THE HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE



EDITED BY ROBERT S. LEVINE

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

Nathaniel Hawthorne THE HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES



AUTHORITATIVE TEXT

CONTEXTS

CRITICISM

Edited by

ROBERT S. LEVINE

UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND, COLLEGE PARK

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Introduction

In March 1850, after years of toiling in semiobscurity as a writer of tales and sketches, the forty-five-year-old Nathaniel Hawthorne published his first novel. The Scarlet Letter, to great acclaim and good (albeit modest) sales of around six thousand copies. Writing the novel after the loss of his civil service job at the Salem Custom House and the death of his mother. Hawthorne tapped into what Herman Melville termed his "great power of blackness" to produce a tale so intensely concentrated in its tragic tone and vision that, as Hawthorne proudly reported to his friend Horatio Bridge, its conclusion gave his wife, Sophia, "a grievous headache." Eager to build on the success of The Scarlet Letter. Hawthorne's publisher James T. Fields urged him to get to work on a second novel, and Hawthorne readily complied, beginning the writing in September 1850. He completed The House of the Seven Gables within five months, and it was published in April 1851. Sophia Hawthorne much preferred the conclusion of her husband's second novel—or at least it made her happier. "There is unspeakable grace and beauty in the conclusion," she declared, "throwing back upon the sterner tragedy of the commencement an ethereal light, and a dear home-loveliness and satisfaction." Hawthorne, too, appeared to prefer the "home-loveliness" of his second novel to the putative gloom of his first, remarking to Bridge that the novel is "as good as anything that I can hope to write" and asserting to his friend (and reviewer) Evert Duyckinck that the novel is a "more natural and healthy product of my mind." Whereas some reviewers of The Scarlet Letter were disturbed by its darkness, reviewers and readers of The House of the Seven Gables were nearly unanimous in celebrating the novel for its literary mastery, grace, and cheerful perspective on life's possibilities. As Henry T. Tuckerman rhapsodized about the novel in his Iune 1851 essav-review in the Southern Literary Messenger: "The natural refinements of the human heart, the holiness of a ministry of disinterested affection, the gracefulness of the

Herman Melville, "Hawthorne and His Mosses," in Melville, The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839–1860, ed. Harrison Hayford et al. (1987), 243; Hawthorne to Horatio Bridge, February 4, 1850, in Hawthorne, The Letters, 1843–1853, ed. Thomas Woodson et al. (1985), 311; Julian Hawthorne, Nathaniel Hawthorne and His Wife, 2 vols., 3rd ed. (1885), 1:383.

homeliest services when irradiated by cheerfulness and benevolence, are illustrated with singular beauty." Hawthorne thought Tuckerman got things just right, and he wrote Tuckerman immediately upon reading his "beautiful article": "I felt that you saw into my books and understood what I meant." Hawthorne's readers, too, seemed to appreciate *The House of the Seven Gables* even more than *The Scarlet Letter*, for in its first year of publication it outsold *The Scarlet Letter* by over seven hundred copies.²

Though this overview of Hawthorne's relatively late emergence as a novelist tells a happy story of burgeoning authorial confidence and success, it also looks forward to problems to come for the reputation of The House of the Seven Gables. True, in the first year after its publication, the novel was received more enthusiastically than The Scarlet Letter, but over their initial ten years in print The Scarlet Letter would outsell The House of the Seven Gables by approximately two thousand copies (13,500 to 11,550). While The Scarlet Letter would quickly become known as Hawthorne's masterpiece. The House of the Seven Gables would be viewed with suspicion as a novel that suffers for its dogged determination to provide readers with uplift and good cheer. Critics have been especially hard on the very conclusion that had moved Sophia to celebrate her husband's artistry, with some regarding it not only as Hawthorne's sell-out to his middle-class readership but also as a sign of his blindness to the more complex interrogation of property rights and class that had informed the bulk of the novel. I will return to the problem of the ending (without ruining the suspense for new readers). But first it would be useful to reconsider the question of the novel's supposed normalcy, a virtual tenet of criticism of The House of the Seven Gables for the past hundred years or so that has helped keep the novel in the shadows of The Scarlet Letter. The House of the Seven Gables may be much stranger than its critical reputation suggests.

To recover a sense of that strangeness, we should consider Hawthorne's own comments on the novel in a letter to Fields of November 1850. While explaining to Fields that he aspired toward a realism commensurate with the detailed "minuteness of a Dutch picture," he confessed to his difficulty in working as a realist, and consequently asserted his rights as a romancer to depart from strict verisimilitude. But even as he declared those rights, he recognized

Hawthorne to Bridge, March 15, 1851, in Letters, 1843–1853, 406; Hawthorne to E. A. Duyckinck, April 27, 1851, in Letters, 1843–1853, 421; Henry T. Tuckerman, "Nathaniel Hawthorne," Southern Literary Messenger 17 (June 1851), 348; Hawthorne to H. T. Tuckerman, June 20, 1851, in Letters, 1843–1853, 452. See also Duyckinck, p. 323 herein, and Tuckerman, p. 327 herein. For sales figures, see the Introduction to Nathaniel Hawthorne, The House of the Seven Gables, ed. William Charvat et al. (1965), XX.

the risks. "Sometimes, when tired of it," he stated to Fields of his romance in progress, "it strikes me that the whole is an absurdity, from beginning to end: but the fact is, in writing a romance, a man is always—or always ought to be—careering on the utmost verge of a precipitous absurdity, and the skill lies in coming as close as possible, without actually tumbling over."3 Voicing his frustrations at getting things right, Hawthorne in this letter offers an artistic manifesto of sorts. asserting what he as a writer "ought" to do and is in fact trying to do: take the creative risks that could result in either a wonderfully illuminating new work of art, or a disaster. The image of Hawthorne as a risk taker and even as an experimental novelist attempting to plumb the limits of romance poses a challenge to the talk of normalcy, good cheer, and prudential artistry that has surrounded the critical discussion of The House of the Seven Gables. Choosing a method that involves "careering on the utmost verge of a precipitous absurdity." Hawthorne is trying to do nothing less than comprehend the realities of the increasingly fragmented modern world of the antebellum United States through the mode of romance.

Hawthorne grounds the world of The House of the Seven Gables in the known "realistic" world of Salem in the 1840s or very early 1850s in relation to its historical past, particularly the Salem witch crisis of 1692. In doing so, he presents his readers with a cast of characters, melodramatic plot, and worldview suggestive of a temperament radically at odds with the conventional values and perspectives of his reading public. Consider the novel's main characters. In Hepzibah we have a prideful, scowling old woman who has spent much of her life waiting for her brother to be released from prison. In the old man Clifford we have a repressed sensualist and possible murderer who is taken to the extremes of cosmic exhilaration by the simple act of sipping a cup of coffee. What sort of hero and heroine are these? More conventionally, there are Holgrave and Phoebe, but in Holgrave we have an enthusiast of the arts and social reform who seems at a sadistic remove from the lives that he observes, judges, and sometimes represents; and in Phoebe we have an angel of the house who emerges out of thin air (or from a country carriage) and soon exerts an eerie redemptive dominance over the domestic order of the House of the Seven Gables. The grasping hypocrite Judge Pyncheon seems an obvious villain, though much of what we know about him comes to us through rumor, and the most telling knowledge about this honored politician is communicated by a fly. In the novel's characterizations and plot, there is an obsession with the corporeal weight of

^{3.} Hawthorne to J. T. Fields, letter of November 3, 1850, in Letters, 1843-1853, 371.

history that speaks in an undertone similar to the hissing apprehended by Walt Whitman's persona in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" (1859): "death, death, death, death, death, death." Though Hawthorne appears to resolve the novel's unconventionalities and gloom, over the course of the novel he also presents a less than redemptive vision of what he terms the "Now" of the social world: evanescent, confused, elusive, and lacking in transcendental certainties and meanings. As he remarks rather "unhealthily" on Clifford's conception of the present moment: "he has only this visionary and impalpable Now, which, if you once look closely at it, is nothing." However normal and pleasing *The House of the Seven Gables* is by reputation, the novel has a close literary kinship with Poe's perverse and death-ridden "The Fall of the House of Usher" (p. 260 herein).

That said, there is a crucial difference between Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" and Hawthorne's The House of the Seven Gables, even beyond the matter of their respective endings. In Poe's short story, the narrator is disconcertingly vague in describing the social world. But in The House of the Seven Gables Hawthorne engages fully and concretely the new cultural developments of the antebellum period—its technologies, politics, and ideologies. As Hawthorne's November 1850 letter to Fields suggests, he worried over the possible incongruities of Dutch realism and his own version of romance, and he expressed similar concerns to Fields in a letter written on the day in January 1851 when he completed the draft of the novel: "It has undoubtedly one disadvantage, in being brought so close to the present time; whereby its romantic improbabilities become more glaring."6 Hawthorne's confession here, at the precise moment at which he is preparing to deliver the manuscript to Fields, can again be read as an assertion of aesthetic vision and method akin to his wish to "career" on the brink of precipitous absurdities. In The House of the Seven Gables, Hawthorne chooses to work as a fictionalist in a mode that may appear to be inappropriate to his interest in social reality but, on second glance, is peculiarly well suited to a social reality with its own phantasmagoric character. For Hawthorne, romance best conveys the reigning reality of his modern world.

As a romancer, Hawthorne used his second novel to investigate his social world with a latitude and freedom far more telling than documentary realism. In the Gothic romance tradition established by British writers such as Horace Walpole and Ann Radcliffe, he

^{4.} Walt Whitman, "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking," in Whitman, Leaves of Grass, ed. Scully Bradley and Harold W. Blodgett (1973), 253.

^{5.} Hawthorne, The House of the Seven Gables, p. 107 herein.

^{6.} Hawthorne to J. T. Fields, letter of January 27, 1851, in Letters, 1843-1853, 386.

explores the sometimes hidden connections between genealogy and property. Given his interest in blood and ownership, to what extent is he also commenting on contemporary debates on race and slavery? It is difficult to say, though it is also difficult not to notice the parallels that Hawthorne develops between the genealogical history of the Pyncheon fowls and that of the Pyncheons. His close attention to Chanticleer's racial pride, as analogized to Judge Pyncheon's (and vice-versa), is a shrewd demystification of the racial (and highly racist) thinking of the day. David Anthony argues (p. 438) herein) that Hawthorne uses romance to make race and property fluid and highly provisional categories. Whatever his intentions in adopting such a perspective on race. Hawthorne in The House of the Seven Gables participates in the cultural work of antislavery writers such as William Wells Brown and Harriet Beecher Stowe. who similarly raised questions about the accepted "truths" of genealogical histories, race, and property rights.

Hawthorne's methods and perspective in the novel do not come without their contradictions and paradoxes. For his entire adult life Hawthorne remained aligned with the Democratic Party, the party that time and again sought the expedient way of keeping the slave South in its fold. In view of this biographical fact, how are we to interpret a novel that questions the "truths" of racial genealogies and property rights while, in its happy ending and its blithe unconcern for nonwhite characters, seems to ignore the very implications of its unmaskings? Hawthorne complained to his publisher, William D. Ticknor, about the "d——d mob of scribbling women" in an infamous letter of 1855.7 Given Hawthorne's longstanding distrust of some (but not all) women writers, what are we to make of a novel that, with its interest in the gendered interiors of a house, seems as domestic and sentimental as any of the writings that his letter had implicitly criticized? Hawthorne clearly was fascinated by new technologies of communication and representation. To what extent does he succeed in using the older and somewhat traditional mode of romance to convey his own views on technology? These are just some of the conflicts and questions that have helped make criticism on the novel particularly lively over the past several decades.

The primary and secondary materials in this Norton Critical Edition of *The House of the Seven Gables* are intended to help readers participate in these debates by providing materials on the novel's more compelling contexts, by offering an overview of the novel's critical history, and by reprinting a number of the recent critical essays that have reenergized critical discussion of the novel. The materials in the Contexts section are grouped into four distinct categories.

Hawthorne to W. D. Ticknor, letter of January 19, 1855, in Hawthorne, The Letters, 1853–1856, ed. Thomas Woodson et al. (1988), 303.

The History section presents readers with selections from a number of the primary texts that Hawthorne drew on for his representation of Salem history. The section Hawthorne and the Literary Sketch will enable readers to see how a mode of writing central to his earlier career remained central to his career as a novelist. Hawthorne's novel is about a house, and in antebellum culture the house had all sorts of associations, whether as a figure of the body, of the genealogical house (and thus of racial descent), or of the republican middle class. The insides and outsides of houses were also at the center of contemporary ideological debates on gender and separate spheres. The documents in the Houses section will provide readers with a fuller grasp of the discursive overlaps and implications of these varied ways of thinking about the house during the antebellum period. Finally, the selections in the Daguerreotypy and Other Technologies section will help readers better understand the centrality of technology to Hawthorne's second novel, especially the newly invented form of photography, daguerreotypy, which made its way from France to the United States in 1839. That same year Hawthorne wrote his fiancée Sophia Peabody about daguerreotypy: "I wish there was something in the intellectual world analogous to the Daguerrotype [sic] (is that the name of it?) in the visible something which should print off our deepest, and subtlest, and delicatest thoughts and feelings, as minutely and accurately as the above-mentioned instrument paints the various aspects of nature."8 In The House of the Seven Gables, Hawthorne engaged daguerreotypy and other technologies from a variety of perspectives, including that of the romancer anxious about competing with the new technologies that were capturing the public's attention. The section Daguerreotypy and Other Technologies includes five texts on daguerreotypy, plus additional selections on other key technological developments that Hawthorne represents in his novel: mesmerism (hypnotism), the railroad, and the prison.

In the tradition of the Norton Critical Editions, this edition of *The House of the Seven Gables* offers an extensive section on the critical response to *The House of the Seven Gables* from the time of its publication to the present day. As readers of the articles in the Criticism section will note, the question of the novel's ending has for years been central to critical discussions of the novel, as has the question of the novel's health or normalcy. (See, for example, Catharine Sedgwick's letter of 1851 [p. 320 herein], which offers a dissenting perspective on the matter of the novel's good cheer.) The Criticism section includes nine contemporary responses, a sampling of major critical works written from 1879 to 1979, and eight

^{8.} Hawthorne to Sophia Peabody, letter of December 11, 1839, in Hawthorne, *The Letters*, 1813–1843, ed. Thomas Woodson et al. (1984), 384.

influential essays published since 1981. A number of recent critics have emphasized that, rather than providing a fictional bromide for troubled times, *The House of the Seven Gables* addressed some of the most vexed political and cultural issues of the day: social class, property rights, race, the consequences of the new media, and so on. Though some critics continue to complain about it, there is an increasing critical consensus that *The House of the Seven Gables* is not so easily reduced to its ending.

And yet the ending will no doubt remain central to critical debate on the novel. In the spirit and tradition of romance (and with all of the pleasures of Shakespearean romance), Hawthorne concludes *The House of the Seven Gables* on an affirmative note. But in celebrating the end to the long cycle of violence and retribution chronicled in the novel, Hawthorne provides the seemingly marginal Uncle Venner with an important place in the novel's happy (re)construction of family. Hawthorne's disposition of Uncle Venner raises questions about what sort of "family" he is constructing in this supposedly conventional resolution. Why is it that Hawthorne leaves us not with two individuals choosing to live together happily ever after but with five? Stranger than most readers care to admit, the conclusion is just one "precipitous absurdity" among many that help give *The House of the Seven Gables* its meaning and its power.

A Note on the Text and Annotations

The text of The House of the Seven Gables is that of the Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, a publication of the Ohio State University Center for Textual Studies and the Ohio State University Press. Published in 1965, the Centenary text of The House of the Seven Gables, edited by William Charvat et al., provides what its editors argue is the version of the novel that is closest to Hawthorne's intentions. Since 1965, the Centenary has been accepted by most scholars as the best available text of The House of the Seven Gables. Because Hawthorne's manuscript of the novel survives, the editors of the Centenary text were able to collate the manuscript against the edition first published by Ticknor, Reed. and Fields on April 9, 1851 (and against numerous other editions as well), and to draw informed conclusions about the variants between the manuscript and the published versions. Unfortunately, the proof sheets from the April 1851 printing do not survive, so we can never be absolutely certain about which changes from manuscript to book were made by Hawthorne and which by an editor (or by printers who may have made errors). We do know that Hawthorne never complained about the Ticknor, Reed, and Fields text, which went into several reprintings. In 1883 Houghton, Mifflin, and Company brought out the first of its several printings of The House of the Seven Gables in their popular Riverside Edition. The Riverside emerged as the most widely used text until the publication of the Centenary in 1965. It is important to note that Hawthorne's contemporary readers and reviewers responded to the text established by Ticknor, Reed, and Fields in 1851; that critics such as William Dean Howells and F. O. Matthiessen responded to the text established by Houghton, Mifflin in 1883; and that neither is exactly the same as the Centenary. The editors of the Centenary The House of the Seven Gables provide several sections in their edition that will be of use to those interested in textual history, including a comprehensive listing of the variants between the manuscript and the first book publication.

The footnotes in this Norton Critical Edition aspire to offer basic

information in a nonintrusive manner about such matters as Hawthorne's many literary and historical allusions; some effort has also been made to use the footnotes to guide the reader to the appropriate material in the Contexts sections. The materials in the Contexts sections are also annotated. With the exception of the footnotes to the works reprinted in "Selections from Classic Studies" and "Recent Criticism, 1981–Present," all of the footnotes have been provided by the editor. In the final two sections, the footnotes (with the exception of the initial source note) belong to the respective authors, unless otherwise indicated.

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Despite her serious illness, Gillian Brown graciously helped me adapt her chapter for this edition. I am honored to dedicate this Norton Critical Edition of *The House of the Seven Gables* to the memory of Gillian Brown, an extraordinary scholar, teacher, and colleague.

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The Text of THE HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES

