HAWTHORNE’S ‘INTIMATE, AMBIVALENT RELATIONSHIP’: MESMERISM IN *THE HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES* AND *THE BLITHEDALE ROMANCE*

Denise Yvon Pica  
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HAWTHORNE’S ‘INTIMATE, AMBIVALENT RELATIONSHIP’: MESMERISM IN THE HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES AND THE BLITHEDALE ROMANCE

A Thesis

by

Denise Yvon Pica

Approved by:

_____________________________, Committee Chair
Nancy Sweet, Ph.D.

_____________________________, Second Reader
David Toise, Ph.D.

_____________________________

Date
Student: Denise Yvon Pica

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__________________________, Graduate Coordinator

David Toise, Ph.D

Date

Department of English
Abstract

of

HAWTHORNE’S ‘INTIMATE, AMBIVALENT RELATIONSHIP’: MESMERISM IN THE HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES AND THE BLITHEDALE ROMANCE

by

Denise Yvon Pica

In The House of the Seven Gables (1851) and The Blithedale Romance (1852) Nathaniel Hawthorne uses the symbol of mesmerism in varied and often contradictory ways not only as a lens for examining the shifting connotations of the pseudoscience but also as a way of interrogating and, at times, reconfiguring gender roles and social hierarchies within the nineteenth-century. Using a variety of primary and secondary source materials as the basis of a nuanced analysis of mesmerism within Hawthorne’s texts, this thesis contends that Hawthorne ultimately uses the pseudoscience not only as a site of reflection and re-envisioning of the concepts of masculinity and female agency, but also problemizes the availability of truth not only to the author figure, but to the reader and society as a whole.

_______________________, Committee Chair
Nancy Sweet, Ph.D.

_______________________
Date
DEDICATION

To my parents, without whom I would have never acquired my love of literature. I have gotten to this point because of your love and unending support. Thank you.
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Because Nathaniel Hawthorne as an author works extensively in signs and symbols, types and tokens, his novels often act as sites of unresolved tension or noncommittal stability—spaces where meaning and interpretation are always in a state of flux, defying readers to assign ultimate meaning to any single concept, ideal, or entity. Indeed, as Sacvan Bercovitch so compellingly argues in *The Office of the Scarlet Letter*, much of the allure of any Hawthornian novel arises out of its tendency towards “incompleteness” and its unapologetic tendency towards “accommodation” and “pluralism” (8). Within Hawthorne’s novels lie not solid definitions, but evasive suggestions, and while unsuspecting readers may often grasp onto a tentative thread of truth, they soon find these truths unraveling. In fact, readers of Hawthorne often need only a taste of the author’s works to understand that one of Hawthorne’s greatest (or perhaps most frustrating) assets as a writer comes from his continued refusal to assign an ultimate meaning to the various symbols he employs.¹

However, while many readers find Hawthorne’s texts frustrating because of their continual evasion, this evasion does not merely represent, as many critics would contend, the author’s inability to commit to a definitive, stable reading. Instead, as David Leverenz points out in “Mrs. Hawthorne’s Headache: Reading *The Scarlet Letter,*** through the text readers come to see not only Hawthorne’s “profoundly contradictory

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affinities,” his complexities as a person trying to inhabit a particular social moment and all the inherent psychological uncertainty that such a moment engenders, but also his willingness to accept incompleteness (464). His signs and symbols therefore do not merely represent a “conflict in interpretation,” as Bercovitch argues, but also reflect the author’s own ambivalence with the notion of truth or stability within meaning, especially the truth of the author/creator figure (Bercovitch 119). Undeniably, Hawthorne’s texts are so compelling because, as Leverenz notes, “[Hawthorne’s] interpretative equivocations” continually “impel the contradictions in his voice as well as story” (465).

For Hawthorne, then, the act of writing in many ways reveals the fact that “no ultimate meaning exists” and his “unresolved tensions” are truly part of the author’s own attempts to acknowledge his personal doubts in knowing and understanding (Bell 463, Leverenz 465). Consequently, in any of his stories, a close reading will not only reveal “the text’s intimate, ambivalent relationship” to “the author’s own life and contemporary interpretive community,” but also his attempts to understand the vocation of the artist as the purveyor of truth (Leverenz 465). However, while some readers might find such ambivalence in the artist frustrating since ultimately one cannot assign ultimate meaning to any of Hawthorne’s various symbols, one could argue that such ambivalence also allows readers a much richer interpretative experience—since no single symbol or sign truly embodies a one to one correlation between signifier and signified. Therefore, the minister’s black veil, Georgiana’s birthmark, and Faith’s pink ribbon all become much more than simple symbols of complex psychological truths and, instead, begin to, as Leverenz states, “induce, replicate, and undermine the interpretative expectations of its
contemporary readers” and, in doing so, “posit a more ambivalent relation between [the] text and community,” between sign and symbol, between the act of reading and the act of interpreting (Leverenz 465).

An example of the complex relationship between reading and meaning-making, the author and the interpretative community, can be seen in The House of the Seven Gables (1851) and The Blithedale Romance (1852) where Hawthorne uses mesmerism, a pseudoscience that became increasingly popular in the mid-nineteenth-century, to interrogate the relationship between the genre of the romance, the author, and the reading community. Indeed through a close reading of the two texts, it becomes possible not only to explore Hawthorne’s own “ambivalent relationship” with mesmerism, as evidenced at times by his conflicting interpretations of the pseudoscience, but also the ways in which the writer interacted with his contemporary readership as a creator of mediated reality. In doing so, readers not only begin to see how Hawthorne might have used mesmerism to historically capture a reflection of his contemporary period—after all, mesmerism was a faddish occupation in the mid-part of the century—but also to see how he used the practice (its conventions and enactment) as a site of interrogation, re-envisioning, and questioning. Indeed, using the sign or symbol of mesmerism, Hawthorne both illuminates his own fascination with the pseudoscience, as well as highlights many prevalent mid-nineteenth-century concerns—concerns over issues such as the vulnerabilities of the sentient being, the nature of social hierarchies, personal rights, and ownership. However, rather than definitively coming down on one interpretative side, Hawthorne’s representation of mesmerism as a site of interrogation for the
aforementioned social questions reveals the difficulties of assigning ultimate truth to the practice and its inherent symbolic connotations. After all, mesmerism did not merely inhabit one single interpretative space; instead, its meaning varied depending both on the circumstances and the audience. Consequently, by refusing to ultimately assign a stable meaning to his use of mesmerism in the two texts, Hawthorne not only emphasizes his own contradictory affinities” (his desire for reversal, re-envisioning, and revolt tempered with his—at times frustrating—desire to reassert the status quo), but also his personal anxieties as an author/creator and the social status such figures inhabit (Leverenz 464).

However, to better understand this distinction, one must first understand the ways in which Hawthorne uses mesmerism in his texts. As Stephen Railton points out in “The Address of The Scarlet Letter,” as an author Hawthorne had the uncanny ability to understand the needs and expectations of his readership. Railton notes, “the contemporary audience [for any Hawthorne text] was there, both sociologically and psychologically, before [he] sat down to write his novel: it was ‘there’ in America in 1850 as the actual reading public available to him as a professional writer and ‘there’ in Hawthorne’s mind as his internalized construct of the people he hoped would buy, read, and understand his novel” (481). As an author whose wife personally used the pseudoscience to treat her debilitating headaches and who therefore had a fairly intimate connection to the practice, Hawthorne’s depiction of mesmerism within The House of the Seven Gables and The Blithedale Romance represents a historically accurate interpretation of the pseudoscience—albeit one captured in fictionalized form and therefore carrying all the creative flourishes of such a rendition. Consequently, at its
most basic, his use of the science represents a clear understanding of the preoccupations of his readership and therefore can be said to be, as Railton notes, “dialectically constructed by inescapable cultural facts” (482). Simply stated, Hawthorne understood how mesmerism was being interpreted within his time and how readers would respond to reading about mesmerism or mesmerists in his texts.

However, Hawthorne’s use of mesmerism as a symbol within his two novels has greater import because he also used the practice as a way of shifting the interpretation of mesmerism by his audience and he did this by challenging established notions regarding the pseudoscience. Hawthorne’s two novels therefore become not merely a reflection of certain concerns prevalent within his contemporary society, but also act as reconfigurations of that social moment. In this way, Hawthorne not only “induces” and “replicates” the “interpretative expectations of [his] audience,” but also “undermines” that interpretation (Leverenz 465). This sets up a much more “ambivalent” relationship between the text and the community,” one which not only alters the reader’s perception of mesmerism, but also the ultimate truth of the text and, in turn, the truth of the writer. By refusing readers the luxury of assigning final significance to the practice of mesmerism within his two texts, Hawthorne illustrates the inability of fiction, and in his case the genre of the romance, to accurately capture complex moral or social truths. In this way, Hawthorne reveals his true reason, perhaps, for including mesmerism within his novels. Perhaps the double meanings of mesmerism truly represent Hawthorne’s attempt to demonstrate the inaccessibility of finding truth within the realm of fiction. In this way, the use of mesmerism and its various indefinite connotations represents or stands in for a
greater series of questions possibly plaguing the author, questions regarding the indeterminacy of meaning and the depiction of truth within literature. In fact, Hawthorne’s texts seem to question the very ability to represent truth in the body of a text; meta-textually he interrogates the ability to represent truth through a genre, in effect, once removed from truth.

Consequently, this thesis will dissect how Hawthorne shifts his discussion of mesmerism within his two texts from a reflection of the practice to a more nuanced and subtle deconstruction and re-envisioning of the space that mesmerism inhabited in the nineteenth-century imagination. The thesis will achieve this nuanced analysis by first examining the traditional place that mesmerism inhabited within Hawthorne’s contemporary community and then discussing the subtle ways in which Hawthorne challenges that space to reconfigure the pseudoscience. Chapter 3 will therefore examine the ways in which mesmerism traditionally placed power in the hands of the male operator and not the female patient and then investigate how that traditional gender dynamic finds itself at least partially reversed in *The House of the Seven Gables* when the Matthew Maule/Alice Pyncheon possession (the normative interpretation of mesmeric relationships as espoused by nineteenth-century literature) finds itself reimagined in the subsequent Holgrave/Phoebe Pyncheon possession. In addition, Chapter 3 will argue that through the use of the two mesmeric operators within the text, Hawthorne was able to conceptualize a new masculine identity and reshaping of gender roles because, as will be demonstrated, Holgrave’s self-restraint and treatment of Phoebe in many ways re-envisions not only the conception of masculinity within the nineteenth-century, but also
the traditional relationship between men and women that placed women in subordinate and marginalized positions. Conversely, Chapter 4 will discuss how *The Blithedale Romance* subverts the traditional notion that mesmerists were normally highly sexualized, enigmatic men by investigating Zenobia’s appropriation, if only briefly, of the operator role. In this way, Chapter 4 discusses how Hawthorne was able to reinvent or at least partially reconceive female agency through the character of Zenobia. Finally, the Conclusion of this thesis will discuss how, for Hawthorne, the act of mesmerism (its practice and conventions) became not merely a means of interrogating class and gender relations, power struggles, and concepts of possession and ownership within the nineteenth-century, but also acted as a means of shifting perceptions about the availability of truth through fiction, or more particularly through the genre of the romance. After all, as Leverenz contends, the “complexities of narrative disassociation” within Hawthorne’s novels “have as much to do with Hawthorne’s canny relation to his audience as with his uncanny relation to himself” and his preoccupations as an author and individual within the world he inhabited (479).
Chapter 2

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF MESMERISM

I invite your spirit to be with me . . . Are you conscious of my invitation?
I bid you at that particular time, because I can see visions more vividly in the dusky-glow of the firelight . . .

Come—

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1839) Centenary 15:298

The story of Hawthorne’s complex relationship with mesmerism, and the occult in general, begins early in his career as a writer. In 1825, shortly after graduating from Bowdoin College and three years before his anonymous publication of Fanshawe: A Tale (1828), Hawthorne would occasionally walk “to a particular barren elevation on the western side of [Salem] known as Gallows Hill,” where nineteen persons had famously been executed by order of his ancestor, John Hathorne (Reynolds 7). As Larry Reynolds points out in A Historical Guide to Nathaniel Hawthorne, while “a sense of Satan’s presence had receded into the past by the 1820s and ‘30s, belief in the power of the supernatural had not” (7). Ghosts, spirits, specters, and haunted houses “still constituted a very real feature in American life,” and even college-educated men, such as Hawthorne, could not escape the veil of superstition that lingered over the New England area (7).

Indeed, from his first introduction to mesmerism at the home of his friend, to his own unlikely encounter in 1846 with the apparition of Dr. Thaddeus Harris, Hawthorne’s life would be touched by a series of unsettling meetings with both the mysterious and
These remarkable encounters would set the stage for many of the themes Hawthorne explores in his writing throughout his prolific career; however, none would be quite as provocative as his use of mesmerism, not only because of the sheer amount of time the writer would devote to observing and interacting with practitioners of the pseudoscience, but also because of the interesting ways in which the pseudoscience would be investigated, interrogated, and re-envisioned within the confines of his tales. However, in order to better understand the ways in which Hawthorne would eventually manipulate and mold mesmerism in the body of his texts, one must first understand the brief, tumultuous history of the startling pseudoscience.

THE BIRTH OF MESMERISM

According to Robert Darnton in *Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France*, in February 1778, Franz Anton Mesmer, a Venetian trained doctor from Germany, arrived in Paris and “proclaimed his discovery of a superfine fluid that penetrated and surrounded all bodies” (3). This fluid, as John Warne Monroe, Robert Darnton, and Alfred Binet discuss in their respective biographies of Mesmer’s work, relied heavily on an “invisible force, roughly analogous to electricity” that could not only restore circulation to diseased systems by re-establishing “the harmony of man with nature,” but could also allow a physician to render the use of medicine “and its actions

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2 In April 1842, Hawthorne claims to have seen the ghost of Dr. Thaddeus Harris, a Unitarian minister, for several days in the Boston Athenaeum. Hawthorne’s encounter would become the basis of his fictionalized short-tale, “The Ghost of Doctor Harris,” first written on August 17, 1856 and later published in 1899. Many years later, in September 1858 while in Florence, Hawthorne would write in his notebooks, “I am still incredulous both as to the Doctors [sic] ghostly identity and to the reality of the mysterious touch”— a reference to an encounter between Sophia and an unknown entity experienced during their stay at the Old Manse in Concord (qtd. in Reynolds 7).
more perfect‖ (Monroe 67, Darnton 4, Binet et al. 7).

In Robert Fuller’s opinion, Mesmer truly believed that he had at last come upon “the etheric medium through which all sensations of every kind—light, heat, magnetism, electricity—were able to pass from one physical object to another” (2). And an 1887 treatise on animal magnetism written by Alfred Binet confirmed that Mesmer’s universal substance, when utilized properly, could enable physicians to “judge with certainty the origin, nature, and progress of diseases, however complicated they may be” (7). The novel therapy quickly gained support among amateur scientists and learned men alike as Mesmer repeatedly “proved” the veracity of his claims, illustrating that he could cure individuals of various “affections,” including migraines, hysteria, and epilepsy, simply by restoring the patient’s natural supply of animal magnetism. Indeed, as Binet notes in Animal Magnetism, Mesmer’s new theory of medicine quickly “obtained success” amongst the medical community because “the moment appeared favorable: men’s minds had been stirred by recent discoveries, and were open to any science which afforded a new horizon” (8).

Coming between Benjamin Franklin’s invention of the lightening rod in 1752 and the Montgolfier brothers invention of the globe aérostatique in 1782, the concept of animal magnetism fired the imagination by “rendering the marvellous probable”—science now was the cry and Mesmer’s fantastic notions of magnetic effluvia seemed as likely a cure

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as any of the thousands of curious remedies circulating late eighteenth-century Parisian society (Binet et al. 8).

Indeed, as mesmerism gained the support of some of the most influential men of science, including one of the leading physicians of the faculty of medicine, Charles d’Eslon, individuals began to believe ever more intensely that all medical science could be compressed to “the passing of magnets over the patients’ head in an effort to supercharge their nervous systems with this mysterious, yet life-giving, energy” (Fuller 3). However, while the prominence of mesmerism increased, the practice also quickly began to stimulate gossip since, as eminent physician Herbert Mayo observed in his 1852 text, *Popular Superstitions, and the Truth Contained Therein, with an Account of Mesmerism*, the best method of establishing a “cure” in patients was to apply hands to the stricken area, rubbing vigorously until the individual was sent into “convulsions,” “palpations,” “perspirations,” and “other bodily disturbances” (157). Reports about the “extraordinary powers of Mesmer’s personal power,” especially over women, quickly began to take root and in 1784 a government-appointed commission, which included Benjamin Franklin, issued a report denying the reality of Mesmer’s so-called “universal-fluid” (Mayo 159, Monroe 67). According to John Warne Monroe in *Laboratories of Faith: Mesmerism, Spiritism, and Occultism in Modern France*, by the end of the eighteenth-century century widespread support for the so-called miracle therapy quickly dwindled and while the practice of mesmerism continued among the aristocracy for the better part of five years, Mesmer “severed his own ties with France,” returning to Germany where he died in 1815 (67).
However, while the practice of mesmerism would lose some of its momentum in the ensuing years, fascination with the science continued. During the First Empire and Restoration in France, mesmerism took on a different form, largely due to the influence of a provincial aristocrat, Armand Marie Jacques de Chastenet, the Marquis de Puységur. Unlike Mesmer, who centered his notions of animal magnetism on the moment of “crisis”—the fit-like instance when patients often convulsed as an indication that they were healed—Puységur directed his attention to the study of somnambulism, the placid trance-like state that subjects entered into upon manipulation by the mesmerist (Monroe 67, 68). As Bertrand Méheust observes in Somnambulism et médiumnité, “the Mesmeric state of somnambulism usually entailed a dramatic diminution or augmentation of perceptual and cognitive abilities”—the patient’s intellectual powers either became highly attuned or the entranced subject became almost marionette-like, willing to perform at the will of their masters (qtd. in Monroe 68). However, while men of science were soon again fascinated by the potential afforded by such a practice, especially within the realm of early psychiatry, spectators of the phenomena often continued to be less than supportive. For instance, Monroe notes that “among students of mesmerism” the “distinctive state of altered perception” that occurred between the subject and mesmerist

5 According to Henri Ellenberger, the Marquis was once quoted as saying, “I believe in the existence within myself of a power. From this belief derives my will to exert it. The entire doctrine of Animal Magnetism is contained in the two words: Believe and Want. I believe that I have the power to set into action the vital principle of my fellow-men; I want to make use of it; this is all my science and all my means. Believe and want, Sirs, and you will do as much as I” (72).
6 One of the Marquis’s earliest patients was Victor Race, a young twenty-three year old peasant who had been employed by the family for many years. According to Ellenberger, Race suffered from a mild-respiratory disease and was easily magnetized by the Marquis. While in the trance, the Marquis noticed that the curious state the young man fell into was very similar to sleep; however, “he seemed to be more awake and aware than in his normal waking state” (Ellenberger 71). The Marquis observed that the young man “spoke aloud, answered questions, and displayed a far brighter mind than in his normal condition,” a fact that will become important in Chapter Two of this thesis (Ellenberger 71).
almost always “emerged in the context of a particular kind of relationship:” the
magnétisuer, or mesmerist, served as the “manipulator of fluid, objective observer, poser
of questions, and documenter of answers,” while the somnambule, or patient, “became
the instrument on which the magnétisuer operated” (68, 69). As such, the “relationship
often involved social inequality” since the somnambules were typically “women, or men
of lower class status and less education,” while the mesmerists were often men of rank
and distinction (Monroe 69). And even when the mesmerists were men of lower social
standing, they were unusually self-confident, using their mesmeric powers to direct the
thoughts and actions of their subjects. In fact, contemporary literature often stressed the
delicate, shy, and self-effacing nature of patients, stating that somnambules were often
highly susceptible to manipulation, while mesmerists were described as “physically vital”
individuals with plenty of “intellectual superiority,” “prodigious willpower,” and
“assured mastery” (Monroe 69). Consequently, as interest in the pseudoscience
continued to grow, skeptics of the pseudoscience became increasingly concerned about
the power that mesmeric operators wielded over their patients, questioning the safety of
allowing individuals, especially innocent and naive young women, to fall under the
mesmerist’s spell.

However, despite such public concerns, mesmerism continued to grow in popularity
over the next forty years even as it went through yet another rejection, this time by the
French Académie de Médecine. Scientists at the Académie, after a series of

7 The Académie appointed the first of several commissions to study mesmerism in 1825. Their formal
decision to permanently abandon all study of mesmerism as a serious science was made in 1842 (Monroe
69-70).
unsuccessful experiments, resolved to abandon all further study of lucid somnambulism as a serious science on the basis that there was no definitive proof of the efficacy of mesmerism’s healing powers or even the existence of a universal *fluidum*. Henceforth, the practice of mesmerism made yet another transition, this time into a pseudoscience pursued mainly by *la vie de bohème* or the Bohemian underground (Monroe 70). Indeed, in Monroe’s estimation, beginning in the 1830s, mesmerism’s enactment increasingly became conflated with the work of “journalists, Romantic Socialists, literary writers, and visionary working-class autodidacts” (70). And, as Alice Winter mentions in *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain*, individuals such as Wilkie Collins, Harriet Martineau, Charles Darwin, and even Charles Dickens soon “participated in mesmeric experiments,” while even George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell had “brief but striking personal experiences with it” (16). According to Monroe, “the lucid somnambulist, her mind liberated from bodily constraints, freed to seek enlightenment in the ethereal world of pure essences” became for many the symbol of a broader quest for spiritual fulfillment circulating within nineteenth-century society (70). Mesmerism therefore gained recognition not only as a “therapy but as a means of receiving direct revelations from the beyond,” be it from “spirits, saints, and angels” (Monroe 70, 71). Many famous intellectuals, including Margaret Fuller, Walt Whitman, and Hawthorne’s sister-in-law, Elizabeth Peabody, therefore found in the new science the potential of receiving the spiritual insight that formed much of the basis of American transcendental philosophy, especially since mesmerism relied so heavily on the individual power of both
the operator and subject. Even Edgar Allan Poe became a follower of the fascinating practice. As he famously states in “Mesmeric Revelations” (1844), “Whatever doubt may still envelop the rationale of mesmerism, its startling facts are now almost universally admitted” (410). For Poe, the very fact that mesmerism could allow an individual by “mere exercise of will” to “impress his fellow and cast him into an abnormal condition, of which the phenomena resemble those of death” seemed like fantasy come to life (410). Indeed, as mentioned in Robert Fuller’s text, Mesmerism and the American Cure of Souls, on “several occasions [Poe] observed subjects being placed into the magnetic condition. And he also witnessed a mesmeric séance performed by the renowned spiritualist Andrew Jackson Davis” (36). Like Hawthorne, Poe seems to have been particularly interested in the powers of mesmerism, especially the notion “that, while in this state, the person so impressed employs only with effort, and then feebly, the external organs of sense, yet perceives, with keenly refined perception, and through channels supposed unknown, matters beyond the scope of the physical organs” (410).

Consequently, like Hawthorne, Poe would eventually use the pseudoscience as the basis of various stories including “Mesmeric Revelations” and “Mesmerism in Articulo Mortis” (1845) (later to be known as “The Facts in the Case of M. Vlademar”).

Considering therefore the popularity of mesmerism within popular culture, it comes as

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8 For a full discussion of Margaret Fuller’s and Walt Whitman’s relationship with mesmerism, see Bruce Mills. Poe, Fuller, and the Mesmeric Arts: Transition States in the American Renaissance. Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 2005. Print. Interestingly, as Meg Brulatour from Virginia Commonwealth University discusses, Emerson believed in what he called the Oversoul. (Walt Whitman called it the “float”—an idea closely tied to mesmerism’s notion of a universal fluidum. For followers of Transcendentalism, according to Brulatour, there is an “inner ‘spark’ contained by and connecting all facets of nature, including humankind, which can be discovered not through logical reasoning but only through intuition, the creative insight and interpretation of one’s own inner voices.”

l little wonder that Hawthorne would find himself among those individuals touched by mesmerism; after all, by the end of the 1830s its practice seems already to have become deeply engrained in the popular culture, attracting individuals from all facets of society.

MESMERISM IN HAWTHORNE’S TIME

As Fuller notes, in the period between 1800 and 1850 Americans evidenced what could be described as a “congenital susceptibility” to a wide assortment of medicinal, spiritual, and psychological movements and practices (15). Mesmerism’s subsequent progress in the United States was therefore “intimately bound up with the life of popular culture” (Fuller 15). Parlor rooms and state demonstrations, such as those introduced by Charles Poyen Saint Sauveur in 1836, became the laboratories where mesmerism was enacted. And while in Europe mesmerism had largely been the possession of an idle and bored aristocracy, in America it now became a tool of the middle class: a way for men and women to participate in some of the foremost fads of the time while also questioning, in Fuller’s estimation, the “lawful principles long hidden beneath the appearance of the outer world” (17). Newspapers such as the Providence Journal Bulletin began reporting cases of magnetic somnambulism, and Poyen’s treatise of 1837 smugly declared that “in the nineteen months” since animal magnetism sprung up in New England, its practice went from a “complete state of obscurity and neglect to general notice” (qtd. in Fuller 20). Indeed, Poyen’s text, The Progress of Animal Magnetism in New England, went far in solidifying the exact principles of mesmerism for the American public:

10 On October 23, 1837 the Providence Journal Bulletin wrote, "We do not pretend to be total converts to the cause, but will say that the exhibitions we have witnessed have not only surprised but astonished us…and if the science is a Humbug as some claim we can only say that we have witnessed experiments
The phenomena of somnambulism, which are to be subsequently described, may be ranged in the following order:—Suspension, more or less complete, of the external sensibility; intimate connexion with the magnetizer and with no other one; influence of the will; communication of thought; clairvoyance, or the faculty of seeing through various parts of the body, the eyes remaining closed; unusual development of sympathy, of memory, and the power of imagination; faculty of sensing the symptoms of disease and prescribing proper remedies for them; entire forgetting, after awakening, of what transpired during the state of somnambulism” (63).

In Poyen’s opinion, mesmerism enabled its practitioners to suspend the senses of their entranced mediums while simultaneously infusing mediums with the power of clairvoyance. Articles written in Rhode Island, Maine, and Connecticut supported Poyen’s contentions, and the practice of animal magnetism soon became a topic of conversation on all levels of society. As William Stones notes in *Letter to Dr. A. Brigham on Animal Magnetism* (1837), mesmerism quickly became “a steady theme of interest in New England society,” making “a deep impression upon some of the soundest and best balanced minds” (qtd. in Fuller 20). Indeed, as the New England fever over mesmerism spread, many began to see how the act of mesmerism connected to larger issues at stake within American culture, especially concerns over the vulnerabilities of the sentient being, the nature of social hierarchies, and personal rights and ownership since mesmerism was both a classist, as well as a gendered, practice.

Consequently as the nineteenth-century progressed, the phenomena which had heretofore been linked primarily to parlor tricks and sideshows became connected to greater preoccupations in American society. Tied to notions of possession, spiritual

with some of the most scientific men in our country—'who all expressed themselves as entirely satisfied that there was no deception in what they witnessed.'
contravention, and manipulation, many individuals, including eventually Hawthorne, began to worry about the ramifications of mesmerism’s practice. As one anonymous pamphlet entitled *Confessions of a Magnetizer, Being an Expose of Animal Magnetism* (1845) observed, magnetism was potentially “an agent of great abuse and impropriety” (2). After all, from the time of its inception as a science, mesmerism had been plagued by warnings of its indecency.\footnote{Certain members of the early French commissions had secretly submitted a report to the king warning of the “indecencies to which Mesmer’s science was prone” (Fuller 33).} For example, there were decidedly sexual overtones to the mesmerizing process since the act “often required a passive female to willingly yield all mental resistance and to comply with the physical gestures of an active, dominating male” (Fuller 33). As Fuller questions, “What secret commands might be implanted into the unsuspecting subject’s mind? What unknown power might an unscrupulous operator secure over a trusting volunteer? And mightn’t this mysterious animal magnetic fluid be Satan’s means for claiming innocent souls?” (32). Many in New England society probably shared similar concerns and their fears were only heightened when the anonymous writer of *Confessions* revealed the true nature of the telepathic bond between the mesmerist and subject. In the widely disseminated text, the anonymous author “confessed to having surrendered, quite against his original intentions, to fleeting temptations and to have telepathically impressed affections for himself upon the minds of lovely young ladies” (Fuller 33). In addition, he claimed to have “succeeded in stirring their passions towards him to such a degree that they became willing to commit indecencies” (Fuller 34). The text urged the populace to reconsider how easily they allowed mesmerism into their homes since, the writer argued, the practitioner of animal
magnetism was “an agent eminently capable of subverting moral decencies” (Fuller 34). As expected, many were outraged. Capturing the general mood of dissenters towards mesmerism at the time, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in 1837 that mesmerism belonged to the “copious chapter of Demonology” (5:388). The then thirty-four-year-old essayist, philosopher, and poet, shuddered at the possibility that “an adept [magnetizer] should attempt to put me asleep by the concentration of his will without my leave” (Emerson 312).\(^\text{12}\)

By the time, then, that Hawthorne wrote *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) and *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), the practice of mesmerism had already become a deeply contentious subject in much of American society. While individuals such as William Stone viewed mesmerism as a road to spiritual utopia, others, such as Emerson, were more circumspect (Fuller 34).\(^\text{13}\) However, while Emerson counseled others to “keep away from keyholes” in order to avoid the potentially hypnotic influences of the mesmerist, Hawthorne’s assessment of the science seems much more complex (Emerson 5:388, Fuller 34). As Fuller notes “Hawthorne’s sensitivity to the subtle means by which strong individuals invariably coerce those around them made him wary of mesmerism’s moral implications” (35). At the same time, Hawthorne was intrigued by the science’s

\(^{12}\) On October 6, 1837, Emerson’s journal reads: “I wonder at the interest that animal magnetism inspires in fine persons; not at all that it startles the thoughtless. I feel no strong interest in it. I do not doubt the wonder, but there is wonder enough in my thumbnail already. Its phenomena belong to the copious chapter of Demonology, under which category I suppose everybody’s experience might write a few facts. These obscure facts are only to suggest that our being is richer than we knew, and we are now only in the forecourt or portico. The hints we have, the dreams, the coincidences, do make each man stare once or twice in a lifetime. But animal magnetism seems the phenomena of Disease, and too fuliginous and typhoid in their character to attract any but the physician... Animal magnetism is the shovel put under feet to show how poor our foundations are” (Emerson 312).

potential and shared the “popular opinion that mesmerism could be used to discover and systematize knowledge unattainable through rational investigation” (Fuller 34).

**HAWTHORNE AND MESMERISM**

Hawthorne’s first direct encounter with mesmerism seems to have occurred on July 24, 1837 at the residence of his esteemed friend, Horatio Bridge, a fellow graduate from Bowdoin and lawyer at Augusta and Milburn (Reynolds 57). Bridge’s visitors included a Frenchman, Mr. Schaeffer who, according to Hawthorne, offered to “magnetize [him] in the manner of Monsieur Poyen,”—the man initially responsible for bringing mesmerism to the New England area in March of 1836 (Centenary 8:58). The encounter with Mr. Schaeffer would not be Hawthorne’s last with the pseudoscience and the young writer soon found himself in close allegiance with practitioners of mesmerism in the fall of 1837, precisely at the time of his “confused misalliance” with Elizabeth Peabody, a “galvanizing, passionate advocate” who, in Brenda Wineapple’s estimation, was

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14 According to the *Salem Gazette*, Poyen performed a series of mesmeric experiments for Salem audiences on September 12 and 15, 1837—the same year that Hawthorne was first introduced to the pseudoscience—however, as Taylor Stoehr notes in *Hawthorne’s Mad Scientists: Pseudosciences and Social Sciences in Nineteenth-Century Life and Letters*, the famous mesmerist began offering informative lectures on mesmerism much earlier. On March 23, 1836, Poyen placed an advertisement in the *Daily Advocate* (a Boston-based newspaper) soliciting the attention of doctors and interested volunteers (Stoehr 37). His article, also mentioned in Poyen’s 1837 text *Progress of Animal Magnetism*, was an attempt to elicit the public’s attention in regards to mesmerism’s curative powers: “The attention of the public being now awakened upon the subject of Animal Magnetism, I announce to those persons who feel an interest in it, and wish for more explicit information, that they call upon me at my lodgings, 176 Washington street [sic], from four to five in the afternoon. They will find me ready to give them as ample an instruction as they desire, without any other compensation than the pleasure of fulfilling the duty,—that of spreading more widely a truth I have undertaken to make known to this country, as being equally interesting to science, and useful to health. It is not enough for me to have lectured seven or eight times upon Animal Magnetism; I ought also to instruct how to practise [sic] it for the good of society. It is not enough for some intelligent and liberal-minded persons to have listened to my lectures, or read a few pages on Animal Magnetism; they ought also to embrace it earnestly, and exercise it as an efficient means of helping their fellow creatures, when sick. Physicians are especially invited to call. Should they overlook the study of Animal Magnetism, and foolishly disdain to practice it, it would undoubtedly fall, to the greatest regret of sensible and moral persons, into the hands of quacks, and become, perhaps, instrumental of dreadful abuse” (45).
“involved with all the major reform movements of the nineteenth-century” (“Nathaniel Hawthorne” 22).

In fact, as Taylor Stoehr relates in *Hawthorne’s Mad Scientists: Pseudosciences and Social Sciences in Nineteenth-Century Life and Letters*, Elizabeth Peabody first met Dr. Poyen during a performance in Boston where she spoke with the doctor directly following one of his experiments. Elizabeth was “particularly interested in mesmerism because she thought its curative powers might benefit Sophia,” who suffered from chronic headaches (Stoehr 38). On June, 18, 1836, Elizabeth wrote Mary, the third sister, all about her hopes for the curative powers of the practice:

> Mr. Poyen said there are some experiments of the Animal Magnetists that went to form the theory—that persons differed from each other as bodies do—in being positive and negative—and had attractions and repulsions thereby.—He said that I was a highly magnetized body—he thought I might magnetise if I could concentrate my power in a strong act of will—and I do not know how I shall try to cure Sophia.—I asked him to tell me how I should go to work & he did—so—tell Sophia to be prepared—but you need not tell anybody else. (qtd. in Stoehr 38)

Elizabeth felt that through mesmerism she might be able to “concentrate” her power on the “negative” energies that were ailing Sophia thereby possibly affecting a cure. Elizabeth’s success with her sister goes unrecorded; however, from this fateful meeting onwards, Sophia would, on a fairly continual basis, seek the assistance of various mesmerists in an attempt to cure her debilitating headaches.

On November 11, 1837, approximately one and a half years after Sophia began her mesmeric treatments, Hawthorne met the woman who would become his future wife. At the time, Hawthorne did not know that Sophia was seeking the expertise of Dr. Joseph Emerson Fiske, a recent convert of Poyen’s. And the writer continued to remain in the
dark about Sophia’s involvement with mesmerism throughout the fall and early spring of 1837-1838 even when on May 2, 1838, Sophia wrote to Elizabeth regarding a particularly bad attack the doctor assisted in curing:

I came home quite used up--& was more excruciatingly tortured than for twelve months. I could in no way touch the bed. When I laid down upon it, it seemed to recede under me. I needed a millstone to crush me down. I tried George’s hydrostatic, but that would not do. It is a most desperate sensation to which I am subject & as I told Sarah, the vision of a bare bodkin passed before my mind. But Dr. Fiske came after tea--& and now will not you kneel to him in gratitude when I tell you that he entirely relieved me! As much you love me, so much must you have felt indebted to him. Nothing else in the whole world could have been done me any good—may GOD bless him. (qtd. in Stoehr 40-41)

Dr. Fiske’s prowess as a mesmerist and healer, in Sophia’s opinion, was positively extraordinary; however, even though she was more than willing to write about Dr. Fiske’s success to Elizabeth, Sophia remained mute about her treatments with Hawthorne. Her silence perhaps stems from the fact that, even then, she understood Hawthorne’s vacillating opinion regarding such scientific fads. However, Dr. Fiske’s numerous visits to the Peabody home must not have gone unnoticed by the young writer. But, whatever the young writer’s opinion of Dr. Fiske or mesmerism, he also remained quiet about the subject. As Samuel Coale observes in his biography of Hawthorne, this decision to remain quiet may have stemmed from the fact that during the time, Hawthorne still remained fairly ambivalent about the practice, recognizing that “the process was probably physiologically and psychologically sound” (“Mysteries of Mesmerism” 49).
On New Year’s Day of 1839, Sophia Peabody and Hawthorne became secretly engaged and, in 1840, the Peabodys relocated to Boston, where Elizabeth Peabody set up a small bookshop and dental office that housed a small corner for the sale of “homeopathic medicines, another pseudoscientific fad to which the Peabodys were drawn” (Stoehr 41). Eager to continue the treatments she had started in Salem, Sophia set out to find another mesmerist that could keep her headaches at bay. This time she turned to Mrs. Cornelia Thomas Park, an old friend with whom she had stayed during a cholera scare in 1832 (Stoehr 41). According to Stoehr, Mrs. Park was someone that Sophia “could trust” and “since her new magnetizer was female, it became somewhat easier to explain the situation to Hawthorne, who [still] did not know about Dr. Fiske’s professional relations with Sophia” (42). After all, mesmerism had continually been linked throughout the past 70 or so years with sexual transgression and impropriety—the thought of a female magnetizer therefore, rather than a male operator, might be a consolation to Hawthorne, or so Sophia might have surmised.

Discussing Sophia’s initial revelations to Hawthorne, Stoehr notes that she first “rather cautiously” mentioned Mrs. Park’s experiments with Miss Larned, a somnambulist who could, while in a mesmeric trance, see “visions of other worlds, the usual clairvoyant stock-in-trade of the mesmerists” (42). Hawthorne, who was at the time becoming quickly disillusioned with his work at the utopian community at Brook Farm, was shocked. In a letter to Sophia dated October 18, 1841, he expresses his deep distrust of the pseudoscience, mentioning not only his unwillingness to allow the power of magnetism to be exercised on Sophia, but also speculating as to the dangers of the
phenomena since, in his estimations, such treatments could “perhaps contaminate something spiritual and sacred” in his future wife:

Without distrusting that the phenomena which thou tellest me of, and others as remarkable, have really occurred, I think that they are to be accounted for as the result of physical and material, not of a spiritual, influence. Opium has produced many brighter visions of heaven (and just as susceptible to proof) than those which thou recountest. They are dreams, my love—and such dreams as thy sweetest fancy, either waking or sleeping, could vastly improve upon. And what delusion can be more lamentable and mischievous, than to mistake the physical and material for the spiritual? What so miserable as to lose the soul’s true, though hidden, knowledge and consciousness of heaven, in the midst of an earth-born vision? Thou shalt not do this . . . And thou wilt know that the view which I take of this matter is caused by no want of faith in mysteries, but from a deep reverence of the soul, and of the mysteries which it knows within itself, but never transmits to the earthly eye or ear. (Centenary 15:589-90)

Even Hawthorne’s limited experiences with mesmerism up until this point in his relationship with Sophia were enough for the young writer to mistrust the promised rewards, material or otherwise, that the pseudoscience offered. Instead, Hawthorne counseled prudence and forbearance, fearing the possible ramifications, upon Sophia’s soul, of allowing an “earth-born vision” to cloud her “soul’s true, though hidden, knowledge and consciousness of heaven” (Centenary 15:589-90). At the time then, for Hawthorne the problem was that mesmerism was essentially a false idol, a man-made creation that attempted to overshadow the individual’s true knowledge of heaven and the divine. In fact, judging from the bent of his letter, Hawthorne might not yet have begun to conflate mesmerism with the dangerous sexual dynamics and power inequalities evident within the operator/medium relationship. However, he may have come to this realization by June 30, 1842, just nine days before his marriage, when he cemented his
opinion of mesmerism, at least where his future wife was concerned, in a letter written to
Sophia from a boardinghouse in Boston:

Belovedest, didst thou sleep well, last night? My pillow was haunted with
ghastly dreams, the details whereof have flitted away like vapors, but a
strong impression remains about thy being magnetized. God save me
from any more such! I awoke in an absolute quake. Dearest, I cannot
oppose thy submitting to so much of this influence as will relieve thy
headache; but, as thou lovest me, do not let suffer thyself to be put to
sleep. My feeling on this point is so strong, that it would be wronging us
both to conceal it from thee. (Centenary 15: 634)

In Hawthorne’s estimation, nothing he had heard thus far about the science of mesmerism
eased his concerns about the prudence of allowing Sophia to be placed in a trance by the
manipulations of another.

MESMERISM IN HAWTHORNE’S TEXTS

However, to say that Hawthorne’s letters definitively prove his aversion towards
mesmerism would be to over-simplify the author’s complex relationship with the
practice. For instance, during an 1858 trip to Italy Hawthorne recalls that while the
existence of mesmerism might have tantalized him, it also did not convince him as to the
veracity of such practices:

But what most astonished me is, the indifference with which I listen to
these marvels. They throw old ghost stories quite into the shade; they
bring the whole world of spirits down amongst us, visibly and audibly;
they are absolutely proved to be sober facts by evidence that would satisfy
us of any other alleged realities; and yet I cannot free my mind to interest
itself in them. They are facts to my understanding (which, it might have
been anticipated, would have been the last to acknowledge them), but they
seem not to be facts in my intuitions and deeper perceptions. My inner
soul does not in the least admit them. There is a mistake somewhere. So
idle and empty do I feel these stories to be. (Centenary 14: 398-399)
The passage seems to make clear that Hawthorne understood the essential “mistake somewhere” in mesmerism’s conception, the fundamental idleness and emptiness in the assertions of the practice’s powers; yet, he also found himself pondering the strange pseudo-reality created by the phenomena. In fact, in the very same journal entry dated 1858, Hawthorne contemplates the dark domain created by the fantasy of mesmerism:

The whole matter seems to me a sort of dreaming awake . . . it resembles a dream, in that the whole material is, from the first, in the dreamer’s mind, though concealed at various depths beneath the surface; the dead appear alive, as they always do in dreams; unexpected combinations occur, as continually in dreams; the mind speaks through various persons of the drama, and sometimes astonishes itself with its own wit, wisdom, and eloquence, as often in dreams . . . I should be glad to believe the genuineness of these spirits, if I could; but the above is the conclusions to which my soberest thoughts tend. There remains, of course, a great deal for which I cannot account, and I cannot sufficiently wonder at the pig-headedness both of metaphysicians and physiologists in not accepting the phenomena so far as to make them the subject of investigation. (Centenary 14: 400-401)

Hawthorne then, if not a complete believer, was at least intrigued by the possibilities afforded by mesmerism as a sort of analogy to the waking-dream. After all, any reader of “The Custom House” recognizes the correlation between the dream-like metaphysics of mesmerism and the dream-like state that Hawthorne himself creates. As Hawthorne observes, moonlight “is the medium the most suitable for a romance-writer” because within the shadow realm created by the “unusual light,” things “lose their actual substance” and become “invested with a quality of strangeness and remoteness” (The Scarlet Letter 29). Here, “somewhere between the real world and fairy-land,” the “Actual and Imaginary may meet, and imbue itself with the nature of the other” so that the individual comes ever closer to being “one remove further from the actual, and nearer
to the imagination‖ (The Scarlet Letter 29). And it will be within this realm that Hawthorne eventually sets some of his most psychologically-compelling texts, creating a space where, as Coale notes, “mesmerist-scientists with their penetrating intelligence and trance-inducing powers stalk their prey” (“Mysteries of Mesmerism” 66).

Like the reports Hawthorne hears about mesmerism and its ability to subjugate one individual to the will of another, Hawthorne’s romances will eventually become complex creations, “woven from legends, rumors, testimony, and secrets from the past,” each competing in a dramatic interplay between reality and the unsubstantial realm of the dreamscape (Coale, Mesmerism and Hawthorne, 10). Can Hawthorne then really have been such an adamant protester of mesmerism as his notebooks claim? After all, the pseudoscience found its way into Hawthorne’s literature on more than one occasion, both in The House of the Seven Gables, as well as The Blithedale Romance. Even within his romances there seems to a certain ambiguity to Hawthorne’s use of the pseudoscience.

For instance, consider the opening to The Blithedale Romance where he notes that the Veiled Lady “was a phenomena in the mesmeric line; one of the earliest that had indicated the birth of a new science, or the revival of an old humbug” (5). Here, if one reads Hawthorne’s own feelings about mesmerism in the words of the narrator, then mesmerism seems just another fad meant to falsely enthrall people with “skillfully contrived” stage effects (The Blithedale Romance 5). However, consider also Clifford Pyncheon’s estimations of mesmerism in The House of the Seven Gables: “the harbingers of a better era are unmistakable. Mesmerism, now! Will that effect nothing, think you, towards purging away the grossness out of human life? . . . These rapping spirits . . . what
are these but the messengers of the spiritual world, knocking at the door of substance? And it shall be flung wide open!” (230). Which of these passages, if either, truly reveals Hawthorne’s opinion of the practice of mesmerism?

Perhaps then, one can begin to understand Hawthorne’s view of mesmerism in a more philosophical, rather than literal sense. Wherever mesmerism threatened the inner-sanctity of the practitioner, Hawthorne steadfastly counseled against the use of the movement as a way of healing or cleansing the individual. Such a theory can be construed by observing his resolution when it came to Sophia’s own interactions with mesmerism and also by analyzing Hawthorne’s underlying critique of the victimization so evident in Westervelt’s treatment of Priscilla in *The Blithedale Romance*, or even Matthew Maule’s detrimental enslavement of Alice Pyncheon in *The House of the Seven Gables*. However, as Hawthorne observes in “The Hall of Fantasy” (1843), mesmerism also held a latent potential for man to realize “a better and purer life, than had been realized on earth” (*Mosses From an Old Manse* 172). Indeed, capturing the feelings of even the hardiest skeptic of the age, Hawthorne writes, “The heart of the staunchest conservative, unless he abjured his fellowship with man, could hardly have helped throbbing in sympathy with the spirit that pervaded these innumerable theorists,” theorists such as Poyen who saw in mesmerism the hope for a lighter, brighter future (*Mosses From an Old Manse* 172). After all, as Hawthorne continues, “far down beyond the fathom of the intellect the soul acknowledged that all these varying and conflicting developments of humanity were united in one sentiment”—the desire for a more perfect understanding of human existence (*Mosses From an Old Manse* 172).
Consequently, while Hawthorne may have felt torn about Sophia’s desire to continue her mesmeric treatments, he also recognized the latent potential of the pseudoscience as a healing force, be it in society or specifically for the individual. As Stoehr observes, Hawthorne had “seen mesmerism heal the sick” and he “knew people who had seen ghosts and heard the spirit rappings” (Stoehr 30). And even if he did not completely believe in the veracity of the claims of mesmerists, much of his experience with the movement “hit close to home, for he had married into a ‘reforming’ family” (Stoehr 30). Therefore, one can never truly say with any certainty that Hawthorne did not believe in mesmerism. After all, if nothing else, Hawthorne must have at least believed somewhat in the curative abilities of the pseudoscience since his wife’s headaches were often treated by the mesmerists she sought for treatment. Instead, one must understand that Hawthorne, as any individual living within the nineteenth-century, both confronted and lived through the various fads and movements of his time, changing his opinion and stance as society’s own conception of the phenomena developed and matured. However, Coale confirms that “the techniques [of mesmerism] attracted and repelled [the writer]—the trance/séance, the mesmeric powers, the psychodynamics of the process, the clairvoyant mediums, the intriguing blend of rumor, speculation, and personal testimony” and because of this simultaneous attraction and repulsion mesmerism eventually found its way into Hawthorne’s fiction (Mesmerism and Hawthorne 4). And, in bringing the

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15 Sophia Peabody’s debilitating headaches seem to have come to an end shortly after her marriage to Hawthorne. Some, like Taylor Stoehr argue, that it might have been Hawthorne’s own subtle mesmerism of his bride that completed the cure since an April 17, 1839 courtship letter reads, “I invite your spirit to be with me . . . Are you conscious of my invitation? I bid you at that particular time, because I can see visions more vividly in the dusky-glow of the firelight . . . Come—and let me renew my spell against head-ache and other direful effects of the eastwind” (Centenary 15: 298). Or perhaps Hawthorne was right when, on October 18, 1841, he wrote from Brook Farm, “Love is the true magnetism” (Centenary 15: 590).
practices of mesmerism and its various counterparts and doppelgangers into his romances, Hawthorne, as Coale observes, “both condemned and employed” the essence of mesmerism in ways that would highlight the complicated nature of ever truly accepting or denying the reality of such psychological phenomena (Mesmerism and Hawthorne 5). And so begins Hawthorne’s fascinating relationship with one of the most bewildering and intriguing phenomenon of the nineteenth-century.
Chapter 3

MESMERISM IN THE HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES

And dearest, thou must remember, too, that thou art now a part of me, and that by surrendering thyself to the influence of this magnetic lady, thou surrenderest more than thine own moral and spiritual well-being.

~ excerpt from a letter to Sophia Hawthorne by Nathaniel Hawthorne (October 18, 1841)

As one of the foremost writers of American romance, Nathaniel Hawthorne often traverses a fine line between adhering to historical accuracy and painting a fictionalized world with “suitable remoteness” so that everyday life seems to fade into the liminal space between the reader and text (The Blithedale Romance 2). For Hawthorne, the genre of the romance seems to be a sort of realm midway between private thought and the objective world, a place “where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet” and in doing so imbue each “with the nature of the other” (“The Custom House” 29). However, rather than merely presenting a partial, subjective depiction of the past in an attempt to somehow sway readers into embracing a particular interpretation of a historical event, Hawthorne uses the lens of the past to interrogate or confront certain anxieties existing within his own contemporary space. He does this, according to E. Miller Budick in “The World as Specter: Hawthorne’s Historical Art,” to purposely collapse the divide between the fictional and historical aspects of his texts and in doing so destabilizes readers, introducing them to a version of the past that is more clearly delineated because of its imaginative component, while also “a literal, historical plausibility” (219). In this way, the story’s background seems to bring readers into a context of historical consciousness, which asks them to suspend their (pre-) conceptions of the particular cultural moment.
Hopefully then, readers may begin to accept the reflection of society that Hawthorne so skillfully crafts, acknowledging, if only for a moment, not only the historical accuracy of the landscape he creates, but also how his texts act as powerful sites of cultural critique.

A compelling example of Hawthorne’s ability to use the genre of the historical romance in order to reflect, re-examine, and critique a particular historical moment occurs in *The House of the Seven Gables* where one not only sees traces of Hawthorne’s deep-seeded anxiety about his Puritan past, but also his contemporary fascination with the startling pseudoscience of mesmerism. In fact, within the body of his text, reality and fiction intertwine in often confusing and arbitrary ways so that the fictionalized past of Matthew Maule becomes an almost historical plausibility only shattered by the recognition—especially amongst contemporary readers of Hawthorne’s work—that the motif of mesmerism that underlies the entire romance represents a primarily nineteenth-century preoccupation and not an accurate representation of New England’s past; after all, mesmerism did not reach America’s shores until March of 1836, many years after the Maule family first lost the property that would eventually hold the house of the seven gables.\(^{16}\) However, even while not historically accurate, by investigating the historical past of the Pyncheon family through the lens or motif of mesmerism, Hawthorne can offer readers a vision of the past that gives insight into certain nineteenth-century

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\(^{16}\) In the mid-1600s, the original Matthew Maule builds a house on the property that will eventually become the site of the house of the seven gables. By the late 1600s, the surrounding neighborhood has become more affluent and the wealthy Colonel Pyncheon offers to purchase the land from Maule, who declines to sell the land. Several years later, Maule faces execution after being accused of witchcraft (late 1600s through early 1700s). Rumors abound that Colonel Pyncheon accused Maule in order to gain possession of the land he coveted. The Colonel eventually hires Maule’s son (early to mid-1700s) to build him a new mansion with seven gables on the property. Holgrave’s own visitation to the property can be traced to the mid-1850s (contemporary to Hawthorne’s original readership).
concerns prevalent during his own lifetime, particularly concerns about the shifting nature of social hierarchies, the vulnerabilities of the sentient being, and personal rights and ownership. By melding together literature and culture, the romance and mesmerism, *The House of the Seven Gables* therefore becomes an interesting site of not only reflection, but also of reconceptualization for the author, one where male and female power structures and sexuality are interrogated via the complex possessions and enslavements that occur between Alice Pyncheon and Matthew Maule and, in subsequent generations, between Phoebe Pyncheon and Holgrave. As such, Hawthorne’s tale becomes not merely a historical reflection of Hawthorne’s own New England ancestry but also a space where Hawthorne investigates the collision or intersection between reality and fiction, the spiritual and symbolic, the past and present. In doing so, Hawthorne evidences how the symbol of mesmerism enables him to reflect and even reshape reality—especially the reality of the reader in regards to the starling pseudoscience. For Hawthorne then, the mesmeric scenes within *The House of the Seven Gables* become the medium or tool by which the author interrogates the world around him and gives voice to certain tensions. Indeed, mesmerism becomes the lens through which Hawthorne questions shifting perceptions of class and gender systems, sexuality, ownership, and, particularly, masculine identity as shaped by nineteenth-century New England culture.

However, in order to understand the complex ways in which Hawthorne was able to use mesmerism as a shifting motif or lens for contemporary nineteenth-century concerns over class and gender hierarchies, the vulnerabilities of the sentient being, and questions
of power and authority, one must understand not only the ways in which Hawthorne viewed the pseudoscience, but also the ways in which nineteenth-century readers understood mesmerism and the cultural space the pseudoscience inhabited. As previously discussed in Chapter 2, by the 1850s when Hawthorne wrote *The House of the Seven Gables*, mesmerism was already a well-established medical and commercial phenomenon in the New England area. Mesmeric stage shows such as those made popular by Charles Poyen were prolific throughout the region and opinions were split as to whether mesmerism should be considered a serious science, one that could potentially cure previously untreatable maladies such as migraines and epileptic fits, or just a negligible fad—a quackery much in the manner of the Fox sister’s spirit rappings and other occult pseudosciences traveling the eastern seaboard. However, while many individuals such as William Stone and Ralph Waldo Emerson definitively knew where they stood in regards to mesmerism, Hawthorne’s opinion was more contradictory—a fact that can be noted not only in *The House of the Seven Gables* as will later be investigated, but also in his various correspondences regarding the pseudoscience. For instance, in October of 1841, in response to a letter written by Sophia Peabody, Hawthorne states:

17 In 1848 in Haydesville, an upstate hamlet of New York, seven-year-old Kate Fox and her ten-year-old sister, Margaret, reported hearing strange rapping noises reverberating throughout their house. The sister’s claimed later that these sounds were made by spirits or ghosts attempting to communicate from the beyond. While the Fox sisters would eventually confess (*New York World*, October 21, 1888) that these “raps” were actually created by the cracking of their knuckle joints, the Fox sister’s experiences profoundly changed the way nineteenth-century society viewed the divide between this world and the next. Other occult sciences prevalent during mesmerism’s time include clairvoyance (the ability to gain information about an object, person, location, or physical event through other than the known human senses) and mediumship (a form of spiritual communication in which the medium experiences what he or she believes to be contact with the spirits of the dead, angels, demons, or other immaterial entities).
...my spirit is moved to talk with thee to-day about these magnetic miracles, and to beseech thee to take no part in them. I am unwilling that a power should be exercised in thee, of which we know neither the origin nor consequence, and the phenomena of which seem rather calculated to bewilder us, than to teach us any truths about the present or future state of being. If I possess such a power over thee, I should not dare to exercise it; nor can I consent to its being exercised by another. Supposing that this power arises from a transfusion of one spirit into another, it seems to me that the sacredness of an individual is violated by it; there would be an intrusion into thy holy of holies—and the intruder would not be thy husband! (Centenary 15:588)

As evidenced in the letter, Hawthorne seems to have feared that a crafty mesmerist might somehow violate his fiancé, both physically and spiritually, and he counseled against such a subversive intrusion. Indeed, in the same letter, Hawthorne conceded that he had “no faith whatever that people are raised to the seventh heaven, or to any heaven at all, or that they gain any insight into the mysteries of life or beyond death, by means of this strange science” (Centenary 15:589). In fact, he worried that Sophia might be tarnished by her brush with mesmerism, stating that “something spiritual and sacred” might be contaminated by the “earthly effluence” of the mesmerist (Centenary 15:589). Yet, while Hawthorne’s letter highlights his unyielding attitude towards the practice of mesmerism when it came to the safety of his young wife, the writer and philosopher within him could not help but be mesmerized by the psychological aspects of the science. Indeed, Hawthorne’s own interest in the pseudoscience comes out in a diary entry written in 1842 where he records a list of “questions as to unsettled points of History and Mysteries of Nature to be asked of mesmerized persons” (The American Notebook 93). Indeed, even after Hawthorne finished using the motif of mesmerism within his own writing, first in The House of the Seven Gables and then in The Blithedale Romance, Hawthorne’s
fascination with mesmerism continued as evidenced in 1858, only a six years before his death, when Hawthorne found himself pondering the fascinating possibilities of the interesting corollary between the pseudoscience and the art of writing.\(^\text{18}\)

According to Taylor Stoehr in *Hawthorne’s Mad Scientists*, Hawthorne’s opinion of mesmerism thus seems to fall into two categories. As Stoehr notes, the first hypothesizes that “if the claims of the pseudoscience are true, we are then dealing with spiritual phenomena which we do not understand and which are better left unexplored, for it is immoral and sacrilegious to pry into another’s soul or to let someone pry into yours” (45). The second contends that “whether or not the phenomena are genuine, association with the unsavory class of people who perform magnetic feats is degrading, and one must expect ridicule, or, what is just as bad, notoriety” in consorting with such individuals, a fact that Hawthorne makes plain in his letter to Sophia dated October 18, 1841 wherein he worries about the possibility that consorting with mesmerists might reveal Sophia to be an “imposter” or, worse yet, “crazed” (Stoehr 45-46; *Centenary* 15:590). In addition, one could cite a third category, which would include Hawthorne’s ongoing anxiety about the sexually-overt nature of the pseudoscience and the dangers of allowing a young woman, especially one’s wife, to undergo the hypnotic influences of a potentially dangerous magnetizer. Yet, while Hawthorne seems to have publicly been skeptical of mesmerism, one can little doubt that its successes also made a deep impression on him. After all, the therapies did in many ways relieve Sophia of her headaches and even

\(^{18}\) See Chapter 2, page25.
Margaret Fuller, Hawthorne’s close literary companion, would eventually receive treatment in 1845 for her headaches and a spinal curvature (Stoehr 46).

As illustrated above, Hawthorne then, along with his contemporaries, had complex associations between mesmerism and larger issues circulating within nineteenth-century society—concerns revolving both about the class-based nature of the practice, as well its sexual undertones. *The House of the Seven Gables* therefore acts as an interesting space for interrogating the meaning or connotations of mesmerism within Hawthorne’s cannon because within his text he presents multiple possibilities for the symbolic meaning of the pseudoscience. For instance, as this chapter will reveal, on the most basic level, Hawthorne’s use of mesmerism enables him to question the stability of class systems as evidenced by the ability of lower-class individuals, such as Matthew Maule, to gain agency and transcend their class status in order to attain power over certain elite members of society, individuals such those represented by Gervayse Pyncheon. This reading finds added complication when one also considers that Matthew Maule gains agency over Gervayse Pyncheon by mesmerizing his daughter, Alice—a character indicative of the type of stereotypical female figure most commonly used as a medium to evoke a mesmeric trance—since in the Matthew Maule/Alice Pyncheon dyad one not only sees a reflection of the struggle over class power but also a mirroring of the gender binaries evident in nineteenth-century culture most particularly those that cast men as all controlling and women as weak and feeble. However, analysis of the place of mesmerism within Hawthorne’s work does not end there because, on a deeper level, Hawthorne’s use of mesmerism also enables him to, if only briefly, question the
problematic view of the asexuality of females within the nineteenth-century, most notably through the character of Alice Pyncheon and her overtly sexual response to the figure of Matthew Maule, a reading that will be discussed on pages 50 though 53 of this thesis. In addition, mesmerism becomes a site in the romance for interrogating female agency and empowerment, as demonstrated through the inverted power dynamic between Holgrave and Phoebe Pyncheon where, as this thesis will argue, she, not he, acts as the operator of a much more homely sort of mesmeric witchcraft. Yet, while all of these various readings of the meaning of mesmerism within Hawthorne’s novel ultimately will illuminate the complexity of truly assigning a definitive meaning to the act of mesmerism, Hawthorne’s most compelling use of mesmerism seems to be his use of the pseudoscience to define a new masculinity. As a reading which comes fairly late within this chapter, but perhaps deserves the most attention, Hawthorne’s reconfiguration of the male identity through the mesmerist Holgrave not only gestures to historical changes in his contemporary marketplace, which required a revised definition of maleness, but also to a reshaping of gender roles, as noted in the more egalitarian relationship exhibited between Holgrave and Phoebe Pyncheon. Consequently, while some would argue that the text in many ways merely reimposes gender binaries, after all Phoebe and Holgrave enter into a very safe, domestic relationship in the concluding chapter, Hawthorne simultaneously presents, if only briefly, a re-envisioning of these gender binaries to create a dynamic much more based on equality and not merely possession, ownership, and marginalization. Hawthorne’s use of mesmerism in The House of the Seven Gables, as readers will see, therefore ultimately traverses a finite line between conservatism and
subversion. He eventually reverts in the text to a very traditionalist conceptualization of
gender relations between a man and a woman, yet he does so in a way that acknowledges
the inadequacy of maintaining the status quo since Holgrave, after all, in no way inhabits
the space of the classical, patriarchal male. However, in order to better understand the
complex ways that Hawthorne uses mesmerism in his texts as a motif for much larger
concerns within his time, one must first understand the symbolic connotations of
mesmerism within the writer’s contemporary space.

MESMERISM AND CLASS RELATIONS

As the fever over mesmerism spread throughout New York and the New England area,
scientists and audience members at mesmeric exhibitions began to notice that the type of
power that mesmerists exerted over their subjects seemed disturbingly democratic,
meaning that members of New England’s elite were just as likely as plebian workers to
fall under the hypnotic suggestions of mesmeric operators. As Winter notes because of
the ways in which mesmerism’s enactment re-dispersed power among the classes its
practice became “catalytic particularly to disputes about intellectual authority” and “the
relative status of the classes” (346). Men of high and low social ranks were equally
susceptible not only to the magnetic allure of mesmerism, becoming both operators and
mediums at mesmeric demonstrations both public and private, throughout the New
England area, but also equally receptive to the enshrouding power of the mesmeric
trance. Indeed, according to William Gregory, author of Animal Magnetism or
Mesmerism and its Phenomena (1884), the mesmerized subject was at once classless and
identity-less since the mesmeric patient “often loses, in the mesmeric sleep, his sense of
identity, so that he cannot tell his own name, or gives himself another, frequently that of
the operator” and that this occurs not only because the “operator acquires the power of
controlling the sensations of the subject” but also because the medium’s own socially
constructed identity evaporates under the influences of a gifted magnétiseur (6, 8). In
Gregory’s opinion, the effects of mesmerism seemed uniform across the ranks since
members of the upper-classes were as receptive to the mesmeric eye of the operator as
the underprivileged; doctors, lawyers, and laymen alike were all able, while under the
influence of a skilled magnetizer, to fall into the particular somnambular state necessary
for mesmeric revelations.19 And mediums were not the only individuals who could
transcend class ranks. Many prominent mesmeric operators were also class-
transgressors, inverting typical notions of power as plebian mesmerists oftentimes acted
upon wealthy mediums.20 As Martin Willis and Catherine Wynne observe in Victorian
Literary Mesmerism, because of its ability to transcend class and rank, mesmerism was in
many ways challenging accepted notions of social stratification:

If mesmerism challenged boundaries, one of those most often impugned
was the boundary between the classes. From its beginnings mesmerism
was always associated with radical class politics. Indeed its comfortable
coeexistence with revolutionary France was one of the key reasons it did
not flourish in either Britain or the United States until the 1830s. . .
Certainly by the 1840s, however, mesmeric practice was confronting
accepted notions of class hierarchy and interaction in ways that would not
have been acceptable in other fields of cultural inquiry. If mesmerism was

19 Famous mediums of the nineteenth-century include William Stainton Moses, an Anglican clergyman,
who in the period from 1872 to 1883 filled twenty-four notebooks with automatic writing; Eusapia
Pallidino, an Italian spiritualist medium from the slums of Naples; and Adelma Vay, a Hungarian countess,
who inherited her powers from her mother, the Countess Teleki (later the Duchess Solm).
20 Well-known mesmerists include John Elliotson, Professor of Medicine at the University of London; John
Bovee Dods, a New York philosopher; Phineas Parkhurst Quimby, a clock-maker from Belfast, Maine;
Robert Collyer, a Unitarian clergyman from England; and LaRoy Sunderland, a shoemaker and abolitionist
from Exeter, Rhode Island.
a higher form of knowledge then its enactment by working class mesmerists surely said something about the natural order of nineteenth-century society, if not about the supposed superiority of both mind and body as one moved from the lower to the higher classes. Mesmerism was important and also dangerous in so radically highlighting democracy through scientific investigation. (7)

In fact, only when medical practitioners labored over working-class patients was the internal structure of nineteenth-century truly upheld. Otherwise, in a thousand ways all over the northeastern United States, mesmerism demonstrated that both the upper- and lower-classes were equally susceptible to exploitation and possession thereby overturning accepted notions of supremacy. Previously established perceptions of social relations began to deconstruct as many within society, especially individuals who studied the practice, began to notice the questions about equality that mesmerism seemed to raise.

However, even while many within the scientific community pondered the possibility that mesmerism could realistically tear down certain established social fences, it became increasingly clear at stage performances throughout the region that the practice of mesmerism increased the power of the common people. As John Warne Monroe observes in *Laboratories of Faith: Mesmerism, Spiritism, and Occultism in Modern France*, “mediumism, then, was remarkably democratic, a position available to all people” and, as such, “mediumism could function as a way for the relatively powerless to make their voices heard” (136). Consequently, as worries over the shift of power that could result from allowing working-class individuals to become mesmerists operating

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21 As discussed in *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain* by Alice Winter, the mesmerist Spencer Hall was “unusually outspoken in using mesmerism to champion the power of the ‘common people’” (130). He reasoned that “the democratic character of knowledge was founded in natural law” and that an individual, regardless of birth, could become a medium or operator of the forces of nature (Winter 130). His main goal was to prove the “intellectual validity” of the lower-classes (Winter 130).
over upper-class mediums intensified, many individuals tried to solidify the lines between the ranks by asserting that increased receptiveness to mesmerism correlated not so much to distinctions of class, but instead to notions of intellect by arguing increased receptiveness was a mark of a certain lower-class temperament, an indication of a lack of personal restraint. As such, the contention became that members of the working class were more receptive to the mesmerist’s hypnotic temptations because of their baser, inherently more primitive mental and moral capabilities. Commandeering the observations made by William Gregory, some claimed that “a powerful and very active intellect renders it often more difficult” to mesmerize an individual because mesmerists require a “high degree of impressibility” and passivity in their patients (17). The assumption then was that the less-educated classes were more susceptible to mesmerism because “their intellectual powers are not in so constant activity as is the case with men, for example, engaged in business or in professional and scientific or literary pursuits” (Gregory 17). Indeed, Gregory even confirms in his 1884 text that “the constant activity [of an intellectual mind] opposes the concentration of the thoughts on the object of being mesmerized;” consequently, individuals with very active minds could not reach the passive state necessary for mesmerists to complete their hypnosis (17). Such observations were confirmed by other investigators in the field including Allan Kardec, a prominent French educator, who asserted that “much of the time [communications from beyond], particularly when they address abstract or scientific questions, entirely exceed the knowledge, and sometimes the intellectual capability, of the medium—who is often entirely unaware of what is being written under his influence; who, frequently, does not
hear or understand the question posed” (qtd. in Monroe 137). And while aristocrats, doctors, and even writers occasionally did act as mediums, most pejorative nineteenth-century discussions of mesmerism highlighted the intellectual inferiority of the mediums, reasoning that they were merely the passive vessels of a much higher intellect. In order to sustain this assumption, contemporary practitioners of mesmerism, such as John Elliotson, oftentimes used charity patients and the underprivileged as a way of demonstrating that only lower class individuals possessed the necessary temperament to become effective mediums—primarily an inactive mind, very willing to fall prey to the mesmerist’s suggestions.

However, while men such as Gregory and Elliotson reasoned that only mentally inferior individuals could become uninhibited enough to fall prey to the enigmatic mesmerists—despite emerging evidence that susceptibility was classless—the view that increased susceptibility indicated not only intellectual inferiority, but also a baser, more primitive nature could not explain the overwhelming responsiveness of white, upper-class women to working-class mesmerists. What lay within the bodies of seemingly pure females, which made them so malleable to the overtures of the mesmerists? Why were

22 Allan Kardec, the pseudonym for Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail (1804–1869), is best known as the systematizer of Spiritism. He laid the foundation for all knowledge of spiritism in a series of five books which included *The Spirits’ Book, The Book on Mediums, The Gospel According to Spiritism, Heaven and Hell*, and *The Genesis According to Spiritism*.

23 Generally, when individuals of the upper-classes or elite acted as mediums any spiritual insights articulated during their reveries were seen as merely indications of the person’s inherent virtue shining or speaking through the spiritualistic trance, whereas the same revelations were seen as coming from a higher intelligence or source, and not the actual medium, when individuals of the lower-classes were concerned.

24 John Elliotson (1791-1868), was an English-born physician and student of phrenology and mesmerism who tended to use working class, female subjects for mesmeric research and demonstration, often from Irish immigrant communities, as a means of highlighting the particular temperament required by mediums.
these supposedly finer individuals falling prey to the hypnotic gesticulations of lesser men?

MESMERISM AND GENDER RELATIONS

According to Willis and Wynne, “just as mesmerism questioned the boundaries of class it also challenged gender and sexual roles…. Much of the literary interpretations of nineteenth-century mesmerism envisage a male mesmerizer, invariably insidious and foreign, making passes over the body and manipulating the mind of a young and passive female” (8). Indeed, as Samuel Coale confirms in Mesmerism and Hawthorne: Mediums of American Romance, primarily because of the popularity of the Fox sisters’ success with public trances, the role of women as mediums in touch with the spirits, “mesmerized by such occult messages, became a stereotype that would pervade the 1850s reign of the earliest spiritualist occurrences” (Coale 13).\footnote{Many of the Fox sisters’ stage shows featured an ethereal female, most often a young factory girl, falling under the hypnotic influences of the mesmerist.} As Coale writes, “women were supposed to be passive, easily controlled by outside forces, and far more sympathetic, religious, and sensitive than men” and, as such, it does not seem at all odd that Hawthorne would became deeply suspicious of the practice—after all, his own fiancé often elicited the assistance of mesmerists to cure her headaches. However, while Sophia merely saw the medicinal benefits of the pseudoscience, many others felt that mesmerism also had a more sinister side; after all, the manipulative abilities of mesmerists had been a site of controversy since the science’s earliest conceptions.\footnote{Recall that “certain members of the French commission had secretly submitted a supplemental report to the king warning of indecencies to which Mesmer’s science was inherently prone” (Fuller 33).}
One can little wonder therefore that men such as Hawthorne questioned the validity of allowing a male mesmerist to entrance members of the fairer sex, especially when the marked sexual overtones of the practice were inescapable: the male operator or magnétisuer passing his hands over the passive form of the entranced somnambule. As Alex Owens notes in The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritism in Late Victorian England, even “the vocabulary of trance mediumship oozed sexuality” because “ mediums surrendered and were then entered, seized, possessed by another” (218). The ramifications were all too clear. Under the mesmeric manipulations of the mesmerists “there would be an intrusion” into the spiritual being of the individual and “the intruder would not be thy husband!” (Centenary 15:588). One of Hawthorne’s greatest concerns with mesmerism then was that something spiritual and profane would be corrupted within Sophia, and his fears were justified. Even scientists who studied the procedure confirmed the high degree of domination that the operator displayed over the subject. For example, in their 1887 text Animal Magnetism, Alfred Binet and Charles Fèrè, well-known scientists in the field of mesmeric study, voiced their own concerns about the safety of allowing women to undergo mesmeric manipulation:

A subject of profound hypnotism may undergo all sorts of violence without retaining any recollection or consciousness of it…We even think it possible that subject might be violated in the hypnotic state, in which she would be unable to offer any resistance. (367)27

And such estimations of the increased susceptibility of women while within a trance were confirmed by other spectators at mesmeric demonstrations. In an 1856 review of modern spiritualism by William Ferris, the reverend confirms, “I never knew a vigorous or

27 Italics my own.
strong-minded person who was a medium. . . It requires a person of light complexion, one in a negative passive condition, of a nervous temperament with cold hands, of a mild, impressible, and gentle disposition. *Hence girls and females make the best mediums*” (qtd. in Coale 13). And such concerns over the respectability of allowing a young woman to become a somnambulist were only intensified when individuals of the lower classes acted as the mesmeric operators. What did it say about the moral compass of an individual—especially about a young woman—when a plebeian mesmerist so easily manipulated the actions of someone who was supposed to be, by all contemporary estimations, superior in moral decency? As the century progressed, anxieties about the egalitarian and oftentimes overtly sexual nature of mesmerism became increasingly prevalent in discussions of the pseudoscience’s magnetic influences. For nineteenth-century New Englanders then, the act of mesmerism not only became a visual depiction of larger class struggles occurring within society, but also a space where gender hierarchies and power relations were continually interrogated and reshaped. It therefore comes as little wonder that Hawthorne would use the pseudoscience in his own romances as a way to interrogate the power struggles at the heart of the Pyncheon/Maule relationships.

**THE TROUBLING HOUSE THAT MESMERISM BUILT**

As Hawthorne writes in *The House of the Seven Gables*, from the beginning of Matthew Maule’s and Alice Pyncheon’s ill-fated relationship the two characters are set in

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28 Italics my own.
29 “The Cult of Domesticity” or “The Cult of True Womanhood” (a modern day coinage formulated by Barbara Welter) evolved during the period from 1820 through 1860 and postulated that “true” women were pious, pure, submissive, and domestic. The famous narrative poem, “The Angel in the House” (1854) by Coventry Patmore, solidified these notions.
opposition—Alice acts as the “fair, and gentle, and proud” ancestor of the acclaimed Pyncheon line, while Matthew Maule embodies the stereotype of the “low carpenter man,” an individual for whom the town held a particular “aversion” both because of his “character and deportment,” as well as his ancestral “inheritance” (167). Indeed, as Scipio, the Pyncheon’s servant points out in Chapter 13 shortly after Maule tells him to deliver his “humble respects” to Alice, “the low carpenter man! He had no business so much as to look at” her because of his particularly low station in life (The House of the Seven Gables 167). Consequently, when Alice Pyncheon ultimately submits to Maule, becoming a mere automaton for the beguiling wizard, her capitulation enacts many of the concerns circulating nineteenth-century society not only in regards to the effects of mesmerism on the female body, but also the problematic power mesmerism granted lower-class men.

Interestingly, the character of Matthew Maule in many ways reflects contemporary notions of the ideal mesmeric class-interloper—a fact that Hawthorne probably recognized in creating his magnetic protagonist. Hawthorne writes that Maule, “who was supposed to have inherited some of his ancestor’s questionable traits,” “was fabled to have a strange power of getting into people’s dreams, and regulating matters there according to his own fancy, pretty much like the stage manager of a theater” (The House of the Seven Gables 168). Similar to many nineteenth-century stage mesmerists, Maule

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30 Recall that Matthew Maule is the grandson of an earlier Matthew Maule, “one of the earlier settlers of the town, and who had been a famous and terrible wizard in his day” (The House of the Seven Gables 167). Indeed, this ancestor was eventually “one of the sufferers when Cotton Mather, and his brother ministers, and the learned judges, and other wise men, and Sir William Phipps, the sagacious governor, made such laudable efforts to weaken the great enemy of souls, by sending a multitude of his adherents up the rocky pathway to Gallows Hill”—the same location that Hawthorne often wandered while ruminating about his own ancestor’s part in the witch trials (The House of the Seven Gables 167).
seems endowed with the ability to ensnare the consciousness and dreams of his subjects. The “witchcraft of his eye” seems powerful enough to entrance innocent victims, enslaving them to his magnetic will, and “there was a great deal of talk among his neighbors, particularly the petticoated ones, about what they called the witchcraft of Maule’s eye” (The House of the Seven Gables 168). From the first then, Maule seems to be portrayed as the working-class outcast, a dangerous entity whose mesmeric effect, particularly on ladies, has given him the discomfitting and “marvelous power” of “draw[ing] people into his mind, or send[ing] them, if he pleased, to do errands to his grandfather in the spiritual world” (The House of the Seven Gables 168). Consequently, in depicting Alice Pyncheon under the dominion of an overtly sexualized male whose social status lies far below her own, Hawthorne highlights how the stereotype of the mesmerist and victim not only plays into the national fantasy of the dangerous, alluring magnetizer, but also how the stereotype enacts many of society’s fears concerning the practice of mesmerism both on the female body and as an enabler of class transgression: innocent and defenseless Alice becomes the perfect medium for the lower class Maule because her feminine temperament marks her as an ideal subject for manipulation and, ultimately, exploitation. In fact, the words that Hawthorne uses to describe Alice clearly illustrate how well she fits the mold of the ideal mesmeric subject: beautiful, delicate, fair, and maiden (The House of the Seven Gables 169, 170). Maule even remarks that he needs the “clear, crystal medium of a pure and virgin intelligence, like that of the fair Alice” if he wishes to find the lost deed at the heart of the romance—a deed Maule feels will identify his family as the estate’s true owners and thereby facilitate his movement
between his own social caste and the caste he so desires to inhabit (*The House of the Seven Gables* 177). Hawthorne’s use of the stereotypical female subject therefore illustrates not only the ease with which women of delicate sensibilities are perceived to fall under the mesmerist’s spell, but also the complex power struggles of such interactions. Maule claims, “*She is mine… Mine by the right of the strongest spirit,*” and the narrator confirms “while Alice Pyncheon lived, she was Maule’s slave, in a bondage more humiliating, a thousandfold, than that which binds its chains around the body” (*The House of the Seven Gables* 183, 185). By enslaving Alice to Maule, Hawthorne not only highlights mesmerism’s disconcerting ability to invert typical notions of class relations, but also confirms the fears of individuals who suspected baser motivations as the basis of mesmeric manipulations. Maule wants to change his social identity and he needs to own and control Alice in order to achieve this alteration. Therefore, Hawthorne’s depiction of the relationship between Maule and Alice both highlights the dangers of allowing a male magnetizer—here even a class interloper—to mesmerize a defenseless female and also brings to the foreground disturbing questions about the female body and a woman’s ability to retain her reputation in the face of such blatant sexual domination.

As many prominent nineteenth-century doctors conceded, women might have repressed sexual appetites, which the hypnotic influences of the unscrupulous, lascivious mesmerist might unleash; therefore, the prudence of allowing a respectable woman to undergo hypnosis was a central concern in nineteenth-century discussions about mesmerism, especially when a woman’s very chastity was at stake. Such concerns were
confirmed in 1845 when the anonymous *Confessions of a Magnetizer* was published.\(^{31}\)

By the magnetizer’s own estimation, “mesmerism was an agent eminently capable of subverting moral sensibilities” and his comments were confirmed when in 1884 William Gregory wrote that “young women, when mesmerized, may be easily corrupted by unprincipled men” (qtd. in Fuller 34; Gregory 214). In light of such disturbing revelations, questions arose of whether increased susceptibility in a female implicated her moral righteousness or whether, due to the inherent weakness of the female disposition, women were naturally unable to control their libido while under the controlling will of a more powerful male entity. Gregory claims that “the young person that may be corrupted in [the mesmerized] state may be corrupted in any state; but the virtuous and the pure will neither indulge in an irregular thought nor submit to an improper proposal when mesmerized” (214). However, “two things are desirable [in a patient of mesmerism]…First, a passive and willing state of mind in the patient” and second, “a bona fide passivity or willingness to be acted upon” (2).

In *The House of the Seven Gables*, Alice initially feels very confident that she possesses a “power…that could make her sphere impenetrable, unless betrayed by treachery within”; however, as Maria Tater points out in *Spellbound: Studies on Mesmerism and Literature*, “the very fact that Hawthorne’s fair-haired maidens are susceptible to the mesmerist’s influence indicates some kind of repressed sexual element

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\(^{31}\) As discussed in Chapter 2, in the pamphlet the anonymous magnetizer confesses to, quite fleetingly, having surrendered his best intentions and used his abilities to control the affections of his medium. As Fuller writes in his assessment of the men, “Time after time he had been unable to resist the seductive appeal of beautiful women utterly subjecting themselves to him while grasping his hand and gazing trustingly into his eyes. By skilfully employing his mesmeric powers, he had succeeded in stirring their passions towards him to such a degree that they became willing to commit indecencies” (33-34).
in their character” (*The House of the Seven Gables* 180; Tater 213). After all, “setting aside all the advantages of rank,” Alice Pyncheon attempts to withstand the powerful magnetic force of Maule’s personality—of his mesmeric eye—and finds herself lacking (*The House of the Seven Gables* 180). Not only does she “put woman’s might against man’s might” and discover that she cannot resist, but she also finds herself intensely attracted to the plebian artisan—an attraction that Maule will exploit once he realizes that Alice’s pride will never allow her to truly see him as anything but a lowly worker (*The House of the Seven Gables* 80). Consequently, in representing Alice falling prey to Maule, Hawthorne not only questions Alice’s purity, but also proposes a problematic merging of the classes via a symbolic invasion of the female body that might breed a generation utterly lacking in the hierarchies present within the period.

By portraying Alice Pyncheon falling under the sexually suggestive “spell” of a lower-class male, Hawthorne not only highlights the sexualized nature of mesmeric possession, but also reconfigures the male and female body as vessels of animal attraction. Discussing Alice’s undeniable magnetism, or erotic attraction, towards the young carpenter, Hawthorne writes:

As Alice came into the room, her eyes fell upon the carpenter who was standing near its center, clad in a green woolen jacket, a pair of loose breeches, open at the knees, and with a long pocket for his rule, the end of which protruded; it was as proper a mark of the artisan’s calling as Mr. Pyncheon’s full-dress sword …a glow of artistic approval brightened over [her] face; she was struck with admiration—which she made no attempt to

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32 As Hawthorne, or the narrator, points out, all Maule would have needed from Alice was “the simple acknowledgement that he was indeed a man, and a fellow human being, molded of the same stuff as she,” and he would have lay “down in her path, and let Alice set her slender foot upon his heart” (*The House of the Seven Gables* 178). However, Alice wounds Maule to the core when he realizes that her approving looks are debasing in their ability to turn him from a man into a “brute beast” (*The House of the Seven Gables* 178).
conceal—of the remarkable comeliness, strength, and energy of Maule’s figure. (The House of the Seven Gables 178)

However, while “most other men, perhaps, would have cherished [such a look] as a sweet recollection, all through life,” Maule recognizes the inherent classism residing behind Alice’s appreciation (The House of the Seven Gables 178). He becomes the “brute beast,” perfect for gazing at, but inferior as a potential mate or suitor. Interestingly, as Tater states, “It is no accident that the mesmerists of The House of the Seven Gables are characterized as men of remarkable physical attractiveness, while their subjects are consistently depicted as defenseless, ethereal virgins. Hawthorne undoubtedly suspected that the psychological prowess of mesmerists derives to a great extent from their sexual magnetism” (206). However, while Hawthorne understood that women of the period undoubtedly had sexual appetites of their own, he also understood society’s expectations that such appetites were meant to be concealed and were not meant to make a man question his gender as source of power. Maule therefore not only bewitches Alice because he desires her property, but also because he wants to dominate her and, in doing so, reclaim his own lost masculinity. Such an observation finds credence when one notes Maule’s immediate response to Alice’s perusal: “Does the girl look at me as if I were a brute beast? She shall know whether I have a human spirit; and the worse for her, if it prove stronger than her own” (The House of the Seven Gables 178).33 The power struggle between Maule and Alice therefore becomes not only a struggle over sexual power and land, but also a struggle over masculine identity as Maule must reassert his

33 Italics are my own.
maleness and reaffirm traditional notions of gender hierarchies—after all, it must be difficult for a man, of any class, to be judged by such a proud and “cold” female (*The House of the Seven Gables* 178).

In writing the complex relationship between Maule and Alice, Hawthorne therefore not only brings to light the struggles over power that mesmerism confronts, but also certain contemporary concerns circulating around the pseudoscience, including questions of power and authority, class, and gender. As Tater postulates, “The nature of Maule’s power over Alice is transparently sexual. Her submissive attitude during and after the trance is entirely consonant with an unconscious erotic attraction on her part” (212). The fact that Alice “made no attempt to conceal” her attraction towards Maule evidences a gross destruction of the lines of propriety and the expectations of typical gender roles. Indeed, nineteenth-century society seemed very concerned with the preservation of the non-sexualized female body, and the text highlights this obsession. As Frederick Crews states in *The Sins of the Father*, “when Hawthorne takes extraordinary pains to emphasize the asexuality of a girl, he is preoccupied with the general sexuality of women” (213). Did the increased receptiveness of women to mesmerists indicate that women were repressing unconscious sexual desires? Could Alice Pyncheon’s failure to “make her sphere impenetrable” highlight a much larger failure of men to protect their women from the dangerous manipulations of not only mesmerists, but also other foreign invaders especially when one considers that Alice’s own father fails to protect her from enslavement?
Hawthorne’s own problematic reactions to his fiancé’s experiences with mesmerism suggest that many men of the period were concerned with losing power not only over women but also over themselves. Matthew Maule’s possession of Alice therefore seems to enact this anxiety since it not only details the effects of such experiments on the female corpus, but also the vulnerability of patrician authority, at least to exploitation by young, charismatic, class interlopers—Alice’s father fails to rescue her from the insidious Maule, the man who would wrest control of Alice and the land from his fingers (The House of the Seven Gables 178). In fact, Maule uses his hypnotic influence not only to punish Alice for her pride and for her inability to see him as an individual, but also to take away Gervayse Pyncheon’s jurisdiction over his daughter and in some ways his power as an aristocrat. As Angelic Rodgers notes in “Jim Crows, Veiled Ladies and True Womanhood: Mesmerism in The House of the Seven Gables,” Maule’s control over Alice “force[s] her to undertake tasks that operate against her social standing” and deconstructs her personal identity in ways that threaten the boundaries of the established social caste system (138).

In submitting Alice to his mesmeric manipulations, Matthew Maule not only compels Alice to violate the norms of her station in order to invert typical class distinctions but also destabilizes the notion of control central to the myth of class relations. While men such as Gervayse Pyncheon were expected, by the very nature of their station in life, to retain power both over their land, as well as their families, Maule’s manipulation of Alice highlights that mesmerism may actually allow the operator to subvert this perceived authority, thereby placing the power within the hands of those who, in most cases, would
have limited access to such influence. Hawthorne writes that using his power, Maule could make Alice laugh “even were it prayer time, or at a funeral;” he could make her sad, “and, at that instant, down would come her tears, quenching all the mirth of those around her like a sudden rain upon a bonfire;” or he could make her dance, “not in such courtlike measures as she had learned abroad, but some high-paced jig, or hop-skip rigadoon, befitting the brisk lasses at a rustic merry-making” (The House of the Seven Gables 185). Alice essentially becomes his puppet, an individual without personal agency, a mere automaton in the grip of a “power that she had little dreamed of” (The House of the Seven Gables 185).

Indeed through his mesmeric influence, Maule has not only taken physical possession of Alice, but also inverts her class status, placing her in the position of a bond-servant or slave constrained to do his “grotesque and fantastic bidding” (The House of the Seven Gables 185). And while Gervayse Pyncheon may recognize that an alien will has taken control of his daughter, he cannot make right the manipulation. As William Gregory observes, “after the operator has succeeded in producing the sleep . . . he can, in many cases, produce it by the silent exertion of the will without any passes, or any other process of any kind” (18). In addition, particularly susceptible individuals will continue to remain under the mesmerist’s influence, be they in the same room or not. Gregory points out that with “a susceptible subject, distance is a matter of little or no moment” and thus it becomes exceedingly hard for a somnambule to ever truly escape the influence of their operator (18). Hawt...
Alice’s soul when he notes the ease with which Maule can re-magnetize Alice, even while the two are separated:

He waved his hand with an upward motion; and, after a few repetitions of similar gestures, the beautiful Alice Pyncheon awoke from her strange trance. She awoke without the slightest recollection of her visionary experience; but as one losing herself in a momentary reverie, and returning to the consciousness of actual life, in almost as brief an interval as the down-sinking flame of the hearth should quiver again up the chimney . . . [Yet], her father, as it proved, had martyred his poor child to an inordinate desire for measuring his land by miles instead of acres. And, therefore, while Alice Pyncheon lived, she was Maule’s slave, in a bondage more humiliating, a thousand fold, than that which binds its chain around the body. Seated by his humble fireside, Maule has but to wave his hand; and, wherever the proud lady chanced to be—whether in her chamber, entertaining her father’s stately guests, or worshipping at church—whatever her place or occupation, her spirit passes from beneath her own control, and bowed itself to Maule. (The House of the Seven Gables 184-185)

Whether far or near, Maule can, with but a wave of his hand, make Alice his unfortunate slave. And the ultimate reversal of class occurs when Maule forces Alice to leave a party in order to “wait upon his bride” (The House of the Seven Gables 186). By placing Alice in the position of a maid charged to care for his future wife, Maule usurps class structures that endow families such as the Pyncheon’s with power. He rejects the established social order. However, his plan ultimately errrs because while “he [had] meant to humble Alice, not to kill,” he had “taken a woman’s delicate soul into his rude grip, to play with” and this bodily violation ultimately leads to Alice’s death (The House of the Seven Gables 186). Stripped of all her dignity, “[Alice] felt herself too much abased” and, in her depression, “longed to change natures with some worm” (The House of the Seven Gables 185). Her release finally comes when she falls ill returning home from Maule’s marriage.
However, while her death may herald the end of Maule’s power over her, the Pyncheon family still cannot seem to escape the problematic manipulations of the Maule mesmerists.

The symbolic union between Maule and Alice repeats in subsequent generations when the aristocratic Phoebe Pyncheon also falls prey to another member of the Maule family, this time the enchanting daguerreotypist Holgrave. However, unlike their ancestors, these characters struggle not only with an anxiety over the female body and its capacity for self-control (or its capacity for being commandeered), but also with the preservation of individuality and the interior self because, as Hawthorne himself states in a letter dated October 18, 1841, “the sacredness of the individual is violated” by the practice of mesmerism (*Centenary* 15:588). The issue of spiritual contravention, therefore, stands at the center of the mesmerism scene between Phoebe and Holgrave. Hawthorne writes that “[Holgrave] could complete his mastery over Phoebe’s yet free and virgin spirit: he could establish an influence over this good, pure, simple child as dangerous, and perhaps as disastrous, as that which the carpenter had exercised over the ill-fated Alice” (*The House of the Seven Gables* 187). But in fact, while Phoebe seems equally susceptible to Holgrave’s domination—perhaps also because of a secret attraction to the young man—he cannot seem to “twine that one link more which might have rendered his spell over Phoebe indissoluble” (*The House of the Seven Gables* 187). Yet again, Phoebe herself does not possess the power necessary to resist the symbolic invasion of her body; instead, it falls to Holgrave to have the fortitude to resist enchanting Phoebe in order to finally reclaim the land that his ancestors lost. Hawthorne writes that
as Holgrave finishes telling Phoebe about Alice’s ill-begotten fate, he “observed that a certain remarkable drowsiness had been flung over the sense of his auditress” and that this was the effect, “unquestionably, of the mystic gesticulations by which he had sought to bring bodily before Phoebe’s perception the figure of the mesmerizing carpenter” (The House of the Seven Gables 186). Phoebe finds herself in the somnambular grip of Holgrave’s fantasy and “the lids drooping over her eyes” seemingly drawn down by “leaden weights” are evidence that Holgrave has seduced Phoebe into the “incipient stage of that curious psychological condition which, as he himself told Phoebe, he possessed more than an ordinary faculty of producing” (The House of the Seven Gables 186-187). Holgrave knows that “a veil was beginning to be muffled about her in which she could behold only him, and live only in his thoughts and emotions”; consequently, in order to prevent the same fate from befalling Phoebe as befell Alice, he must exercise his own restraint in finalizing the spell that would forever keep Phoebe under his control (The House of the Seven Gables 187). As the text states, Holgrave “had never violated the innermost man, but had carried his conscience along with him” and while he could “look through Phoebe, and all around her, and could read her off like a page of a child’s story book,” he was yet “beguiled, by some silent charm of hers,” which rendered it impossible to destroy her as fully as Maule had destroyed Alice (The House of the Seven Gables 157, 161). What occurs between the generations that causes Matthew Maule to have an utter lack of respect for Alice’s inner-self, but Holgrave to have a profound reverence for Phoebe’s? To answer this question, one must first ask whether Holgrave truly de-
mesmerizes Phoebe at the conclusion of his story, thereby allowing her empire over her
own body, or whether he retains a distant control over her and in so doing in some ways manipulates the destiny of his family’s fortunes.

William Gregory states that with mesmerism “the influence, whatever it be, seems to travel to any distance, like light” and that an unsuspecting victim of hypnosis may be willed, again and again, to perform for the operator even when not in the direct presence of the operator (18). One could therefore postulate that while seeming not to have “twin[ed] that one link more,” Holgrave does in fact assume dominion of Phoebe’s soul and that their subsequent marriage represents a calculating entanglement of Phoebe’s unsuspecting heart in order to repossess the land his family lost so many generations ago (The House of the Seven Gables 80, 157). After all, Holgrave admits, “I am somewhat of a mystic, it must be confessed. The tendency is in my blood, together with the faculty of mesmerism” (The House of the Seven Gables 192). Such a reading of the possession scene between Holgrave and Phoebe therefore seems possible especially when one recalls that even before their fateful meeting Phoebe “had reason to believe that he practiced animal magnetism, and, if such things were in fashion nowadays, should be apt to suspect him of studying the Black Arts” (The House of the Seven Gables 80). In light of this revelation, one could argue that the “veil,” which figuratively seems to be the enshrouding power of the mesmeric trance, might also literally be the “veil” of marriage, a powerful symbol of submission and ownership that inalterably links Phoebe’s future with Holgrave’s own. After all, from this point forward Phoebe and Holgrave’s future becomes unalterably linked as the two fall deeply into love. As Hawthorne writes, Holgrave’s “glance, [when] he fastened it on the young girl, grew involuntarily more
concentrated” and “his attitude [acquired] the consciousness of power” (The House of the Seven Gables 187). Therefore, “it was evident [to Holgrave] that, with but one wave of his hand and a corresponding effort of his will” he could seal the prenuptial agreements between Phoebe and himself, entangling her in a love spell more permanent than any which could have developed between a notable bottom-dweller of society and an ancestral aristocrat.  

The conclusion of the novel even references “the descendent of the legendary wizard, and the village maiden, over whom he had thrown Love’s web of sorcery” (The House of the Seven Gables 277). While seeming to have freed Phoebe from the ensnaring influences of mesmerism, was the temptation to “become the arbiter of a young girl’s destiny” too great for Holgrave? Like Matthew Maule, does Holgrave enjoy “regulating matters . . . according to his own fancy much like the stage manager of a theater” and does the fusion of Phoebe’s future with his own present him with a seductive solution, allowing him access not only to the woman he loves, but also to the land which rightfully belongs to his family? The “power of the operator over the volition, sensations, perceptions, memory and imagination of his subject” could reasonably enable Holgrave to manipulate Phoebe’s feelings towards him and, thereby, secure not only her destiny, but his as well (Gregory 127). One must therefore ultimately ask whether Hawthorne wishes to revise the past by allowing Phoebe to regain control of her own facilities and thereby liberate the Pyncheon family from their accursed life or whether the incident serves merely as a repetition of the sense of uncontrollability and

34 See page 79 the reference to Holgrave as a young man of “narrow circumstances.” Also, see page 156 wherein Holgrave’s origins are “exceedingly humble” and his education “scanty.”
35 Italics my own.
destruction pursuing the two families. Interestingly, such a concept correlates perfectly with Hawthorne’s own belief that the sins of the father pass from generation to generation and that “the evil of these departed years,” which spring up time and time again are “symbolic of the transmitted vices of society” (*The House of the Seven Gables* 81).

However, while such a reading would, at first glance, seem the most probable, the second scene of mesmerism could also be seen as a revision if one notices not only that Holgrave seems to have the utmost reverence for Phoebe as an individual but also that Holgrave himself becomes entangled by Phoebe’s so-called “silent charm.” Holgrave supposedly does not “twine that one link more which might have rendered his spell over Phoebe indissoluble” even though he observes that a “certain marked drowsiness had been flung over the senses of his auditress” by his “mystic gesticulations” (*The House of the Seven Gables* 187, 186). He recognizes how close Phoebe has actually come to being completely within his power as she “leaned slightly towards him, and seemed almost to regulate her breathing by his”; yet, he seemingly refrains from completely mesmerizing Phoebe because of his sense of personal integrity:

> To a disposition like Holgrave’s, at once speculative and active, there is no temptation so great as the opportunity of acquiring empire over the human spirit; nor any idea more seductive to a young man than to become the arbiter of a young girl’s destiny. Let us, therefore—whatever his defects of nature and education, and in spite of his scorn for creeds and institutions—concede to the daguerreotypist the rare and high quality of reverence for another’s individuality. (*The House of the Seven Gables* 186-187)

Holgrave, the perfect operator of the mesmeric trance, a man who has even recently been “a public lecturer on Mesmerism, for which science he had a very remarkable
endowment,” refrains from using his powers to overcome Phoebe’s susceptible disposition because, unlike Maule, he understands the fragility of the human spirit (The House of the Seven Gables 157). Therefore, while his opinion of the social institution of class may be as controversial as Maule’s and he lives by a law that differs from Phoebe’s own, he does not feel that she should suffer for the sins of her fathers. In light of these revelations, Holgrave does not seem to entrance Phoebe at all. But can one safely say that his subsequent love for her does not suggest a reciprocal mesmerism of his own heart and soul? In Svengali’s Web: The Alien Enchanter in Modern Culture, author Daniel Pick asks: “How far is being in love with the object the same as being psychologically enslaved by it?” (11). Could Holgrave’s perplexing conversion to conservatism at the end of the novel indicate the presence of a hypnotic influence much more powerful and natural than his own?  

Tater suggests, “There exists in Hawthorne’s work one character who is at once a mesmerist and artist, but who ultimately renounces hypnotic witchcraft and art to embrace the homely witchcraft and artfulness of domestic felicity” (208). In this particular quote, Tater alludes to Holgrave, the mesmerizing daguerreotypist; however, the reference to “homely witchcraft” and its allusion to Phoebe seems unmistakable. Hawthorne wrote, “Little Phoebe was one of those persons who possess, as their exclusive patrimony, the gift of practical arrangement. It is a kind of natural magic” and that “no less a portion of such homely witchcraft was requisite to reclaim Phoebe’s

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36 Recall that in the last chapter of The House of the Seven Gables, Holgrave states, “You find me a conservative already! Little did I think ever to become one. It is especially unpardonable in this dwelling of so much hereditary misfortune, and under the eye of yonder portrait of a model conservative, who, in that very character, rendered himself so long the evil destiny of his race” (274).
chamber” (*The House of the Seven Gables* 68). Unlike the unnatural automations of Holgrave’s mesmerism, Phoebe’s subtle, yet compelling witchery could easily enslave the unsuspecting heart through the arts of beauty and grace. Interestingly, Hawthorne often used the pet name “Phoebe” for his own wife, Sophia, thereby supporting Hawthorne’s view that “love is the true magnetism” (*Centenary* 15:590). The type of feminine power Phoebe wields enables her to cast “loves web of sorcery” thereby highlighting not only the shifting roles of master and slave, male and female in nineteenth-century society, but also suggesting that love, not sexual attraction or mesmeric manipulation, represents the true magnetizer—a notion Hawthorne makes clear in a letter dated October 19, 1841 and addressed to Sophia:

> Most beloved, what a preachment have I made to thee! I love thee, I love thee, I love thee, most infinitely. Love is the true magnetism. What carest thou for any other? Belovedest, it is probable that thou wilt see thy husband tomorrow. Art thou magnificent. God bless thee. (*Centenary* 15:590)

However, while such a re-envisioning or re-interpretation of love as a form of magnetism reverses typical expectations for nineteenth-century readers since it suggests that involuntary attraction, not voluntary manipulation, represents the true source of power within any mesmeric relationship, the simplistic view that love somehow represents a lesser form of evil also seems misleading. After all, there are still some problematic aspects of possession, of losing one’s self (heart and mind) at the core of this particular depiction of love. In this way, Hawthorne evidences the true impossibility of ever escaping the manipulations at the center of his romance. Regardless of who does the

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37 Letter dated August 26, 1843 (eight years before Hawthorne wrote *The House of the Seven Gables*) and the first known time that Hawthorne refers to his wife as Phoebe.
possessing, someone must always find themselves within the snare of another—submission remains.

Consequently, if one sees the second mesmerism merely as a repetition of the first, then one must ultimately acknowledge that the issue of ownership acts as a central theme in the novel. The idea of dominion over the body, mind, and land permeates *The House of the Seven Gables*, and Hawthorne asks the reader to consider who really does have the right to property and if this entitlement extends to owning the individuals inhabiting the home. Does Holgrave, with his close association to the Maule family, consider the soil to be his birthright and does he in fact use mesmerism to return the home and land to its original family? Such a reading appears plausible if one considers the disturbing alteration of Holgrave’s character at the end of the novel when he suddenly seems very concerned with issues of status and property as evidenced most notably by his desire to rebuild the ancestral home of the Pyncheons. Marrying Phoebe, therefore, enables Holgrave to subvert the position of the Pyncheon patricians much more soundly than Maule’s manipulations of Alice ever could. And he achieves this subjugation through the manipulation of Phoebe’s attraction towards him.

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38 In Chapter 11 of *The House of the Seven Gables*, Holgrave states, “But I wonder that the late judge—being so opulent, and with a reasonable prospect of transmitting his wealth to descendents of his own—should not have felt the propriety of embodying so excellent a piece of domestic architecture in stone, rather than in wood. Then, every generation of the family might have altered the interior, to suit its own taste and convenience; while the exterior, through the lapse of years, might have been adding venerableness to its original beauty, and thus giving impression of permanence which I consider essential to the happiness of any one moment” (273-274). Hearing this from Holgrave, Phoebe immediately remarks, “how wonderfully your ideas have changed” indicating not only the oddity of such comments coming from a man who only moments before wished “people to live in something as fragile and temporary as a bird’s nest,” but also the true extent to which Holgrave has become preoccupied with status and the creation of an ancestral abode (274).
As Gregory notes in his text, one may feel “a kind of attraction” towards the mesmerist after awakening from a trance and that “a permanent liking for the mesmerist, in the ordinary waking state” may develop (20). Hepzibah Pyncheon, Phoebe’s aunt, notices Holgrave’s ability to ensnare the heart of his entranced victim when she comments, “[He] has such a way of taking hold of one’s mind that, without exactly liking him, I should be sorry to lose sight of him entirely” (*The House of the Seven Gables* 80). If Phoebe has fallen prey to this same attraction then one may read the second mesmerism as a problematic means of bringing the saga of the home full circle, of returning the property to the original landlord, thereby affirming Hawthorne’s statement “that the act of the passing generation is the germ which may and must produce good or evil fruit in a far-distant time” (*The House of the Seven Gables* 12). By rectifying the wrong that has been committed against the Maule family, the newest generation of Pyncheons can sow their seed to produce fruit and continue their dying stock. The purification of the line through the union of Phoebe and Holgrave enables the family to cast their germ once more far into the future. In this way, the end may seem happy and blight-free. However, the complex aspects of ownership and lost autonomy still overshadow such images of growth and fertility since one must ponder what toll the mesmerism of Phoebe’s soul will have upon her body and what good may come from a union sanctified by the problematic melding of love and mesmeric possession. In addition, one must ask themselves what Hawthorne’s investment might be in attempting a reinterpretation of mesmerism, that while opening a more complex reading of the meaning of the pseudoscience within his romance, also fails to truly redirect the darker
aspects of mesmerism into healthier terrain (i.e. possession for true freedom and solidarity). In addition, one must also consider where Hawthorne, as the creator and author of *The House of the Seven Gables* places himself. Does he align himself with the diabolical Maule, bewitching those around him and even his fiancé with the artistry of his pen, or does Hawthorne more precisely see himself as Holgrave, a man ensnared by the sorcery of true love’s vows? To answer such a question, one must first consider Hawthorne’s own investment in the practice of mesmerism and its effects on the body, particularly as depicted through his concern over Sophia and her own dabbling into the disquieting pseudoscience. Why was the practice of mesmerism such a controversial topic for Hawthorne and how does his fear of the practice come through in his art?

On March 8, 1889, recalling a conversation she had with Alfred Marshall, Beatrice Webb wrote that the eminent Cambridge professor truly believed that “woman was a subordinate being, and that, if she ceased to be subordinate, there would be no object for a man to marry” (qtd. in Showalter 25). Indeed, in Marshall’s opinion, “marriage was a sacrifice of masculine freedom, and would only be tolerated by male creatures so long as it meant the devotion, body and soul, of the female to the male . . . Contrast was the essence of the matrimonial relation: feminine weakness contrasted with masculine strength: masculine egotism with feminine self-devotion” (qtd. in Showalter 25). As Elaine Showalter observes in *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture in the Fin De Siècle*, as the century waned, “opportunities to succeed at home were not always abundant; the stresses of maintaining an external mask of confidence and strength” was a constant

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39 Beatrice Webb (a.k.a. Beatrice Potter) (1858-1943) was an English sociologist, economist, socialist, and reformer.
struggle for men who, like Hawthorne, were faced with making do with the limited amount of financial prospects available in order to sustain and raise their growing families (9). And such pressures, invariably, lead to a crisis as men were challenged not only as producers within the traditional family unit, but also as figures of power. As a writer who oftentimes depended on the generosity of friends and acquaintances in order to find his next position, Hawthorne must have felt this disturbing sense of stress and the pressure to maintain an outward show of strength and fortitude, even while inside he was deeply insecure not only in regards to his abilities as a provider, but also because his occupation as a writer often categorized him as disturbingly feminine.

Reflecting on the status of authors in the nineteenth-century, Brenda Wineapple writes, “writing might just as well be women’s work, which in Jacksonian America it mainly was” (“Nathaniel Hawthorne” 18). From the time of Hawthorne’s graduation from college, the young writer agonized both about the invisibility and the inherent ignominy of becoming an author—especially when he was able-bodied enough for more masculine employment. As Michael S. Kimmel notes in *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, “during the 1800s, thanks to the Industrial Revolution, paradigms shifted, and ‘American men began to link their sense of themselves as men to their position in the volatile marketplace, to their economic success’” (9). Writers such as Hawthorne had to contend with shifting redefinitions of masculinity and the profession of writing often came under criticism because of its marked tendency towards becoming a female-dominated profession—an idle piece of business meant for amusement but not for reliable, gainful employment. Consequently, as T. Walter Herbert contends, Hawthorne
“was sharply aware that the reigning model of manhood, defined by increasing self-reliance, violated his own native temperament” and was also, in many ways, inaccessible to an artist who struggled from paycheck to paycheck (qtd. in Person 30). As such, Hawthorne was continually required to find alternative jobs not only to assure the financial independence of his family, but also to retain a sense of masculinity. Indeed, while the profession of writing remained “a respectable occupation for men” in the nineteenth-century, “other occupations, especially in business and industry became increasingly associated with manliness in a way that authorship did not” (Person 30).

And Hawthorne’s fears about being seen as demasculinated probably were only heightened by other’s opinions of the young writer. Recalling the words of one of Hawthorne’s fellow classmates at Bowdoin, Wineapple writes that Nathaniel was a “taciturn fellow,” the “most diffident member of the class,” and someone who was constantly “shrinking almost like a girl from all general intercourse either in the sports or meetings of his fellow students” (Hawthorne 50). And such observations about Hawthorne’s masculinity were not only limited to Bowdoin alumni. Even Margaret Fuller, Hawthorne’s close literary companion, noticed Hawthorne’s feminine qualities, especially in relation to his status as a writer. In letter written in March of 1836, Fuller notes that the “Gentle Boy” has “so much grace and delicacy in feeling” that the she took the author to be a “lady” (qtd. in Person 31). Another friend and contemporary of Hawthorne agreed. In an 1842 review of Twice-Told Tales, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow commented that much of Hawthorne’s “genius” included “a large proportion

40 One of Hawthorne’s reasons for joining Brooke Farm might have been a desire to “prove” that he could master, or at least partake, in more masculine employment.
of feminine elements” (qtd. in Person 31). Similar remarks undoubtedly did not escape Hawthorne’s attention. After all, even though Hawthorne knew “that fiction is a kind of woman’s work, decorative and useless, an idler’s trade, not a manly one,” he still defended himself in another context, saying “that, ridiculous as the object was,” he would “follow it up with the firmness and energy of a man” (qtd. in Wineapple, *Hawthorne*, 79).

Given such remarks, Person theorizes that during much of Hawthorne’s adult life, the author “suffered” from acute “career anxiety”—consumed not only with retaining his oftentimes elusive sense of masculinity, but also with establishing his power as an individual and writer (32).

If one recognizes that Hawthorne oftentimes suffered from severe bouts of anxiety, especially in regards to retaining his masculine identity and establishing his power as a male within a field dominated—at the time—by some very strong-willed, intelligent women, then we could perhaps read Hawthorne’s fears about mesmerism less as an articulation of the dangerous effects of the practice on the female body and more as a reflection of his own fears of emasculation.41 As Wineapple points out, through characters such as Hester Prynne, Zenobia, and Alice Pyncheon Hawthorne “censured and scolded those women who, he felt, threatened to rob him of his income, his professional stature, his masculinity: that ‘d—d mob of scribbling women,’ he called the female competitors, who, he feared, sold more books than he” (“Nathaniel Hawthorne” 33). Once, Hawthorne even went so far as to tell his editor, William Ticknor, that he

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41 Famous strong-willed, intelligent female writers of the time include Margaret Fuller, whom Hawthorne met in October of 1839; George Eliot who famously sneered at *The Blithedale Romance* in “The Westminster Review.”
wished women were “forbidden to write on pain of having their faces deeply scarified with an oyster-shell” (qtd. in Wineapple, *Hawthorne*, 282). Indeed, it seems that because of his profession, Hawthorne suffered from a powerful castration anxiety, afraid to be degraded, dominated, or made insignificant by the female writers against whom he competed.\footnote{Such an assumption finds credence when one considers that in its first year of circulation, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) sold nearly three hundred thousand copies, while Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance* (also published in 1852) barely sold seven thousand (Wineapple, *Hawthorne*, 282).}

Such a loss of power, especially within the professional realm, must have been troubling for the young writer and Hawthorne’s attempts to retain a greater sense of authority, even if only in his home life, can be seen through his numerous letters warning Sophia to stay away from the influences of mesmerists. As Hawthorne firmly tells Sophia on October 18, 1841 in regards to her revelation that she plans on seeing Mrs. Park to relieve her headaches: “Thou shalt not do this” (*Centenary* 15:588). And while he claims his concerns are merely based on his “deep reverence of the soul,” which fears that something spiritual or profane might be harmed within Sophia if she continues such treatments, the letter also suggests a deeper source of unease, mainly his own fear of losing control over his fiancé. Hawthorne states, “I am unwilling that a power should be exercised on thee” because “the intruder would not be thy husband” (*Centenary* 15:588). Indeed, he questions, should any “human being com[e] closer into communion with thee than I may” and reminds Sophia “thou art now a part of me, and that by surrendering thyself to the influence of this magnetic lady, thou surrenderest more than thine own moral and spiritual being” (*Centenary* 15:588). For Hawthorne, then, the problem seems
to be the power relations exercised between the mesmerist and subject and the subsequent loss of supremacy experienced by the husband. Not only could his young wife be bewitched by the controlling influence of the mesmerist, but Hawthorne might experience a similar loss of control both over his own physical body, as well as the body of his future spouse. As Coale questions, were Hawthorne and the mesmerist then in a “battle for Sophia’s being” and, if so, could Hawthorne possibly win (“Mysteries of Mesmerism” 64)? Unfortunately, the ineptitude Hawthorne voices on October 10, 1839 suggests that, he does not have the mesmeric talent to call Sophia back should she be pulled away by the stronger power of a more influential magnetizer: “My inward eye can behold you, though but dimly. Perhaps, beloved wife, you did not come when I called, because you mistook the locality from whence the call proceeded” (Centenary 15:355).

Perhaps, then, one of the reasons that Hawthorne created the character of Matthew Maule in The House of the Seven Gables stems from his own anxieties about his inability to save Sophia should she fall under the mesmeric influences of another. Given the ability of mesmerists to retain control over their subjects, even from afar, Hawthorne must have pondered the possibility that his fiancé would never truly be safe from the grip of her operator. Such anxiety finds expression in The House of the Seven Gables through the pleadings of Gervayse Pyncheon when he begs Maule, “Why dost thou keep dominion over my child? . . . Give me back my daughter” to which Maule replies, “Why, she is fairly mine” (184). Maule becomes the archetypal mesmeric fiend, a characterization of the masculine, sexualized mesmerist at the center of many nineteenth-century concerns about the pseudoscience; he becomes the man that the anonymous
author of the *Confessions of a Magnetizer* warns against. If we read Maule as such a representation, then truly he acts as an embodiment of Hawthorne’s apprehension of castration—his fear that another individual, in this case another man, will take control over Sophia and in doing so destroy Hawthorne’s influence as a lover, husband, and man. As Crews contends, one of the reasons that Hawthorne might have married “the spiritual and semi-invalid Miss Peabody” stems from his desire to achieve a fantasy of control (242). Crews claims that Hawthorne’s personality, which “sustain[s] at a lower intensity all the ambivalence of his art,” also expresses a disturbing sense of intimidation and an “obsession with self-control” (242). It therefore comes as no surprise that this control would extend to retaining power over his delicate and ethereal wife.

Alternatively, however, a much more complex reading of the Maule figure could also emerge, one that, while entirely speculative, suggests that the enigmatic mesmerist might be a representation of the author himself, a man who must possess in order to reassert his masculinity. Recalling this chapter’s earlier discussions about Maule’s need to reclaim his masculine identity through an act of enslavement, could one make the argument that Maule’s mesmeric acts represent a figurative way for Hawthorne to silence, repress, and dominate those women who threatened his own masculinity within society, especially those scribbling women he so hated? Does Alice then become a larger metaphor for those strong, proud-willed women that threatened Hawthorne’s self-conception and his ability to govern both himself and his affairs? As Wineapple notes, Hawthorne in many ways was deeply invested in creating female characters, which he “punishes, humiliates, and kills” as an enactment of his own resentment against their increasing presence within
the marketplace ("Nathaniel Hawthorne” 33). As such, he oftentimes writes about a “feminism that attracted and repelled him” and, in his diabolical treatment of Alice, we can read the components of Hawthorne’s life: “his preoccupation with women,” “women’s bodies” and “women’s writing,” especially their writing of a male body without agency and control (Wineapple, “Nathaniel Hawthorne,” 34). Maule’s aggressive manipulation of Alice therefore acts as a punishment not only for daring to place herself above a man, but also for crushing Maule’s sense of masculine power—her sexual approval belittles Maule and categorizes him as a mere brute, an animal not worthy of true consideration. To reassert his power, he must consume her and he does this by enacting a powerful spell upon Alice—a force similar to the one Hawthorne wished he could also assume over the women in his own life.

However, Maule does not represent the only mesmerist within The House of the Seven Gables that one could align Hawthorne with. If one does in fact read Maule as merely a representation of the Svengali-figure, the alien-enchanter who rips control from the aristocratic Gervayse Pyncheon to assume dominion over the defenseless Alice, then one could argue that Holgrave, as Maule’s foil, might act as Hawthorne’s true doppelganger: an attempt to reclaim or at least reconfigure the identity of the mesmerist and, in doing so, prove that “love is the true magnetizer” (Centenary 15:588). After all, Holgrave in many ways seems the closest characterization of Hawthorne within the romance in that he shares many of the author’s personal moral beliefs, most notably “the rare and high

Interestingly, Hawthorne may have been right. While the mesmeric gesticulations of Dr. Fiske did in many ways cure Sophia, at least temporarily, of her headaches, her true cure seems to have come after her marriage to Hawthorne when she abruptly cut of all her ties to the pseudoscience claiming to have been completely rehabilitated. For a discussion of the Svengali-figure in literature, see Maria Tater. Spellbound: Studies on Mesmerism and Literature. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton U.P., 1978.
quality of reverence for another’s individuality,” which ultimately prevents him from twining “that one link more which might have rendered his spell over Phoebe indissoluble” (The House of the Seven Gables 187). Such a hypothesis also finds credence if one considers that Holgrave seems disturbingly self-deprecating of his abilities as a story-teller. Referring to Phoebe’s near catatonic-state during the rehearsal of his story about Matthew Maule, Holgrave states:

You really mortify me, my dear Miss Phoebe . . . My poor story, it is but too evident, will never do for Godey and Graham! Only think of one falling asleep at what I hoped the newspaper critics would pronounce a most brilliant, powerful, imaginative, pathetic, and original winding up! Well, the manuscript must serve to light lamps with—if, indeed, being so imbued with my gentle dullness, it is still capable of flame! (The House of the Seven Gables 187)

Perhaps then, through the character of Holgrave, Hawthorne sets up an apology or at least an excuse for his own inability to wield the mesmeric powers so easily accessible to other men. He claims that love, not psychological or even sexual prowess, acts as the true magnetizer and that real men can retain possession of their wives without the stage-like affects of mesmeric demonstrations.

Indeed, in painting Holgrave as a sensitive, deeply reverential individual who chooses to forego manipulating Phoebe, instead relying on his intelligence and disposition to entrance the young girl, Hawthorne might not only be criticizing contemporary men of his time who he felt reverted to subterfuge to gain power over the women in their lives—and one can little doubt that many men attempted to use mesmerism to win over the objects of their affections—but also re-envisioning the conception of masculinity within the nineteenth-century. Referring to a statement made by Leland Person in his text
Aesthetic Headaches: Women and a Masculine Poetics in Poe, Melville, and Hawthorne, Paul Gilmore writes, “Hawthorne casts Holgrave squarely in between [often] radically opposed, but equally unsatisfactory, models of masculinity—in a position to synthesize both extremes within his own personality into a masculinity that incorporates the feminine” (227). The unsatisfactory models of masculinity that Holgrave seems to straddle can be none other than those espoused by Matthew Maule—the overtly sexualized, churlish mesmerist who seeks complete command of Alice Pyncheon, even if such a possession endangers her life—and the highly feminized character of Clifford Pyncheon. In fact, while Holgrave seems to wield just as much mesmeric control as Matthew Maule, he can temper and contain his control in a way that reinvents notions of male empowerment. Through the character of Holgrave, the definition of male empowerment becomes less about ownership and more about a certain nobility of spirit, a certain amount of male fortitude, a silent and latent power that does not continually need to be exercised to prove a man’s prowess. In this way, Holgrave not only redeems the Svengali-like portrayal of mesmerists set forth in the character of Matthew Maule, but also highlights the fact that individuals could be men even if they did not use the latest scientific fads and did not believe in possessing, enslaving, and owning a woman. And finally, Holgrave’s character illustrates that one’s masculinity need not be tied to patriarchal authority and one’s ability to produce. As Kimmel contends, in the period leading up to the Civil War a new identity for men was beginning to develop separated from the “stable anchors of landownership or workplace autonomy” (9). Hawthorne’s itinerant mesmerist in many ways typifies this changing conception of male identity
because he inhabits a space once removed from both the rising, urban business class and the older, patriarchal upper-crust, a space in many ways inhabited by Hawthorne himself. Hawthorne’s reconfiguring of the male identity within nineteenth-century society through the character of Holgrave would have therefore been extraordinary because not only does it gesture towards historical changes in definitions of maleness developing within the latter part of the nineteenth-century, but it also reshapes gender roles in a way that allows room for both male and female agency to intermingle to create a more egalitarian space for both sexes. However, one also has to concede that Hawthorne has a deep investment in such a reconfiguration; after all, he was one of those individuals often criticized for his inability to remain firmly entrenched within the realm of the masculine.

RECONFIGURING MESMERISM IN THE HOUSE OF THE SEVEN GABLES

As the preceding discussion of mesmerism within The House of the Seven Gables suggests, the symbolic meaning of the pseudoscience within Hawthorne’s text can never truly be solidified. Instead, readers of Hawthorne must recognize that complex readings can be engendered from even the most seemingly concrete interpretations. Does Hawthorne’s use of mesmerism within his romance represent a literal reenactment of the pseudoscience or does his use of mesmerism act as a motif or signifier for much larger concerns within his own contemporary period? A nuanced reading of The House of the Seven Gables suggests both. Mesmerism for Hawthorne then was a literal, historical fact—a practice that was used within his lifetime to alternative cure, enlighten, and

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connect this world and the next—yet also a figurative means by which Hawthorne reflects, reconceptualizes, and re-envisions some of the foremost anxieties of the nineteenth-century, especially those related to class and gender hierarchies and binaries. In this way, the mere presence of mesmerism within his text expands, enlarges, and complicates a stable reading evidencing that literature does not dwell in truths but possibilities, not merely in mirroring but also in refracting—an observation that can be confirmed by investigating Hawthorne’s use of mesmerism within his other texts.
Chapter 4

MESMERISM IN THE BLITHEDALE ROMANCE

“It is a spell; it is a powerful enchantment, which I wrought for her sake, and beneath which she was once my prisoner...”

*The Blithedale Romance* Nathaniel Hawthorne (1852)

As suggested in Chapter 3 of this thesis, much of Hawthorne’s work as a writer of romances seems to circulate around the desire to reexamine social hierarchies, as a historical reality, using the lens or motif of mesmerism and, in doing so, offer insight into some of the foremost tensions or collisions occurring within the nineteenth-century especially in regards to the nature of social hierarchies, possession and ownership, and notions of sexuality and power. In Hawthorne’s hands, mesmerism becomes a site not only of interrogation and intersection, but also a place of re-envisioning, a space where the writer may challenge readers by inverting typical notions they have about the nature of power and authority in order to create a world different than the one the contemporary audience inhabits. Such a re-envisioning occurs in *The House of the Seven Gables* when Hawthorne posits the possibility of an altered definition of masculinity through the character of Holgrave and also when he gives agency to Phoebe’s sexuality—a reconfiguration that places the source of magnetic attraction within the hands of a female not male operator. However, while *The House of the Seven Gables* asks readers to re-envision or at least re-examine certain definitions of the male/female identity, one could argue that the text does not, in any definitive way, restructure notions of hierarchy within society since, by the end of the novel, Phoebe Pyncheon and Holgrave enter into a very safe domestic relationship—one in which the male dominates and the female inhabits a
respectable, if marginalized, position. The same cannot be said of *The Blithedale Romance*. Indeed, as this chapter will demonstrate, in creating the fictionalized realm of Blithedale, Hawthorne overturns some of the foremost power structures acting within nineteenth-century society causing readers to re-examine what it means to be a female and gain agency in a world traditionally dominated by men.

In order to understand how *The Blithedale Romance* acts as a reconsideration of some of the most fundamental aspects of male/female relations within nineteenth-century society, one must first understand how Hawthorne uses the character of Zenobia and her experiences with mesmerism in order to envision a space where women might become the owners of power—even if, as we shall see, such authority seems to break the solemn covenant of sisterhood that exists between women. Indeed, as this chapter will contend, while at first glance Zenobia seems to act as the vehicle by which Hawthorne reinscribes traditional power dynamics, especially when one considers the troubling relationship between her and Westervelt, such a reading ignores the fact that Zenobia in many ways also challenges perceptions of female agency, empowerment, and sexuality. After all, not only does she gain power over Priscilla and thereby claims some sort of masculine power of her own, but she eventually also commits suicide—an emphatic act of self-assertion that ultimately frees her from the male-dominated world she inhabits and thereby criticizes a space that claims to be egalitarian yet does not allow women to exist as liberated and sexualized individuals under their own volition and control. Interestingly, as in *The House of the Seven Gables*, Hawthorne will again use the motif of mesmerism as a site of interrogation within the novel and while the representation of the pseudoscience
was not inherently unique to Hawthorne—recall that other contemporary writers such as Poe also wrote about the phenomena in their own works—the complexity of Hawthorne’s usage warrants investigation because of the way he uses the science to interrogate some of the foremost anxieties of his time.45

THE VELLED LADY: MASTER AND SLAVE IN THE BLITHEDALE ROMANCE

As Maria Tater points out in Spellbound: Studies on Mesmerism in Literature, in the nineteenth-century, while most authors such as Melville and Poe began using mesmerism as a figurative or symbolic means of exploring certain psychological phenomena such as abnormal mental states, spirit rapping, and clairvoyance, Hawthorne wrote about the pseudoscience as a way of investigating some of the foremost concerns of the time including questions about the vulnerabilities of the sentient being, the nature of social hierarchies, personal rights, and ownership. Indeed, as Tater contends and Chapter 2 demonstrates, by the time of The Blithedale Romance’s publication in 1852, the themes of “psychological domination and its inevitable concomitant, emotional bondage,” were already staples of Hawthorne’s fiction and his obsessive, enduring interest with the “master-slave” relationship produced by the practice of mesmerism would be a “controlling principle in many of his tales and romances” throughout his writing career (200).

In light of these revelations, The Blithedale Romance offers an interesting insight into the questions of spiritual contravention, personal autonomy, and psychological enslavement at the heart of Hawthorne’s writing. As Tater points out, “it is no accident”

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45 For a discussion of Poe’s use of mesmerism, see Chapter 2.
that Hawthorne has characterized the enigmatic mesmerist, Westervelt, as a man of “remarkable physical attractiveness,” while his innocent subject, Priscilla, remains throughout the text a “defenseless, ethereal” virgin” (206). Nineteenth-century readers of Hawthorne’s text would have perceived the power struggles at the heart of Westervelt’s possession of Priscilla since such struggles ultimately reflected some of their own anxieties about the problematic pseudoscience. However, readers of the romance would have been much harder pressed to understand the complex questions being raised by Zenobia’s symbolic re-enslavement of Priscilla. Why would a self-proclaimed woman’s rights activist consign her sister to lifetime of servitude, effectively making her a “bond-slave” to the men who seek to guide her, and what does such an act say about the ties that bind women (The Blithedale Romance 116)? In addition, why would Hawthorne substitute a female mesmerist in the place (or space) of authority and how does such an inversion not only challenge contemporary notions of the practice of mesmerism—its practice and performance—but also certain hierarchical structures present during the period? Indeed, by questioning the presumption that mainly men could wield the sinister forces of the mesmerist’s influence, Hawthorne expertly weaves into The Blithedale Romance the notion that the practice of mesmerism could potentially destabilize traditional conceptions of female passivity, thereby challenging and upturning existing norms of gender, authority, and power.

As discussed earlier in this thesis, since mesmerism’s arrival in New England in the late 1830s public opinion about the science had vacillated between lauding the practice as

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46 For a more complete discussion of the prudence of allowing a defenseless female to undergo mesmeric hypnosis by a man, see Chapters 2 and 3.
a harbinger of an enlightened age and positioning it as a problematic form of mind
control, bent on manipulating the entranced individual into a hapless marionette.\textsuperscript{47}

According to John Warne Monroe in \textit{Laboratories of Faith: Mesmerism, Spiritism and
Occultism in Modern France}, the idea of “one soul immorally dominating another, by
means of some mysterious exertion of the will” shocked and intrigued spectators at
mesmeric demonstrations, and while the stage shows of famous mesmerists such as
Charles Poyen continued to gain in popularity throughout the latter half of the century,
audiences at such exhibitions could easily perceive that the “distinctive state of altered
perception” that occurred between the subject and mesmerist almost always emerged in
the context of a particular kind of relationship”—one that startlingly highlighted the great
disparities in social status between the operator and subject (Monroe 68). Indeed, it
seemed to many observers that the \textit{magnétisuer}, or mesmerist, served as the “manipulator
of fluid, objective observer, poser of questions, and documenter of answers,” while the
\textit{somnambule}, or patient, “became the instrument on which the \textit{magnétisuer} operated”
(Monroe 69). This relationship, as previously noted, was often one that involved obvious
discrepancies in social rank as the somnambules were typically “women or men of lower
class status and less education,” while the mesmerists were often men of rank and
distinction (Monroe 69). In fact, contemporary literature frequently stressed the delicate,
shy, and self-effacing nature of patients, stating that \textit{somnambules} were highly
susceptible to manipulation, while mesmerists were described as “physically vital”
individuals with plenty of “intellectual superiority,” “prodigious willpower,” and

\textsuperscript{47} For a more full discussion of mesmerism and the concerns revolving its practice, see Chapters 1 and 2.
“assured mastery” (Monroe 69). As such, many critics of the science, including Hawthorne, became increasingly concerned about the power that mesmerists wielded over their patients, questioning the safety of allowing individuals, especially innocent and naïve women, to fall under the mesmerist’s spell.

As the century progressed, many within society began to tie the act of mesmerism to notions of possession, spiritual contravention, and manipulation, especially when the entranced subject also happened to be female. After all, from the time of its inception as a science, mesmerism had been plagued by warnings of indecency since, as Hawthorne himself noted in a 1841 letter to Sophia Peabody, the mesmerist’s “power arises from the transfusion of one spirit into another” and, as such, “it seems that the sacredness of the individual is violated by it; there would be an intrusion into thy holy of holies—and the intruder would not be thy husband!” (Centenary 15:588). Indeed, as Angelic Rodgers notes in “Jim Crows, Veiled Ladies and True Womanhood: Mesmerism in The House of the Seven Gables,” “part of the controversy caused by mesmerism, and certainly one of Hawthorne’s personal objections to the mesmerization of Sophia Peabody, came from the idea that the mesmerist and subject entered into a relationship that was even more intimate than sexual relations” (132). Such an observation seems especially astute since the means by which an operator achieved domination over the subject often required direct manipulation of the individual’s body. In Hawthorne’s Mad Scientists: Pseudoscience and Social Science in Nineteenth-Century Life and Letters, Taylor Stoehr notes that the “most common means of subjugating the will of the somnambulist was, of course, the eye of the mesmerist, which when fastened on the eye of his victim, engaged
them in a test of mental and spiritual power, the outcome of which was usually as certain and beyond the control of the hapless female” (55). However, such methods were not the only ones used. In his 1852 account of mesmerism, Herbert Mayo, a former senior surgeon at Middlesex Hospital and Professor of Anatomy and Physiology at King’s College, states that operators of mesmerism often achieved subjugation over their patients by applying their hands to the stricken area and rubbing vigorously until the individual was sent into “convulsions,” “palpations,” “perspirations,” and “other bodily disturbances” (157). As Sharrona Pearl argues in *Dazed and Abused: Gender and Mesmerism in Wilkie Collins*, the practice of mesmerism therefore became a means by which to “control women’s bodies,” since under the physical direction of often overtly sexualized men, women “entered ecstatic states” that lead to “potentially compromising situations” (163). Consequently, one can little wonder that the “intimate relationship between the mesmerizer and mesmerized led to suspicion of the morality of the experience” (Pearl 163).

Because the practice of mesmerism was very susceptible to social critique, especially in light of the highly sexualized nature of its enactment, the pseudoscience soon found its way into contemporary literature. Individuals such as Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Dickens, and even Hawthorne’s close friend, Herman Melville, began alluding to mesmerism in their own work. However, while for many writers of the time mesmerism acted merely as a medium to discuss other psychological phenomena, Hawthorne saw the value of interrogating mesmerism’s most basic premises in order to confront issues at the forefront of nineteenth-century society, including questions about power and authority. Yet, while
Pearl contends that Hawthorne would use the pseudoscience in a much more conformist manner in *The House of the Seven Gables*, mainly as a “powerful tool to reinscribe gender ideologies,” his agenda in *The Blithedale Romance* seems much more obscure (163). Indeed, *The Blithedale Romance* does not merely represent another attempt to render, as Pearl states, “active women passive and passive men active” in order to solidify traditional conceptions of sexual hierarchies, but really represents an attempt to invert notions of nineteenth-century gender ideologies by giving agency to Zenobia (163). Zenobia becomes, at least for a little while, the true manipulator of Priscilla’s mesmeric trance and, in doing so, not only reconceptualizes for readers the notion that mesmerism was merely a “tool of dominance” used by men to control female sexuality, but also the notion that women could never be mesmerists because of their inherently delicate and susceptible natures, a concept discussed at length in Chapter 3 of this thesis (Pearl 163).

Consequently, in order to fully understand how Hawthorne uses the symbol or motif of mesmerism in *The Blithedale Romance*, this chapter will first examine the ways in which Zenobia subverts the position of the mesmerist, a role traditionally reserved for men, and how her subversion reconceives notions of female agency and empowerment within the nineteenth-century. However, this reading will be immediately complicated by the acknowledgement that Hawthorne’s text problematizes such a simple analysis of the romance since, on a deeper level, the true source of Zenobia’s power seems to be the enigmatic Westervelt, the mesmeric puppeteer who seems to be working through Zenobia in order to reclaim the innocent and naïve Priscilla. As a result, this chapter will also
examine the ways in which *The Blithedale Romance* seems to reinforce traditional gender binaries because once again the female character finds herself under the dominion of a much more powerful male protagonist. In addition, such a reading supports Hawthorne’s ambivalence in committing to any sort of radical reconception of gender identities. However, as mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis, Hawthorne’s texts are never truly stable and, as the ending of this chapter demonstrates, even as the other readings foregrounded in this chapter suggest Hawthorne’s attempts to reinforce gender hierarchies, one cannot overlook that at the end of the novel Hawthorne in many ways grants Zenobia a redefined conception of female agency since her upraised arms at the conclusion of the text emblematically signal to readers her struggle against the narrow limitations or definitions of femininity existing within Hawthorne’s time. *The Blithedale Romance* therefore very much critiques the inability of women in the nineteenth-century to find a space where they can have access to the same type of control as men and suggests that there should be an alternative, besides death, for women who reside outside the traditional conceptions of female identity.

**ZENOBIA, MESMERISM, AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF FEMALE AGENCY**

In fact, one can little argue that Zenobia, the self-proclaimed women’s rights advocate at the heart of *The Blithedale Romance*, redefines traditional notions of femininity by refusing to conform to the definition of women as naturally passive and innocent.

Coverdale, the newcomer to Blithedale, describes Zenobia as “fine, frank, and mellow,” a woman whose, “hand, though very soft, was larger than most woman would have liked—or than they could afford to have”—though not a whit too large in proportion with the
spacious plan of [her] entire development” (15). In addition, he calls her “remarkably beautiful, even if some fastidious persons might pronounce [her features] a little too deficient in softness and delicacy” (The Blithedale Romance 15). Zenobia therefore seems to be the complete opposite of her maidenly, little sister, Priscilla. While the narrator describes Priscilla as a “slim and unsubstantial girl,” “perfectly modest, delicate, and virginlike”—in other words, the perfect embodiment of Hollingsworth’s “gentle parasite”—Zenobia represents a very different type of woman (The Blithedale Romance 26, 77, 123). She embodies strength and sensuality. Her “broad laugh—delectable to hear, but not the least like an ordinary’s woman’s laugh” distinguishes her as somehow more masculine and, yet, Coverdale takes great pains to describe her as having a “fine, perfectly developed figure;” an Eve-like apparition whose sex does not fade away in “ordinary intercourse” (The Blithedale Romance 17). Zenobia therefore constitutes an enigma: highly sexualized by the men around her, therefore very much female, yet also somehow masculinized since her “bloom, health, and vigor” differentiate her from nineteenth-century conceptions of the ideal woman (The Blithedale Romance 16). What then must Hawthorne mean by placing this obviously feminine personality in the place of the mesmerist? What about Zenobia allows her to inhabit a space traditionally reserved for strong, sexually aggressive men? In order to understand this inversion of typical mesmeric gender hierarchies, one must first understand that Zenobia does in fact become the arbitrator of Priscilla’s destiny. By flinging the gauze over Priscilla’s head during the recital of her legend, Zenobia effectively lays claim of Priscilla, thereby symbolically becoming the operator over the young woman’s soul.
At the beginning of Chapter 13, Zenobia tells a supposed legend in order to entertain the young women of the household with a so-called “ghost story;” however, astute readers soon begin to realize that Zenobia does not merely tell a factitious story, but really reiterates her own fateful meeting with Westervelt in the woods surrounding Blithedale farm—a meeting that will ultimately provide her with the tools to entrance the unsuspecting Priscilla. Hawthorne writes, “‘Oh, a story, a story by all means!’ cried the young girls. ‘No matter how marvellous, we will believe it, every word. And let it be a ghost-story, if you please!’” To which Zenobia responds, “No; not exactly a ghost-story, but something so nearly like it that you shall hardly tell the difference. And, Priscilla, stand you before me, where I may look at you, and get my inspiration out of your eyes” (The Blithedale Romance 107). Interestingly, her desire to have Priscilla stand before her enacts or mimics the configuration most often used by mesmerists to entrance their unsuspecting victims. As noted previously in Chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis, mesmerists were thought to have the ability to look directly into the eyes of their patients and at any time affect a trance-like state. Consequently, Zenobia’s desire to look into Priscilla’s eyes seems to arise out of her desire to cast the veil of her mesmeric influence over the “pale and nervous child” (The Blithedale Romance 185). Such an observation finds support in Samuel Coale’s own discussion of this particular scene in Mesmerism and Hawthorne: Mediums of American Romance when he states, “Zenobia also tells her tale ‘wildly and rapidly…giving it the varied emphasis of her inimitable voice, and the pictorial illustration of her mobile face,’ much in the manner of a mesmerist at the height of his
In addition, Coale notes that “Priscilla is very much the medium of [Zenobia’s] mesmerism,” a defenseless victim who does not know that her sister will soon send her into a bondage much worse than death (Mesmerism and Hawthorne 111). Interestingly, in order to solidify her mastery over Priscilla, Zenobia uses a veil, a symbol traditionally associated with marriage and woman’s subjugation to the rule of her husband. However, while the veil once again acts as a symbol of enslavement, similar to the way in which the veil works in The House of the Seven Gables, here the veil does not tie a woman to a man, but instead one woman to another.

As Pearl notes, in most contemporary renderings of the mesmeric bond between a man and a woman, the male figure takes the role of the dominant figure, thereby reinforcing the notion that mesmerism “supports an older authority, that of patriarchal power” (163). However, readers of The Blithedale Romance do not see a typical retelling of the male/female dichotomy; instead, we see a figure who has the mental strength to subvert the position traditionally reserved for her in the master-slave relationship and, in doing so, inhabit a space usually under the dominion of men. Indeed, since “the female as medium fit easily into the emerging Victorian vision of gender roles,” writers did not often use women as mesmeric operators (Coale, Mesmerism and Hawthorne, 13). Instead, most fictional recreations of the master-slave relationship at the heart of mesmerism mimicked the relationship between Westervelt and Priscilla, where a “strange man,” often in the form of a wizard or mountebank, takes advantage of a young maiden’s

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48 Italics my own. Note the gender-specific language of this particular quote and the assumption that men, not women, are the most common operators of mesmerism.

49 For a full discussion of the use of the veil in The House of the Seven Gables, see Chapter 3.
“lack of earthly substance to subject her to himself, as his familiar spirit” (*The Blithedale Romance* 188).\(^{50}\) Such representations therefore reconfirmed the notion forwarded by contemporary scientists, such as William Gregory, that “a powerful and very active intellect renders it often more difficult” to mesmerize an individual because mesmerists require a “high degree of susceptibility” and passivity in a patient (17). As mentioned earlier in Chapter 3, even Reverend William Ferris, in his 1856 review of modern spiritualism, noted “I never knew a vigorous or strong-minded person who was a medium . . .It requires a person of light complexion, one in a negative passive condition, of a nervous temperament with cold hands, of a mild, impressive, and gentle disposition. *Hence girls and females make the best mediums*” (qtd. in Coale, *Mesmerism and Hawthorne*, 13).\(^{51}\)

However, in *The Blithedale Romance*, Zenobia, who while not necessarily a conventional female still belongs, by her own declaration, to the order of “the softer sex,” seizes the position of the mesmerizer (16). Indeed, through her mesmeric gesticulations, Zenobia places (or re-places) Priscilla in a mesmeric trance just as powerful as any that Westervelt exercised over the fair maid. Retelling the climactic moment of Priscilla’s enslavement, Zenobia states:

> So the lady took the silvery veil, which was like woven air, or like some substance airier than nothing, and that would float upward and be lost among the clouds, were she once to let it go. . .[and] the lady stole noiselessly behind [Priscilla], and threw the veil over her head. (*The Blithedale Romance* 115-116)


\(^{51}\) Italics my own.
Through Zenobia’s manipulation, the veil becomes a physical manifestation of the universal fluidum, the ether-like substance that contemporary doctors observed settled over patients as they fell into a mesmeric trance. Zenobia, as the operator of this mesmeric trance, therefore becomes the source of power in the relationship between the two women, the one that resettles Priscilla into a bondage from which she cannot escape.

In light of this reading, one can therefore see how Hawthorne might have used the practice of mesmerism in his own text as a site of reconceptualization. By giving Zenobia all of the attributes typically associated with the ideal mesmerist, Hawthorne enables Zenobia to bend Priscilla to her will. However, one cannot merely see Zenobia as a virago-figure, a masculinized female sent to mimic a science usually practiced by men. Instead, he makes clear that Zenobia’s ability arises out of her “native power and influence,” her intrinsic female identity (The Blithedale Romance 189). Indeed, as Hawthorne points out, while many women would have quaked under the power conveyed through the use of such a controlling practice, Zenobia seems the perfect operator since she transcends, in many ways, the narrow path typically traversed by women of her period. Discussing Zenobia’s unique ability to transcend the confines of typical nineteenth-century womanhood, Hawthorne’s narrator observes:

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52 In Science and the Imagination: Mesmerism, Media, and the Mind in Nineteenth-Century English And American Literature, Betsy Van Schlun states that much of Mesmer’s original theory of universal fluidum circulated around notions first developed by Descartes and Newton in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. According to Descrates, “forces were transmitted by means of a material substance—‘the ether’” and that this ether acted as a “conducting medium” (Van Schlun 29-30). Years later, Newton asserted that this ether (what he called world ether) “permeated all physical bodies and filled all spaces” and functioned as “a transmitting material between the particles, making action at a distance possible” (Van Schlun 30). In the eighteenth century, Mesmer reworked the ideas of the two scientists into the notion that all individuals are filled with a magnetic fluid that can be harnessed not only to influence others, but also to tenuously connect people over vast areas of space. In the late nineteenth-century, the notion of magnetic fluid was again refined by Charles Richet into the notion of ectoplasm, a spiritual energy that exuded from mediums while in a trance. The fluid was said to be gauze-like in texture, similar to chiffon or muslin (Richet).
So great was her native power and influence, and such seemed the careless purity of her nature, that whatever Zenobia did was generally acknowledged as right for her to do. The world never criticised her so harshly as it does most women who transcend its rules. It almost yielded its assent, when it beheld her stepping out of the common path, and asserting the more extensive privileges of her sex, both theoretically and by her practice. The sphere of ordinary womanhood was felt to be narrower than her development required. (*The Blithedale Romance* 189-190)

Zenobia somehow has a personality or female identity too powerful to remain within the limited confines of her sex and society, in general, grants her more agency because of this intrinsic influence. Therefore, Hawthorne’s reconfiguration of Zenobia as the master in the operator/subject relationship in many ways acts as a reaction against the misogynistic belief that only men had enough innate command to become mesmerists. As discussed previously in Chapter 3 of this thesis, by painting the portrait of a bewitching young woman who deftly wields the mesmerist’s power, Hawthorne again demonstrates the egalitarian nature at the heart of the pseudoscience.53

Unfortunately, such a revisioning, while making great inroads into questioning the legitimacy of nineteenth-century gender hierarchies, also falls prey to criticism since, as Tater notes, “the recurrent pattern of exploitation and manipulation within the framework of human relations at Blithedale” still lies at the center of the tale (219). We cannot merely look at Zenobia’s possession of Priscilla as a successful attempt by a female to exercise a power society typically associated with only men. Instead, we must also look at the fact that her manipulation of Priscilla represents a failure of sorts—the failure of

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53 Chapter 3 discusses more fully the notion of the egalitarian nature of mesmerism, particularly the ability of young women, such as Phoebe Pyncheon, to become a type of mesmerist through the use of “homely witchcraft” (*The House of the Seven Gables* 68).
one sister to protect the rights and liberties of a much weaker one, as well as the failure of one woman to protect a member of her own sex. From a moral standpoint, Zenobia should have sheltered her sister from the sinister forces of Westervelt; instead, she delivers her back into the hands of the enigmatic magician, forcing Priscilla to return to her life as a veiled and subjugated lady.

As Zenobia notes in Chapter 13 during the retelling of her fateful meeting in the woods, Westervelt’s warning that Priscilla will become her “deadliest enemy” represents the true reason that she ultimately re-enshrouds Priscilla (The Blithedale Romance 115). In speaking with Zenobia, Westervelt claims that she will soon find herself in imminent peril unless she heeds his advice:

‘Lady,’ said he, with a warning gesture, ‘you are in peril!’ …. ‘There is a certain maiden, who has come out of the realm of Mystery, and made herself your most intimate companion. Now, the fates so ordained it, that, whether by her own will, or no, this stranger is your deadliest enemy. In love, in worldly fortune, in all your pursuits of happiness, she is doomed to fling a blight over your prospects. There is but one possibility of thwarting her disastrous influence.’ (The Blithedale Romance 115).

Zenobia therefore makes the decision to use the symbolic veil of the mesmeric trance to re-enslave Priscilla because she feels that a failure to do so might allow the younger woman to somehow triumph over her (The Blithedale Romance 115). However, the true reason behind Zenobia’s actions are much more sinister; after all, she must instinctively recognize that Priscilla, with her charm and innocence, will win Hollingsworth’s heart, thereby ruining Zenobia’s prospects with the man she has come to love.54 Interestingly,

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54 One can assume that Zenobia recognizes Hollingsworth’s favoritism of Priscilla as her actions following Coverdale’s revelation that Hollingsworth “has certainly shown a great tenderness for Priscilla” seem to indicate her inner-turmoil and pain. Noting the observations of Coverdale, Hawthorne writes, “Zenobia
while Westervelt suggests that some otherworldly influence, some secondary source, will cause Priscilla to blight Zenobia’s chances not only in love, but also in money, Zenobia eventually becomes her own source of ruin by committing the ultimate sin against her sister. She willingly consigns Priscilla to a lifetime as a “bond-slave” and in doing so garners the wrath of her father who will finally choose to give his fortunes to Priscilla rather than a sister who would overlook familial bonds in order to raise herself (The Blithedale Romance 116). Westervelt therefore does much more than tell Zenobia the outcome of her future if she does not heed his warnings; he also reflects back to her an image of what she will do in order to gain power, love, and money—the bonds she will break in order to elevate herself. Westervelt is therefore also a terrible prophet, a seer of the future, and also a manipulator of truth because while Hawthorne in some ways grants Zenobia power in the act of possessing Priscilla, she also becomes Westervelt’s pawn. He uses her jealousy and greed to regain control over Priscilla because, as he states, the veil “is a spell; it is a powerful enchantment, which I wrought for her sake, and beneath which she was once my prisoner” (The Blithedale Romance 115). By throwing the “silvery veil” of the mesmeric trance once more over Priscilla, Zenobia allows Westervelt to regain possession over Priscilla—she allows Westervelt to “rise up through the earth, and seize her”—and in doing so consigns both Priscilla and herself to a lifetime of servitude (The Blithedale Romance 115).

In light of this reading, one could say then that Zenobia’s suicide does not merely represent the actions of a thwarted lover or a woman who finds her fortunes radically had turned aside. But I caught the reflection of her face in the mirror, and saw that it was pale;—as pale, in her rich attire, as if a shroud were round her” (The Blithedale Romance 167).
reduced; nor, can we say that Zenobia strikes the final blow because she comes to recognize her own culpability in destroying the tenuous sisterly bond between Priscilla and herself. No, what ultimately kills Zenobia is the realization that she has become as much a puppet as Priscilla, a victim of Westervelt’s diabolic desire to regain power over the one he lost. And, while Zenobia might not figuratively be under Westervelt’s spell in the same way as her sister, she recognizes that she has also lost her autonomy by relegating her power to a man.55 Outlining the final act of repossession when Zenobia hands over her control to Westervelt, Hawthorne writes:

As the slight, ethereal texture [of the veil] sank inevitably over [Priscilla’s] figure, the poor girl strove to raise it, and met her dear friend’s eyes with one glance of mortal terror, and deep, deep reproach. It could not change her purpose…[and] at the word, uprose the bearded man in the Oriental robes—the beautiful!—the dark Magician, who had bartered away his soul! He threw his arms around the Veiled Lady; and she was his bondslave, forever more! (The Blithedale Romance 115-116)56

Interestingly, in the very moment when Zenobia felt her power to be at its strongest, she becomes a mere tool for the dominance of a much more powerful force. Therefore, Zenobia, much like the Veiled Lady, becomes a bondslave of sorts, selling her soul to the beautiful Magician in exchange for love and prosperity. Indeed, as she utters “the fatal words” and “flung the gauze over Priscilla’s head,” she consigns herself to the same bondage she envisioned for her sister, a fit imprisonment perhaps for a woman who has betrayed the sacred bonds of her sisterhood (The Blithedale Romance 116).

55 Zenobia’s speech on page 217-218 of The Blithedale Romance, quoted in its entirety within this chapter on page 19, seems to suggest that she understands her lack of agency and self-determinacy as she calls herself “an hereditary bondslave.”
56 Italics my own.
Thus, while one could read Zenobia’s triumph over Priscilla as a momentary inversion of typical nineteenth-century gender dynamics, or at least a challenge of traditional notions of female passivity, Pearl’s argument rings true: “mesmerism is used to questions ideas about gender, at times challenging existing norms, but ultimately supporting notions of female passivity and male activity” (163). In many ways, far from presenting a fully re-envisioned representation of mesmeric relations, Hawthorne reverts to conventional readers’ expectations regarding the pseudoscience where men dominate over women. One could argue, therefore, that *The Blithedale Romance* does not really interrogate nineteenth-century society because Zenobia actually holds the same marginalized position as Priscilla—a pawn of Westervelt, the true, enigmatic mesmerist. Westervelt therefore becomes the true arbitrator of both Priscilla and Zenobia’s destiny; however, while Priscilla eventually finds herself saved by Hollingsworth, Zenobia does not have the same recourse. Instead, she finds herself utterly destroyed, ruined by the very man who claimed to offer her insight into how she could save herself. Her “human character was but soft wax in [Westervelt’s] hands” and she finds her soul “virtually annihilated” at the hands of a more powerful and sinister puppeteer (*The Blithedale Romance* 198). In the end, therefore, she proves Coverdale’s notion true, that “our souls, after all, are not our own. We convey a property in them to those with whom we associate, but to what extent can never be known, until we feel the tug, the agony, of our abortive effort to resume an exclusive sway over ourselves” (*The Blithedale Romance* 194). Interestingly, Coverdale’s words in many ways mimic Hawthorne’s own concerns
about the evils of mesmerism and its problematic ability to subjugate the very soul of the medium to the mesmeric operator:

“Supposing that this power arises from the transfusion of one spirit into another, it seems to me that . . . an individual is violated by it.” (Centenary 15:588)

Coverdale therefore seems to speak for Hawthorne as representing mesmerism as a dangerous “intruder” that could somehow take over an individual’s spirit to such an extent that they could no longer remain agents of their own lives (Centenary 15:588). Indeed, when it came time for Zenobia to shake off the iron fetters of her sex, she found that they had enclosed upon her even more tightly. Her observations at the end of the novel, shortly before her death, therefore seem appropriate:

There are no new truths, much as we have prided ourselves on finding some. A moral? Why this...—that the whole universe, her own sex and yours, and Providence, or Destiny, to boot, make a common cause against the woman who swerve one hair’s breadth out of the beaten track. Yes; and add, (for I may as well own it, now) that, with that one hair’s breadth, she goes all astray, and never sees the world in its true aspect, afterwards! (The Blithedale Romance 224)57

Unfortunately, Zenobia also confirms Hawthorne’s observation that “a person who appears to be master ‘must inevitably be at least as much a slave, if not more, than the other. All slavery is reciprocal’” (qtd. in Tater 220).

However, even though The Blithedale Romance ultimately seems to reaffirm traditional notions of gender and power through its use of mesmerism, Zenobia’s character does act as an interesting addition into the canon of mesmeric literature. After

57 Zenobia’s reference to the fact that “there are no new truths” in many ways reflects Hawthorne’s opinions about the writer’s place within the community as a purveyor of truth, a discussion which will be more fully explored in the conclusion of this thesis.
all, besides Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne’s novels rarely contain
women who even attempt to transgress the boundaries of gender that would enable them
to become operators instead of mere subjects, mesmerists instead of mere somnambulists.

In fact, while Hawthorne may not have given Zenobia the same power as the mesmerist,
he does provide her, as he does many of his females including Phoebe in *The House of
the Seven Gables*, with a secondary sort of influence, an influence that even Westervelt
recognizes:

> Her mind was active, and various in its power...her heart has a manifold
> adaptation; her constitution an infinite buoyancy, which (had she
> possessed only a little patience to await the reflux of her troubles) would
> have borne her upward, triumphantly, for twenty years to come. Her
> beauty would not have waned—or scarcely so, and surely not beyond the
> reach of art to restore it—in all that time. She had life’s summer all before
> her, and a hundred varieties of brilliant success. What an actress Zenobia
> might have been! It was one of her least capabilities. How forcible she
> might have wrought upon the world, either directly in her own person, or
> by her influence upon some man, or a series of men, of controlling genius!
> Every prize that could be worth a woman’s having—and many prizes
> which other women are too timid to desire—lay within Zenobia’s hand”
> (*The Blithedale Romance* 240).

Therefore, while Zenobia’s female identity in many ways weakens her, her status
as a woman also brings the possibility of gaining power through femininity, a fact
that Zenobia never recognizes even though she often contrives to win men with
her beauty and sexual allure. Instead, Zenobia mistakenly locates the source of
female power in a male-dominated practice, completely ignoring the inherent
power which resides much more in “homely witchcraft” than in psychological
domination (*The House of the Seven Gables* 68). As previously discussed in
Chapter 3, Hawthorne affirms the existence of such a feminine influence when, in
his letter to Sophia dated October 18, 1841, he wrote, “Most beloved, what a
preachment have I made to thee! I love thee, I love thee, I love thee, most
infinitely. Love is the true magnetism. What carest though for any other?”
(Centenary 15:590). Yet, Zenobia does not recognize such a persuasive ability
within herself and she soon finds her power to be a mere illusion, a spectral
apparition contrived by the true mesmerist operating behind and through her.

Consequently, one must ask whether Hawthorne’s romance does in fact
present an alternative to the traditional concepts of gender forwarded in the texts
of his contemporaries or whether, given his own ambivalence about the troubling
practice of mesmerism, Hawthorne merely reinvents those concepts, suggesting
for a brief moment the possibility of an overturn, but ultimately remaining very
conservative about the possibility of true change. To answer this question, one
must consider whether Zenobia ever escapes her symbolic enslavement, not only
to Westervelt but also to Hollingsworth—after all, her love for the reformer
ultimately compels Zenobia to transgress the very ties that bind one woman to
another. As Zenobia acknowledges in the hours leading up to her death:

I am a woman—with every fault, it may be, that a woman ever had, weak,
vain, unprincipled, (like most of my sex; for our virtues, when we have
any, are merely impulsive and intuitive,) passionate, too, and pursuing my
foolish and unattainable ends, by indirect and cunning, though absurdly
chosen means, as an hereditary bond-slave must—false moreover, to the
whole circle of good, in my reckless truth to the little good I saw before
me—but still a woman! A creature, whom only a little change of earthly
fortune, a little kinder smile of Him who sent me hither, and one true heart
to encourage and direct me, might have made all that a woman can be!
(The Blithedale Romance 217-218)
Zenobia’s impassioned speech concedes that her obsessive passion blinded her to her sisterly obligations and, in the end at least, it seems that she recognizes that love, not mesmeric possession, could have saved her from the fate she ultimately chose. Interestingly, Zenobia’s self-deprecating speech also highlights a particular view of women as posited by the author. As Brenda Wineapple notes, Zenobia in many ways embodies Hawthorne’s “bifurcating view of women: independent, defiant, brilliant, on the one hand, and passive, meek, and adoring on the other” (“Nathaniel Hawthorne” 23). Consequently, through Zenobia’s character, readers can in many ways see a reflection of Hawthorne’s own anxieties about the female sex as she acts as the perfect representation of the dualism that the author felt existed within all women.

According to Wineapple, in The Blithedale Romance Zenobia embodies the “doomed protofeminist heroine,” a “vibrant woman too advanced, too overwhelming, too modern for the Prufrockish narrator, who can neither comprehend nor compete with her” (“Nathaniel Hawthorne” 33). Zenobia, with her eccentric mannerisms and her outlandish exoticism, threatens Coverdale and the collected, ordered society that the Fourierists at Blithedale farm envision. Hawthorne, the “self-satirizing double” of the narrator, must therefore censor and repress her, binding her to the overtly-masculinized characters of Hollingsworth and Westervelt as a way of reaffirming her identity as weak and powerless. Indeed, as Wineapple goes onto argue in her own discussion of the text, “Zenobia is Hawthorne’s homage to and rebellion against strong, sexual women” and, while
such a reading seems highly conjectural, Hawthorne may have destroyed her character as a way of punishing, humiliating, and killing that which enthralls him (“Nathaniel Hawthorne” 33). Such acts of destruction, as one might recall from Chapter 3 of this thesis, are not uncommon in Hawthorne’s work. In fact, Hawthorne often seems to have reverted to symbolic acts of violence as a way of reasserting the dominance of his position, and men in general, within nineteenth-century society. Zenobia must therefore remain within the firm grasp of Westervelt’s and Hollingsworth’s power at the end of the novel not only because an escape would prevent Hawthorne from possessing and overcoming that which he scorns, but also because through her death Hawthorne can dismiss “his attraction to and identification with her”—the act of deconstructing Zenobia becomes the writer’s way of distancing himself from the woman who, unnervingly, shares too many of his own traits as a scribbler, outsider, and nonconformist (Wineapple, “Nathaniel Hawthorne” 33). Consequently, by committing her to a watery grave, Hawthorne may in some ways be reclaiming his masculinity and reaffirming contemporary gender dynamics that cast men as all powerful and women, as Hawthorne himself states in a letter to William D. Ticknor, as “feeble and tiresome” (qtd. in Wineapple, “Nathaniel Hawthorne,” 33). As a result of his symbolic censorship, the end of the novel seems to suggest that Zenobia does not regain agency over her own body and her death becomes a symbolic surrender to the patriarchal power structure that would caste out women such as Hester Prynne and herself.
However, while such a reading seems plausible in light of Brenda Wineapple’s assertions, an alternative reading also exists within the text that warrants investigation. As Maria Tater observes in her own analysis, even though men such as Westervelt and Hollingsworth are at the root of Zenobia’s downfall, by the end of romance “Zenobia is no longer subject to Hollingsworth’s hypnotic influence; his magical spell has been broken; she is his slave no more. Just as Priscilla is liberated from her bondage to Westervelt, so Zenobia is released from enslavement to Hollingsworth” (228). Could one argue then that in choosing death Zenobia somehow breaks the spell that binds her as a “hereditary bondslave” to Hollingsworth? And, do Zenobia’s upraised arms at the end of the text, “rigid in the act of struggle,” symbolize her unwillingness to remain a puppet easily molded and manipulated by the men who wish to possess her (The Blithedale Romance 235)? If so, then her powerful act of self-assertion helps readers to better understand Hawthorne’s true purpose in regulating Zenobia to a watery grave.

If one sees the ending not as a recapitulation to contemporary power structures, but instead as a powerful act of defiance, then perhaps Zenobia’s suicide acts as a representation of Hawthorne’s own desire to reconceive or re-envision notions of female agency within the nineteenth-century. After all, while the Blithedale experiment fails in very much the same manner as Hawthorne’s real-life utopian experiment, Brook Farm, the writer does not seem as willing to concede defeat; there has be the achievement of some sort of utopian ideal—even if such an
achievement only occurs symbolically. Zenobia’s aggressive act of self-affirmation therefore becomes a potent means by which the writer moves beyond the male-dominated space of Blithedale and perhaps even the contemporary space he inhabits. By suggesting that Zenobia chose death, Hawthorne effectively forbids men such as Westervelt and Hollingsworth from possessing her. Westervelt even confirms such a prohibition when he states, “She is now beyond my reach” (*The Blithedale Romance* 241). And if men such as Westervelt and Hollingsworth are no longer able to manipulate and play with an innocent woman’s soul then, in committing her body to the water, Hawthorne also literally frees Zenobia’s spirit from any mortal peril that might befall her were she to remain alive. After all, as Hawthorne observed in a letter to Sophia dated October 18, 1841, one of his greatest fears about mesmerism was that it would enable the operator to “contaminate something spiritual and sacred” within the individual (*Centenary* 15:588). If such an observation proves true, then perhaps death offers a better alternative for Zenobia than the possibility of lifelong imprisonment to the will of a conscienceless master. Perhaps one can read Zenobia’s death, then, as a symbolic assertion of Hawthorne’s belief that the value of an individual’s “spirit is inestimable,” while “the lifeless body is so little valued,” a fact that both Westervelt and Hollingsworth do not recognize as they mourn the sad wreckage of Zenobia’s lifeless form (*The Blithedale Romance* 244). Interestingly, if one were to read the ending of *The Blithedale Romance* in this manner, then perhaps Zenobia’s suicide also acts as Hawthorne’s commentary about the value of
material delusions such as those exercised by the practitioners of all occult sciences including mesmerism since both Westervelt and Hollingsworth do not realize that the true Paradise exists not in our world but the next and any attempt at finding utopia here on earth seems but a fickle attempt at grasping for an unattainable perfection, a view that Hawthorne makes clear in his October 18, 1841 letter to Sophia when he writes, “What so miserable as to lose the soul’s true, though hidden, knowledge and consciousness of heaven, in the midst of an earth-born vision” (Centenary 15: 589).

For Hawthorne then, the conclusion of The Blithedale Romance becomes not merely a site of reconfiguration, but a site of interrogation into the practice of mesmerism and the space such occult sciences inhabit within his contemporary space. As Hawthorne goes on to observe in the October 18, 1841 letter, “Without distrusting that the phenomena which thou tellest me of, and others as remarkable, have really occurred, I think that they are to be accounted for as the result of physical and material, not of a spiritual, influence” (Centenary 15:588). Indeed, in Hawthorne’s estimation, “what can be more lamentable and mischievous, than to mistake the physical and material for the spiritual?” (Centenary 15:588).

Westervelt and Hollingsworth both fail to recognize, in bewailing Zenobia’s fate, that nothing can be as “miserable” as to “degrade high Heaven and its inhabitants into any such symbols and forms” as invented by man (Centenary 15:588). Zenobia, however, seems to have recognized this fact, and in order to escape the earthly influence of the mesmeric men who wish to own and control her, she
escapes to the one and only paradise. In this way, she has achieves a
transcendental awareness that places her in a position beyond patriarchal society
and its transitory power structures. She achieves true enlightenment, and like
Hawthorne himself, recognizes the futility of binding oneself to material
constructs that are but vague shadows of the one, true heaven.

As one can see, mesmerism in *The Blithedale Romance* once more embodies
multiple meanings and, just like in *The House of the Seven Gables*, its
interpretations are never fully stable. In fact, through an analysis of the various
mesmeric scenes in the text, contemporary readers’ expectations about the
meanings of mesmerism continually are challenged or complicated by other, just
as realistic and viable, interpretations. Perhaps then, one can acknowledge that
Hawthorne’s use of mesmerism within his romances acts not merely as a way of
reflecting upon a popular cultural phenomenon of his time—and interrogating that
phenomenon from a writerly perspective—but also acts as an attempt to re-
envision certain contemporary concerns about power and authority, identity and
gender. However, Hawthorne’s use of mesmerism does not merely end there. By
refusing to let readers assign final significance to the symbolic meaning of
mesmerism within his texts, Hawthorne also makes a profound statement about
the position of the writer within society as a purveyor of truth. Does writing then
act as a cultural work more critical than such quasi-scientific “humbugs” as
mesmerism or does Hawthorne have the same ambivalence about writing and the
authorial identity as he has about mesmerism—that writing can mimic, reflect,
and reposition human experience, but can never ultimately provide access to truth in the way that readers envision (The Blithedale Romance 5)? As the Conclusion of this thesis will demonstrate, Hawthorne’s ambivalence about the ultimate symbolic meaning of the motif of mesmerism within his texts in many ways reflects his uncertainty about the cultural work of the writer and the author’s relationship with his contemporary interpretative community.
Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

Mr. Hawthorne manages the supernatural so well, he makes it so credible by refining away the line of demarcation between the natural and the supernatural, he derives profit so ingenuously from the existing tremor of the public mind, arising from what is seen and said of mesmerism, electro-biology, spirit-rappings, and Swedenborgian psychology.

Anonymous review of “American Novels” in North British Review (1853)

Given the readings advanced in the previous two chapters, one can begin to see that Hawthorne's use of mesmerism acts not merely as a way of reflecting upon a popular cultural phenomenon in the nineteenth-century—and interrogating that phenomenon from a writerly perspective—but also acts as an attempt to (re-)position or re-conceptualize the significance of writing within the author’s contemporary interpretive community. Through the practice of mesmerism—and its enactment within his texts—Hawthorne acknowledges the impossibility of ever truly assigning meaning or, as Millicent Bell states in “The Obliquity of Signs: The Scarlet Letter,” “final significance” to any complex, human practice, especially when such a practice continues to evolve and reshape its meaning within the spaces it inhabits (Bell 455). Indeed, in purposefully preventing the reader from producing a definitive, stable reading of the symbol of mesmerism within the realm of his romances, Hawthorne may be making the point that all interpretations are necessarily limiting, incomplete, and perhaps inadequate. Or, as Sacvan Bercovitch notes in The Office of The Scarlet Letter, “virtually every symbol [in Hawthorne] demands interpretation, and every interpretation takes the form of a question that opens out into a variety of possible answers, none of them entirely wrong, but none
itself satisfactory” (19). However, while some readers might assume that such an unwillingness to commit to any single interpretation acts as evidence of Hawthorne’s problematic anxieties as an authorial figure and the place he inhabited in the contemporary literary community, an analysis forwarded within Chapters 3 and 4, such a reading of Hawthorne’s use of pluralism in many ways negates the sophisticated authorial decisions that go into creating a text that continues to evade. After all, as Bercovitch points out, meaning with Hawthorne’s text, “while indefinite, is neither random nor arbitrary; rather, it is gradual, cumulative, and increasingly comprehensive” (19). Indeed, one could ultimately argue that what seems like equivocations and contradictions within Hawthorne’s work may merely be acknowledgements of the lack of stability within all signs and the limitation of human beings, even writers, to act as purveyors of truth.

Perhaps then, Zenobia’s observation near the end of The Blithedale Romance that “there are no truths, much as we have prided ourselves on finding some” more accurately represents Hawthorne’s own views about the ability of novels or texts to act as sites of truth and meaning, a fact that he makes evident through his evasive use of mesmerism as a symbol or motif within two of his texts (224). In fact, as discussed earlier in the Introduction to this thesis, the minister’s black veil, Georgiana’s birthmark, the scarlet letter, and Faith’s pink ribbon are all merely signifiers that evidence that perhaps “no ultimate meaning exists” (Bell 463). In this way then, Hawthorne’s various signs begin to reflect the notion that truth acts just as unstably as that which it attempts to reveal. For instance, mesmerism does not represent truth or reality, just as truth does not reside in the act of mesmerism. Truth and the sign therefore, whatever it may be, continually turn on
each other in Hawthorne’s texts evidencing the impossibility of literature and the writer to clearly delineate reality within a realm once shadowed and removed from actual life. Samuel Coale then was perhaps wrong in *Mesmerism and Hawthorne* when he wrote that within the realm of the romance “political ideologies, economic uncertainties, and class distinctions” deconstruct thereby enabling the reader to gain a fuller understanding of themselves and the world they inhabit (19). After all, given the previous readings within the text, the opposite reading of truth and self-knowledge (self-identity) seems much more plausible: that one cannot find greater understanding of themselves and their time within the confines of the text, merely more indeterminacy. However, such indeterminacy expands the possible readings to include multiple meanings and ways of understanding not only the literature we read but the spaces we inhabit. And writers, as cultural workers, do not merely open the reader’s eyes to the complexities of different interpretations but also reflect back to the reader the important fact that not knowing does not “impair my sovereignty in myself; that it does not make me tributary” (qtd. in Bell 463).

For Hawthorne then, the use of mesmerism and other symbols within his texts seems to act as a reflection of his greater concern or preoccupation with the representation of truth and the ability to gain truth through fiction. Just as Hawthorne questioned the possibility that mesmerism, and its practice, brought the practitioner “into the mysterious of life beyond death,” he seemed to question the ability of literature (or the writer) to bring the reader into self-knowledge and true enlightenment (*Centenary* 15:586). After
all, his observations in his famous letter to Sophia dated October 16, 1841 could be just as true of writing as they are about mesmerism:

What so miserable as to lose the soul’s true, though hidden, knowledge and consciousness of heaven, in the midst of an earth-born vision? If thou wouldst know what heaven is, before thou comest hither hand in hand with thy husband, then retire into the depths of thine own soul, and thou wilt find it there among holy thought and feelings; but do not degrade high Heaven and its inhabitants into any such symbols and forms. (Centenary 15: 589)

The problem, for Hawthorne, seems to be the false idolatry that individuals carry for human signs and symbols, especially those that pretend to represent or capture truth in all its multifaceted complexity. Literature, much like mesmerism, inhabits such a place since the complex truths supposedly revealed within the confines of the text are merely arbitrary concepts created by individuals just as flawed as the reader. Bercovitch’s observation then that “all meanings are partly true, hence, interpreters must choose as many parts as possible of the truth and/or as many truths as they can possibly find in the symbol” represents a problem because, one could argue, that Hawthorne’s intention was not to provide readers with multiple versions of the truth within his text, but to acknowledge that just as realistically “there is no secret,” no truths at all (Bercovitch 19, Bell 463). Instead, as Bercovitch goes on to observe in his text, “every interpretation [in Hawthorne’s romances] takes the form of a question”—not about the multiplicity of truth, its pluralism—but about truth itself and the availability of truth not only to the author figure, but to the reader and society as a whole (19).
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