

"The Destined Prophetess:" *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and the American Jeremiad

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In this paper, I examine the power and reach of the American jeremiad as a tool for social reform by tracing its development through Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. The American jeremiad, as outlined by critic Sacvan Bercovitch, is both an ideological viewpoint and a literary genre. It attempts to reform American society by calling attention to society's flaws. The jeremiad seeks to link personal conviction with public policy, often drawing on common religious beliefs and archetypes to prove the validity of its claims. Because the jeremiad system is embodied through protest, however, it ultimately absorbs all calls for reform, creating an unbreakable cycle.

Using Bercovitch's arguments, I demonstrate how Stowe and Hawthorne both use the jeremiad genre to advance their critiques of American society, particularly through the characters of Cassy and Hester Prynne. Through Cassy, Stowe puts forth a typically jeremiadic argument about the cruelties of slavery, using religious imagery and a strict adherence to Christian principles. Hawthorne, on the other hand, uses Hester to criticize the jeremiad's primary function: The joining of personal beliefs and secular government. My paper argues that, despite Hawthorne's dissatisfaction with the jeremiad, both novels ultimately conform to the jeremiad system and show that system's strength as a form of national rhetoric. Reading Hawthorne's and Stowe's novels through a jeremiadic lens show its ideological power to integrate people of all backgrounds into a uniquely American system.

In 1850, Nathaniel Hawthorne published *The Scarlet Letter*, the novel that critics would come to see as his masterpiece. The story of the adulteress Hester Prynne and the punishment foisted on her by the Puritan community of Boston received immediate acclaim. Contemporary reviews categorized it as a work of "extraordinary power" and hailed Hawthorne as a uniquely American writer (Duyckinck 238-9). Two years later, Harriet Beecher Stowe, a New England housewife, published *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Her expose on slavery, which had first been serialized in the *National Era*, was a literary sensation both in the United States and abroad (Showalter 111, 108). On first reading, no two works could seem more dissimilar. While Hawthorne's novel is a brief, microscopically focused tale of sin and

guilt, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is a work of epic proportions, spanning the entire United States and encompassing a diverse cast of characters. *The Scarlet Letter* is steeped in ambiguity, while Stowe's purpose echoes stridently through every page of her novel. What both works hold in common, however, is their adherence to the jeremiad, a genre of literature that was transformed into a form of social protest by the New England Puritans. The American jeremiad worked to reform society even as it condemned it, as the Biblical prophet Jeremiah had both condemned the people of Israel and called them to repentance. When these novels are examined through the lens of the jeremiad, two characters in particular stand out: Stowe's Cassy and Hawthorne's Hester Prynne. Both women become female

Jeremiahs in the works they inhabit, prophetesses who both decry the state of current affairs and point toward a better future. Examining the two women together shows the flexibility and power of the jeremiad as a vehicle for social change, providing a way to see them as empowered female characters. Cassy and Hester demonstrate how the jeremiad allows for both the joining together of public and private life and their splitting apart when necessary, creating a system of protest and change that is the ultimate manifestation of freedom.

The Jeremiad Tradition

The jeremiad has long been a driving force in the American literary landscape, and by extension, a driving force in American culture. In his comprehensive study of the genre, critic Sacvan Bercovitch characterized jeremiads as “ancient formulaic refrain[s]” (6) that were appropriated and transformed by Puritan settlers. Jeremiads traveled to America along with the colonists: The first jeremiad Bercovitch quotes is a sermon by John Winthrop, one of the founders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Fleeing from a country they considered morally bankrupt, the Puritans identified deeply with a rhetoric that warned of impending doom for countries that turned their back on God. However, the uniquely American jeremiad that they would develop was different from its European predecessors from the start. While the European jeremiads promised damnation with little hope for grace or improvement, American jeremiads adopted a different approach. Instead of simply condemning sin, these sermons stressed America’s special place and mission within a context of Biblical fulfillment. The Puritans were a people chosen by God, fated to work out a mighty purpose in their new homeland. Thus, while the Puritan jeremiads did denounce the sin that was seen in the community, they also promised a brighter future when God would fulfill His promises to them and establish His

kingdom on earth. The tremendous physical and spiritual ordeals the settlers faced in their day-to-day lives only served to convince them further of their holy purpose because they “dr[ew] their inspiration from insecurity” (62). As the settlers became more and more entrenched in the American landscape, so too did their form of the jeremiad.

As the jeremiad grew and developed, it moved farther and farther away from its Puritan roots, ultimately becoming a more secularized form of national rhetoric. One of the figures Bercovitch credits with spearheading this change is Jonathan Edwards, the great Puritan preacher and one of the leaders of the Great Awakening. According to Bercovitch, Edwards extended Puritan theology, making it applicable to all American Christians (106). The jeremiad became an American story instead of simply a Puritan one. As a consequence, it was also more inclusive and secular, shifting focus from religion to a “belief in human progress” (93). The thing that did not change was the jeremiad’s emphasis on the fusion of public and private selves. The Puritans had believed that it was only by harnessing their personal convictions to public government that they could bring about the kingdom of God on earth; their descendants followed a similar creed that substituted “limitless secular improvement” (94) for a sacred kingdom.

Several decades after the Great Awakening, the American Revolution proved to be a culmination of jeremiadic ideals. In separating from England, the colonists marked revolution as a “vehicle of providence” that ended the mission begun by their Puritan forefathers (134). Instead of violence and mutiny, the Revolution brought about “the harvest of Puritanism,” (132) the completion of the first settler’s divine purpose. The rhetoric of the jeremiad enabled the revolutionaries to see their work as an execution of God’s will (134). Ultimately, the American Revolution reinforced the jeremiad as a means to enact change through rebellion and protestation, and ensured that

this pattern would leave a lasting mark on American culture.

Essentially, the jeremiad was used to forge spiritual life to public progress. It created a tradition that “consecrated the American present as a movement from promise to fulfillment” and then transformed that fulfillment into a national drive for reform and development (93-4). This tradition of progress through protest had a profound impact on American culture, creating what Bercovitch argues is an unbreakable system. Since the jeremiad is built on a tradition of protest, calls for reform to the system become a means of participating in and maintaining that same system. In some ways, the jeremiad tradition becomes “a fundamental force against social change” (204) that subsumes all causes and reforms into itself. This tradition creates a vision of American culture that is constantly striving for a perfection that it can never reach.

Although the jeremiad’s most recognizable form is a sermon, its crucial role in American development ensured that it cropped up everywhere, from political tracts to novels and poetry. Fiction, in particular, can provide “the most striking testimony . . . to the power and reach of the American jeremiad” (180). Within this tradition, Cassy and Hester emerge as characters who are crucially important, both to the novels they inhabit and to the jeremiad tradition. In *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *The Scarlet Letter*, they become the fullest revelations of Hawthorne’s and Stowe’s purposes. They are jeremiads in human form, prophetesses who condemn the societies they live in and foretell a brighter future. In some ways, they are strikingly similar: Both are defined by extramarital sex and motherhood, both live on the fringes of society, and both navigate a mythical American landscape filled with figures who either tempt or teach them. Both emerge as prophetesses of a new order. However, these similarities only serve to underscore the vastly different principles they advocate. While Cassy embodies the

jeremiad’s purpose of joining public and private life together, Hester represents a rebellion against that very principle—something that still places her squarely in the jeremiad tradition.

“What a Thing it is to be a Christian”

When Cassy first appears in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, she is a broken woman who epitomizes the evils of slavery. Tom meets her shortly after he is bought by Simon Legree, a cruel and inhuman plantation owner. The Legree plantation is a “wild, forsaken” (Stowe 312) place in the middle of swamps, a home of decay and misery and an “inferno on earth” (Donovan 101). Cassy, Legree’s sex slave, is a beautiful but profoundly troubled woman. When Tom first meets her in the cotton fields, he notices that her face is “deeply wrinkled with lines of pain, and of proud and bitter endurance” (320). An atheist who has lost all hope in God and man, Cassy cries out desperately against society and her place in it. When she is ministering to Tom after he has been beaten, she tells him that he “must give up” and that calling on God is useless because “he never hears” (327). Raised as a free woman, she was passed around from man to man as a sex slave, and gave birth to two children who she loved dearly. After she and her children were separated and sold, she bore her new master another son, who she killed in desperation. Her life is now one of hopeless despair that is slowly driving her to madness. In Cassy, Stowe combines the worst aspects of slavery: The tearing apart of families and the gradual dehumanizing and damnation of everyone who is touched by it. Cassy speaks the truth when she warns Legree to “be careful, for I’ve got the devil in me” (337). She bears within her all the madness, desperation, and evil that springs from slavery, and she gives voice to it in her seizure-like fits, her furious railings against God, and her cries of judgement. Speaking to Tom, she condemns the entire United States, saying “in the judgement day, I will stand up

before God, a witness against those that have ruined me . . . body and soul” and “when everything comes to light;--won’t there be vengeance, then!” (335). In these first appearances, Cassy acts as a brutal indictment of America’s “peculiar institution” and the lengths to which it drives the men and women under it.

Although Cassy fully embodies the judgement of the jeremiad, but she does not yet represent its prophetic purpose. In Stowe’s world, social reform and progress are intimately linked to Christianity. It is not enough to simply acknowledge that the institution of slavery is wrong; human sympathies must be “in harmony with the sympathies of Christ” (404-05). Ultimately, Stowe calls for the jeremiadic ideal of the synthesis of public and private life. Christianity, the personal and spiritual, must be harnessed to public policy and opinion before any effective change can take place. As an atheist, Cassy can condemn slavery endlessly, but if she is to change society and her position in it, her conversion is vital.

Stowe places Cassy in a hell-like landscape that she must transcend before gaining her position as prophetess. Fittingly, Tom and Legree, the two most important men in her life, function as representatives for Christ and the devil, respectively. Tom, the novel’s protagonist, serves as the catalyst for Cassy’s redemption. A “good” and “pious” man (2), his position as a Christ figure becomes fully apparent after her arrival at the plantation and begins to interact with Cassy. He entreats her to become a Christian (336) and ministers to her singing hymns and reading from the Bible (361). For her part, Cassy is mysteriously drawn to him. At their first meeting she “ke[eps] close at his side” (321) even though they have never met before, and she uses her influence with Legree to help him in any way she can. As for Legree, his actions continue to push Cassy to her limits, and threaten to damn her soul irrevocably. His abuse compounds her atheism and drives her to alcoholism (343), and when he buys a young girl, Emmeline, to

replace her, she resolves to murder him. The climax of this battle for Cassy’s soul comes when she attempts to enlist Tom’s help in killing Legree. Tom refuses and reminds her that God calls her to love her enemies, and once again begs her to turn to Christ. Realizing that Legree will drive her to damnation, he advises her to flee the plantation with Emmeline, but only if she can “go without blood-guiltiness” (363). His encouragement spurs her to formulate an escape plan. Tom refuses to tell Legree where Cassy and Emmeline have gone, and as a result is beaten to death. Jane Tompkins has pointed out that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* recasts Christ’s crucifixion within the context of slavery (134). When seen through this lens, Tom’s purpose becomes sacred. His death redeems Cassy, allows her and Emmeline to escape, and paves the way for her prophetic reenactment of a better future.

While Cassy’s relationship with Tom sets her on the path that will eventually lead her out of the Legree plantation to freedom, it is her relationship with Emmeline that cements her position as a female Jeremiah. Fifteen-year-old Emmeline has recently been separated from her own mother, and looks for a replacement in Cassy. At first, Cassy’s manner is far from encouraging. She advises Emmeline to drink, and when Emmeline tells her that she regrets being born, Cassy tells her own thoughts of suicide (342-3). As Cassy begins to improve under Tom’s influence, however, she becomes determined to prevent Emmeline from suffering as she did. When Tom convinces her to escape, she concocts an elaborate escape plan that involves hiding in the attic and convincing Legree the house is haunted. Although Cassy’s manner is still quite harsh—she threatens to kill Emmeline if she faints (369)—her actions still speak of motherly protection and love. While she and Emmeline hide in the attic, she tells Emmeline that she is the only thing keeping her from surrendering to Legree: “If it wasn’t for *you*, child . . . I’d go out to them . . . for what use will freedom be to me?” (374). Emmeline

promises to be a daughter to her, and Cassy embraces her. This regaining of motherhood is significant because, as other critics have observed, Stowe's novel also tells "the story of salvation through motherly love" (Tompkins 125). Throughout *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, mothers act as figureheads of a social order based on Christian love. From Mrs. Bird who is determined to obey the Bible even if it means breaking the law (Stowe 72) to St. Clare's mother who taught him the "idea of the dignity and worth of the meanest human soul," (208) the mothers of Stowe's novel hold tremendous power to shape not only their families, but also all of society into a new vision of freedom and love.

Cassy's reclaiming of motherhood through Emmeline foreshadows her reunion with her own lost children, and reveals her purpose as a prophetess: She prefigures a reshaping of society through the reunion of families. That Cassy rarely speaks in the novel's closing chapters does not hinder her purpose, her actions are enough. As soon as she "sink[s] . . . into the bosom of the family" and becomes "a devout and tender Christian" (392), she fulfills her prophetic duty. Stowe makes clear that the reunion and healing Cassy's journey points toward is only possible through the linking of Christianity and public policy. The last paragraphs of the novel are a jeremiad in miniature, claiming that the United States can only be saved "through repentance, justice and mercy" or else it will be destroyed by "the wrath of Almighty God" (408). Cassy's story demonstrates how such repentance and justice can take place: Through conversion and familial love. By wedding Cassy's bitter condemnation of slavery with her triumphant escape and conversion, Stowe puts forth a vision of social reform that epitomizes the jeremiad's approach to social protest.

Cassy and the Harris family's move to Liberia, one of the most controversial parts of the novel, demonstrates the problem with the type of social reform the jeremiad advocates. Liberian colonization was never embraced by the African American

community of Stowe's day (Ammons 233), because they rightly saw it as an excuse to expel them from the United States. That Stowe has George Harris refer to Liberia as "*Our nation*" (394) reveals both a hope for a new country built on the principles Cassy foretells and a disturbing undercurrent of racism. Such duality is not uncommon for jeremiads. As Bercovitch observes, "their affirmations betray . . . a fear of the future" (xiv) even as they call for improvements to the current system. While the jeremiad calls for a better future, it is often unable to do more than dimly herald that same future. This same ambiguity can also be seen running through *The Scarlet Letter*.

"The Sanctity of a Human Heart"

While Cassy's prophetic journey represents the quintessential jeremiadic journey toward social and personal amalgamation, Hawthorne's Hester Prynne becomes a symbol of the need to separate public and private life. Hawthorne's Puritan community of Boston is one that has already achieved the appearance of the jeremiadic ideal of religious governance. In their community, "religion and law [are] almost identical," and this unity has worked its way so deeply into the settlement that "the mildest and severest acts of public discipline were alike made venerable and awful" (Hawthorne 37). According to their worldview, the crime Hester has committed is indeed severe: She has committed adultery and given birth to an illegitimate child. As the women of the community note, she has disgraced the entire settlement, and deserves to die, or at least be branded (39). Instead, she is forced to wear the titular scarlet letter. It immediately removes her from the rest of the community and "tak[es] her out of the ordinary relations with humanity" (41). Her act of rebellion breaks the link between the public and personal spheres of her life. As a convicted sinner, she will not be able to fit into the unity of soul and law that the Puritans have constructed. The Puritan elders

are keenly aware of this, pushing her to confess and repent so she can remove the letter. Hester refuses, saying “It is too deeply branded. Ye cannot take it off” (49). By accepting the scarlet letter, Hester marks herself as the prophetic of a new system, one which will repudiate the values of the jeremiad and insist on a separation between secular government and the complicated workings of the human heart.

Although this new order is at first looked on with fear and horror, it becomes clear that the jeremiad system, instead of correcting sin can lead to deeper sin and hypocrisy. At first, the scarlet A is repulsive not only to the Puritans, who associate it with “the flames of the infernal pit” (50), but also to Hester. The prophetic burden she is saddled with gives her no joy. Through the letter, she gains “a new sense . . . a sympathetic knowledge of the hidden sin in other hearts” (60). This new sense torments Hester, who is unsure whether she is seeing the truth or is being tempted by the devil. However, these thoughts condemn the jeremiad tradition by forcing her to realize the flaws inherent to it. A complete wedding of spiritual life and public policy is impossible, and will only result in the hidden sin she sees. Even though the most radical of Hester’s thoughts are never voiced verbally, she still condemns the jeremiad by her questioning and becomes a symbol for its abolishment. Meanwhile, the people around her either beckon toward the new system Hester has unwillingly become a member of, or illustrate the failings of the jeremiad to an extreme degree.

Pearl, the illegitimate daughter of Hester and Arthur Dimmesdale, develops into the physical incarnation of the new order her mother is slowly becoming aware of. From almost the beginning of her daughter’s life, Hester links Pearl to the letter she wears. Pearl is “the scarlet letter endowed with life,” and Hester dresses her in “crimson velvet” dresses with “flourishes of gold thread” (69) that are eerily reminiscent of the “fantastically embroidered and illuminated”

letter on her own breast (41). Just as the scarlet letter gives Hester a subversive awareness that she both draws toward and recoils from, her daughter fills her with a mixture of deep love and perplexing fear. Pearl is to be Hester’s means to redemption, but she is also irrevocably connected to the sin that condemned her in the first place. Hester’s love for Pearl and for her “remoteness and intangibility” makes her long to “snatch her to her bosom, with . . . earnest kisses,” but also makes her question whether the girl is entirely human (63). Like the new system Hester prophesies, Pearl at first steadfastly refuses to be bound to the jeremiad. When Hester brings her to be examined by the town elders, she writhes away when one of the men attempts to “draw [her] betwixt his knees,” fleeing to a window where she perches “like a wild tropical bird. . . ready to take flight into the upper air” (75). When the men ask who made her, she attributes her existence entirely to her mother who, she claims “plucked” her from a “bush of wild roses” (76). In this scene, she not only firmly aligns herself with Hester and her new order, she also repudiates the Puritan worldview, and with it, the jeremiad.

While Pearl pulls her mother toward a rejection of the jeremiad, Hester’s husband Roger Chillingworth represents the jeremiad tradition twisted into something perverse and monstrous, and her lover, Dimmesdale, becomes a victim of it. Chillingworth, who returns from his Indian captivity to learn of Hester’s infidelity, becomes obsessed with discovering the identity of her lover. Despite Hester’s refusal to give Dimmesdale up, he makes it his life’s mission to expose and damn her lover’s soul. Like the jeremiad, Chillingworth becomes a force that demands conformity. Dimmesdale’s sins, his personal life, must be uncovered and must be forced under the law. Chillingworth comes to symbolize the jeremiad’s all-encompassing power that claims ownership of all beliefs and ideologies and attempts to force them into an indistinguishable whole. When he claims that “Thou and thine, Hester Prynne,

belong to me,” he is demanding that the jeremiad tradition continue (54). He quickly discerns Dimmesdale’s secret and sets about “probing” him “like a treasure-seeker in a dark cavern” (83). Dimmesdale himself is tormented by his sin. He becomes “careworn and emaciated” (77) and begins scourging himself (96). Despite his guilt, his attempts to confess are feeble at best. Although he often preaches from the pulpit that he is “altogether vile,” (95) his need to join the community’s religious expectations with the state of his heart cause him to fall into hypocrisy, torment, and even greater sin.

Hester tries to help Dimmesdale by attempting to break him free from Chillingworth and the stifling control of the jeremiad. After she learns that Chillingworth is tormenting him, she resolves to help Dimmesdale, and meets with him in the forest. During their meeting, she tries to convince him to leave Boston and its jeremiadic form of government for good. She is partially successful when she persuaded him that Chillingworth’s sin of “violat[ing] . . . the sanctity of a human heart” (126) was worse than their adultery, but Dimmesdale is still powerfully bound to the jeremiad and the government it represents. While Hester begs him to forget his sin and to “Meddle no more with it! Begin all anew!” he tells her that he is “powerless to go” (127). He cannot imagine a life away from the colony, saying “I have had no other than to drag on my earthly existence in the sphere where Providence has placed me. . . . I dare not quit my post” (127). His existence and purpose are tied to the community and the work of the jeremiad that it embodies. Finally, however, Hester is able to convince him to leave the settlement with her and Pearl. She takes off the scarlet letter (130), prepared to abandon Boston and the jeremiad for good.

However, Hester’s abandonment of the letter is premature, as Dimmesdale’s death demonstrates. Although her journey up to this point has seemed to prepare her for a break from the jeremiad, his death reveals her true prophetic purpose: A prophetess of

the jeremiad. After preaching an election day sermon that “foretell[s] a high and glorious destiny for the newly gathered people of the Lord,” (157) Dimmesdale collapses on the town scaffold. Before dying, however, he claims Pearl as his daughter. Pearl, with the same “bird-like motion” (159) that characterized her earlier fleeing from the jeremiad, runs to Dimmesdale and embraces him while Hester reluctantly follows. By acknowledging Pearl, Dimmesdale also acknowledges the new system she represents. However, this acknowledgement also reconciles her to and binds her to the jeremiad, finally uniting Dimmesdale’s spiritual and public selves, which have been at war with each other over the course of the entire novel. In his final moments, he willingly exposes his sin to the community and proclaims that “his own red stigma, is no more than the type of what has seared his inmost heart” (161). Dimmesdale’s death becomes a jeremiadic sacrifice, and in his final moments, he begs Hester to continue this work. Asking her to help him to the scaffold, he tells her to use her strength to support him but to “let it be guided by the will which God hath granted [him]” (160). Dimmesdale’s final actions accept the new order Hester revealed to him, but they also call for this order to be instituted through the jeremiad. He begs Hester to follow in his footsteps and submit herself and her order to the jeremiad system, a request she eventually honors when she returns to Boston many years later, still wearing the scarlet letter.

Instead of founding a new order, Hester ends the novel as a prophetess of the jeremiad. After her return, she lives out the rest of her life advising unhappy women and proclaiming “her firm belief, that, at some brighter period . . . a new truth would be revealed” (166). By conforming to the jeremiad, she is able to work change to it from within. She advises the women who come to her that at some distant point in the future “the whole relation between man and woman” will be built “on a surer ground mutual happiness” (166). Tellingly, Pearl has

disappeared from the narrative, only communicating with Hester through gifts and letters (165). Within the jeremiad, changes come gradually, and Pearl and the system she represents do not yet have a place in Boston. The new order that Hester suggests is more merciful and loving than the old, but it still springs from and is entrenched in the jeremiad system. It will be brought about by people like Hester and Dimmesdale, who selflessly bind their private and public lives to the jeremiad in order to work change through it, change that they themselves may never see. While Hester at first seemed to prophesy the destruction of the jeremiad tradition, she ends *The Scarlet Letter* as its greatest champion. Her eventual submission to and reconciliation with it shows the jeremiad's ability to self-correct and adapt to the changing needs of the community.

The ambiguity that filled the last pages of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* also fills *The Scarlet Letter's* final chapter. Hawthorne is reluctant to categorize Hester as the prophetess of the new order she advocates. While Hester "had vainly imagined that she herself might be the destined prophetess," she "had long since recognized the impossibility that any mission of divine and mysterious truth should be confided to a woman stained with sin" (166). Once again, the jeremiad's reach far exceeds its grasp. Calling for a reform of the social order, Hawthorne finds it impossible to present a clear picture of what such a future would look like. Like "the destined prophetess," it will come in some shape that is, at present, alien and unrecognizable. As Nina Baym observes, Hawthorne refuses to write a happy ending that he believes goes against men and women's fundamental natures (557). Although Baym was discussing the novel through a feminist lens, her analysis holds true for a jeremiad reading of the novel as well. *The Scarlet Letter* calls for reform, but ends by conforming to the same system it rebelled against, because there is no viable alternative it can see.

Prophetic Mothers

A jeremiadic reading of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Scarlet Letter* provides a valuable commentary on American rhetoric and identity, but it also says a great deal about the power of motherhood within a jeremiad system. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the full implications of this linkage, a brief analysis does demonstrate the impact and scope of the American jeremiad. One of the most intriguing threads joining Hester and Cassy together is their shared motherhood, and in Stowe's and Hawthorne's novels, the powers and limitations of motherhood are deeply linked to the jeremiad.

Cassy and Hester are both quietly extraordinary until their children force them into the public eye and into action. When Cassy's biological children are sold away from her, she is driven to madness and murder. This behavior leads her to be passed down from master to master, until she arrives at the Legree plantation. It is the appearance of Emmeline, a girl who has been separated from her mother just as Cassy's children were, that spurs her into decisive action. Pearl draws Hester into the public sphere in an even more explicit manner. A "sin-born infant," (Hawthorne 46) Pearl is the only physical confirmation of Hester's affair. If she had never been conceived, Hester's sin would never have been discovered, and she would never have been forced to bring her private life under public scrutiny. Like the jeremiad, motherhood takes private acts and transforms them into public ritual.

Just as the jeremiad encompasses both power and limitation, motherhood leaves Cassy and Hester open to weakness as well as strength. As discussed above, Cassy sees Emmeline as her only reason to go on living (Stowe 374). While mothering Emmeline encourages Cassy to grasp and make use of the strength she does have, it also limits that strength by channeling it into one single, precarious goal. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester's relationship with Pearl

illustrates the same principle. When the Boston elders consider removing Pearl from her custody and placing her with another family, she becomes desperate, declaring “God gave her into my keeping! . . . I will not give her up!” in a voice that is “almost . . . a shriek” (Hawthorne 76). However, these seeming vulnerabilities also lead to some of the women’s most powerful actions. Cassy’s devotion to Emmeline leads her to defy Legree in increasingly more open and final, and the elder’s threat prompts Hester to demand help from Dimmesdale in one of the novel’s most charged and arresting scenes. Cassy’s and Hester’s children, their greatest source of helplessness, ultimately prove to be their greatest source of strength in an echo of the jeremiad’s incorporation of supposedly contradictory purposes.

By entwining motherhood and the jeremiad system so deeply in their works, Stowe and Hawthorne elevate motherhood itself to a sacred act. In Cassy’s and Hester’s worlds, the final purpose of motherhood is to redeem its practitioners and raise them to a place in society they could never have reached otherwise. If Cassy had never met Emmeline, she would never have left Legree, and if Pearl had never been born, Hester would never have discovered the limitations of the jeremiad. Motherhood is also an act that is nonvirginal by definition, providing worldly and potentially sinful women with a place of influence and power. From an ideological standpoint, this sanctification of motherhood is revolutionary. The jeremiad established a national rhetoric that is deeply woven into American values and identity. By using prophetic mothers as the spokespersons of their novels, Hawthorne and Stowe pave the way for a world where women and mothers have influence and power just as earth-shaking as their male counterparts.

Destined Prophetesses

Although their purposes at first seem diametrically opposed to each other, Cassy and Hester end their journeys both upholding

the jeremiad tradition. However, instead of blindly conforming to the ritual, both become prophetesses who foretell changes to flawed systems. In spite of her move to Liberia, Cassy still represents a Christian government overthrowing slavery and healing its damage. In spite of Hawthorne’s insistence that Hester is not “the destined prophetess,” the ending belies his claims. Cassy and Hester both end their journeys prophesying new social orders, whether it is through Cassy’s conversion and reunion with her family, or through Hester’s return to Boston. Despite the fact that the neither Stowe, Hawthorne, nor the jeremiad could envision the futures Cassy and Hester foretold, they still make steps toward those changes, and so did the United States. Slavery was abolished. The Constitution declared America a land of religious liberty. Although racial and religious discrimination are still pressing problems, America continues to make steps to correct them. Moreover, the fact that Stowe and Hawthorne choose to place their most convincing arguments and predictions in the mouths of women cannot be overstated. Within their respective worlds, Cassy and Hester are the lowest of the low: a slave woman and an adulteress. In the futures Stowe and Hawthorne dimly imagine, they gain redemption, and power over the hearts and minds of communities and nations. Limiting though it may be, the jeremiad’s ability to encompass conflicting arguments and hold them both to be true makes it one of the truest literary expressions of American principles. By encompassing all calls for reform, it becomes a vibrant, contradictory tradition that slowly moves toward change. The jeremiad ultimately suggests that in America male and female, slave and free, saint and sinner, all have a crucial purpose in reforming and shaping the nation.

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