

"The Sweet Word," Sister:
The Transformative Threat of
Sisterhood and *The Blithedale Romance*

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A politicized rhetoric of sisterhood evolved in the United States over the latter two-thirds of the nineteenth century as women entered the political arena with the goal of redefining their roles and rights in the nation. Employed to suggest a connection between personal and communal ties among women, sisterhood rhetoric was shaped and nuanced over the course of the century, becoming a centerpiece in woman's rights lexicons—an oft-repeated charge to gendered solidarity. Beginning with early women orators like Sarah and Angelina Grimké, Ernestine Rose, and Lucretia Mott in the 1830s, sisterhood gradually took on new, politicized meanings, as more and more women were challenged with the call to fight "for yourself and your sisters" (Bloomer 240). A term, therefore, that had traditionally described a safely domestic relationship, was being transformed in the public arena, becoming in the 1840s and 1850s—in conjunction with the rising tide and gathering focus of the woman's rights movement—a popular epithet of reformism. Within this societal context, Nathaniel Hawthorne published a tale about American reformism—a tale about sisterhood and its overlapping incarnations as personal and political relationship. For sisterhood's evolving connotations, its revolutionizing resonances appear to have layered themselves with disquieting ease around Hawthorne's already extant anxieties about the private ties of women. He knew, perhaps, as the woman's rights leaders who were organizing at mid-century knew, that hopes for rights such as the franchise, improved employment opportunities, and access to education depended on mobilizing women to act, collectively, in their own interests. Advocates hoped to create a critical feminine mass to lobby law makers, and in the course of such work to transform what Zenobia in *The Blithedale Romance* terms "the type of woman-

hood, such as man has spent centuries in making" (127).

Published in 1852—two years after the first national woman's rights convention in Worcester, Massachusetts, seven years after the publication of Margaret Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, and a decade and a half after the Grimké sisters delivered throughout Boston, Salem, and other Massachusetts towns their stirring defenses of abolition and the right of women to political participation—*The Blithedale Romance* poses uneasy questions about sisterhood's power to effect change or to satisfy emotionally the women who claim the relationship. It examines what women may be to each other and do for each other in a society dominated by men ready to counteract efforts to alter the status quo. In positioning two heroines as communal sisters who are later revealed to be biological half-sisters, Hawthorne examines the intersections of personal and public meaning for a relationship fraught with contradiction and contention in a patriarchally controlled society.

In the opening pages of *The Blithedale Romance*, the community proves itself conversant with a sisterhood ideal that little heeds the direct aims and implied connotations of the nineteenth-century's developing woman's movement. Blithedalers tout sisterhood in its innocuous and well-worn guise as part of a larger sibling rhetoric. Sororal/fraternal terminology flows unabashedly in Coverdale's recollection of the community's inception. Members sanguinely anticipate "a familiar love" (51), a "blessed state of brotherhood and sisterhood" (46), attained effortlessly and, almost literally, overnight: "Tomorrow, if you please, we will be brethren and sisters, and begin our new life from day-break" (48). Few details elucidate what Blithedalers mean by these familial terms, as the rhetoric is invoked in much the same way many utopian thinkers, experimenters, and reformers used it: as a casual shorthand for such values as a common sense of purpose, increased intimacy, and mutual respect. Despite, or perhaps because of, Blithedalers' unwillingness to anchor their rhetoric in explicitly defined objectives, betrayal of the familial rhetoric is evidenced even at the community's inception. Speculation about degrees of personal commitment and allegations of hidden agendas mingle with the promising prospects of the communal table and fireside chat.

Hollingsworth and Coverdale create the first obvious rupture of the communal fraternal ideal, and critics have made much of the failure of their connection and the homoerotic crisis it may have signaled in Hawthorne's psyche. Yet interest in the novel's rendering of male homosociality has overshadowed what, I suggest, is the significant tie and break between Zenobia and Priscilla. Indeed, their sisterhood, literal and figurative, seems to me to be at the heart of the tale.¹ Among the characters assembled at Blithedale, it is these two women whom Hawthorne

shows to most need Blithedale's reform promises and to most genuinely seek out its familial potential. While Hollingsworth's objective from the beginning is to plunder Blithedale's resources to further his prison reform scheme, and Coverdale aims mainly for a temporary reprieve from his habitual ennui, Zenobia and Priscilla come to Blithedale looking for something more in line with the community's attractive, albeit vague, rhetoric.

Priscilla literally comes to Blithedale to find her sister; however complex or conflicted her designs for relationship, she asks at first "only that [Zenobia] will shelter me, only that she will let me be always near her" (58). Zenobia's motivation is less clearly articulated, but is, perhaps, not unlike that of Priscilla, despite Nina Baym's claim that Zenobia "has no sense of sisterhood" (199).² Zenobia is a young woman disaffected with the status quo: in mainstream Victorian America, she has found, there are no "happy" women, whatever their wealth, intelligence, or beauty (80): contented girlhood ends with the discovery that the attraction of a husband comprises woman's "one single event, which she must contrive to make the substance of her whole life" (80). The fact that she comes alone to Blithedale while still in the full flush of young womanhood suggests that she has rejected or abandoned this great object as inadequate to her needs. There are, moreover, few motives to be found to explain her foray into Blithedale other than a wish to find a kind of fulfilment in a new communal configuration. Unhappy as she may be about her lot as a woman in America, Zenobia needs none of the material boons of Blithedale that immediately captivate the starved Priscilla: plentiful food, domestic security, fresh air, invigorating activity, and pretty things have all been Zenobia's before she comes to Blithedale. Zenobia must have believed, then, that Blithedale promised her something she needed—perhaps new roles, relationships, and freedoms as a woman. It is she who proposes that "by-and-by, perhaps, when our individual adaptations begin to develop themselves, it may be that some of us, who wear the petticoat, will go afield, and leave the weaker brethren to take our places in the kitchen!" (48)—a comment that reflects a tacit acceptance of essentializing gender discourses of masculine strength and feminine weakness, but which also threatens the upset of traditionalist sphere divisions. Certainly the enthusiasm other Blithedalers evince for her ideas and leadership suggests that a substantial emotional investment accompanies her "liberal pecuniary aid" to the community (177). And her acceptance of the bond Priscilla precipitately thrusts upon her intimates that she, too, may be seeking sisters in whose "large heart" she can "nestle" (177). For despite Coverdale's emphasis on her rivalrous resentment of Priscilla, Zenobia categorically commits herself to the younger woman, informing Westervelt, "I neither know nor care what it is in me that so attaches her. But she loves me, and I will not fail her"

(114).

That Zenobia does, in spite of her pledge, ultimately fail her sister is her greatest shame, her measure of self-defeat. Self-interest patently trumps her duty of care for her sister—and Zenobia, a woman who “lectures on the rights of women” and writes “tracts in defence of the sex” cannot claim to misunderstand the symbolic import of her effort to push Priscilla out of the path to Hollingsworth (141, 60). Sisterhood crumbles in *The Blithedale Romance* under the weight of feminine heterosexual desire—under the compulsions of competition for the attention of a man. Yet as guilty as Zenobia is of inserting herself into a very old cultural paradigm of sisterhood—one reliant on patriarchal assumptions about “dark” women’s capacity for scheming against “innocent” women—she alone has not destroyed her connection to Priscilla. Though Coverdale places the blame for the ruination of the sisters’ relationship and its symbolic potential squarely on Zenobia, the narrative intimates a collusive effort to ensure the women’s estrangement.

One can trace throughout *The Blithedale Romance* the lineaments of a purposefully engineered plot to destroy Zenobia and curtail her relationship with Priscilla. Evidence abounds of orchestrated masculine retaliation against Zenobia’s presumptuousness and of a purposed contravention of the threat posed by her in community with other women. The danger of intimacy—contagion—posed by communal sisterhood was not ignored by men like Coverdale and Hollingsworth, as it was not ignored by Hawthorne. Zenobia, “with an influence breathing out of her, such as we might suppose to come from Eve” (49), could spoil a woman like Priscilla, whose cultivated pliancy might prove unable to resist such a compelling model of femininity. Indeed, Priscilla appears to seek out a stronger will to direct her, and whether she will follow the lead of Zenobia or of Hollingsworth constitutes the novel’s tension. As James Mellow notes, the fear of an impressionable woman falling under the influence of another woman is clearly articulated in Coverdale’s scrutiny of Priscilla’s fascination with Zenobia. “Coverdale,” he notes, “is highly critical of the cult of ‘personal worship’ women lavish on their ‘saints and heroes’”—a discomfort reflecting, perhaps, Hawthorne’s own “ambivalen[ce] about the unquestioned admiration that young women and girls expended on the heroines of their sex; it was the kind of idolatry he had witnessed among the girlish admirers of Margaret Fuller” (396). Within *The Blithedale Romance* at least, the risk of contagion may be managed: the machinations of Coverdale, Hollingsworth, and Moodie are effective in helping ensure that sisterhood fails at Blithedale, and that Zenobia is punished for pushing too hard against the “narrow limitations” set for her and her sex (39).

To credit Coverdale’s account of Zenobia and Priscilla’s relationship is

to believe that the connection is doomed from the outset. Drawing on a literary convention in the representation of sisters—rendering a pair of sisters as opposites in appearance and moral constitution—Coverdale accentuates dissimilarity in the women to the point of utter incommensurability. Zenobia as a mature, voluptuous woman, overflowing with “health and vigor” (48) stands in stark contrast to the wan, “slim and unsubstantial” Priscilla (56). Indeed, Coverdale’s desire to polarize the women precludes much attempt at rendering personality. What passes for description of the women may in reality be reduced to aphoristic commentaries on opposing—and corporeally confirmed—valuations of femininity: Coverdale pits the libidinous against the restrained, the exotic against the homespun, the assertive against the self-effacing. To complete the portrait of difference, Coverdale emphasizes the women’s positioning at extreme ends of the class scale. Zenobia is an independently wealthy and educated woman with the capacity and leisure to pursue a life of thought and action, writing and lecturing, “in behalf of woman’s wider liberty” (126). Priscilla, on the other hand, is a seamstress barely capable of subsistence, developmentally stunted in body and mind by perpetually unsatisfied need. Given circumstances so easily manipulable into emblematic contrast, Coverdale insinuates that Zenobia resists some of Priscilla’s early overtures because of a settled class prejudice. His preoccupation with delineating Zenobia as an interloping “queen,” however, only completes the sleight of hand that disguises a fundamental similarity in Zenobia’s and Priscilla’s situations: the women’s divergent claims to caste, their social status and economic profiles, are in essence equally precarious, equally contingent on masculine dictate.

Hawthorne’s—not Coverdale’s—choice to have the “heroines” occupy very different places in the class stratum was perhaps intended to comment on the insincerity of propounding social sisterhood as a metaphor for egalitarian, cooperative relationship when class and race divided women in nineteenth-century America as fully as gender supposedly connected them. The characterization of Zenobia as decidedly upper class and Priscilla as hopelessly poor may have been intended as a comment on the social demographics of the actual woman’s movement in America: class division proved a major though not unacknowledged challenge to leader’s efforts to gather women under a banner of gendered solidarity. Yet, Zenobia is an anomaly as a representative of the woman’s rights movement at mid-century; the majority of women leaders, like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Antoinette Brown, and Lucy Stone, emerged from the increasingly educated and restive middle classes of New York, New England, and the Mid-West. In having Zenobia occupy a privileged yet historically atypical position as a reformer, the divide between her and Priscilla appears that much wider, and the possibility of spanning it that much less plausible,

than if Zenobia had occupied a more representative, modest social position.

To enhance the sense of division resulting from class chasm, Coverdale urges the sisters to further separation by encouraging their pursuit of the same man. Coverdale inveigles readers, as he does Zenobia and Priscilla, to believe that in their love of Hollingsworth, the sisters create "so utter an opposition of their dearest interests, that, on one part or the other, a great grief, if not likewise a great wrong, seemed a matter of necessity" (160-61). Yet his insistence on "necessity" is factitious and cunning. In Coverdale's schematics, Zenobia and Priscilla are adversaries so fully propelled by emotion and libido that they are unable to avoid collision. They stop having choices the minute they fall in love with Hollingsworth. But Coverdale's account serves to distract from the fact that Coverdale, along with Hollingsworth, fuels and perhaps creates the women's opposition. His ruse is purposeful: if fate does not permit success, or if Zenobia and Priscilla appear to squander their opportunity for sisterhood because they "jostle one another in their love of a man like Hollingsworth," Coverdale and the patriarchal culture for whom he speaks escape scrutiny about their roles in the sisters' personal tragedy and in the gendered social aims they embody (90)—hence Coverdale's insistent emphasis on depicting Zenobia and Priscilla's rivalry and his detailed reporting of minor flirtations and petty acts of pique.

In addition to separating the sisters narratively by meticulously dichotomizing ascriptions of traits and motivations, Coverdale is also directly involved in dividing the sisters, pitting them against each other as events unfold. As a participant in Blithedale, Coverdale maintains a dogged interference in the sisters' lives, obsessively ferreting out the details of their feelings and giddily spurring them on to conflict. He clearly helps further a schism between the sisters, delighting in whatever he can interpret as a manifestation of contention over Hollingsworth. Coverdale's most successful tactic is to instill or speak aloud to Zenobia and Priscilla suspicions about the other's preeminence in Hollingsworth's affections. After witnessing a hand-clasping avowal of Zenobia's passion for Hollingsworth, for example, Coverdale taunts a confused Priscilla: "'Zenobia and yourself are dear friends, of late. . . . She loves you now, of course,' suggested I. 'And, at this very instant, you feel her to be your dearest friend?'" (130). The sarcastic "of course" snidely contradicts the declaration that Zenobia loves Priscilla, and the question mark denies that they are the dearest of friends. His words goad Priscilla to resent Zenobia's pursuit of Hollingsworth. Altogether, Coverdale's insinuation is that Priscilla cannot love Zenobia and Hollingsworth too, as Priscilla appears to want to do. By suggesting that heterosexual love makes women competitors, not

friends or communal sisters, Coverdale introduces Priscilla to the same claims of inevitability regarding a break with her sister that he constructs for the reader: "we may rest certain that our friends of today will not be our friends of a few years hence; but, if we keep one of them, it will be at the expense of the others" (93). But it is Coverdale himself who "puts strange thoughts into [Priscilla's] mind" (130), inciting rivalry by asking her to view Zenobia as a formidable competitor for Hollingsworth rather than the sister Priscilla knows her to be:

"[O]bserve how pleasantly and happily Zenobia and Hollingsworth are walking together! I call it a delightful spectacle. It truly rejoices me that Hollingsworth has found so fit and affectionate a friend! . . . [I]t is really a blessed thing for him to have won the sympathy of such a woman as Zenobia. Any man might be proud of that. Any man, even if he be so great as Hollingsworth, might love so magnificent a woman. How very beautiful Zenobia is! And Hollingsworth knows it, too!" (130)

Lest we believe, even for a moment, that the "petty malice" that propels Coverdale to needle Priscilla is an uncalculated impulse, or that it is somehow motivated by his late-confessed love for her, we remark that he offers Zenobia precisely the same treatment. (His delayed confession, in fact, is merely another example of his effort to disguise his motivations for interfering so perseveringly in Zenobia and Priscilla's lives.) Invading Zenobia's Boston salon just before she offers Priscilla up to Westervelt (and therefore presumably while she still has time to change her mind), Coverdale prods Zenobia, steeling her resolve: "Do you know, I have sometimes fancied it not quite safe, considering the susceptibility of [Priscilla's] temperament, that she should be so constantly within the sphere of a man like Hollingsworth? . . . Hollingsworth could hardly give his affections to a person capable of taking an independent stand, but only to one whom he might absorb into himself. He has certainly shown great tenderness for Priscilla" (160). What more does Zenobia need to dispel any doubt about her plan of action? To have Hollingsworth she must, according to Coverdale, remove Priscilla. Coverdale targets two vulnerable points, both of which warn Zenobia against complacency: first, he pinpoints Priscilla's particular suitability (as a compliant woman) to be a partner for Hollingsworth, and, second, he notes Hollingsworth's susceptibility to the younger woman's neediness. The first thrust contains the real barb—an effort to shame the haughty Zenobia by undercutting her pretension to advocating new identities for women. He salts a galling wound in this seemingly inconsistent feminist, whom he implicitly accuses of being prepared to shed her ideals and identity in order to attract Hollingsworth. Clearly, Coverdale seeks not only to fan in Zenobia an animosity towards Priscilla, but also to slight her as a feminist fraud who is prepared to be the woman she chastises Priscilla for being: one without mind or spine, whom a man must "stoop"

to love (127).

That Coverdale assigns Zenobia the largest measure of responsibility for the failure of the sisterhood ideal reflects his concern to portray her as the spoiling, transgressing element in the Blithedale saga. For all his seeming admiration for Zenobia—indeed, because he recognizes her social and sexual power—Coverdale's objective in his narrative is to humble her, to punish her presumption and her disdainful disregard for men like himself. Zenobia's independence, her self-assurance, and her absolute indifference to either Coverdale's charms or his opinions affront his masculinity, his sense of his potency and authority as man and poet. In short, in her personal conduct and public advocacy for women's expanded opportunities and freedoms, Zenobia trespasses on masculine prerogatives and bends gender boundaries sacrosanct to Coverdale. He signals his perception of her transgression into masculinity's compass by pointedly recounting a slip of Zenobia's tongue; when he asks Zenobia on first acquaintance whether she knows Hollingsworth, she responds, "No; only as an auditor—auditress, I mean—of some of his lectures" (53). The inclusion of the linguistic blunder is curious, considering that Coverdale is telling the tale over a decade after the fact. What Zenobia's mistake suggests to Coverdale, however, and makes him remember (or perhaps invent) it, is that Zenobia's sense of her gender identity has become confused: she rethinks her original impulse to use a masculine or nongendered noun to refer to herself and substitutes a more clearly feminized and socially acceptable term. Zenobia (at least in Coverdale's portrayal) forgets her place, her role ascribed to her by Victorian American society—a supposition reinforced by Coverdale's salacious suspicions about her sexual experience. His speculations about her sexual history indicate a resentment of Zenobia's independence from patriarchal regulation, as her "not exactly maidenlike" behavior "defrauds" men of control over women's sexuality (71, 72).

Far from willing to remain powerless in relation to Zenobia, Coverdale goes to work to constrain her with the most effective tool available to him: the power of unchallenged representation. His narrative constitutes a damning whisper campaign Zenobia cannot refute, or—in a perhaps more apt analogy—a transcription of one of those "secret tribunals" Zenobia suspects men undertake against a woman, where they "judge and condemn her, unheard" (195).

Coverdale clearly resents Zenobia's trespasses against patriarchal privilege, not only in a sensual capacity, but in a social context as well. He repeats, several times, that Zenobia seems for all intents and purposes to govern the Blithedale community. She is, for example, the "first-comer" to the farm and assumes the role of hostess on the first night, welcoming Coverdale and the others "as if to my own fireside" (48). Moreover, the

storytelling sessions, dramatic productions, tableaux vivants, May-Day celebrations, and masquerade picnics that ensue—all the activities that bind the community together—reflect Zenobia's initiative and organization, and it is to her that the community looks for direction. Somewhat petulantly, Coverdale indicates that Zenobia's will becomes synonymous with that of the community: he notes that "May-Day—I forget whether by Zenobia's sole decree, or by the unanimous vote of our Community—had been declared a moveable festival" (79). And it is Zenobia's touch that signals Priscilla's acceptance into the community: "From that instant [of Zenobia's caress], . . . [Priscilla] melted in quietly amongst us, and was no longer a foreign element. . . . [H]er tenure at Blithedale was thenceforth fixed" (62). These images of Zenobia "decreeing" holidays and "anointing" members partake of an overriding impulse to portray her as "queenly," not in celebration of her preeminence and power as a woman but to underscore her connection to her fêted yet fated historical namesake.³ Zenobia, Queen of Palmyra, led an army against Roman emperor Aurelian but was defeated by him and the force of his empire. Coverdale delights in the analogy and stretches the connection to its limit.

In addition to his startling accumulation of designations and descriptions of Zenobia as queenly, Coverdale magnifies her identification with the vanquished princess by never disclosing her real name. He repeats the fact that "Zenobia" is only a nom-de-plume: "Zenobia, by-the-by, as I suppose you know, is merely her public name; a sort of mask in which she comes before the world" (42). "She had assumed it, in the first instance, as her magazine-signature; and as it accorded well with something imperial which her friends attributed to this lady's figure and deportment, they, half-laughingly, adopted it in their familiar intercourse with her" (46). Presenting only what he wants to be understood about Zenobia, he refuses to unmask the identity behind the joke. The depth of Coverdale's desire to have posterity elide the Blithedale woman's experience with that of the third-century queen is sounded most tellingly in his proposition that Zenobia be buried below the Pulpit, the scene of her humiliation and final separation from her sister, with only "Zenobia" engraved in the stone. He seeks to leave nothing of her real identity: "It was my own wish, . . . that, on the rugged front of the rock, the name by which we familiarly knew her—ZENOBIA—and not another word, should be deeply cut, and left for the moss and lichens to fill up, at their long leisure" (211). Though he is denied his wish about Zenobia's burial site, Coverdale's design to contain the meaning of Zenobia's life is nonetheless achieved. In his narrative, she remains unnamed, a cipher for feminine defiance and defeat.

To "cover" the extent of his involvement in the affairs of Zenobia and Priscilla, as well as to disguise the true nature of his designs for Zenobia

and for sisterhood, Coverdale attempts to divert attention away from his own connections to the women by directing it towards Westervelt—a figure set off from the “regular” *Blithedale* cast by vague intimations of mysterious, immanent evil. Coverdale promulgates the theory that Westervelt’s influence—again some uncontrollable force—contributes to the tragedy that takes place in *Blithedale*: he is imputed to be Zenobia’s lover/nemesis and the necromancer from whom Priscilla must be rescued. Contrary to Coverdale’s designs, however, Westervelt points as much to, as away from, Coverdale’s own guilt in his dealings with Zenobia and Priscilla. The devil-cum-mesmerist plays something of the sooth-sayer, tearing at Coverdale’s self-exculpatory camouflage.

Beginning with a description of his “ludicrously irate” first response to Westervelt’s “halloo” in the woods, Coverdale iterates repeatedly his disdain for a man he portrays as fundamentally bereft of moral and spiritual feeling (103). Without anything specific to allege against Westervelt, Coverdale again relies on insinuation to bolster his decided yet surprisingly undetailed characterization. He assures readers, for example, that everyone who encounters the gold-toothed wizard, including Moodie’s “gross and simple neighbors,” instantly intuitively Westervelt’s wickedness (174). Yet the very groundlessness of Coverdale’s conclusions about Westervelt suggests a far more personal and less arcane source than Coverdale admits. Westervelt appears, as he is introduced, to know quite a bit about the *Blithedale* community and about the histories and personalities of the figures of most interest to Coverdale: he knows that Zenobia’s money is Hollingsworth’s object, that Hollingsworth’s commitment to his prison scheme borders on insanity, and that Priscilla’s mind and body have been devastated by poverty (107, 108). Presumably, Westervelt is no more ignorant about Coverdale than he is about the others. Westervelt’s salutation to Coverdale as “friend,” affirming a kind of kinship between them, is, then, revealing (103).

The revulsion Coverdale feels emerges from the fact that Westervelt mirrors for Coverdale his unheroic patriarchal agendas, whose centerpiece is women’s continued degradation and subjugation. The professor has his finger precisely on Coverdale’s pulse, which is the pulse of mainstream patriarchal society. Westervelt perceives and makes use of Coverdale’s and Victorian America’s hypocrisies, particularly the paradoxical desire to view women as at once spiritually superlative and socially debased; hence his side-show with the Veiled Lady. People like Coverdale gratify yet excuse their voyeuristic arousal at the spectacle of a quintessentially manipulable woman by designating feminine pliancy evidence of either divine elevation or inherent helplessness requiring masculine supervision. Westervelt differs from Coverdale—and even Hollingsworth—precisely,

and only, in that his abuses of Priscilla are obviously staged and his intentions easily fathomed: he aims to make a profit. The spiritual trumpery in which he packages the spectacle of woman's subjugation is merely a concession to the public's wish to be shielded from the full implications of its own desires.

Westervelt's "evil," then, is comprised primarily of opportunism, of profiting from the further victimization of an already victimized womanhood. But whatever Westervelt's crimes, he is not responsible for America's entire population of enervated women. Rather, he is the consummate representative of western civilization's male-authored values, which have created such women as Priscilla. Labeled "the pale Western child" to signal her origins within that same patriarchal agenda, Priscilla is the anemic feminine byproduct of ideological systems that have denied women participation in configuring cultural values, power systems, and identities (174). If anything, Westervelt challenges Coverdale's and America's fetishization of the feminine debility they have created, contending, for example, that Zenobia "even with her uncomfortable surplus of vitality, is [a] far better model of womanhood" than Priscilla (108). Such commentary cuts to the heart of the matter: Zenobia's obvious sexuality and natural independence are threatening, even to Westervelt, but reflect a real, fully developed womanhood. In contrast, the figure of femininity celebrated by Coverdale is unnatural, cultivated to suit patriarchy's taste by exploitation, malnutrition, and mental and physical deprivation. There is no denying that Westervelt is willing to use women as stock in trade. At the same time, however, he prevents Coverdale from cloaking completely his own role in upholding the values that keep women subject—that help prevent a "better model of womanhood" from taking root.

Hollingsworth is as concerned as Coverdale to prevent women from working in concert to change the status quo, though he exhibits a bluff confidence in men's capacity to counteract women's efforts. Indeed, Hollingsworth seems to exhibit a sense of security in his authority over women that Coverdale (and perhaps Hawthorne) covets but cannot emulate. A man of self-confident conviction and obvious physical prowess, Hollingsworth appears not to share Coverdale's compulsion to obfuscate his attitude towards the nascent woman's rights movement. He flatly states his determination to keep women bound within domestic roles and patriarchal ideals of feminine behavior. Yet the reactionary stridency of his voice exposes the alarm with which many men met the unnerving shifts woman's rights activists were inciting in America's thinking about women, and Hollingsworth's fulmination against woman "without man as her acknowledged principal" echoes innumerable nineteenth-century newspapers, pamphlets, and sermons (128). The quasi-hysterical tone denotes fear as much

as aggression—a fear of sisterhood, or, in short, of women acting together without masculine regulation. He accuses women's leaders—unsexed "petticoated monstrosities"—of encouraging women's "separate action," of creating a self-sustaining community that ignores the "sovereignty" men have grown to regard as natural and even providential (128). Yet Hollingsworth's vitriol emerges from a recognition that men's authority is neither natural nor absolute, but rather dependent on women's conditioned acquiescence. Herein lay the threat of woman's rights rhetorics of sisterhood: women were encouraged to look to other women for guidance and approval. The possibility was there that Zenobias might unmake Priscillas, "those delicate, nervous young creatures, not uncommon in New England" and not uncommon in America (108).

For this reason, the romantic triangle between Zenobia, Priscilla, and Hollingsworth may be seen as a struggle between Zenobia and Hollingsworth for Priscilla as much as a contest between the two women for the ideologue. In Blithedale, Zenobia and Hollingsworth share, from the first moment, Priscilla's adulation and dependence. But Priscilla is made aware by Coverdale that she is not permitted intimacy with both, and Coverdale urges competition with Zenobia rather than alliance. Predictably, when Hollingsworth discovers that the fortune he was to control through Zenobia has been transferred to Priscilla, he wields his influence over the younger girl to separate the sisters forever, solidifying his authority over the new heiress and old inheritance. He adopts Coverdale's premise—that Priscilla simply cannot be loyal to both himself and Zenobia.

The ruthlessness and cunning of Hollingsworth is made explicit in his deft exercise of commodified femininity. For all his rhetoric of openly violent repression, he is as busy at manipulating women's emotions as he is at threatening their bodies. Priscilla's obedience to his command—"come"—after the final confrontation between himself and Zenobia, marks the triumph of his authority over the claims of sisterhood, as well as his success in attaining the mercenary end he has always sought at Blithedale (198). His choice of Priscilla is a crushing rebuke to Zenobia in more ways than one, however. Not only is the materialistic nature of Hollingsworth's interest in the women exposed in his pursuit of the cash, but he signals that, for him, the sisters are entirely interchangeable, part of the general traffic in women. Zenobia's education, intelligence, refinement, and beauty rate little in Hollingsworth's calculations; a woman with a fortune is an attractive woman.

Priscilla's unprotesting acquiescence to the supposition that she must choose between Hollingsworth and Zenobia, coupled with her unhesitating selection of Hollingsworth, marks the dissolution of sisterhood, both at the immediate and at the symbolic level. Biological and communal sis-

ters are separated forever, and Blithedale's familial promises nullified. Priscilla's obedience to Hollingsworth signals the defeat of Zenobia, the feminist and the woman—the endpoint of a process that has been assisted by Coverdale and Hollingsworth but which had begun with the sisters' first and most effective nemesis: their father.

In spite of Moodie's tendency to hover on the margins of Zenobia and Priscilla's lives throughout the narrative, his influence permeates much of what happens at Blithedale, for he has choreographed much of the sisters' distance and difference from each other, socially and personally. We learn late in the novel that before Blithedale is ever reached, and before Zenobia and Priscilla are introduced, Moodie has masterminded the conditions that will help direct the course of his daughters' relationship. He tries to orchestrate their fate, and is helped in his manipulations of Zenobia and Priscilla by the men they encounter at Blithedale.

Moodie's ostensible, yet obviously absurd, premise for sending Priscilla to Blithedale is to gauge Zenobia's worthiness to remain sole inheritor of his brother's estate. He purports to submit Zenobia to a test of sisterly love and fealty towards Priscilla—a test about which Zenobia knows nothing. When Zenobia is found wanting in feeling towards his younger daughter (a stranger to Zenobia until the women meet in Blithedale), Moodie suggests he is justified in stripping the elder daughter of her fortune in favor of the younger. Of course, Coverdale tacitly concurs with the shift in fortune, helpfully highlighting Zenobia's rebuffs of Priscilla. In addition to the questionable fairness of the test, however (given that Zenobia sees Priscilla as a stranger), the particular mode of punishment Moodie devises for Zenobia belies his guise of paternal concern for Priscilla. Laying claim to Zenobia's fortune at the precise moment he does—though he has forborne to do so throughout the many years that she was raised in affluence while Priscilla languished in poverty—smacks of ulterior motivation and malicious, patient planning. His procrastination is important: he has knowingly denied Priscilla the commonest advantages during her short lifetime in order that he may strip Zenobia of her wealth and station just as she has completed "her triumphant progress towards womanhood" and is "adorned with every variety of feminine accomplishment" (176). Not only does he wait until Zenobia's assurance of status has helped forge her character and expectations, but he also waits until she requires her money to win the man she loves.

To rationalize Moodie's unaccountable behavior towards Zenobia in the matter of the inheritance, Coverdale must resort to his imagination to flesh out some "general grounds of surmise in regard to the old man's feelings" (177). "Mainly from fancy," he admits, Coverdale creates a conversation between Zenobia and Moodie that positions Moodie in a positive

light, proposing that he cripple Zenobia because Priscilla means more to him than his long-lost daughter. Coverdale imagines, "then, perhaps, another thought occurred to him. 'My poor Priscilla! And am I just, to her, in surrendering all to this beautiful Zenobia? Priscilla! I love her best—I love her only!'" (179). This sentimentalized narrative shows Coverdale at his manipulative best, proffering interpretation that rationalizes Moodie's attack on Zenobia. But, given the tragedy that results from Moodie's wholesale transfer of his brother's estate from one child to another, it is difficult to believe that love for either daughter forms any part of Moodie's enterprise.

The story of Moodie's life, recounted in "Fauntleroy," describes a man who views women as objects or tools—to adorn the rich man, work for the poor one, and, most importantly, act as serviceable victim, whom even the most degraded man may dominate to alleviate his sense of frustration and powerlessness. Young Fauntleroy/Moodie marries one beautiful woman merely so she can be "the most brilliant ornament of his outward estate" (171). Widowed, penniless, and living in a crumbling gubernatorial mansion (itself a testament to a ravaged patriarchal power), Moodie palliates his "torpid despair" by taking a second bride who is so debased even Moodie towers in comparison. For what reason other than the meager compensation afforded by another's more profound degradation would he wed such a wretch? She is "a forlorn, meek-spirited, feeble young woman, a seamstress," a "poor phantom," a "dim shadow," who unluckily bears him a "tremulous creature" much like herself (173). Emasculated by having all his markers of power and prominence stripped from him, Moodie is a bitter though circumspect man. He preys on weakness.

Zenobia is Moodie's ultimate target. It rankles him to have his elder daughter (a woman supposed by law and by convention to be subject to his direction) savor the comforts of an "external splendor" lost to him, emphasizing by contrast the abjection of his own circumstances. Zenobia's gender has not barred her from the privileges afforded by wealth, such as independence, education, and some behavioral license. She has, moreover, achieved some reputation as an author/lecturer, while her father's name has been "forgotten by the multitude who passed it so diligently from mouth to mouth" (172). Moodie's design is to cut from under Zenobia all claims to eminence and comfort.

Raised by her uncle in affluence, "with native graces clustering luxuriantly about her," Zenobia exudes self-assurance (176); she little imagines how tenuous her claim to her social world and to economic security really is—dependent on the discrimination of a father she barely remembers. Dying suddenly and intestate, her uncle has provided no means to circumvent the law designating a male next-of-kin his heir. The beneficiary

of a legal system crafted to maintain traditions of primogeniture, Moodie is in control. Whatever his brother's wishes, whatever "justice" rather than law might urge in Zenobia's favor, Moodie holds legal right to the estate. Though a dependent taken in by her uncle, even a surrogate child, Zenobia is supplanted by a man who had long been to his family only "a weary thought, linked with contagious infamy, and which they were only too willing to get rid of" (173).

The ultimate objective of Moodie's plan must be to separate the sisters, to pit one against the other. Otherwise, he would not position the sisters as he does, insisting on an all-or-nothing dispensation of their inheritance. Enhancing his own efforts to fashion Zenobia and Priscilla as inevitable competitors rather than potential cooperators, Coverdale promotes, unquestioned, the notion that the entire fortune belongs to one or the other of the sisters. In his (re)creation of Moodie and Zenobia's meeting, he stresses that for one sister to win, the other must lose: "'Put up your purse,' said the supposed mendicant, with an inexplicable smile. 'Keep it—keep all your wealth—until I demand it all, or none!'" (178). Moodie alone will decide what belongs to him and whether to claim it, placing Zenobia entirely within his power. Again, his timing is deliberate: his threat to divest Zenobia of her fortune is made just when Zenobia is most desperate to secure Hollingsworth, most sensitive to the idea of being replaced by Priscilla in Hollingsworth's "affections." Indeed, the clever retribution Moodie has planned for Zenobia centers in Priscilla, whom he has fashioned to be Zenobia's usurper.

Moodie is the controlling influence in Priscilla's life for all the years leading up to her sojourn in Blithedale. He has singly contoured Priscilla's personality and ethics. Though purportedly born "pale" and "nervous" like her mother, Priscilla clearly remained physically weak and dependent and dependent because her father wanted her so. Moodie, like Westervelt, the kind of femininity desired by men, and Coverdale's and Hollingsworth's reactions to Priscilla prove the old man's sagacity. Coverdale is smitten by the "pleasant weakness in the girl," and Hollingsworth responds to her with protectiveness, taking Priscilla "as his own especial charge" at Blithedale (92). The measure of patriarchal culture's predilection for feminine debility is taken in Coverdale's discovery of a "peculiar charm" in the "weakness and irregularity" of Priscilla's gait, her legs apparently lamed by lack of exercise and by malnutrition (91). In remarkably similar language, Zenobia and Westervelt on separate occasions contradict Coverdale's romanticized perceptions of Priscilla's fragility, wiping the gloss from suffering. Zenobia attributes Priscilla's "paleness, her nervousness, and her wretched fragility" to the all-too-sublunary reality of having "been stifled with the heat of a salamander-stove, in a small, close room, . . . and fed

upon dough-nuts, raisins, candy, and all such trash, till she is scarcely half-alive" (61). Westervelt fingers "unwholesome food, bad air, lack of out-door exercise, and neglect of bathing" for the frailty beleaguering New England women like Priscilla (108). While the social costs of industrialization and urbanization for those who formed the working classes and urban poor were very real and difficult to remedy, leaving many men and women as miserable as Priscilla, readers must be mindful that Moodie, rather than disinterested economic forces, controls Priscilla's fate; resources are available to Moodie for the taking, but he chooses not to approach Zenobia or challenge her for many years. Moreover, that the "insubstantial" Priscilla grows stronger and "merrier" so quickly at Blithedale casts suspicion on Moodie's treatment of his supposedly beloved daughter—a daughter we also know he had once bartered to Westervelt, and whom Westervelt exploits by exhibiting as the Veiled Lady (79-80, 93).⁴

Because Priscilla appears so little her own person, so fully determined by her father's influence, it is difficult to fathom in precisely what relation she stands with Zenobia. The ambivalence of her role is compounded by Coverdale's narration: because readers are privy only to what Coverdale chooses to present as motivation for her actions, we cannot know for certain what Priscilla wants from the woman she knows to be her sister, despite her plea for love and protection (58). Though Coverdale relates Moodie's account of Priscilla forming in childhood a "beautiful affection" akin to adulation for the unknown Zenobia, her behavior towards her sister is demonstrably more complex and contradictory—with cause. From infancy, Priscilla has been fed by Moodie a steady diet of stories that would surely inspire shame and create resentment against her comelier, luckier older sister. Obviously goading, and obliquely slighting her mother, he

had often talked to the little girl about his former wealth, the noble loveliness of his first wife, and the beautiful child whom she had given him. Instead of the fairy tales, which other parents tell, he told Priscilla this. And, out of the loneliness of her sad little existence, Priscilla's love grew, and tended upward, and twined itself perseveringly around this unseen sister; as a grape-vine might strive to clamber out of a gloomy hollow among the rocks, and embrace a young tree, standing in the sunny warmth above. (174)

Though it is not entirely beyond the bounds of credulity that a kind of admiration and "love" for Zenobia could grow from such sour seeds, the stories promote something beyond common sibling rivalry: a young woman, sharing Priscilla's paternal lineage, has everything, and herself, nothing. If a rivalry between the women exists, as Coverdale insists it does, it logically begins here.

Though Priscilla states that she seeks in Blithedale her sister's protection, she plays a role sculpted for her by Moodie, whether or not she is aware of the fact. Indeed, the riddle of Priscilla's entire role may be reduced to a question about her silence over her paternity. Why does Priscilla not reveal her biological connection to Zenobia? Part of the answer, perhaps, resides in the question itself. Priscilla's reticence represents either an act of collusion with her father or a betrayal by omission. That the ques-

aware of the fact. Indeed, the riddle of Priscilla's entire role may be reduced to a question about her silence over her paternity. Why does Priscilla not reveal her biological connection to Zenobia? Part of the answer, perhaps, resides in the question itself. Priscilla's reticence represents either an act of collusion with her father or a betrayal by omission. That the question of Priscilla's motivation rests on her silence, on what she does not say, is in itself suggestive of a lack of agency. She is likely more pawn than plotter in Zenobia's downfall.

Whatever her intention, Priscilla does contribute centrally to Zenobia's destruction. Her proximity to Zenobia is Zenobia's undoing, as the clinging-vine imagery quoted above suggests. The image describes Priscilla's supposed developing and enveloping affection for Zenobia, and though on the surface the vine-on-tree concept points to the potential for verdant growth, beauty, and connection, there are dark undertones to the analogy. The repetition of the vine imagery in the description of Coverdale's hermitage confirms the corrosive effect of clinging vines on the trees that support them:

A wild grape-vine, of unusual size and luxuriance, had twined and twisted itself up into the tree, . . . wreathing the entanglement of its tendrils around almost every bough. . . . A hollow chamber, of rare seclusion, had been formed by the decay of some of the pine-branches, which the vine had lovingly strangled with its embrace, burying them from the light of day in an aerial sepulchre of its own leaves. (109-10)

Pictured as a thriving tree, Zenobia embodies strength and brilliance accrued by basking in the "sunny warmth" of wealth and privilege. Sickly Priscilla, the image insinuates, seems to be capable of raising herself only by attaching herself to her sister, parasitically draining away Zenobia's strengths—her wealth, self-assurance, Hollingsworth's esteem—so she can live the peculiar fairytale she has been taught to covet.

Enhancing the doubly connotative clinging vine metaphor for Priscilla and Zenobia's relationship, the novel stages a repeated tableau of Priscilla posed at Zenobia's feet, staring upwards: a clutching girl fixed to the trunk of a sturdy woman. And, on the first night at the farm, Zenobia laughingly imagines a scene in which Priscilla "melt[s] away at my feet, in a pool of ice-cold water, and give[s] me my death with a pair of wet slippers"—a clear foreshadowing of Zenobia's watery end and of Priscilla's implication, however unwitting, in it (60). For whatever Coverdale's claims, Zenobia resorts to the pond because of her betrayal and loss of sisterhood, real and symbolic. Of course, Coverdale proffers the predictable but untenable explanation that Zenobia "take[s] her life as a result of unrequited love for a man, rather than remorse for injuries done a sister" (Kolodny xxviii). Yet Westervelt's incredulity at Coverdale's characterization of

Zenobia's suicide supports an argument for skepticism about Coverdale's pat conclusions: "Love had failed her, you say! Had it never failed her before? Yet she survived it, and loved again—possibly, not once alone, nor twice either. And now to drown herself for yonder dreamy philanthropist!" (213). Once again, Westervelt resists Coverdale's superficial and self-exculpating meaning-making, leading to another explanation for Zenobia's insurmountable despair: the shame of scheming against a sister to gain the questionable boon of romantic love, and the consciousness of being betrayed by one who knew Zenobia to be a biological as well as communal sister.

It is indeed sisterhood that predominates Zenobia's mind after the cataclysm at Eliot's Pulpit as signaled in her cryptic comment to Coverdale that "lip of man will never touch my hand again. I intend to become a Catholic, for the sake of going into a nunnery. When you next hear of Zenobia, her face will be behind the black-veil; so look your last at it now—for all is over!" (204). The black veil may betoken her death, her literal removal beyond the gaze and touch of men, but the nunnery simultaneously evokes a figurative rejection of the world of men in favor of a woman's sanctuary where "sisters' convent communities and female-defined networks provided . . . physical, emotional, economic, and spiritual sustenance" (Coburn 4). And, of the three vows of "chastity, poverty, and obedience" requisite to enter religious sisterhood, two stipulations have been met for Zenobia by Hollingsworth's rejection and Moodie's reclamation of her fortune (Coburn 9). That Zenobia does not finally opt for the convent reflects, perhaps, her refusal to comply with the last, particularly paternalist, criterion of religious orders. In any event, Zenobia's last expressed desire is to be amidst a community of women, and, in a sense, her goal is accomplished in her death as it is not in her life: after being dragged from the pond, she is given over to communal sisters, the "tirewomen" whose ministrations prepare her for burial.

Priscilla, as the sister left behind, finds no communion with other women. She retires to a secluded cottage with Hollingsworth to become, exclusively, a companion and crutch for him. The fact that she appears, when Coverdale returns years later, to be flourishing as Hollingsworth has diminished, bolsters a sense that she thrives through parasitism, getting what she needs the only way she knows how (215). That she draws everything Zenobia prized away from her is undoubted. Yet, I would argue that the fact that Priscilla supplants Zenobia is Moodie's, rather than Priscilla's, greatest success. Moodie's example has taught Priscilla that gain necessitates another's loss, and that power derives from countervailing weakness. From Priscilla's infancy, Moodie has shaped her as a nemesis for Zenobia—one that can undermine all Zenobia fancies about herself:

her role as an advocate for women, her responsibility to them, particularly the weakest and least privileged, and her capacity to serve as an example and act in solidarity with them. Zenobia's failure to be a sister to Priscilla, whom she knows until the end of the novel only as a communal sister, is emphatically underscored by the revelation of biological connection. The "We are sisters!" gasped by Priscilla as she and Zenobia are separating forever stings, poignant in its very mootness at this point (198). Zenobia, with all her power, intelligence, and understanding of women's systemic subjugation, chose to throw over her sister because she "wanted a clear path" to Hollingsworth (199). She has betrayed herself—as a woman and as a woman's rights advocate—as much as she has betrayed Priscilla in restoring the girl to Westervelt, fulfilling Moodie's hopes exactly. The calls to sisterhood that were getting louder in the American North at mid-century are silenced in *Blithedale*. Sisterhood remains for Zenobia, as it does for Priscilla, a "sweet word," a rhetorical promise unfulfilled—nothing more.

In *Miles Coverdale* Nathaniel Hawthorne provides us with a "narrator-agent" (Wayne Booth's term) purposefully distanced from the author as the originator of *The Blithedale Romance*. As we have seen, *The Blithedale Romance* is Coverdale's story to do with as he wishes; he dissembles, he obfuscates, and he constructs a moral for the tale that chastises a woman for transgressing gendered boundaries. His delineation of Zenobia and Priscilla's relationship promises the defeat of nineteenth-century women's leaders' rhetoric of common purposes and political cohesion. Women are weak in Coverdale's *Romance*: advocacy for reform for women is depicted as mere feint, a façade to mask the disappointment of traditionalist female hopes for husband, children, and home (126). And feminine solidarity is, he says, a myth, the naïve precondition to mutual betrayal in the triumph of self-interested heterosexual desire. Personally and politically empowering visions of sisterhood are not allowed to exist in Coverdale's paradigm; men are too invested in the status quo, their power too institutionalized to be overcome by interloping, radical women seeking the enlistment of America's complacent womanhood into new ways of thinking. Coverdale's role as writer, it seems, is to help stem the tide of women's uprising for social change. He is a mover in the shadows, like Moodie, but his purposes are as deliberate and malign for women. The masculine muscle he flexes is not physical, like Hollingsworth's, but discursive, and is successfully brought to bear on a problem woman.

Coverdale's account of events at *Blithedale* works to affix blame for the failure of women's relationship on the biological and communal sisters themselves, and his version of the story stands undisputed—a testament to the power that inheres in controlling representation. Coverdale's writing takes its place among the more obvious modes of social control voiced

by Hollingsworth. The cracks in Coverdale's gloss, however—the rhetorical and behavioral inconsistencies that point up his prejudices and preoccupations—create footholds for speculation and counternarrative. In the gaps created by Coverdale's elision of crucial links in the chain of recounted events and by his admission of resorting to “fancy” and “surmise” to narrativize motivation (177), Zenobia and Priscilla's story peeks through, though it remains indistinct. “Thus far, no woman in the world has ever once spoken out her whole heart and her whole mind,” claims Zenobia, and she cannot begin to hope to accomplish that feat in such a text as Coverdale's (126). As Dale Bauer affirms, Coverdale's storytelling becomes “a forceful method of social control, . . . a way of circumscribing opposing discourses in one's own readings and thereby domesticating rival readings” (31).

If the imprint of Coverdale's hand and the belief system directing that hand are visible in *The Blithedale Romance*, Nathaniel Hawthorne's presence is less so. Hawthorne's positioning in relation to his narrator is indistinct at best, allowing wide berth for speculation about his attitudes towards Coverdale and towards Zenobia and Priscilla and their fate. Some critics have claimed that Hawthorne has created a narrator in *Blithedale* through whom he can critique the destructive force of unquestioned patriarchal authority. It has also been claimed that the narrator's obvious similarities with the author are intended to signal the author's discomfort with his own part in a patriarchal culture that crushes superlative beings like Zenobia in an effort to preserve the submissiveness of Priscillas. Yet such generosity of interpretation seems incompatible with the words Hawthorne himself used and the fears his personal writings suggest about women's nature, roles, and rights. Rather, Hawthorne's sympathies in *The Blithedale Romance* parallel quite closely, I believe, those of Coverdale. In having Coverdale play the part of celebrator of masculine authority and patriarchal power structures, a character quite clearly distinct from himself, Hawthorne secures a front man, upon whom he can deflect accusations of reactionism and misogyny. Yet, in characterizing Coverdale as a writer, and in placing him in circumstances so closely aligned with his own experiences at Brook Farm, Hawthorne demands that readers link Coverdale and himself at some level. The analogizing imperative, however, is not an effort at patriarchal *mea culpa*, but a metafictional maneuver through which Hawthorne can dilate upon his own role as writer in America.

In making Coverdale pretentious, effete, and voyeuristic, Hawthorne laughs, albeit nervously, at the public's perception of the romancer, of himself. Yet his purpose, surely, is to confirm through Coverdale the legitimacy and efficacy of his admittedly unconventional form of masculinity.⁵ In a society in which masculine achievement was measured in physical

pro prowess, productive labor, ingenuity in creating wealth, and innovation in the name of expansionism, Hawthorne was not a man's man. Through Coverdale, however, whose prissiness, meddlesomeness, and general uselessness are made pointedly apparent, Hawthorne registers his belief that a man, simply by virtue of his gender, occupies a rightful position of power over women. As Judith Fetterley has argued about the seeming ambiguity in Henry James's attitude towards his unlikeable Southern hero in *The Bostonians*, masculine authority may be emphasized precisely by demonstrating that the weakest and most economically unsuccessful man is nonetheless—as he should be—powerful in his position relative to women: "James establishes a connection between maleness and power; whatever political and personal disadvantage [Basil] Ransom suffers as a result of coming from the conquered half of the nation is countered and outweighed by the immense advantage that accrues to him as a result of being male" (124). Indeed, for all of Hawthorne's derision of Coverdale as a man and poet, Coverdale ultimately controls the meaning of Zenobia and Priscilla and their relationship; he, as a (male) writer, has an important part to play in containing discourses of radical social change. The power to represent, to shape consciousness and affect cultural values, is among the strongest of all forces—is, indeed, instrumental in perpetuating the status quo by preventing unauthorized interpretations of America's social structures and values from reaching wide audience. The "moral" of a story like Coverdale's acts in conjunction with other male voices warning women away from the idea that they can change the way things are. Male power is too entrenched, Coverdale's *Blithedale* says, too well-established and defended to give way soon or easily. Hawthorne—though perhaps without fully believing it—wanted, I think, to affirm that men like Coverdale, and like himself, would help prevent a woman's rights agenda from taking root, whatever dreams women had of solidarity producing change.

Hawthorne may have been feeling besieged by women and the woman's movement—as well as other reforms—by the time he wrote *The Blithedale Romance* in 1852. America at mid-century was changing, both in political climate and popular taste. The North and South were irrevocably polarizing over states' rights and slavery, issues about which Hawthorne was, at best, ambivalent. His own sister-in-law, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, who was a vocal and tenacious advocate of reformism, sent him political tracts and criticized his political reticence. And, women were signing petitions, holding conventions, and addressing legislatures throughout the country to demand suffrage. Adding to the turmoil for Hawthorne was the fact that Americans in unprecedented numbers were reading sentimental fiction, written predominantly by women. The commercial coups of the "d---d mob of scribbling women" cut him with a sense of his impotence

in the face of a tide of women interloping into literary as well as social and political domains once deemed the preserve of men (*Centenary* 17:304). That Hawthorne felt hostility towards women transgressing sphere boundaries is suggested in his private writings—in his use of rhetorics of masculine containment of and aggression against women writers. Hawthorne's dark jest that Julia Ward Howe "ought to have been soundly whipt" for publishing *Passion Flowers*, for example, carries echoes of Hollingsworth's vow to "scourge" women back into the places assigned to them by separate spheres ideology (*Centenary* 18:53). A similarly menacing tone is registered in a letter Hawthorne wrote to publisher James Fields in December 1852 about writer Camilla Crosland: "All women, as authors, are feeble and tiresome. I wish they were forbidden to write, on pain of having their faces deeply scarified with an oyster-shell" (*Centenary* 16:624). In this same letter, Hawthorne reveals, too, a furtiveness about his acrimony that is reminiscent of Coverdale; he nervously reminds his friend at the end of the missive not to make a mistake and forward the letter addressed to Fields to Mrs. Crosland. He had enclosed a presumably more gracious note for her (*Centenary* 16:625). Unfortunately for Hawthorne, however subtle his aims, women writers, like women activists, were not disappearing at mid-century; nor were they being silenced. Politically-engaged, reforming women—the "hitherto imaginary monsters" of Hollingsworth's rant—were very real in New England, New York, and elsewhere in America. Indeed, they were just beginning to grow in numbers and earnestness in their calls to sisterhood.

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Notes

¹Early criticism of the novel tended to emphasize the symbolic value of the break between Coverdale and Hollingsworth as a breach of Blithedale's purported communal, utopian ethic. A recent article by John N. Miller expands on this tradition by arguing that Blithedale's ethic of "familiar love" and "human sympathy" is breached by the triumph of Eros in the community, and that with the clear eroticization of Coverdale and Hollingsworth's relationship Hawthorne threatened for his nineteenth-century audience the very notion of an ideal communal brotherhood. Critics like Annette Kolodny and James Mellow note the sexualized nature of the men's relationship, but do not provide full explorations of the implications of male homoeroticism in the text. Kolodny claims, for example, that Hollingsworth's appeals to Coverdale to join him in his prison reform scheme are reported in the language of "failed seduction" (xix), and Mellow argues, without elaboration, that "the critical confrontation in *The Blithedale Romance* is between two men, Coverdale and Hollingsworth, and [that] it . . . has sexual implications" (399).

Queer theory and masculinity studies have sparked reevaluations of the homoeroticism of Coverdale and Hollingsworth's relationship. David Leverenz argues that as a man concerned about accruing and maintaining power, Coverdale identifies in his love for Hollingsworth a peril to his patriarchal authority—the relationship is abjured by Coverdale, then, to preclude a threat to his sense of masculinity. Monika Mueller elaborates Leverenz's suggestion that Hollingsworth's proposals to Coverdale are formulated in the language of rape. In her book-length study of homosociality/homosexuality in Hawthorne's and Melville's romances, *The Infinite Fraternity of Feeling* offers an extended reading of an abortive homosexual romance between Hollingsworth and Coverdale (derived, perhaps, from a homoerotic "crisis" in 1851 in Hawthorne and Melville's relationship). This tie between Hollingsworth and Coverdale is destroyed, Mueller contends, by Hollingsworth's attempted "rape" of Coverdale with his "phallic, rigid, philanthropic idea" (22). Drawing on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's and Luce Irigaray's theorizations of patriarchal triangulated desire, Mueller goes on to argue that the failed male relationship in the text transmogrifies into a homosocial exchange of Zenobia and Priscilla between Hollingsworth and Coverdale. Lauren Berlant's article examines Coverdale's sexuality—arguing that Coverdale's "secret" is that he is in love with Hollingsworth—in the context of his fantasy that utopia resides a hymenal space between dyadic love and communal attachment, (sexual) innocence and knowledge, and romance and history. Situating *Blithedale* within a history of sexuality that suggests that gender and sexual identities were crystallizing in the nineteenth century, Benjamin Scott Grossberg interprets Coverdale's desire as a search for a queer utopia—one that refuses to delimit desire or assign it to discrete categories. Hence Coverdale's desire for Hollingsworth is not distinct from his desire for Zenobia and Priscilla individually, nor, indeed, from his desire for all of them together. With the concentration of critical interest on Coverdale and Hollingsworth, then, little attention has been paid to *The Blithedale Romance* as a tale about Zenobia and Priscilla and their sisterhood.

²Nina Baym contends that Priscilla attempts to establish a sisterly relationship with Zenobia, and that Zenobia rejects her because Zenobia "shows a fatal man-centeredness; the victimized woman in Priscilla, the possible development of Priscilla as a free human being: these do not interest her" (199). It is Zenobia, then, in Baym's reading, who creates rivalry where there should be sisterhood. As I explain, however, Priscilla's hopes and actions in relation to Zenobia appear far more mixed and Zenobia's interest in sisterhood more real and profound than Baym posits. I particularly disagree with Baym's contention that "Priscilla goes to Hollingsworth at the end only when Zenobia will not have her" (199). From the beginning, Priscilla is urged to choose between Zenobia and Hollingsworth, as though a choice were necessary, and is led to choose Hollingsworth, even though Priscilla knows Zenobia to be her biological sister.

³Roberta F. Weldon also considers the representation of Zenobia as a queen, though she suggests that the guise is part of the story's replication of a fairytale plot of old father-kings trying to unseat ruling daughter-queens. Weldon argues that *Blithedale* stages, through Moodie and Zenobia, Hawthorne's concern with the connection between gender and power and its reflection in his own relationship with his daughter, Una. Weldon's analysis of Moodie, in particular, parallels my own on two fundamental points. First, Weldon alleges that Moodie

resents Zenobia's "threat to his patriarchal status" and the "freedom and sovereignty she is afforded" (35, 36). Moreover, though Weldon does not specifically address Moodie's influence on the relationship between the sisters, she contends that Moodie is responsible for setting Priscilla up as a "rival sister and potential rival queen to Zenobia" (34). Contrary to my argument, however, Weldon posits that Moodie sets up the rivalry because he loves Priscilla but also can control her.

⁴In "Some Rents in the Veil: New Light on Priscilla and Zenobia," Barbara Lefcowitz and Allan Lefcowitz argue that Moodie acts as a pimp for Priscilla, hawking her "purse" to supply funds. Whether or not Moodie's involvement in his younger daughter's misery takes precisely this form, his complicity in her commodification is indisputable.

⁵The fact that women writers were accruing renown and riches greater than his own seemed to compromise Hawthorne's sense of himself as an author. Michael Newbury's *Figuring Authorship in Antebellum America* describes the gradual professionalization of authorship occurring around the mid-nineteenth century. Newbury argues that the increasing imbrication of authorship in the market economy posed psychic as well as material complications in terms of an author's identity: "Writers could realize themselves precisely as professionals who performed no other sort of work and who were respected, in public terms, primarily for the work they performed. But such potential advantages might be weighed against the dependence on the reading public and its tastes for one's livelihood and for a commercially legitimated sense of authorial self" (5). Compounding the discomfort surrounding the measure of art in terms of marketability, according to T. Walter Herbert, was Hawthorne's nagging suspicion that writing was an unmanly pursuit, an unworthy repository for his energies. Herbert notes, he "complained about the years of unobstructed effort . . . because they seemed a departure from normal manliness," and he bemoaned the fact that "poetic identity—centered on cultivating emotional sensitivities in seclusion from the world—was feminine" (6). The fact that women writers in America, whose work Hawthorne generally denigrated, were enjoying the very commercial success Newbury suggests legitimated writing as a profession, was viewed by Hawthorne as both affront and threat—affront to his identity as an author with fewer sales if more critical respect, and threat to his sense of himself as a man in a "feminine" profession increasingly chosen by women.

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