

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The medical palimpsest of *The Scarlet Letter*: an interdisciplinary reading

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The multiple historical layers of Roger Chillingworth's character have been overlooked in criticism of *The Scarlet Letter*. By considering the possible influence of Robert Browning's dramatic poem *Paracelsus* (1835) on Hawthorne's romance (1850), as well as the ways in which overtones of both herbalism and clinical medicine complicate Chillingworth's character, one rediscovers Chillingworth as Hawthorne's audience likely experienced him: as a fictional palimpsest bearing multiple inscriptions of medical history that reveal an interplay between integrity and corruption. Thus, an interdisciplinary reading of *The Scarlet Letter* challenges the conventional critical assessment of Chillingworth as a satanic or Faustian figure.

fail to acknowledge Chillingworth's full potential in the novel".³ Thus, by examining his paradoxical embodiment of Paracelsian iatrochemistry, herbalism, and clinical medicine, a contemporary audience rediscovers Roger Chillingworth as he likely would have been read during the nineteenth century, namely, as a palimpsest¹ whose simultaneous embodiment of diverse medical traditions intensifies the romance of *The Scarlet Letter*.

CHILLINGWORTH AS IATROCHEMIST

Roger Chillingworth, according to Hawthorne's nuances, should also be known as Roger Prynne, an English scholar who sends his wife Hester to New England, planning to join her shortly. In his prolonged absence, he is thought to have died at sea. During this time, Hester's affair with Arthur Dimmesdale, an unmarried Puritan minister, becomes known through her pregnancy. On the day of her public sentencing on the town scaffold, Roger Prynne emerges in the crowd, having just been released from captivity among the Native Americans. To protect himself from public shame, he changes his surname to Chillingworth and begins to practise medicine in Boston, both as the town physician and as the personal physician of Arthur Dimmesdale, who has cuckolded him. As a physician, Chillingworth becomes his patient's nemesis: a healer made murderous by the heat of revenge. While Chillingworth's villainy is unmistakable, his character has been misunderstood as purely evil, an oversimplification that ignores both the scope of his education and his scientific proficiency. The full irony of his character emerges as his various dimensions intermingle like the multiple inscriptions of a palimpsest.

Understanding the horror of Chillingworth's corruption requires first understanding his integrity as an iatrochemist, which constitutes the primary layer of his character. His interest in alchemy is often regarded as an ominous trait, given the standard associations of alchemy with astrology, as well as the pseudoscientific quests for an elixir of life and a "philosopher's stone" that would transform lead into gold.⁴ For instance, Max Autrey includes Chillingworth's alchemical background among "his many dark secrets" and characterises his past, largely by virtue of his alliance with alchemy, as

Roger Chillingworth, the vengeful physician of *The Scarlet Letter*, is most often read as either a stock villain or as a Faustian figure, despite his wide travels and elusive allusions to historical medical figures. Such an oversimplification of his character occludes the modern reader's experience of *The Scarlet Letter* as a romance, whereas nineteenth century readers would have recognised the paradoxical tension between clinical medicine and homoeopathy in Chillingworth's practice of medicine. Hawthorne's knowledge of medical history encourages a more complex reading of Chillingworth than readers today have tended to produce, beginning with the possible influence of Robert Browning's dramatic poem *Paracelsus* (published fifteen years before *The Scarlet Letter*) on Chillingworth's character, and Hawthorne's exposure to herbalism through his father in law's occasional occupation as an apothecary.¹ Hawthorne's friendship with Oliver Wendell Holmes also gave him first hand knowledge of clinical medicine, a burgeoning but hotly contested movement in the nineteenth century, grounded in the French clinics and brought to the United States by physicians such as Holmes who had studied abroad (Miller,¹ pp 47, 134).

The historical layers evident in Chillingworth's character must be read, according to Hawthorne, in the moonlight of romance, where the "Actual and the Imaginary may meet".² Hawthorne allows historical layers to intermingle in Chillingworth's character, creating an elusive interplay between patterns of integrity and corruption. Hawthorne's subtlety, as Bethany Reid observes, "creates images that disturb readers, fend off interpretation, and cause us to

¹A palimpsest may be: 1: "a parchment or other surface on which writing has been applied over earlier writing which has been erased"; and/or 2: "something reused or altered but still bearing traces of its earlier form" (*Compact Oxford English Dictionary*).

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“shadowy.”³ During his visit to Hester in the prison house, after the public sentencing, Chillingworth cites the most famous of alchemists as an influence on his medical education, claiming that some of his remedies are “as old as Paracelsus” (Hawthorne,² p 52). This link to Paracelsus is the first historical layer inscribed upon Chillingworth’s character, and it is an ambiguous one. Paracelsus is a controversial figure, heralded enthusiastically by some medical historians as a pioneer in “occupational pathology, toxicology, and dietetics”.⁶ Others take a more cautious view of Paracelsus as a “supposed ‘contributor’ to a range of fields which, by our modern categories of knowledge, are contradictory, and which did not exist as categories of knowledge in his own time”.⁷ As an unorthodox physician who openly burned texts with which he disagreed, including Galen’s works, Paracelsus was a medical rebel whom a traditional physician would be hesitant to claim as an influence.

Hawthorne may have wished to use Paracelsus’s ambiguous reputation as a catalyst in *The Scarlet Letter*, but he may also have included this allusion to the Swiss alchemist after reading Robert Browning’s dramatic poem *Paracelsus*. Browning’s poem, published in 1835, depicts the polemical alchemist as a visionary rather than an occultist, a view of Paracelsus that was likely available to Hawthorne through his personal acquaintance with Browning (Miller,¹ pp 368, 436). *Paracelsus* proceeds in five acts, with the first and second acts entitled “Paracelsus aspires” and “Paracelsus Attains,” respectively. The fourth and fifth acts also bear these respective titles, while the third act is simply entitled “Paracelsus”. This repeated culmination of aspiration in attainment, centred on the name Paracelsus, shows Browning’s apotheosis of the alchemist.

Paracelsus’s aim to overthrow orthodox medical tradition was not unlike Browning’s own aims as an emerging writer. The poem was his breakthrough work. After its publication, as biographer W Hall Griffin observes, Browning came into his own as a major literary figure.⁸ Despite initially hostile reviews, Browning’s poem was heralded by John Forster, Leigh Hunt, and W J Fox as the mark of original talent. Forster followed his influential 1835 review of *Paracelsus* in *The Examiner* with an article published a year later in *The New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal*, in which he effectively canonised Browning: “Without the slightest hesitation we name Mr Robert Browning at once with Shelley, Coleridge, Wordsworth. He has entitled himself to a place among the acknowledged poets of the age.”⁹ Forster was a young and ambitious critic, and his enthusiasm for Browning proved contagious. Browning was honoured at a dinner in 1836 by both Walter Savage Landor and William Wordsworth for his success with *Paracelsus*. Wordsworth reportedly leaned across the table to say that he was proud to toast Browning’s health (Griffin,⁸ p 77). Such praise bolstered Browning’s claim to greatness; as Sarah Wood observes: “*Paracelsus* became the foundation of Browning’s corpus”.¹⁰ For the next decade, Browning included the phrase “By the author of *Paracelsus*” on the title page of each of his new works, thus illustrating the culmination of his own literary aspirations (Wood,¹⁰ p 78).

In Browning’s poem, Paracelsus’s character claims divine inspiration for his mission to overthrow medical tradition, framing his journey to the University of Basel as a “ready answer to the will of God/Who summons me to be his organ”.¹¹ Browning emphasises the young scholar’s “fierce energy”, driven by an “instinct striving/Because its nature is to strive” (Browning,¹¹ p 18). Near the close of the fifth act, as Paracelsus lies dying of exhaustion, having given himself unreservedly to study, his friend Festus offers this bedside elegy: “Here is earth’s noblest nobly garlanded—/Her bravest champion, with his well-won meed” (Browning,¹¹ p 159).

Though Festus’s line adds irony to the conclusion, the poem develops an idealistic view of scholarly inquiry as beginning with aspiration and culminating in attainment. These goals shape Roger Chillingworth’s character as a lifelong scholar, and Hawthorne’s initial invocation of Paracelsus in *The Scarlet Letter* similarly reinforces Chillingworth’s energy and ambition. In the first inscription upon the palimpsest of his character, Hawthorne shows Chillingworth openly modelling Paracelsian iatrochemistry, thus setting him apart from the mystical alchemists as a serious scholar and an empiricist. Such a distinction is necessary to redress the conventional notion of Chillingworth as a thoroughgoing villain.

Iatrochemistry is simply the application of chemistry to medicine, a practice central to the current field of pharmacology. Although Paracelsus advocated iatrochemistry in the sixteenth century, the movement did not generate wide interest until the 1600s, the historical milieu of Chillingworth’s character.¹² Through his “inauguration” of the “alternative school of iatrochemical medicine,” Andrew Weeks maintains, Paracelsus pioneered what would later be known as modern chemistry (Weeks,⁶ p 28). Iatrochemists, at Paracelsus’s urging, abandoned attempts to change lead into gold, instead channelling their energy into making medicine (Shryock,¹² p 12). While admitting to Hester that he once sought gold in alchemy, Chillingworth concerns himself exclusively in *The Scarlet Letter* with collecting plants in order to transform them into medicine. When he and Dimmesdale move into shared quarters so that the doctor can better observe his patient, Chillingworth stocks his laboratory with “a distilling apparatus, and the means of compounding drugs and chemicals, which the practiced alchemist knew well how to turn to purpose” (Hawthorne,² p 87). Dimmesdale sometimes witnesses Chillingworth’s iatrochemistry at work, “visiting the laboratory, and, for recreation’s sake, watching the processes by which weeds were converted into drugs of potency” (Hawthorne,² p 90). Hawthorne establishes this link to Paracelsian iatrochemistry as an authentic historical allusion before introducing elements of doubt into Chillingworth’s character.

As an iatrochemist, Chillingworth is the “wise and just man” that Hester remembers later in the romance. This layer of his character reflects his “earnest, studious, thoughtful, quiet years, bestowed [...] faithfully for the advancement of human welfare” (Hawthorne,² pp 118–19). Hawthorne introduces Chillingworth first as a “man of thought” and as the “bookworm of great libraries” (Hawthorne,² p 52). When his scholarly integrity meets with rumours of occultism, the depth of Chillingworth’s character intensifies the ambiguity of *The Scarlet Letter*. For Hawthorne to achieve this effect, Chillingworth’s scientific credibility must be firmly rooted before doubt can be artfully cast upon it.

The Scarlet Letter does not support interpretations of Chillingworth as a Faustian figure, despite William Stein’s attempt to conflate the pursuit of forbidden knowledge with Chillingworth’s practice of medicine in *Hawthorne’s Faust*.¹³ First, Chillingworth uses no incantations in his practice of medicine: his knowledge and deft use of medicinal plants is consistently scientific. Second, Chillingworth tampers with no forbidden knowledge, as Faustian figures such as Stevenson’s Henry Jekyll and Shelley’s Victor Frankenstein do; that is, he does not test the limits of science by creating new life or changing the nature of existing life. Chillingworth is a student of science, not a medical pioneer. Third, Chillingworth makes no literal bargain with the devil, as do Goethe’s Faust and Marlowe’s Faustus. His lust for revenge has no preternatural air about it other than what the townspeople of Boston imagine. His obsessive torture of Dimmesdale, while feverish and sinister, is also fuelled by Puritan social norms and Dimmesdale’s literal self

flagellation. Chillingworth embodies the horror of a wise man deranged by common malice. Hawthorne's allusion to Paracelsus is essential to establishing this troubling conflict in Chillingworth's character; otherwise, a reader might assume (as many contemporary readers have) that the physician had always been driven by ill intent.

Chillingworth's medical competency is bolstered further in contrast to general medical practice in New England during the seventeenth century. While debates between traditional physicians and folk practitioners surfaced regularly in European countries, the two camps often blurred indistinguishably in the New World. Puritan belief in literal diabolical forces fuelled the conflation of folk and professional practice, since nearly all illness was ascribed to supernatural causes.¹⁴ Ministers and physicians were thought to occupy roles so complementary that, in some cases, ministers doubled as physicians. A notable example of this blurring of clerical and medical roles in *The Scarlet Letter* is the "aged deacon and apothecary" of Boston, whose spiritual reputation ostensibly overshadows a need for formal medical training (Hawthorne,² p 82).

While Dimmesdale and Chillingworth speak freely on intellectual matters, their social roles as minister and physician remain distinctly defined. Dimmesdale, "a true priest", is fascinated by the "man of science", finding in his company the "occasional relief of looking at the universe through the medium of another kind of intellect than those with which he habitually held converse" (Hawthorne,² p 85). Chillingworth's scientific training brings "a freer atmosphere into the close and stifled study, where [Dimmesdale's] life was wasting itself away" (Hawthorne,² p 85). Chillingworth's education reinforces his status as an intellectual equal to Dimmesdale. In fact, "a kind of intimacy [...] grew up between these two cultivated minds, which had as wide a field as the whole sphere of human thought" (Hawthorne,² p 86). Despite this closeness, Chillingworth is never mistaken for a minister and Dimmesdale is never mistaken for a doctor. As serious intellectuals, they each recognise and respect the division between their vocations.

The first layer of Hawthorne's medical palimpsest establishes Chillingworth's scientific credibility, providing a foundation that Hawthorne merges with the imaginary for the full effect of the romance. Having introduced Chillingworth as a "man of thought" and as a proficient physician, Hawthorne intensifies *The Scarlet Letter* by casting doubt on Chillingworth's practice of medicine through his alleged ties to herbalism.

CHILLINGWORTH AS HERBALIST

Herbalism is the faintest layer on the medical palimpsest of Chillingworth's character. In the context of *The Scarlet Letter*, herbalism and iatrochemistry are easily confused. Both eschew surgery, as Chillingworth seems to do with his exclusively vegetable remedies. Herbalism must be distinguished as the more primitive of these two traditions: its roots in Stone Age medicine far predate Paracelsus's work in the sixteenth century. Additionally, from antiquity to the present time, herbalism has been linked with spiritualism. Iatrochemistry, in contrast, seeks empirical knowledge of herbal remedies grounded in experimentation.

To further clarify this distinction, herbalism can be seen as a catalyst for romance in Chillingworth's character precisely because of its emphasis on spiritualism. An iatrochemist might do ill by malpractice, but a hostile herbalist may have the putative spiritual force of bad medicine at his/her disposal. While Chillingworth's practice of medicine does not involve incantation, his circumstantial exposure to herbalism during his Native American captivity casts doubt on his scientific credentials and warrants separate discussion

as the second layer of intrigue in his character. The pattern of integrity established by Hawthorne's allusion to Paracelsus becomes corrupted as rumours of Chillingworth's diabolism build throughout the narrative.

Given the history of herbalism in Europe and Asia, Hawthorne may have assumed that his character had been exposed to the herbal tradition in Europe before his immersion in Native American medicine. The ancient practice of herbalism was first documented by Chinese physicians around 3000 BC.¹⁵ The medical historian Charles Talbot argues, however, that records of herbal remedies are predated by centuries of folk tradition, in which case herbalism can be said to be as old as human society.¹⁶ Chinese and East Indian herbs came to Europe along trade routes; likewise, new plants found their way from Europe to Asia. Information about the medical properties of herbs was often disseminated inaccurately, such as the seventeenth century belief that potatoes were aphrodisiacs (Camp,¹⁵ p 159). Consequently, European herbalists were often viewed as quacks, relying more on superstition than on science for the efficacy of their remedies.

Hawthorne indicates that Chillingworth is initially respected by the townspeople of Boston, who had been exposed only to folk practitioners before his arrival. As they sense his concealed motives and begin gossiping about his potential diabolism, Hawthorne begins to describe Chillingworth more in terms of herbalism than iatrochemistry. For instance, the "multitude of far-fetched and heterogeneous ingredients" of Chillingworth's remedies (Hawthorne,² p 82) resembles the herbalist practice of "polypharmacy", or "the inclusion in one prescription of up to twenty different ingredients to make sure that some worked" (Camp,¹⁵ p 164). Hawthorne's allusions to herbalism prompt Taylor Stoehr to align Chillingworth with the "nineteenth-century pseudoscientists who were making such a fuss over the proper gathering and purification of their drugs, and whose successful cures seemed to have an air of 'modern necromancy' about them".¹⁷ The efficacy of Chillingworth's prescriptions, evidenced first in his treatment of both Hester and Pearl during their prison interview and later in Dimmesdale's tenuous survival, belies the quackery suggested by polypharmacy. Nevertheless, Hawthorne's description of Chillingworth's ingredients as "far-fetched" adds a grain of doubt to his character, confounding a simplistic view of Chillingworth by exposing an interplay between integrity and corruption within his character.

Chillingworth's most damning link to herbalism is his association with Sir Kenelm Digby, a European quack. Hawthorne's description of Chillingworth as a "man of skill" is immediately followed by the caveat that "he was heard to speak of Sir Kenelm Digby, and other famous men,—whose scientific attainments were esteemed hardly less than supernatural,—as having been his correspondents" (Hawthorne,² p 83). Digby is recognised by medical historians as a physician who also dabbled in the occult, and his work on digestion and plant vegetation, according to Francis McKee, shows a "blurring of distinctions between chemistry, alchemy, and cookery".¹⁸ He was also known to administer "sympathy powder," a specious folk practice whereby the injured person's bloody clothing was soaked in powder to alleviate the pain. For this reason, historian Howard Haggard includes Digby in a chapter titled "Superstitions of medicine" (Haggard,⁴ p 260). Hawthorne uses this allusion to intensify the elusiveness of Chillingworth's character.

Even as a herbalist, Chillingworth is not a thoroughgoing practitioner of alternative medicine: he confesses to his patients in Boston that he has as much respect for the "simple medicines" of Native American tradition as he does

for the “European pharmacopoeia” (Hawthorne,² p 82). Herbalists such as Digby distrusted organised medicine and would have professed more respect for Native American methods than for the European College of Physicians. Conversely, scholarly physicians attempted to subordinate indigenous remedies to mainstream European medical discourse. Historian Eric Stone reflects this pattern by observing that “the Indian added 59 drugs to our modern pharmacopoeia”.¹⁹ Chillingworth avoids either extreme, acknowledging each tradition separately, yet co-mingling them in his practice of medicine.

Chillingworth’s fascination with herbal treatments has also been thought to resemble homoeopathy, a medical movement founded by Samuel Hahnemann in Germany during the early 1800s.²⁰ Disgruntled with traditional methods, Hahnemann deviated from the Galenist tradition of treating illness with opposites, such as drawing blood to reduce fever. Hahnemann based his system on the assumption that “like cures like”—for example, believing that nutmeg might be used to treat the brain since both bear physical resemblance.²¹ Homoeopaths distinguish between “allopathic” treatment of illness, a term coined by Hahnemann to represent the symptom specific treatments common to traditional medicine, and the holistic homoeopathic method of responding to a patient’s mental and emotional needs as well as to symptoms of physical illness.²¹

One of the most troubling aspects of Chillingworth’s character is that he recognises Dimmesdale’s mental and emotional dimensions, as a holistic healer would, yet deliberately dissects Dimmesdale’s psyche in search of proof that the minister is the father of Hester’s illegitimate child. As the minister’s personal physician, Chillingworth “deem[s] it essential [...] to know the man, before attempting to do him good”, assuming that “heart” and “intellect” intersect with physical illness (Hawthorne,² p 85). Hawthorne further reflects that Chillingworth “strove to go deep into his patient’s bosom, delving among his principles, prying into his recollections, and probing everything with a cautious touch, like a treasure seeker in a dark cavern” (Hawthorne,² p 86). However entwined Chillingworth’s personal motives are with his treatment of Dimmesdale, the physician uses chemical and psychological tactics separately, keeping Dimmesdale alive by chemical means (his “drugs of potency”) and tormenting him by psychological means—a direct violation of holistic principles.

The contrast between homoeopathy and Chillingworth’s practice of medicine is heightened by Oliver Wendell Holmes’s view of homoeopathy as a “humbug” of the nineteenth century. Homoeopathy is still disparaged by scientific physicians, but the public clash between the two traditions is less visible in the twenty first century, when clinical medicine possesses much more social authority than it did in the first half of the nineteenth century. Few contemporary physicians would attack alternative medicine with Holmes’s vehemence; thus, one must re-imagine the context of *The Scarlet Letter* to fully apprehend the dramatic effect of co-mingling the characteristics of these polarised traditions in Chillingworth’s character. Holmes confidently states at the beginning of his 1842 address that the “pretensions and assertions” of homoeopathy “cannot stand before a single hour of calm investigation” (Holmes,²⁰ p 39). Discounting the scientific credibility of homoeopathic physicians, Holmes links them with mesmerists and ancient conjurers, claiming that society always includes “a class of minds much more ready to believe that which is at first sight incredible, and because it is incredible, than what is generally thought reasonable” (Holmes,²⁰ p 33). While addressing the prevalence of homoeopathy in the nineteenth century, Holmes links it with earlier examples of quackery, including

Sir Kenhelm Digby. Hawthorne’s friendship with Holmes would have acquainted him with Holmes’s views on homoeopathy. Additionally, Hawthorne’s father in law’s and brother in law’s occasional employment as apothecaries would have reinforced his exposure to Hahnemann’s alternative school of medicine (Miller,¹ p 134). Associating Chillingworth’s character too closely with homoeopathy would have greatly diminished Chillingworth’s stature as an intellectual, which may explain Hawthorne’s explicit distinction between Chillingworth and the aged deacon/apothecary character in Boston.

While quacks are dangerous for their blunders, Chillingworth is dangerous for his proficiency. His systematic psychological torture of Dimmesdale reveals a malevolence underpinned by prodigious medical insight. The corruption of his integrity is the most obvious point of intrigue in Chillingworth’s character, as it colours his villainous role. His Native American captivity is essential to understanding the force of bad medicine in *The Scarlet Letter*, as Chillingworth could not have learned cures “potent for good” among the American Indians without also learning cures equally potent for ill. As Eskimo and North American Indian tribes acknowledged the presence of both a good spirit and an evil spirit in every human being, so medicine men sought to exorcise the evil spirit through good medicine (Camp,¹⁵ p 14). Likewise, a medicine man might choose to feed the evil spirit and subdue the good; for this reason, medicine men or witch doctors often filled the roles of both priest and physician (Camp,¹⁵ p 12). While little is said in *The Scarlet Letter* about the time Chillingworth spent with Native Americans, Hawthorne allows readers to assume that Chillingworth was immersed in this spiritualised medical discourse both during his captivity and after his return to the Puritan city of Boston.

In the romance, Boston’s rumour mill invokes occultism to cast doubt on Chillingworth’s character. An “aged hand-craftsman” claims that Chillingworth was in league with Dr Simon Forman, a “famous old conjurer” (Hawthorne,² p 88). Others suspect him of having “join[ed] in the incantations of the savage priests”, as these medicine men were “universally acknowledged to be powerful enchanters, often performing seemingly miraculous cures by their skill in the black art” (Hawthorne,² p 88). Chillingworth’s alleged links to renegade herbalists and “savage priests” cloud aspects of his earlier ties to the scholarly practice of iatrochemistry. In the interplay between these two layers, Chillingworth emerges sometimes as a man of sound medical repute and at other times as a suspicious dabbler in the “black art” of bad medicine. The emergence of corruption in his character fuels Dan Vogel’s comparison of Chillingworth to Milton’s Satan, as “both are highly intellectual, both are prideful, both suffer increasing physical ugliness as their inner evil waxes. But [...] though evil, they are noble; though wicked, they bear themselves with dignity; though nefarious, they have wisdom”.²² Yet the satanic reading of Chillingworth fails to acknowledge that Milton’s Satan does not pursue knowledge “faithfully for the advancement of human welfare”, as Chillingworth claims to have done. Nor would Hester Prynne characterise Satan as “wise and just”, though she describes Chillingworth as such while recalling the early years of their marriage (Hawthorne,² pp 118–19). Mistaking Chillingworth for a literal devil or for a witch doctor requires believing the Puritan rumour mill in Boston, not the evidence provided by Hawthorne. Chillingworth represents the greatest threat to Dimmesdale in his resemblance to the clinician, with his emotional restraint and penetrating gaze, and this final inscription on the palimpsest of his character reflects Hawthorne’s abiding fear of scientific medicine in the mid-nineteenth century.

CHILLINGWORTH AS CLINICIAN

Hawthorne may have vilified doctors because of his ill treatment by family practitioners as a child (Miller,¹ p 47). Additionally, his familiarity with clinical medicine via his friendship with Oliver Wendell Holmes exposed him to the stoicism of experimental physicians; thus, it is reasonable to assume that Chillingworth's ominous nature partly reflects Hawthorne's first hand experience of medicine in the nineteenth century. As both a man of science and a competent physician, Chillingworth would have been more at home in the nineteenth century than in the seventeenth century. He might have consorted with professionals like Oliver Wendell Holmes, freshly returned from their studies in the French clinics, rather than his barber/surgeon and apothecary colleagues in seventeenth century Boston. Chillingworth resembles the "more than seven hundred American physicians" who studied in Paris between 1820 and 1860, "return[ing] as devoted disciples of the new clinical methods".²³ One of these methods was clinical observation, which Michel Foucault describes as "the Gaze that envelops, caresses, details, atomizes the most individual flesh[,] [...] that fixed, attentive, rather dilated gaze which, from the height of death, has already condemned life".²⁴ From his appearance at the scaffold in the opening scenes to the close of the romance, Chillingworth fixes his eye on those around him with just this sort of penetrating and attentive gaze.

The weight of this gaze upon Dimmesdale prompts the narrator of *The Scarlet Letter* to warn readers that "a man burdened with a secret should especially avoid the intimacy of his physician" (Hawthorne,² p 86). While the intimacy of a Paracelsian might carry a chemical threat and the intimacy of a holistic herbalist might be treacherous on both physical and psychological grounds, neither of these earlier layers of Chillingworth's character carry the force of his clinical gaze. His physical deformity is most repugnant when it is joined to the "great white eye that unties the knot of life" (Foucault,²⁴ p 144). In this morbid resemblance to clinical medicine, as Stephanie Browner argues, Chillingworth reflects Hawthorne's "scathing condemnation of the physician's gaze and [...] tenacious resistance to the medicalization of the body" (Browner,²³ p 142). Indeed, the sinister force of Chillingworth's gaze, as Browner further suggests, may imply a "pointed critique that goes to the very center of nineteenth-century medical science" (Browner,²³ p 140). Chillingworth's practice of medicine is undoubtedly malevolent and invites sharp criticism. A straightforward social critique of clinical medicine would, however, leave little room for romance, just as pure fantasy would obscure the historical setting of *The Scarlet Letter*.

If Chillingworth were simply a "charlatan with a menacing gaze" or a "ghoul who administers poisonous elixirs", as John C Long suggests, then his character would be caricatured in this manner throughout the romance.²⁵ Yet, as a once honest man with authentic scholarly roots and sound medical acumen turned to foul ends, Chillingworth evokes intrigue while tainting the medical profession with villainy. By exposing the fallacy of clinical objectivity through Chillingworth's villainous transformation, Hawthorne weaves social critique into *The Scarlet Letter*, but this critique is meant to merge with the imaginary for a full romantic effect. Such an effect is achieved as Chillingworth's stoical mask is broken by flashes of hatred.

A clinician must be a dispassionate observer with a steady eye out for diverse results. Such a gaze, Foucault explains, "refrains from intervening; it is silent and gestureless" (Foucault,²⁴ p 107). Chillingworth is described as having been "calm in temperament" throughout his life; additionally, Dimmesdale (even when startled) can detect in Chillingworth only "his kind, watchful, sympathizing, but never

intrusive friend" (Hawthorne,² p 90). Such emotional restraint allies Chillingworth with the clinical physicians of the nineteenth century who embody "the blank, unassuming, and yet knowing gaze of the new medicine" (Foucault,²⁴ p 143). Yet, bias seethes beneath Chillingworth's calm countenance, and his ability to be both methodical and passionate shows the full depth of his sinister function in the romance.

Chillingworth is characteristically calm when he appears at the scaffold near the beginning of the narrative. On the edge of the crowd, he is, at first, a dispassionate observer. The clinical gaze described by Foucault mirrors Chillingworth's demeanour as he "ben[ds] his eyes on Hester Prynne" (Hawthorne,² p 44). This initial gaze passes over Hester "carelessly", reflecting "a man chiefly accustomed to look inward, and to whom external matters are of little value and import". When observation yields insight, however, Chillingworth's gaze turns "keen and penetrative" as "a writhing horror twist[s] itself across his features" and "his face darken[s] with some powerful emotion" (Hawthorne,² p 44). In this split second, Chillingworth's bias flashes unmistakably through the clinical gaze. He buries this passion immediately, as "he so instantaneously control[s] [it] by an effort of his will, that, save at a single moment, its expression might have passed for calmness" (Hawthorne,² p 44). Chillingworth carries the face of a clinician throughout the romance, but moments like this betray his malevolent purpose and bring traces of earlier layers of the palimpsest of his character to light, recalling herbalists like Digby and their association with occultism.

While purporting to refrain from bias, the clinical gaze of Hawthorne's medical milieu was, according to Foucault, "haunted by that absolute eye that cadaverizes life and rediscovers in the corpse the frail, broken nerve of life" (Foucault,²⁴ p 166). Herein lies the diabolical turn in Chillingworth's character as his stoical powers of observation are turned to premeditated malice. No longer does Chillingworth refrain from intervening, as a clinical observer should; rather, he searches for disease in the midst of life and seeks to hold up Dimmesdale pre-mortem as a breathing, and thus tortured, embodiment of the "broken nerve of life". Amid Dimmesdale's "pure sentiments", Chillingworth "gropes" for an animal nature, stealing about in the minister's "dim interior" like a thief (Hawthorne,² pp 89–90).

When Chillingworth finds evidence of Dimmesdale's guilt at the end of the section, "The Leech and His Patient," Hawthorne abandons the quaint title with its allusions to the Galenist practice of phlebotomy for the more clinically titled subsequent section, "The Interior of a Heart," evocative of the intricate anatomical knowledge of clinical medicine, with its emphasis on human dissection. The intimacy of a hostile leech is disagreeable, but the intimacy of a malevolent physician who gazes beneath the skin to one's biological centre is far worse. Hawthorne suggests that the clinician is a far more sinister parasite than his historical predecessors, who affixed leeches to their patients and were thus known by the same name. When Chillingworth catches Dimmesdale asleep, uncovers his bosom, and covets with "wonder, joy, and horror" at what he sees (which might be a literal symbol of adultery, such as the letter "A" that Hester is forced to wear, or a more figurative form of guilt, such as self mutilation), the powerful emotion he first felt at the scaffold returns for an instant (Hawthorne,² pp 95–6). Henceforth, Chillingworth's stoical character resonates with festering hatred. In the elusive chase of romance, Hawthorne shows this horrific blurring of the actual and the imaginary: the unassuming gaze of clinical medicine twisted into a leer by the glow of hostile purpose.

Chillingworth is a self styled "fiend" by the close of the romance (Hawthorne,² p 118). The rumour mill of Boston

does most of the embellishing of Chillingworth's devilish side, suspecting him of being either "Satan himself, or Satan's emissary" and imagining that his face is sooty with smoke from literal hellfire (Hawthorne,² p 88). These imaginary qualities are most effective when blurred with the similarity between Chillingworth's original demeanour and the clinical gaze of nineteenth century physicians. Thus, when Chillingworth is deprived of his patient/victim by Dimmesdale's death, he bears a "blank, dull countenance, out of which the life seem[s] to have departed" (Hawthorne,² p 172). In the wake of the minister's passing, Chillingworth loses his "vital and intellectual force": without a patient in whom to find the "broken nerve of life", Chillingworth's "blank, unassuming, and yet knowing gaze" is rendered harmless (Hawthorne,² p 175). While his meteor lit leer beneath the scaffold during "The Minister's Vigil" and his caper after uncovering Dimmesdale's bosom are pregnant with both the actual clinical gaze and the imaginary rumours of diabolism, Chillingworth's visage at the close of the romance is reduced to a pallor no longer evoking the intrigue that his complex function throughout the romance has established.

With the freeze frame of Chillingworth's final expression in mind, one might recall Hawthorne's multiple historical inscriptions upon his character. Behind Chillingworth's flat gaze in the closing scene lies the "great white eye" of early clinical medicine that "unties the knot of life". Beneath the clinical eye linger traces of herbalism, Chillingworth's potentially dark secrets: Sir Kenelm Digby's mixture of science and occultism, bad medicine, polypharmacy. Yet further back, before his hair turned grey, perhaps, one might glimpse Roger Prynne, the iatrochemist, bent over a Paracelsian text, still the "wise and just man" that Hester once knew. On a moonlit night in Hawthorne's study, these layers would show a palimpsest ripe for romance.

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