (Jarvis, 150). In the delineations of women’s anatomical and mental peculiarities, the asylum physicians seem to perpetuate and fortify the association of femininity and madness, put into focus by Showalter, Chesler, and other feminist critics as facilitating the enabling of female oppression. While there is no doubt, that

nineteenth century medicine did not miss any opportunity to teach women how to regulate their body, their mind, and their behaviour, a closer look at asylum reports reveals that there were not more women institutionalized than men. In fact, the statistics show a preponderance of male patients in American asylums (140).

Asylum statistician Edward Jarvis interpreted this as resulting from the fact that men's "intellectual functions are oftener exercised ... their inclinations and propensities, of whatever nature, intellectual, moral, or physical, are more powerful and uncontrollable, and they are more likely to over-work and disturb the brain than women" (150). Jarvis relates men's greater susceptibility to mental exhaustion to being exposed to "the varies and changes in life and fortune, accidents and injuries" of modern life (151). Physicians were united in the fear that the turbulent modernization of society would result in the degeneration of the nation; indeed, insanity was declared to be a mass disease by superintendent Amariah Brigham (76). For him and other experts on insanity, the apparent rise of mental illness in America must be explained as resulting from being a country "where people enjoy civil and religious freedom, where every person has liberty to engage in the strife for the highest honors and stations in society, and where the road to wealth and distinction of every kind is equally open to all" (78).

As the intellectual pattern of civilized life and the competitive marketplace was made out to be the main culprit of facilitating male insanity, early psychiatrists called for the retreat from public and political action into the private sphere. An idealized version of the home and of domesticity was pitted as a safe and balancing haven against a public life full of strenuous economic and political activities, a privatized, isolated place of retreat for men returning from the marketplace. To a woman fell the duty of making the house into a proper home, where she was expected to protect the moral and mental health of those entrusted to her. This task of shielding men's mental health from the strains of a modernizing society ties in with the movement of female repression and simultaneous idealization which was formulated by bourgeois men in the first third of the nineteenth century and which Barbara Welter christened the *Cult of True Womanhood* (1996). To be a true woman was to play a "female role bound by kitchen and nursery, overlaid with piety and purity, and crowned with subservience" (Smith-Rosenberg, 13). Religion, household and child-rearing also were the realms to which the antebellum psychiatric community assigned the natural place of women. In her seminal study on domestic individualism, Gillian Brown likewise brings up the reciprocal relationship of women's sphere and the rapidly expanding antebellum economy in arguing that "the domestic cult of true womanhood facilitated the transition to a life increasingly subject to the caprices of the market" (3). The ideology of the domestic sphere therefore gained momentum as reaction to market economy expansion in correlation with the alleged rise of mental disease. This idealization of the home was not only propagated in medical texts, but also in advice books such as Catherine Beecher's *Treatise on Domestic Economy* (1841), in which she painted the home as a place of retreat from a "perpetually fluctuating state of society" (18). In a similar vein, *Godey's Lady's Book*, one of the first women's magazines, instilled the values of mental hygiene and true womanhood in girls, wives, and mothers. Sentimental novels and their stories of the passive and submissive, but morally superior heroine popularized the domestic agenda even further. In fact, most American writers of fiction at that time engaged either with the female ideal and its consequences, or with

contemporary psychological theories; or, like Nathaniel Hawthorne, with both (Paryż, 27). In the following, two of Hawthorne's novels, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) and *The House of Seven Gables* (1851), will be read through the lens of nineteenth-century psychiatry and domesticity. These two novels can be read as case studies, seemingly backing up the claim of the antebellum psychiatric community that domesticity and true womanhood constitute a tremendous influence on mental health, while approaching this claim in oppositional ways.

In *The Scarlet Letter* the central female figure, Hester Prynne, is an adulteress and does therefore not qualify as a true woman. On the contrary, she is described to be passionate and defiant, and thus, following the logic of the psychiatric imagination of an ideal woman, she cannot exert a beneficial influence on the men connected with her. Her husband, Roger Chillingworth, who has seemingly returned from the dead, is consumed with vengeance after being confronted with his wife's affair and slips into bodily and mental deterioration while his quest for the lover's identity and revenge takes its course. He openly accuses Hester of never having fulfilled her domestic duties towards him:

My heart was a habitation large enough for many guests, but lonely and chill, and without a household fire. I longed to kindle one! It seemed not so wild a dream ... that the simple bliss, which is scattered far and wide, for all mankind to gather up, might yet be mine. And so, Hester, I drew thee into my heart, into its innermost chamber, and sought to warm thee by the warmth which thy presence made there! (80)

In comparing the heart to the hearth, the household fire and the home, Hawthorne puts to use the rhetoric of domestic ideology as employed in women's magazines, domestic treatises and medical texts and to which he would later take recourse in *The House of the Seven Gables*. Hester did not fulfill her wifely duties, she could not turn her husband's house into a home and she refuses to show loyalty to him even in the moment of the above accusations. The novel shows how the lack of a true feminine influence and domestic life in men's time of need contributes greatly to Chillingworth's growing monomania, his obsession with revenge and with Arthur Dimmesdale, the town's minister and Hester's secret liaison. Although Hester's heart belongs to Dimmesdale; however, the illegitimate nature of their relationship denies domestic bliss and therefore its presumed stabilizing qualities. What is more, the lack of domesticity, the guilt and shame Dimmesdale feels are contributing to his slow but steady mental and physical degeneration, helped along by his religious fervour, which was seen, like Chillingworth's long hours of studying, both as a precipitating and predisposing cause of insanity in the eyes of the antebellum psychiatric community (Brigham, 116). Hawthorne presents his heroine as being unable to qualify as a true woman, unable to provide a mentally safe environment for the men associated with her, and thus forfeiting her domesticating power. Placed in Puritan New England, Hester occupies a liminal status at the outskirts of society, both figuratively and literally – two hundred years later she may have joined the ranks of the women of the asylum.

Contemporary reactions to the novel were not favourable as critics, both female and male, pointed out its general morbidity. In her scathing review, Margaret Oliphant deplores the novel's medical approach. In her opinion, the characters of *The Scarlet Letter* "are exhibited to us rather as a surgeon

might exhibit his pet cases, than as a poet shows his men and women". She continues to complain: "it is not wonderful ... that the new science which is called "anatomy of character" should be in great request ... For ourselves, we have small admiration of the spiritual dissecting-knife" (562). Although this and other critiques lament the apparent medicalization of aesthetics, they simultaneously employ a medical language themselves, showing not only how Hawthorne's novel is inseparable from medico-psychological discourse but also how the application of this discourse was readily perceived by the public. Apart from "the spiritual dissecting knife", the elements of the novel most criticized were the ones negating the domestic ideology of the bourgeois middle class. In a letter to a friend, Hawthorne himself relates that the novel sent his wife Sophia, "to bed with a grievous headache" and a broken heart due to the novel's rejection of domestic bliss (Hawthorne, CE, XVI: 312). It might have been those reactions that led him to write his next novel *The House of Seven Gables* which was more in line with contemporary ideals and expectations and which he professed to be "a more natural and healthy product" of his mind (CE, 421).

Whether this is true or not remains to be debated – after all, Hawthorne's Berkshire neighbour and author of domestic advice books, Catherine Sedgwick, aptly compares reading the book with wandering "through the wards of an insane asylum" (Dewey, 328). Yet, the central female character of the novel, Phoebe Pyncheon, does differ substantially in every way from Hester Prynne as she exhibits the function of a moralizing, domesticating agent – the function of which Hester has been denied.

Phoebe fulfils all the criteria of true womanhood as earlier laid out, which enables her to exert a beneficial influence on the "morbid specimen" inhabiting the House of Seven Gables. Stephen Knadler rightly points out that in Hawthorne's fiction, "the buried referent is the language of modern psychology, which had been invested with institutional authority" (281). This is especially evident in *The House of Seven Gables* as Knadler shows that Hawthorne, in describing the "inmates" of the mansion, employs a diagnostic narrator assigning various signs of deviance and mental derangement to the residents (*HSG*, 218). Hepzibah Pyncheon, suffering from melancholia and a delusional family pride, has "grown to be a kind of lunatic" and needs, from time to time "a walk along the noonday street to keep her sane" (184). Clifford Pyncheon, recently released from an asylum-like prison is described as "partly crazy, partly imbecile", and exhibits fits of passion and phases of depression and is diagnosed with mania, monomania and moral insanity in the course of the novel. Holgrave embodies the unsteady young man influenced by contemporary technological innovations, reform movements and radical political democratic thought that psychiatrists and politicians feared would tear society apart. He proclaims himself to be "a morbid", "a mystic" and his mind as having "a twist aside" (218). In this regard, Holgrave, Hepzibah and Clifford are all deviant from the expected social norm and in dire need of the reforming influence of a feminine angel in the house. This role is assigned to Phoebe who takes it up without hesitation. The qualities of true womanhood – piety, purity, subservience – come naturally to her. What is more, her drive to turn the house into a home, supposed to serve as a mentally sound environment in the eyes of the antebellum psychiatric community, is innate. This is seen as soon as she moves into the gothic residence. Instead of complaining about the dusky bedchamber, Phoebe immediately puts to use her "gift of practical arrangement" to give the room "a look of comfort and habitableness" (71). She continues to degothicize and domesticate the house, as she takes charge of the

garden and reclaims the vital domestic space of the kitchen hitherto neglected by her cousin Hepzibah. As she scours pots and brews tea, she reminds the reader of Rachel, the domestic angel in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Both Rachel and Phoebe are "diffusing a sort of sunny radiance" while doing housework which they elevate to something sacramental (204).

Hawthorne, Beecher Stowe, medical texts on mental hygiene, and domestic advice books all employ the same spiritual rhetoric that paints the domestic work of women in a sacred light. "When women work, that work is characterized as spiritual, transcendental; woman is imagined as an ideal beyond her body, the selfless domestic angel" (Brown, 64). Phoebe's "homely witchcraft" also transforms shop-keeping from "proper work" which was deemed unnatural for women into a spiritual-transcendental activity. "I am as nice a saleswoman, as I am a housewife", says Phoebe, and indeed, she excels at both, turning shop- and house-keeping into playful and angelic tasks (*HSG*, 78). In taking charge of all areas of the house, Phoebe, so to speak, "rekindles the ... household-fire" that warms the hearth, both literally and figuratively as the hearth is the symbolic epitome of domesticity (105). As the fire is kindled, the house, formerly described as gloomy, dismal and rotten, is imbued with Phoebe's friendly presence and finally turned into a home, an elementary condition in order for the residents to be beneficially influenced. Hawthorne's narrator mirrors this belief spread by antebellum medical and domestic texts, when he declares a home to be "that very sphere which the outcast, the prisoner, the potentate, the wretch beneath mankind, the wretch aside from it, or the wretch above it, instinctively pines after – a home!" (141). It becomes clear that in Phoebe's character Hawthorne shares Catherine Beecher's conviction that "to American women, more than any others on earth, is committed the exalted privilege of extending over the world those blessed influences, that are to renovate degraded man, and clothe all climes with beauty" (12–13). And in fact, the young girl's influence on her wretched cousins is visible almost immediately. It is her active home-making and her gift to transform all worldly tasks into acts of beauty that drives away Hepzibah's melancholia and Clifford's nervousness. For the latter, Phoebe is soon irreplaceable, as she fulfils the role of his "nurse, his guardian, and his playmate" (*HSG*, 138).

One of Hawthorne's literary tableaux, positioning all the novel's characters as spending a quiet, happy summer Sunday afternoon in the blooming garden, serves to fortify the positive influence of her "healthy presence". In those garden scenes, the sinister Holgrave "applied himself to the task of enlivening the party", "even Hepzibah threw off one tint of melancholy", and "Clifford grew to be the gayest of them all" (156). Especially Clifford profits from the domestic life Phoebe has created. Prematurely aged due to his wrongful imprisonment, he "grew youthful, while she sat beside him" (139). Continuously unsettled by the reproaches of the villainous Jaffrey Pyncheon and swaying between fits of passion and phases of depression, the established domestic sphere, personified by the true woman, has provided him the refuge the psychiatrists declared would stabilize his mental constitution. Holgrave aptly points out to Phoebe that "whatever health, comfort, and natural life exists in the house, is embodied in your person" (216). The domestic scenes in the garden are reminiscent of the moral treatment regimen practiced in American asylums. As David Kennard summarizes in *Therapeutic Communities* (1983), "moral treatment meant placing the victim of ... social pressures in an environment designed to restore inner equilibrium. In their asylums they attempted to create a new, ideal mini-society in which the virtues of order, calm and productive work would replace the

chaos and competitiveness of a burgeoning new world” (13). Patients were set up in situations mimicking a calm domestic environment without restraint or punishment, a practice that was endorsed by virtually every superintendent. As early as 1832, Amariah Brigham argues that since

insanity is generally produced by morbid excitement of some portions of the brain, it requires for its cure that this disordered organ should be left in absolute repose. Hence arises the benefit of Asylums for Lunatics ... where their minds are not excited, but soothed by kind words and gentle and affectionate treatment (31).

In fact, the psychiatric community unanimously declared the asylum the only appropriate place for lunatics and the only place where a cure could be effected (Connolly, 413). Hawthorne, on the other hand, portrays the asylum as a place of punishment and a looming threat over Clifford’s head. However, as Benjamin Reiss points out, Hawthorne does seem to embrace the therapeutic premise of the moral treatment regimen (5): through Phoebe’s gentle and affectionate treatment and her admittance of an “odd kind of motherly sentiment” toward Clifford she effectively restores his mental balance and is partly able to resocialize him (*HSG*, 206).

Holgrave is the third inhabitant affected by Phoebe’s socializing powers. Hawthorne depicts him as the embodiment of the modern man, albeit a too progressive one for society’s taste. While the character serves to introduce contemporary technological innovations as well as fads and trends of the nineteenth century, Holgrave is also a radical, and first and foremost the personification of social disorder (Pfister, 156). Phoebe is shocked as she is exposed to his passionate fantasy of tearing down society and paving the way for a new kind of political and social order, which is contrary to her own moral compass and her innate obedience to traditional authority. However, Phoebe, in her role as a true woman and automatic reformer of men, manages to have a more than a balancing influence on him as well. “Without such purpose, on her part, and unconsciously on his, she made the House of the Seven Gables like a home to him, and the garden a familiar precinct” (182). Affected by the innocence and morality of the young girl, he withstands the temptation to mesmerize her and eventually falls in love with her.

The ending, the most contested part of the novel, sees Holgrave marrying Phoebe, accepting her presidency over “a superior, moral economy” and forsaking his radical beliefs in favour of upward mobility (Brown, 6). He confesses that his past life seemed “lonesome and dreary” but as Phoebe crossed the threshold, “hope, warmth, and joy” entered with her. He dispels her fear of him leading her astray from her “own quiet path” and nature by admitting his “presentiment, that, hereafter, it will be my lot to set out trees, to make fences – perhaps, even, in due time, to build a house for another generation – in a word, to conform myself to laws, and the peaceful practice of society” (*HSG*, 306–7). Through this marriage, Holgrave is domesticated and integrated into the conservative community.

Phoebe’s impact on the cases of Clifford on the one hand, and Holgrave on the other hand sheds light on the difference between a supportive therapeutic concept of domesticity and a controlling concept of domestication. As both Hawthorne and Amariah Brigham believed, a woman’s positive influence depended on her own ignorance or aversion of the morbid: “Whatever was

morbid in [Clifford's] mind and experience, she ignored, and thereby kept their intercourse healthy by the incautious, but, as it were, heaven-directed freedom of her whole conduct" (143). Stephen Knadler specifies, that in Phoebe's case the ignorance of the morbid is combined with a restraint in judgement as a respite from the continuous judgement of society (297). This constitutes a necessity in order for the "insane" to regain self-control, a conviction that Hawthorne shared with the early psychiatrists.

The sick in mind, and perhaps, in body are rendered more darkly and hopelessly so by the manifold reflection of their disease, mirrored back from all quarters, in the deportment of those about them; they are compelled to inhale the poison of their own breath, in infinite repetition. But Phoebe afforded her poor patient a supply of pure air (*HSG*, 143).

So, while the concept of domesticity defines the "feminine gaze" as a retreat from a fragmented world "by overturning society's normative judgments" and by defying categorizations of insanity or deviance, the concept of domestication casts women as the main agents in obeying the rules of mental hygiene, as main agents in the "construction of the subject according to the laws of the norm" and society's reforming impulses (Knadler, 296–297).

While *The Scarlet Letter* deals with obsession, mania, and delusion caused by a lack of domesticity, pushing the central female character to a liminal and marginal social status, *The House of Seven Gables* portrays the home, domesticity and domestication as therapeutic elements in the treatment of mental derangement in contrast to the opinion of the psychiatric community which posited the asylum as the only truly curative place (even though, one might remember, Catherine Sedgwick did call the House of Seven Gables a lunatic asylum). In Phoebe, Hawthorne ascribes to woman an active, reformist, morally superior role, complicit in the perpetuating of an oppressive ideology of femininity. The novel breaks off just as Holgrave and Phoebe embark upon the journey to their new abode and invites the reader to imagine a happily-ever-after. However, when confronted with the nineteenth-century exposés mentioned in the beginning, the reader might just as well imagine a different outcome: What would happen if Phoebe stepped outside her role as the perfect, moral, self-medicating angel and fails to fulfil the domestic agenda? What happens to the happy couple, when the realities of marriage and the burden of pregnancy, childbirth, or the death of a loved one "overtax" Phoebe? What happens, when Phoebe, like Elizabeth Packard and Elizabeth Stone, chooses a different religious denomination than her husband? We can only wonder whether Phoebe would not become another one of those voices telling the story of their institutionalization; or whether Phoebe would belong to that large group of women, whose voices were never to be heard again after entering the asylum.

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