



## Writing for Boys and Girls

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# "Writing for Boys and Girls: Hawthorne's Defense of Women"

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## Biography

Linda SAHMADI has defended her dissertation on "The emergence of a feminist discourse in Nathaniel Hawthorne's short fiction (1832-1844): the writing of a 'becoming-woman'" at the Blaise Pascal University (Clermont-Ferrand) in December 2015. The present talk takes after a previous talk given at the 2014 NHS Summer Meeting at North Adams, and includes Deleuze and Guatarri's concepts of becoming-woman and minor literature as they can be applied to children literature. Linda SAHMADI has also participated at the 2016 FAAS International Symposium (French Association for American Studies) on the subject of Minor Voices and Children Literature.

## INTRODUCTION

When Hawthorne undertook the writing of his children books, it was also, and perhaps above all, to face a delicate financial situation. In this respect, it seems that these books, namely *A Wonder Book for Boys and Girls* and *Tanglewood Tales*, respectively published in 1851 and 1852, that is right after the success of *The Scarlet letter*, were to be considered as a brief literary parenthesis in Hawthorne's career. Yet, they are rightly to be described as adroit pieces of literary rewriting. Greek mythology is being transmuted into Gothicized, Americanized and, what is of most interest to me, feminized stories. Traces of Puritan thought are to be found under this palimpsestic artwork. They fall into the politicized crucible of Hawthorne's nascent feminism which, to me, is one of the main aspects of his fiction, and more particularly his tales and short stories. Indeed, Hawthorne, under the pretext of offering to the public his version of classical Greek mythology, is creating a new text where women are to be given the possibility, enacted or not, of delineating the borders of a new female territory. I here refer to Deleuze and Guatarri's concept of minor literature, and am using it to

refer to women, and the female characters of Hawthorne’s fiction, as a political minority. Indeed, even in the realm of Greek mythology, Hawthorne purposes to denounce and address the wrongs done to this minorized portion of humanity.

I’d like to hold on for a minute on what I mean by “minority.” In *Thousand Plateaux*, Deleuze and Guatarri define it as an entity of individuals whose status of inferiority will, paradoxically allow a process of reterritorialization following, almost logically and naturally, the other process of deterritorializaion due to that inferior, “minor” as Deleuze and Guatarri choose to call it, status. This development should produce a new status, what they call a “becoming”. In Hawthorne’s case, the “becoming-woman” is what the female character tends towards. As Hawthorne rewrites the Biblical founding myth of Genesis, primarily with his New Eve “type,” he also enterprises to rewrite classical Greek myths, not afraid to introduce, when needed, a touch of what I call his “proto-feminism” like when he takes the liberty to give life to a charming daughter for King Midas, a child aptly called Marygold in whose hands lie metaphorically the redemption of the greedy monarch. In Hawthorne’s fiction, women are found to be the main actor in man’s regenerating process, and, more symbolically, the main actor in America’s renaissance.

Here, I will concentrate my efforts on a few couple of Hawthorne’s mythological tales, namely “The Gorgon Head,” “The Golden Touch,” and “The Paradise of Children.” In these stories, the character of Primrose, one of the children in Eustace Bright’s audience, or, to use Genette’s terminology, one of the implied readers, stands out as a responsive actor in the literary process of rewriting and retelling. It will be seen that this Fuller-like girl child of almost thirteen is one of Hawthorne’s female speaker and defender of women’s right to write and respond to literary works. The characters of Marygold of “The Golden Touch” and

Pandora of "The Paradise of Children" will also allow me to decline Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of minority and becoming-woman.

# I.

Primrose is part and parcel of the complex network of diegetic layers, and is indeed the most interesting children of the attentive audience. She incessantly disparages Eustace's literary talents, and even questions his authority and legitimacy as story-teller. Here I'd like to quote some revealing remarks by "saucy" Primrose:

*"[...] Primrose, who was a bright girl of twelve, with laughing eyes, and a nose that turned up a little, 'the morning is certainly the best time for the stories with which you so often tire out our patience. We shall be in less danger of hurting your feelings, by falling asleep at the most interesting points, - as little Cowslip and I did last night!'" ("Tanglewood Porch: Introductory to "The Gorgon's Head," p.15).*

*"As to their one tooth [speaking about the Three Grey Women], which they shifted about,' observed Primrose, 'there was nothing so very wonderful in that. I suppose it was a false tooth. But think of your turning Mercury into Quicksilver, and talking about his sister! You are too ridiculous!'" ("Tanglewood Porch: After the Story of "The Gorgon's Head," p.42)*

*"Why, as to the story of King Midas, ' said saucy Primrose, 'it was a famous one thousands of years before Mr Eustace Bright came into the world, and will continue to be so as long after he quits it. But some people have what we may call 'The Leaden Touch,' and make everything dull and heavy that they lay their fingers upon.'" ("Shadow Brook," after the story of "The Golden Touch," p.64)*

Her interaction with Eustace, and even her interference in Eustace's glory, is at once a source of motivation for him and a way for Hawthorne to defend criticism of literary works by women. She seems to be a miniature of Hawthorne's friend and female writer Margaret Fuller, whom he admired as one of his scholarly friendships. Primrose may also be read as a deviant and early version of those "scribbling women" whom Hawthorne himself famously

disparaged in this often commented passage from his letter to his friend and publisher William Ticknor dated January 1855:

*"America is now wholly given over to a damned mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash – and should be ashamed of myself if I did succeed." [cited in John T. Frederick, "Hawthorne's Scribbling Women," in The New England Quarterly 48-2 (June 1975): 231]*

Primrose is one who does not know how to "hold her tongue" ("Tanglewood Porch", Introductory to "The Gorgon Head," p.17), regrettably enough for Eustace, who thus betrays a certain lack of confidence in the sensible realism and even fictional legitimacy of his tales. She takes after her father, Mr. Pringle, who strongly discourages Eustace to "put any of [his] travesties on paper" and, most of all, "never more to meddle with a classical myth." His imagination is, according to this sharp connoisseur of classical works, "altogether Gothic, and will inevitably Gothicize everything that [he] touch[es]. The effect [would systematically be] like bedaubing a marble statue with paint." ("Tanglewood Fireside: After the Story" of "The Three Golden Apples," p.115). Mr. Pringle seems to have been an effective teacher of literary taste to his daughter Primrose who, like Margaret Fuller, displays an independent mind as to what a good story is, or should be. Hawthorne thus endows one of his female characters, a child at it, with a literary education and intelligence which were supposed to be man's precious treasure.

After the story, this portion of the tales which offers a meta-analysis of the unfolded narrative, Primrose comes back on certain elements of the tale, thus delivering her opinion on the quality of the textual fabric. A piece of literary work, whether it be a written text or an oral delivering, becomes valuable only for the reactions, negative or positive, that it excites. "Saucy Primrose," as she is justly nicknamed by the narrator of the "Shadow Brook" section of "The Golden Touch" tale (p.64), evinces a straightforward judgement of Eustace's story.

To me, Primrose is like a surrogate author figure, another one of Hawthorne's *personae*, or masks, that serve to look at his fiction with a sharply critical eye. That Hawthorne gives this difficult role to a girl is in itself relevant in his treatment of women in the field of literature. She is also a Sophia-like figure who, more than once, gave her husband opinions about his work. Primrose, with both Fuller and Sophia Peabody as spiritual and literary mothers, is thus to be read as a positive character in that she constitutes an invaluable help in the creative process of story-writing and story-telling. She provides the authors, both Eustace and Hawthorne himself, with the necessary metatextual comments to perfect themselves in the art of literary re-creation. These women prevent the authors from enjoying a delusive self-satisfaction in their talents which then need constant sharpening.

One such intervention by Primrose deals with the literary clichés that Eustace seems to take pleasure in displaying in his tales. Following our interest in minor literature, these clichés portray female characters as somewhat lacking originality of personality. For example, Primrose denounces the flatness of Mercury-turned-Quicksilver's sister who is a precious help for Perseus in his vanquishing the Gorgon Medusa. Eustace sarcastically defends himself against this creative flaw saying that "If I had thought of it sooner, I would have described her as a maiden lady, who kept a pet owl!" ("The Gorgon's Head," p.42). He thus further proves his lack of originality when it comes to depicting female characters since he merely follows a stock tradition of beautiful maidens whom a pet animal contributes to domesticate still further. Where he does innovate is not so much in the physical description as in the role attributed to those female characters. Indeed, it is with her help, together with that of Quicksilver, that Perseus manages to cut the head of the terrifying Medusa. She is thus given an active role in the hero's quest. What Primrose does criticize then is the regrettably aborted quality of this active role. Yet, in Eustace's defense, it seems that his remark is also a veiled criticism of this

female passivity which literary tradition had erected as the canonical and ultimate quality as it was the outward sign of self-control and virtue. In fact, Eustace is subtly voicing a judgement of his own against the reader's expectations in the depiction of female (secondary) characters.

## II.

Now, I'd like to focus on two female characters who, to me, epitomize Hawthorne's proto-feminist vision as they portray both concepts of minority and becoming-woman, the first by falling victim to male domination, both on a physical and a symbolical level; the second by trying to overcome this minorized situation. With Pandora and Marygold, Hawthorne manages to create an entangled piece of writing as it condenses a rewriting of the Greek myth of the Pandora Box and of the Biblical Myth of the Fall, itself being the original Ur-text of both the Greek myth and Hawthorne's version of it. Entanglement is then the right word when it comes to qualify this mythological patchwork that is the tale of "The Paradise of Children." The Christian connotation lurks behind this title which betrays a subtle process of Puritanization of the Greek fabric.

Concerning Marygold, I'd like to analyze what I call the literary process of literalization of the figurative, which is the founding stone of Hawthorne's claim of the "becoming-woman." As for Pandora, I'd like to return, if time will allow me, to the underlying biblical tones that pave the way for a reevaluation of women's place in the fall of Man.

### *Literalization of figurative images: towards a becoming-woman*

In his fiction in general, and in his mythological tales in particular, Hawthorne resorts to irony and a sarcastic kind of humor to convey some of his revolutionary ideas, especially

when it comes to denounce the tragic destiny of women. This irony can take different forms and one of them is the process that consists in literalizing what is supposed to be, and what should remain at a figurative level. A didactic purpose can also be discovered under that veil of humorous speech. The most telling example that can be found in the corpus of mythological texts is that of the daughter of King Midas, amusingly named "Marygold" by the narrator. I have to point out the spelling variation of that name. A "-y" has come to replace the "-i" of the original flower. This manipulation is in itself revealing of Hawthorne's purpose to lament the killing, both physical and metaphorical, of the female identity, and to wonder why such treatment should be tolerated both by society at large, and by women themselves. The underlying, palimpsestic religious tone also transpires through this superficial modification. We can clearly hear Virgin Mary's name, and the purity of Marygold's heart validates this interpretation, as well as the purifying tears that King Midas sheds on account of her. This side of Marygold's character corresponds to Hawthorne's adherence to traditional symbolism and conventional feminine virtue as being the healer of men's sins.

Yet, the process of literalization intervenes in the second half of Marygold's name. The melted semantic reference to the original flower and the overt mention of the precious metal constitute the drama of the tale and the tragedy of the little girl. The love for beautiful and colorful flowers that so much characterizes Marygold triggers off her successive deterritorializations. From little girl, she becomes-flower through the passive influence of her name. From natural flower, she becomes a golden flower: the precious touch by her father transmutes her into a golden marigold (with an "-i" this time), a sister for all her other flowery friends likewise transformed into gold plants. As she is a human being, the final deterritorialization that she undergoes is that of becoming-statue of gold under the fatherly embrace. The gold contained in the little girl's name should have remained figurative, but



Midas’s greed has turned it into literal gold, and has thus killed the little human flower that so resembles Beatrice Rappaccini, another one of those women-flowers that seemed to intrigue Hawthorne. Their fragility, their ephemerality and their beauty condense those qualities that are reputed to be essential in and to women, namely paleness, modesty and virtue. The becoming-statue undergone by Marygold is essential for Hawthorne to convey his point: these “natural” qualities in fact are mortifying to women who are thus imprisoned in unchanging molds that dictate assumed identities that cannot be wholly livable in the outer world. That Marygold turns into a statue of gold under the touch of her father, a man, is in itself a denunciation of the patriarchal system that is at the origin of such mortification. Hawthorne manages to blend a more religious reading with a political defense of women’s right to an identity of their own. The different becomings open to women are thus entangled, perpetually succeeding and following one another, so much so that the becoming-flower and the becoming-statue finally fuse to allow for the becoming-woman: they are then the necessary steps to be taken to achieve their female identities.

*Pandora: biblical and mythological intertextuality at the service of Hawthorne’s feminist perspective*

In the literary economy developed by Gérard Genette, intertextuality is one out of the five of the fundamental “types of transtextual relations” and partakes of the “textual transcendence of the text” defined by Genette himself as being “everything that institutes a manifest or discreet relation with other texts.” (*Palimpsests*, p.8) As I have already pointed out in my introduction, the biblical text and the mythological one are superimposed on one another so that Hawthorne’s legendary tales offer a multi-layered creation. Hawthorne’s personal reading is inseparable from a necessary subjective filtering, a long and complex decantation which eventually give out a clean product. To paraphrase Pierre Arnaud,

Hawthorne’s deconstructivistic approach consists in these three steps: “alteration, displacement, and alienation” (Pierre Arnaud, “Au service de Lucifer: le diable, la magie et le pacte dans *Le Moine* de M. G. Lewis,” in *Maître et serviteur dans le monde anglo-américain aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles: [actes du Colloque Société d’études anglo-américaines des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles]*, 1985: 143). By alienating the original myths, this process makes it possible to distort the spirit of those myths. This allows Hawthorne to elaborate still further his proto-feminist ideology, and to direct it to a privileged public that are young children. Indeed, he hopes to make young people, boys and girls alike, just as the title of his *Wonder Book* clearly indicates, realize how deeply and strongly preconceptions and received ideas about the sexes are anchored in the minds and hearts of men and women. The author, through the voice of Eustace Bright, but also that of “naughty Primrose”, wishes to contribute to an evolution in the mentality of the American society. A return to the founding myth of humanity, namely the Fall of Man, is therefore crucial to bring a new light to this story that has put women in an awkward situation for centuries. The pagan version of Genesis is to be found in the story of Pandora’s box.

Unfortunately, I can’t elaborate on this point, and I have now to conclude my talk.

## CONCLUSION

To bring Deleuze and Guatarri a bit further, I’d say that the becoming-flower of those of Hawthorne’s female characters can also be read as a way for Hawthorne to indicate the possibility of a “ligne de fuite” for those women entrapped in hermetically defined categories.

In fact, they are the targets of male desires, and their bodies become the object of male idealization. Hawthorne's fiction will be the locus of a dismantling of all those (sometimes) contradictory constructions of the feminine, those same definitions which allowed the holders of political, religious, social and moral authority to further strengthen their power over girls and women. Hawthorne deftly uses female stereotypes to his advantage, and turns them into a meaningful weapon to denounce what they are meant to represent. In other words, the literalization of figurative discourse make it possible to implement those "lignes de fuite" "from the outside," as Deleuze and Guatarri say, by defining "dimensions" or qualities on the top of which Hawthorne will add other challenging qualities without the former ones being impacted by the new ones. This makes for the ambiguous position held by Hawthorne towards the generic question. The metaphor of the statue, that we find in "The Birthmark" (1843) ("But it would be as reasonable to say that one of those small blue stains which sometimes occur in the purest statuary marble would convert the Eve of [Hiram] Powers to a monster." (*Twice-Told Tales*, 1987, p.119), is somehow a double-sided literary weapon as it both serves to subtly reinforce the esthetic canons of female beauty and to condemn those same norms. The female body is that marble or gold that Midas-like and Powers-like men carve according to a pre-established pattern. The artistic metaphor plays the tragedy of the feminine figures, trapped in what Bourdieu calls the "invisible enclosure" of male domination.

Greek mythology, as much as the Bible or other literary classical works like Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Lewis's *The Monk* or Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, thus appear to provide Hawthorne with the indispensable authoritarian references to feed his inspiration and his proto-feminist politics: this literary legacy is, under Hawthorne's pen, first Americanized, to be, finally, feminized. Women can, with his enlightened help, come of age, and break free from the ideal of the eternal feminine.

## MISCELLANEOUS

- Pearl, the minor woman *par excellence*;
- Woman as the instrument of the regeneration of America; // “The Great Carbuncle,”  
“The New Adam and Eve;”
- Pandora // Hannah in “TGC”: temptation, but sin shared with the male protagonists;
- Identification by Marygold with the other flowers // Beatrice: empathy, sympathy,  
sisterhood
- Pandora // Eve: by her fault, loss of “Paradise”; childhood of humanity
- Epimetheus = guilty like Pandora, at least in spirit at first, then in deed
- Pandora’s disobedience = blessing in disguise : Hope for humanity, like Eve permitted  
the development of the human conscience and freedom