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THE CIRCULATION OF WOMEN IN *THE HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES*

TERESA GODDU

In an 1836 review of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, Edward Everett, the president of Harvard, remarked that in a republic "transmitted political equality demands a healthy circulation of property" and that this transmission is "gradual, salutary, and life-giving, because all is done in conformity with the dictates of nature."[1] Nathaniel Hawthorne's fable of class conflict, *The House of the Seven Gables*, takes a similar stance when it figures social discord in terms of an economic crime. The espoused moral of the book—to "convince mankind . . . of the folly of tumbling down an avalanche of ill-gotten gold, or real estate, on the heads of an unfortunate posterity, thereby to maim and crush them, until the accumulated mass shall be scattered abroad in its original atoms"—argues for a society built on economic circulation.[2] Moreover, like Everett, the novel ultimately calls for a gradual redistribution of wealth and power instead of a radical reversal: the Pyncheons are not forced to give up their wealth, only to share it with the Maules. By choosing to alter the tattered garments of the old order by patchwork instead of by exchanging them for a new suit, Hawthorne contains the text's revolutionary and egalitarian impulses within "ancient limits" (p. 307).

Many critics have argued that the novel's conservative ending—Hawthorne's attempt to "settl[e] some sunshine" over a novel that "darkens damnably towards the close"—seems forced and fails to offer a resolution to the social problems of the novel.[3] Although I agree that the novel presents few solutions, I do think that the logic of the ending makes sense when viewed through the lens of the novel's sexual politics. Besides a healthy circulation of property, the novel's democratic model, I will argue, depends upon the proper circulation of women within society. To borrow Gayle Rubin's apt term, the "traffic in women" is used to delineate the text's social alternatives and to express its solution.[4] Through the novel's three women, Hepzibah, Alice, and

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Phoebe Pyncheon, and the modes of circulation associated with them—incest, forced exchange, and alliance, respectively—I will show how the novel works out a conservative vision of social change. With the correct exchange rate, the "poor business" of Hepzibah's cent shop at the beginning can be transformed into the "pretty good business" of inheritance by the end (pp. 47, 319).

If, as Rubin argues (and Levi-Strauss before her), women serve as the main conduits through which social relations are formed, then a democracy depends upon the free and equal exchange of these goods. Hepzibah, the "perfect picture of Prohibition," represents an aristocratic rather than a democratic model of exchange when she hoards her goods (p. 127); her conception of gentility, as Holgrave points out, no longer implies "privilege, but restriction" (p. 45). An emblem of the Pyncheon family pride, she dwells "in strict seclusion; taking no part in the business of life" (p. 31). Not only does she withdraw from intercourse with the world, but also as an "antiquated virgin" she fails to play her proper role as a woman by entering the marriage market (p. 136). Throughout the novel, Hepzibah remains private Pyncheon property.

Hepzibah's chastity serves as a symbol for the larger withdrawal of the Pyncheon family from worldly transactions that might sully their rank or wealth. Her representative nature becomes apparent in her association with two family emblems: the Pyncheon family house and the Pyncheon chickens. The chickens, Chanticleer, his wives and their single offspring, whose aristocratic crowns are "analogous to Hepzibah's turban," symbolize the Pyncheon fate (p. 89). Their race, like the Pyncheon clan, has degenerated as a result of "too strict a watchfulness to keep it pure" (p. 89). The house, which is personified as a body, refuses admittance as Hepzibah's virginal body does. Barred from intrusion, no one may enter the house except members of the family. Even Holgrave, who lodges in a remote gable, has restricted access to the main house: his gable is "quite a house by itself" and it is separated from the main house by "locks, bolts, and oaken bars, on all the intervening doors" (p. 30). Such solitariness and seclusion, corollaries of the Pyncheon family pride, threaten not only to end the Pyncheon line (Jaffrey's son dies and Phoebe will take her husband's name), but also to undermine the very workings of a democratic society. For, by refusing to circulate their women as well as their wealth, the Pyncheons reject both an equal distribution of property and political power.

The Pyncheon's fear of democracy is figured in terms of the incest taboo. "Incest," as Talcott Parsons writes, "is a withdrawal from [the] obligation to contribute to the formation and maintenance of supra-familial bonds on which major economic, political, and religious functions of the society are dependent."[5] Lying at the heart of the incest prohibition is, as Levi-Strauss argues, the rule of reciprocity: "[t]he prohibition of incest is *less a rule of prohibiting*

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marriage with the mother, sister, or daughter, than *a rule obliging* the mother, sister, or daughter to be given to others."[6] When the Pyncheons withdraw from their obligation to trade, breaking the taboo, they hinder society's proper functioning. Again, Hepzibah symbolizes the family's incestuous mode. Like Chanticleer who mates both with his wife and his sister, Hepzibah's passion is not for a lover but for her brother. Just as her brain is "impregnated with the dry-rot of its [the house's] timbers" from dwelling too long alone, so too does her "heart feed upon" the image of her only attachment, her brother (pp. 59, 32). Her seclusion heightens her sole sentiment, turning it into the "strong passion of her life" (p. 31). Hepzibah's incestuous feelings for Clifford, however, symbolize a restrictive social posture more than a sexual attraction. Resistant to the new realities of the marketplace, this "time-stricken virgin" retreats from her positive obligation to maintain the social order into illusions of an aristocratic past and a brother's love (p. 134). Significantly, at the site of exchange—the shop—it was with her brother, Clifford, and not a future husband that the young Hepzibah played. Hepzibah's desire "to wrap Clifford up in her great, warm love, and make it *all the world* to him," then, signifies less an illicit longing than a withdrawal from worldly transactions (p. 34, emphasis added).

Even when Hepzibah does enter into the cycle of exchange by going to market, she fails to circulate. Forced to become an "aristocratic huckstress" in order to provide for Clifford's return, Hepzibah opens a cent-shop (p. 79). When she begins to trade, it would seem that her incestuous seclusion has ended. Taking "down the bar from the shop-door, leaving the entrance free" to the house, she enters into the circulation of society (p. 40). However, even though the passageway between the house and the shop may now be open, Hepzibah continues to retreat from any real exchange. At the first ring of the bell, Hepzibah goes "to do fierce battle with a housebreaker," still defending all intrusion (p. 42). Once in the shop, she operates in terms of a noblesse oblige instead of the reciprocity of a market economy. Three times, first with Holgrave, then with Ned Higgins, and finally with an impoverished woman who wants to buy flour, she refuses to take money in exchange for her goods. Squeamish at the site of copper coins, she chooses to remain "a lady a moment longer" (p. 46). Later, she draws on a pair of silk gloves before she counts the "sordid accumulation of copper-coin" so as not to contaminate herself (p. 81). Although Hepzibah does work in the shop, she continues to find such traffic painful (p. 67). Moreover, once Phoebe the consummate shopkeeper arrives, Hepzibah relinquishes most of the trade to Phoebe so that she can concentrate on Clifford.

By retreating from the public marketplace to take up the private roles of sister, mother, and wife to Clifford, Hepzibah remains not only unsullied but also unproductive. Her love for children is "torpid, if not extinct" and by using

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the single egg produced at the Gables for Clifford's breakfast, she sacrifices the continuance of Chanticleer's feathered race (p. 39). Hepzibah, then, symbolizes a static, sterile order that adds nothing to the functioning of society. Opposing this barren aristocratic order, the novel posits an emerging, productive capitalist order that is associated with an excessive sexuality. For instance, Jaffrey Pyncheon, the "Pyncheon of To-day," who with his gold-headed cane, his gold-bowed spectacles, and his "massive accumulation" of flesh represents capitalism's monied class, has had a "wild, dissipated" youth full of "low pleasures" and wears out his wife in three years (pp. 116, 311). The organ grinder's monkey, who exemplifies the "moral condition" of this new economy, not only has an "excessive desire for whatever filthy lucre might happen to be in anybody's pocket" but is also depicted as having an enormous tail, "too enormous to be decently concealed under his gabardine" (p. 164). Although Hawthorne seems attracted to this new order, as Clifford is to the roaring tide of humanity beneath his arched window, he also identifies with Clifford's "shivering repugnance at the idea of personal contact" with this uncontrollable world (p. 165). Ultimately, Clifford, like the novel itself, retreats from the unruly nature of this new model: whereas the old order was too closed, the new is too open. The novel's impetus, then, comes from a desire not to preserve the aristocratic order or to instate a capitalist one, but to merge the two in pursuit of a society that is built on orderly circulation.

The text figures the reconciliation of these two orders in terms of a sexual union: the sterile Pyncheons must be impregnated by a productive force. With the flight of the two owls, the "broken portal" of the Pyncheon house signals, as Phoebe says, a change in the state of the family (p. 285); for, as Uncle Venner observes from Alice's blooming posies, "something within the house was consummated" (p. 286). However, the way this consummation occurs is crucial. Instead of ending with the aggressive intrusion of Judge Pyncheon into the house—a scene that is figured as a rape and that ends in violence—the novel concludes with the fulfillment of Phoebe's and Holgrave's love, choosing gradual modification over sudden change. What is at issue is not whether the Pyncheons will be penetrated, but what mode that penetration will take: lawful or violent impregnation, marriage or rape.

The interpolated story of Alice Pyncheon represents the latter: a non-regulated exchange between the Maules and the Pyncheons that ends in violation. Her story highlights the role women play as a commodity to be traded between men in the economic relations of society. Alice is bartered, like the house before her, for Matthew Maule's knowledge about the Pyncheon's claim to eastern lands, proving that the father's business has everything to do with the daughter. Again, economic exchange is described in sexual terms. Matthew Maule, "clad in a green, woollen jacket, a pair of loose breaches, open at the knees, and with a long pocket for his rule, the end of which protruded,"

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penetrates Alice's "pure and virgin intelligence," laying a tight "grasp upon her maiden soul" (pp. 201, 200, 208). This mesmeric merging is depicted as a forced instead of a free exchange when Gervayse Pyncheon claims that Maule has robbed him of his daughter. Shaking her violently and giving her a heart-throbbed kiss, Gervayse tries to reassert his control over Alice to no avail. Since she is not freely given by her father, Alice's union with Matthew Maule is unlawful. Sullied by Maule and subject to uncontrollable outbursts that prevent her from marrying, Alice can not fulfill her proper role as wife; instead, she must play the mistress to Maule's every command. The unregulated nature of this merging, as represented by Alice's ungovernable sexuality, which lies outside the institutional boundaries of marriage, poses a threat to social order. Since she is traded as a commodity instead of being exchanged as a gift, Alice serves as a disruptive force instead of as an agent of communal cohesion and stability: for, as Lewis Hyde remarks, the "cardinal difference between gift and commodity exchange" is that "a gift establishes a feeling-bond between two people" while the sale of a commodity does not.[7] Moreover, in taking both Alice and another wife, Matthew Maule upsets the normal rules of alliance. Like the incestuous model in which Hepzibah plays all roles to one person, Maule's excessive exchange embodies the same problem in reverse: he performs the role of husband to too many wives. Matthew Maule also replays the Pyncheon's original sin when, instead of stealing Gervayse's land, he robs Gervayse of his most precious commodity—his daughter. Maule's model of forced exchange, a mirror-image of the Pyncheon's incestuous pattern offers a violent reversal, not a peaceful resolution. It is only through Phoebe, who allows for a lawful union between Pyncheon and Maule, that the novel finds a suitable solution to class conflict, one that offers recompense without revolution.

Through her "homely witchcraft" Phoebe domesticates the troubling nature of Alice's story (p. 72). "As nice a little saleswoman as housewife," Phoebe symbolizes the perfect compromise (p. 78); "unconventional, and yet so orderly and obedient to common rules," she represents change that occurs within the limits of the law (p. 68). Unlike Hepzibah and Alice, Phoebe—herself the daughter of a mixed-class marriage—merges aristocratic and plebeian characteristics.[8] An example of "feminine *grace and availability* combined," both a lady and a woman, she represents the new order emerging from the old (p. 80, emphasis added). Although she is a virgin, unlike Hepzibah, this "little saleswoman" actively goes to market. She serves as public property not only by working in the shop but also by refusing to participate in any type of incestuous exchange with her male cousins. Her meetings with both Judge Pyncheon and Clifford have sexual overtones. When Judge Pyncheon tries to kiss Phoebe, she instinctively draws back since "[t]he man, the sex, somehow or other, was entirely too prominent in the Judge's demonstrations of that sort" (p. 118); and when Clifford notices her blooming

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womanhood, "the ripeness of her lips, and the virginal development of her bosom" from which his heart tingles "with the keenest thrills of pleasure," Phoebe refuses to acknowledge the attraction, ignoring "[w]hatever was morbid in his mind and . . . thereby *keep[ing] their intercourse healthy*" (pp. 141, 143, emphasis added). She also avoids a potentially improper situation at home by leaving when a new arrangement of sexual relations occurs—her mother's remarriage—"which made it desirable for Phoebe to establish herself in another home" (p. 73). By rejecting incestuous relationships and by interacting with the world (she not only works in the shop but she also goes out regularly for walks, to church, and to lectures), Phoebe corrects Hepzibah's reclusive model. Moreover, through Holgrave's refusal to repeat Matthew's model of rape, Phoebe escapes Alice's example of unlawful exchange.

In Phoebe's union with Holgrave two problems are solved: not only does it break the incestuous pattern of the Pyncheons, but it also offers an orderly and gradual model of limited exchange. For, although Phoebe breaks the circle of the family by marrying Holgrave, she immediately enters into another closed circuit: alliance takes the place of incest. Levi-Strauss describes alliance as only a slightly more open version of incest. He writes, "there immediately appears another risk [in addition to incest], that of seeing two families, or rather two lineages, isolate themselves from the social continuum to form a bi-polar system, an indefinitely self-sufficient pair, closely united by a succession of intermarriages."[9] The close ties between the Pyncheons and Maules, forged by a secret and a curse, as well as the way that both families are "marked out from other men," reveal Phoebe's and Holgrave's marriage to be a restricted, not a generalized exchange (p. 26). When Phoebe and Holgrave unite, they are isolated from the world, bound by their "*exclusive* knowledge of Judge Pyncheon's mysterious death" (p. 305, emphasis added); embracing within a secret circle of love, they are kept within "a solitude in the midst of men" (p. 305). Most importantly, Phoebe marries someone already connected to the house: Holgrave's gable might be "quite a house by itself" but it is joined to the main house by a secret passageway (p. 30). Hence, by letting down the bars between Holgrave's gable and the rest of the house, not between the house and the outside world, Hawthorne shows his conservatism; instead of merging the Pyncheons into "the great, obscure mass of humanity," which would result in free circulation, he joins them with another family, creating an alliance of limited exchange (p. 185). The chickens symbolize this status: though they may begin to lay eggs at the end of the novel, they still have not been bred with another line, nor are their eggs being sold at market.

Unlike Allan Lloyd Smith, then, who argues that there is a movement from alliance to sexuality in the book, and hence from a closed to an open system, I would argue that the movement is from incest to alliance, from a totally closed to a partially closed system.[10] Instead of embracing a new order,

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the Pyncheons only realign themselves within a long-standing alliance pattern. By ending with alliance, a form that Michel Foucault argues "reproduce[s] the interplay of relations and maintain[s] the law that governs them," the novel chooses the gradual spiral progression of Clifford's vision over the radical break of Holgrave's original ideal.[11] The Maules get their money but only through several layers of mediation: Hepzibah and Clifford will pass on money to Phoebe who then will share it with Holgrave. Like Phoebe who smothers her intuitions "in order to keep the universe in its old place," Hawthorne turns a story of class conflict into a family feud when he retreats from the radical economic alternative of the book, the generalized exchange of business, and chooses instead another inheritance model, the restricted exchange of alliance (p. 131).

In this sexual framework, Hawthorne's gradualist politics make perfect sense: alliance allows for a compromise between the stasis of incest and the violation of free exchange.[12] Like his culture, which relied on a Victorian ideology of sexual control to regulate the massive social dislocation caused by Jacksonian America's movement toward a market economy, Hawthorne depends upon the symbolic economy of women to resolve the social problems of the novel, bringing it to a "prosperous close."[13] Through Phoebe, his Victorian woman, Hawthorne contains the lawless forces of this new order within the boundaries of love and the family: domesticated by Phoebe's love, Holgrave, the representative mobile and unruly Jacksonian male, gives up his lawless ways to "build a house for another generation" and "to conform [him]self to laws, and the peaceful practice of society" (p. 307). In having Phoebe and Holgrave set up housekeeping in the Judge's country-seat rather than the House of the Seven Gables, Hawthorne has it both ways. He rejects the old order and contains the new by replacing the Pyncheon house, which is, in Holgrave's view, "expressive of the odious and abominable Past, with all its bad influences" with the Judge's country-seat, a house that retains some agrarian associations even though it is built from the spoils of a capitalist order (p. 184). Following the novel's pattern of penetration and withdrawal, a pattern that exemplifies Hawthorne's ambivalent attempts throughout the book to merge the two orders, the ending's final consummation is figured as a withdrawal from both an aristocratic past and a capitalist present.

Despite its sexual-symbolic logic, Hawthorne's ending offers no real social solutions. His gradualist politics—as exemplified by such comments that slavery is "one of those evils which divine Providence does not leave to be remedied by human contrivances, but which, in its own good time, by some means impossible to be anticipated, but of the simplest and easiest operation, when all its uses shall have been fulfilled, it causes to vanish like a dream"[14]—depends on divine intervention, not human reform. At the end of *The House of the Seven Gables*, Providence works its magic on capitalism, making its

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threatening forces disappear. This displacement is apparent in Hepzibah's altered relationship with two of the novel's minor characters: Ned Higgins, who represents capitalism's consumer culture, and Uncle Venner, who symbolizes the dispossessed working class. Finding that a "harlequin-trick of fortune" has intervened in her favor, Hepzibah need no longer rely on Ned Higgin's voracious appetite for her livelihood since she now has enough money to fill the "cavern of his interior with as various a procession of quadrupeds, as passed into the ark" (pp. 64, 318); once offered a place with Uncle Venner at his farm, the work-house, she now invites him to join her at the Pyncheon's country-seat. At the end, then, the realities of the marketplace disappear as easily as Venner's brick work-house is transformed into a gingerbread cottage. Yet the threat of violation still remains in the text. Alice Pyncheon's story, like her posies and notes, continues to trouble the text as gloom haunts the novel's sunshiny ending. By concluding with the entrance of the bridal couple into the serpent's home, the novel warns that the Pyncheon's new Eden might once again face the threat of penetration. For, just as the Maule's simple habitation, built outside the center of town, became exceedingly desirable as the town grew out to encompass it, the Judge's country-seat, situated only a few miles from town, will also face the city's encroachment.

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NOTES

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1 Edward Everett, "De Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*," *North American Review* 43 (July 1836), p. 186.

2 Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables, Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, ed. William Charvat et al. (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1965), 2:2. All subsequent references to this work will be cited parenthetically in the text.

3 Hawthorne to James T. Fields, letter of November 29, 1850, quoted by William Charvat, "Introduction," *The House of the Seven Gables*, p. xxii. For discussions of Hawthorne's unsatisfactory ending see Michael T. Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 96 and Walter Benn Michaels, "Romance and Real Estate" in *The American Renaissance Reconsidered*, eds. Walter Benn Michaels and Donald Pease (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1985), pp. 178-79, n. 3.

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4 Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy of Sex'" in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), pp. 157-210.

5 Talcott Parsons, "The Incest Taboo in Relation to Social Structure" in *The Family: Its Structures and Functions*, ed. Rose Laub Coser (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1974), p. 56.

6 Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, trans. James Harle Bell and John Richard Von Sturmer, rev. ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 481, emphasis added.

7 Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p. 56.

8 By continually identifying Phoebe with her maternal, plebeian side, Hawthorne emphasizes her difference from her secluded and aristocratic cousins. Hepzibah repeats over and over again "Phoebe is no Pyncheon. She takes everything from her mother!" (p. 79).

9 Levi-Strauss, p. 479.

10 Allan Gardner Lloyd Smith, "The Deployment of Sexuality" in *Eve Tempted: Writing and Sexuality in Hawthorne's Fiction* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), pp. 61-71.

11 Michael Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), p. 106.

12 For a discussion of Hawthorne's conservative and often contradictory politics see Richard Brodhead, "Hawthorne and the Fate of Politics," *Essays in Literature* 11 (1984): 95-103.

13 Hawthorne to E. A. Duyckinck, letter of April 27, 1851, quoted by William Charvat, "Introduction," *The House of the Seven Gables*, p. xxii. For an analysis of this socio-sexual nexus in Jacksonian America see Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1985) and "Sex as Symbol in Victorian Purity: An Ethnohistorical Analysis of Jacksonian America," *American Journal of Sociology* 84, supplement (1978): S212-47; and John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988). For readings of *The House of the Seven Gables* in relation to the economic changes of the nineteenth century, see Michael T. Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace*, Walter Benn Michael, "Romance and Real Estate," and Sarah B. Davis, "The Bank and the Old Pyncheon Family," *Studies in the Novel* 16 (1984): 95-103.

14 Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Life of Franklin Pierce* in *Tales, Sketches, and Other Papers* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1883), p. 417.

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