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Another View of Arthur Dimmesdale: A Profound Lesson in Scapegoating from The Scarlet Letter

Near the end of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale stands on the scaffold of shame and tears away his shirt to reveal something to the community. The narrator exclaims: "It was revealed! But it were irreverent to describe that revelation" (*Novels* 338). The actual manner in which this revelation is manifest is hidden, which allows readers to fill in the details. The presumption is that there indeed was some mark on the minister's chest, and the narrator provides three explanations, derived from eyewitnesses, as to how it came into existence. It was either the result of Dimmesdale's self-flagellation, the effects of Chillingworth's evil potions, or the seemingly supernatural transference of spiritual guilt onto the hypochondriac minister's body. Curiously, the narrator discounts the testimony of the few stubborn witnesses who claimed not to see anything significant on the minister's chest.

I admit to being one of those stubborn old men who resist common interpretations. I maintain that the revelation here is *not* that Dimmesdale is definitely the father of Hester's daughter, Pearl; the revelation is that Dimmesdale has been scapegoated, and not by the Puritan community of the novel, but *rather by the community of readers of the novel*. These readers have followed each other in creating a canonical interpretation of the text that is unanimous in its imputation of guilt to the Good Reverend Dimmesdale. And yet, I argue, the text is sufficiently and significantly ambiguous regarding whether Dimmesdale is indeed Pearl's biological father. What happens is that readers, following the lead of the story's narrator, fill in the details of the public events in order to create a private offense that is not necessarily there. The story is thus indeed about scapegoating and witch-hunting, but it is also, I

argue—mounting an admittedly large challenge to the canonical scholarship—a story of literary witch-hunting.