



The Scarlet Mob of Scribblers: Rereading Hester Prynne

Associate Professor Jamie Barlowe

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Jamie Barlowe finds it bitterly ironic that in literary criticism of *The Scarlet Letter*, a major American novel about a woman, the voices of female critics have been virtually excluded.

Barlowe examines the causes and consequences of the continuing disregard for women's scholarship. To that end, she chronicles *The Scarlet Letter's* critical reception, analyzes the history of Hester Prynne as a cultural icon in literature and film, rereads the canonized criticism of the novel, and offers a new reading of Hawthorne's work by rescuing marginalized interpretations from the alternative canon of women critics.

Despite the fervent protestations of scholars that women and minorities are no longer excluded from the arena of academic debate, Barlowe's investigation reveals that mainstream scholarship on *The Scarlet Letter*—studied as models by generations of students and teachers—remains male-dominated in its comprising population and in its attitudes and practices, which function as the source of its truth-claims. Rather than celebrating the minimal handouts of the academy to women and minorities—and of the culture that nurtures and supports the academy's continuing discrimination—Barlowe constructs a case study that reveals the "rather pitiful state of affairs at the close of the twentieth century."

By interrogating canonized assumptions, Barlowe charts new directions for Hawthorne studies and American literary studies. Through this exposé of ingrained institutional bias, perpetuated myths, and privileged critics, Barlowe provides a refigured perception of the field and state of contemporary literary scholarship.

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