

A stage adaptation of the Hawthorne novel, written in Two Acts and in blank verse. The play, set in 17th Century Boston, dramatizes the story of Hester Prynne who, after conceiving a daughter out of wedlock, struggles to create a life of repentance and dignity while trying to protect the identity of her paramour, the minister Arthur Dimmesdale.

THE SCARLET LETTER

by D. A. Dorwart

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The
Scarlet Letter



A Verse Tragedy In Two Acts By
D. A. DORWART

Based Upon The Novel By
NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

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First Edition

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ACT ONE

The set consists of a mammoth wooden wall upstage rising from the stage floor up into the flies. The wall is weathered and stained to permit projections that dramatically change its nature. The wall contains several doors, flush with its surface and barely discernible. There are, for example, two massive doors center, within which is a smaller door. There are also doors left and right – as needed. On a second level are sliding panels that open to create balconies. A lone small window with leaded mullions appears near the extreme top right side of the wall. The stage floor is raked and surrounded with wood chips.

At rise: Percussion/Music. The cast assembles briskly in a formal arrangement across the stage. They are anonymous, perhaps silhouetted, and motionless. A spot picks up the Chorus, a striking woman dressed in deep crimson garb, a gown or suit abstracted, modernized as are all the costumes.

Prologue

CHORUS

A throng of men and women in somber hue,
With beards and steeple hats and muslin hoods,
Assembles here before this prison door.
The grim aspect of their facade portends
A dreadful undertaking's close at hand.
Nearon the threshold of this my narrative,
Which issues forth from that unlucky portal,
There stands a rose. It has been kept alive
In history, surviv'd the wilderness
Long after pine and oak have abdicated;
'Tis cover'd now, this month of June, with gems
According fragrance and fragile beauty,
A token showing Nature's deepest heart
Can still be kind to the outlaw coming forth.
To you, the listener, one flower tender'd here
As sweet and moral blossom or as relief
To a tale of human frailty and abject grief.

Scene One

Music/Sound. The lights quickly cross fade. It is now morning, and the impatient crowd buzzes in the square outside the prison. A group of women gathers downstage. They are "countrywomen, broad-shouldered and ruddy-cheeked, bold and rotund of speech." Sarah is the youngest, and Elizabeth, the matriarch, is the oldest.

ELIZABETH

I tell ye, it would greatly be to public
Benefit if we good wives of fair
Repute should handle Hester Prynne. If hussy
Such as she before us stood for judgement,
Would she receive a sentence like
The magistrates awarded her? Marry,
I trow not!

MARTHA

They say, the Reverend Master
Dimmesdale takes it grievously to heart
Such scandal comes upon his congregation.

ABIGAIL

The magistrates are God-fearing men
But merciful overmuch.

ELIZABETH and SARAH

Aye. 'Tis true.

ABIGAIL

They should have branded her with iron
Hot upon her brow. Yea, Madame Hester
Would have winc'd at that, I warrant me.

SARAH

Little will she care what they put upon
The bodice of her gown. She'll cover it
With brooch or bib and walk the streets as ever.

MARTHA

But let her cover it as best she may,
The sting will always be within her heart.

ELIZABETH

Why do we talk of brands on gown or flesh?
This woman's brought us shame and ought to die!

JOHN THOMAS (*crossing to Martha*)

Mercy on you, Elizabeth! Is there
No virtue in woman save that which springs from fear
Of gallows? Harsh words. Mark ye, now,
The lock is turning in the prison door,
And Mistress Prynne comes forth into the light.

ELIZABETH

The magistrates will have themselves to pay
If their own wives and daughters go astray.

The small center door opens from within. Like a black shadow emerging into the sun, the Town-Beadle, staff of office in hand, comes forth. He lays a hand upon the arm of a tall woman and draws her forward to the threshold of the prison-door. With a natural dignity, she repels his hand and steps forward into the sunlight. She carries a baby in her arms and shields it from the burning light. She surveys the townspeople and lowers the baby to reveal on the breast of her gown, in crimson cloth, surrounded by embroidered flourishes of gold, the scarlet letter 'A'.

JOHN THOMAS

Three months have not diminish'd her in beauty.

MARTHA

Rather bathes she in misfortune's halo.

SARAH

She has good skill at needle, that is sure.

ELIZABETH

Did ever brazen plot such exhibition?
Her manner flaunts the crime before our faces.

ABIGAIL

And makes a pride from that the magistrates
Had well resolv'd a fitting punishment.

MARTHA

Good neighbors, peace. Let's not add rank
To this e'er-growing spectacle. I know
That every stitch in that embroidered letter,
She's doubtless felt engrav'd upon her heart.

BEADLE (*pounding with his staff*)

In the name of good King Charles, make way!
Open wide a passage! I promise Mistress
Prynne shall be install'd where all may have
Fair sight of her, from rise to setting sun.
A blessing on our righteous Colony,
Where iniquity is dragg'd into the light.
Come, Hester Prynne, and show your scarlet
Letter about the square for all to see.

Children run before the Beadle and Hester. The crowd falls in behind them as they create a procession. Apart from the crowd stand a native warrior and his companion, Roger Chillingsworth, a man of great intensity and mystery. He has a slight limp. As Hester passes him, her gaze becomes transfixed. The procession exits, and Chillingsworth intercepts John Thomas. Martha and his child(ren) wait apart briefly for him, then exit after the crowd.)

CHILLINGSWORTH

Kind sir, a moment please. Who is this woman?
Wherefore is she paraded to such public shame?

JOHN THOMAS

You must be a stranger hereabout, good sir,
Else you'd have heard of Hester Prynne, for she
Hath rais'd a goodly scandal.

CHILLINGSWORTH

How so, pray tell?

CHILLINGSWORTH (*cont'd.*)

I am a stranger, truly sir, a wanderer
Against my will. With mishap have I met
And long resided 'mong the native-folk;
Just now deliver'd here by this good man.
So please tell me about this Hester Prynne.
Have I her name correctly? What's her offense?

JOHN THOMAS

'Twill glad your heart aft' your predicament
To find a place wherein transgression's punished,
As here in our god-loving colony.
Yon' woman was wife to a learned man,
English by birth, who plann'd to cross the sea
And cast his lot with us in Massachusetts.
He sent his wife ahead and stay'd at home
Dispensing his affairs. In two years since
No tidings come of this poor gentleman, and,
Thus, the wife was left to her misguidance.

CHILLINGSWORTH

So learned a man might've thought more learnedly.
Perhaps he'll come to look into the matter.

JOHN THOMAS.

It behooves him well, if he be still in life.
More like he rests upon the salt sea's bed.

CHILLINGSWORTH

The babe appears some three or four months old.
Pray tell, kind sir, who may the father be?

JOHN THOMAS

With that I cannot help. The matter stays
A riddle, for Mistress Prynne declines to speak.
Perhaps the guilty stands as witness there,
Unknown to man, forgetting he's observ'd by God.

John Thomas' son or daughter runs in to fetch his father.

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CHILLINGSWORTH

And the punishment decreed for this offense?

JOHN THOMAS

The penalty is death.

CHILLINGSWORTH

Death, you say?

JOHN THOMAS

Our magistrates have not been bold to put
In force the absolute of our just law.
With tenderness of heart, they have decreed
She stand this day upon the pillory,
And for the rest of her remaining days,
To wear a mark of shame upon her bosom.

CHILLINGSWORTH

A wise decree.

JOHN THOMAS

Indeed, sir, yes. And now –

*John Thomas' bows courteously and then exits with his child.
Chillingsworth and the warrior stand alone.*

CHILLINGSWORTH (*augmenting with sign language*)

She'll be a living sermon 'gainst such sin
Until the letter's carv'd upon her tomb.
And yet a wife so young and fair was doubtless
Tempted to her fall. Iniquity's companion
Should stand beside her on the pillory
And take the shame upon her breast upon his own.
He will be known, I vow. He will be known!

They exit.

Scene Two

The lights cross fade as the procession enters. A platform rises upon which stands a pillory. The balcony doors slide open above to reveal Governor Bellingham, magistrates and two ministers, the senior John Wilson and the younger Arthur Dimmesdale. The Beadle attempts to help Hester up the steps of the platform, but she, again, refuses his assistance. When she reaches the top she turns toward the assembly.

WILSON (*first silencing the crowd*)

Hearken unto me, Hester Prynne!
I've sought in vain to sway my younger brethren
That he should deal with you, herein the face
Of Heaven and all before us now assembl'd.
Knowing your native temper more than I,
Better could he assess what arguments
That might prevail upon your obstinacy
And unbecoming stance, insomuch
As you no longer should conceal the name
Of him who tempted you to this most grievous fall.
With young man's softness, he opposes;
Saying it would wrong a woman's nature, forcing
Her by light of day before a gather'd
Host to bare her heart's abysmal secrets.
But I assert, the shame lay in the sin's
Commission, not the showing forth of it.
Therefore, brother Dimmesdale, I beseech you,
Yet again, to argue for this sinner's soul.

He turns to Bellingham to enlist support.

BELLINGHAM

Master Dimmesdale, responsibility
Of this poor woman's soul abides with you.
Admonish her confession as proof and
Consequence thereof.

WILSON

Speak brother. It is
Of magnitude to her soul, as well to thine,
Within whose charge she rests. Pray, convince
This woman to tell the truth!

Dimmesdale reluctantly rises and comes forward.

DIMMESDALE.

Mistress Prynne,
Hears't thou what these good men direct? See'st thou
The grave accountability under which I labor?
If thou believ'st it be for thy soul's peace,
And that thy earthly punishment thereby
Be more effectual to your salvation,
Then I charge thee now speak out the name
Of him, your fellow sinner and fellow suff'rer.
Be not still from any misdirected
Tenderness, though he descend from high
And stand by thee on shame's own pedestal,
Yet were it better than to hide a guilty
Conscience through his life. What can this silence
Do for him, except to add hypocrisy
To sin? Heaven hath granted thee
An open ignominy so thou may'st exercise
An open triumph over evil.
Take heed how thou deniest him, who lacks
The courage here to grasp it for himself,
The bitter cup present'd to thy lips!

Silence

WILSON

Woman! Transgress ye not beyond the limits
Of Heaven's mercy! Speak out the name!
Thy repentance may avail to cleave
The scarlet letter from thy breast. Speak!

HESTER

Ye sir cannot remove it. It is
Too deeply branded. And would that I might so
Endure his agony as well as mine.

ELIZABETH

Speak, the name!

CROWD (*becoming agitated*)

Yes. Speak. Speak his name!

ABIGAIL (*shouting.*)

Give your child a father!

CROWD

Speak. Speak.
Speak his name!

HESTER

Never! Never will I speak his name!

DIMMESDALE (*aside*)

She will not speak. What wondrous
Strength and generosity.

CROWD (*chanting and yelling*)

Speak. Speak. The father's name. Speak!

DIMMESDALE

And still she will not speak!

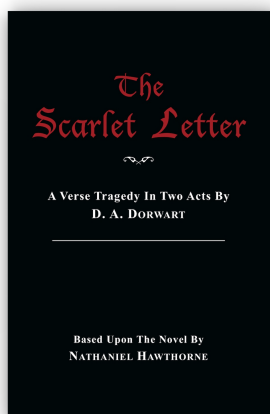
HESTER (*above the din*)

In heaven my child will find his father to come.
NEVER SHALL SHE DESCRIBE AN EARTHLY ONE!

The lights fade to black as the shouts continue.

Scene Three

The prison. The area is divided into a corridor and Hester's cell. In the blackout, moaning is heard, then the crying of a baby. The lights come up on jailer Brackett, who is leading Chillingworth toward the cell.



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