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Madsen, Deborah Lea

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Hawthorne's Puritans: From Fact to Fiction

Deborah L. Madsen

Nathaniel Hawthorne's view of his first American ancestors as belonging to a grim and gloomy race, impatient with human weaknesses and merciless towards transgressors, reflects a wide-spread popular attitude towards the Massachusetts Bay colonists. Indeed, Hawthorne's contribution to the construction and perpetuation of this view is not inconsiderable. Hawthorne frankly confesses to his own family descent from one of the "hanging judges" of the Salem witchcraft trials, and he does not spare any instance of persecution, obsession, or cruelty regarding the community led by his paternal ancestors. But Hawthorne does not stop at indicting his own family history; in a famous exchange with the president of Hartford College, Thomas Ruggles Pynchon, shortly after the publication of *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851) Hawthorne is accused of blackening the reputation of another of New England's great colonial families. Hawthorne denied any knowledge of a "real" Pynchon family, let alone one with living (and litigious) descendants. He apologized for his mistake and offered to write an explanatory preface (which never appeared) for the second edition.¹ Historical evidence suggests that Hawthorne, in fact, knew the history of the Pyncheon family, in particular William Pyncheon and his son John, of Springfield, who shared political and business connections throughout the mid-seventeenth century with William Hathorne of Salem. William Hathorne was a notorious persecutor of Quakers and his son John was the "hanging judge" of the witchcraft trials; William Pyncheon was a prominent fur-trader and founder of several towns along the Connecticut River who left the colony abruptly in *circa* 1651 accused of heresy. Given this history, a more likely model for the grim Colonel Pyncheon of Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel is rather a composite of John and William Hathorne than William Pynchon. So why should Nathaniel, who had already in his fiction revealed his family skeletons, choose to displace his own family history on to the Pyncheon family, with all the trouble that then ensued?

In this essay I wish to argue that Nathaniel Hawthorne's defence of his family lies in the creation of a monolithic Puritanism, in which all figures of authority acted as his own ancestors acted. To this end, he obliterates the history of subversion and heresy that involved even the colonial elite; heretics are represented in Hawthorne's fiction as exceptional individuals, and subversives are always defeated by the overwhelming forces of orthodoxy. Nathaniel Hawthorne is able to excuse the sins of his fathers by showing that they were incapable of acting otherwise. The primary consequence of this strategy, however, is a powerful misrepresentation of actual Puritans, of the dynamics of Puritan theology, and the politics of colonial New England. And this misrepresentation is now enshrined in the American literary canon where its influence can continue unabated.

Shortly after the appearance of *The House of the Seven Gables*, Hawthorne received a letter of complaint from Peter Oliver, as he remarks at length in a letter to Fields dated 23 May 1851:

It seems there was actually a Pyncheon (or Pynchon, as he spells it) family resident in Salem, and that their representative, at the period of the Revolution, was a certain Judge Pynchon, a tory and a Refugee. This was Mr Oliver's grandfather, and (at least, so he dutifully describes him) the most exemplary old gentleman in the world. There are several touches, in my account of the Pyncheons, which, he says, make it probable that I had this actual family in my

eye, and he considers himself infinitely wronged and aggrieved, and thinks it monstrous that the "virtuous dead" cannot be suffered to rest quietly in their graves... He writes more in sorrow than in anger, though there is quite enough of the latter quality to give piquancy to his epistle. The joke of the matter is, that I never heard of his grandfather, nor knew that any Pyncheons had ever lived in Salem, but took the name because it suited the tone of my book, and was as much my property, for fictitious purposes, as that of Smith.²

Hawthorne goes on to explain that he has "pacified" Mr. Oliver with an undertaking that, should *The House of the Seven Gables* be reprinted, he will include a preface apologizing for the unintentional wrong inflicted upon the Pynchon family – "else these wretched old Pyncheons will have no peace in the other world, nor I in this."³ Hawthorne was bothered by several "claimants of the Pyncheon estate," as he referred to the controversy, and speculated that perhaps every descendant of Judge Pynchon would remonstrate with him. In June 1851 he joked to Fields: "After exchanging shots with all of them, I shall get you to publish the whole correspondence, in a style corresponding with that of my other works; and I anticipate a great run for the volume. This last letter fills two sheets."⁴

Earlier indications of Hawthorne's awareness of the Pynchon and indeed Oliver families is even less flattering than the portrait of the Pyncheons created in *The House of the Seven Gables*. In the *American Notebooks* (August 1837) Hawthorne describes:

[i]n the cabinet of the Essex Historical Society, old portraits... Endicott, Pyncheon, and others, in scarlet robes, bands, &c. Half a dozen or more family portraits of the Olivers, some in plain dresses, brown, crimson, or claret... Peter Oliver, who was crazy, used to fight with these family pictures in the old Mansion House ; and the face and breast of one lady bear cuts and stabs inflicted by him. Miniatures in oil, with the paint peeling off, of stern, old, yellow faces...

Nothing gives a stronger idea of old worm-eaten aristocracy - of a family being crazy with age, and of its being time that it was extinct - than these black, dusty, faded, antique dressed portraits, such as those of the Oliver family.⁵

It would appear that Hawthorne not only was repulsed by these images, but he also perceived them in an emblematic perspective; seeing the Olivers and Pyncheons as representative of a decadent, corrupt, and cruel Puritan culture. Certainly, Hawthorne was aware of these families in a historical context as early as 1837. What is uncertain is whether he understood these families to have actually become extinct rather than simply deserving extinction, as he observed in his notebook.

The issue of whether Hawthorne knowingly used the name of an existent New England family in *The House of the Seven Gables* is of course complicated by the fact that there were not one but two well-known and influential Judge Williams to be found in the Pynchon family. William Pynchon (1590-1661), founder of Springfield, migrated to the New World with the Winthrop fleet and was an important member of the Massachusetts Bay Company. In his reply to Thomas Ruggles Pynchon's protest over *The House of the Seven Gables*, Hawthorne argues that "[t]he name was suggested to me by that of the Massachusetts Patentee, who... returned to England and had not, so far as I was aware, any further connection with New England history" (5 June 1851).⁶ But this William Pynchon, of Springfield Massachusetts, had a descendant, William Pynchon of Salem (1723-1789), who was a prominent member of the Essex judiciary – he married into another of the old New England families (the Sewalls) – until his Loyalist sympathies during the Revolution brought to a rather abrupt end the social prestige he had enjoyed. Certainly, the family of the latter Pynchon assumed it was he who had been calumniated by Hawthorne's novel, in the first chapter of which the narrator notes: "During the revolution, the Pyncheon of that epoch, adopting the royal

side, became a refugee, but repented, and made his reappearance, just at the point of time to preserve the House of the Seven Gables."⁷ This is not William Pynchon, the "Massachusetts Patentee," being referred to here. In the preface to his edition of his grandfather's diary, Fitch Edward Oliver observes:

It is not a little remarkable that a name honoured from the earliest days of the Colony, and now borne by one, its chief representative, who had passed the larger part of his life in Salem, eminent in his profession, and of singular purity of life, should have been selected to be sullied in the pages of a modern romance. A more repulsive character has rarely been portrayed by writers of fiction than that of Judge Pynchon in "The House of the Seven Gables" ; and when it is remembered that William Pynchon was the only one of the family who had ever resided in Salem, and that from his learning, and fitness for the judicial office, he was sometimes accorded the title of Judge, it was but natural that the author of that attractive story should have been asked for an explanation of what seemed so unwarrantable a liberty.⁸

The household of William Pynchon was situated in very close proximity to the house of William and Mary Hathorne. Only a single block separated William Pynchon's house on the highway to Marblehead from the Hathorne property on Main Street. Pynchon's diary entry for Sunday 10 December 1786 reads: "The storm continues until 11 o'clock; the sun breaks out, but the wind continueth; the snow drifts in front of my house, and just admits of a view from my office window of Pike's garret window and of Hathorne's eastern garret window."⁹ William Pynchon keeps a regular diary account of the experiences and events affecting his near neighbours, the Hathornes.

Adjacent to the Hathorne residence, but standing on the property of Deacon Samuel Holman, there is marked a shop (note that in *The House of the Seven Gables* the sole tenant of the house in which the shop is located is Mr Holgrave). In his diary entries for February 1784, William Pynchon has an amused story to tell of Mrs. Hathorne's antics as shopkeeper. On Sunday February 15, Mrs. Hathorne's shop was "broken open, and great quantities of goods stolen out."¹⁰ On the 18th, Mrs. Hathorne departs for Providence, "to visit the Conjuror to find her goods," Pynchon records with wry humour.¹¹ Shortly thereafter, on Friday February 20, and with no apparent supernatural intervention, Pynchon writes that the "[g]reat part of Mrs Hathorne's goods are found at Marblehead, parts being offered for sale and to exchange, at very low rates; Jack sets out for Providence to call her home from the Conjuror's; the receivers, etc., of the goods are brought over from Marblehead, examined, and part of the goods found and the persons committed."¹² Incidents such as this cast an interesting light upon Nathaniel Hawthorne's decision to characterize the faintly ridiculous Hepzibah Pyncheon as a storekeeper, in *The House of the Seven Gables*, in part to signify the extent to which the once-proud colonial family has declined. It is interesting to note also, whilst looking at the map of Salem, around the year 1780, that on Long Wharf Lane is the house of Captain Daniel Hathorne, Nathaniel Hawthorne's grandfather. Given Nathaniel's knowledge of and interest in his Salem ancestors, it is impossible to believe that he wrote in good faith of his ignorance of the historical Pynchon family. But why should Hawthorne attempt to displace the sometimes dark, sometimes pathetic, history of the New England Hathornes on to the Pynchon family? What would he achieve by erasing the differences between the colonial Hathornes and the colonial Pynchon family? And what are the differences that Hawthorne obscures as he constructs a monolithic edifice that is New England Puritanism?

William Pynchon was a member of the Boston elite, journeying to the New World with the Winthrop Fleet. He was one of the twenty-six patentees of the Massachusetts Bay Company; in April 1629 he was sworn in as one of eighteen assistants named in the Massachusetts Bay Charter and in August of that year he became one of the twelve signatories to the Cambridge Agreement.

He was one of the founders of Roxbury and was chosen magistrate and assistant every year until 1636; during the years 1632-34 he served as the colonial treasurer; he was also colonial advisor on ordnance. In the latter capacity he encountered trouble when, in 1634, he promoted the idea of arming local Indians to facilitate their fur trapping activities. Pynchon obtained permission for this unusual step from the Court of Assistants, but the General Court overturned the decision and fined Pynchon, together with Thomas Mayhew, £10 each. This is the earliest recorded instance of Pynchon's uneasy relations with the colonial authorities ; although he was of the colonial elite – entering into a trading consortium with Governor Winthrop and his son in 1634 – Pynchon chafed at the restrictions placed upon his activities, and these conflicts became more frequent in the course of his illustrious New World career. In the spring of 1635, Pynchon led a group of settlers into the Connecticut River valley where he intended to establish a settlement and fur-trading enterprise. Agawam (later Springfield) became a thriving centre of trade and focus for the further settlement of the region which Pynchon facilitated. Again, he was elected annually magistrate of Springfield, with responsibility for adjacent settlements, and assistant to the General Court. Pynchon's success was due in no small part to the good relations he enjoyed with local native tribes and, in June 1648, he refused to take into custody natives suspected of murdering another Indian on the grounds that such action would violate native sovereignty; Winthrop wrote in his journal: "Mr Pincheon offered his assistance, but wrote to the governor, that the Indians murdered, nor yet the murderers, were not our subjects, and withal that it would endanger a war."¹³ The good relations Pynchon enjoyed with the natives was not shared by all prominent men in the region, especially those who had acquired a reputation for committing atrocities during the Pequod War. In 1638, one such man, Captain John Mason, made representation to the Connecticut General Court, accusing Pynchon of fraudulent dealing in the matter of buying corn from the natives on behalf of the river towns. Specifically, Pynchon was charged with raising corn prices for private gain, keeping local Indians in fear of him so they would trade with no one else, and various minor misdemeanours which Pynchon easily disproved. He denied that he had been engaged in price speculation and pointed in evidence to his own shortage of corn. Thomas Hooker, on behalf of Connecticut, then offered a moral rather than legal condemnation of Pynchon's conduct: he argued that Pynchon had broken his magistrate's oath by neglecting the common good that he was bound to uphold. By widening the scope of the controversy in this way, Hooker involved the churches at Agawam and Hartford and indeed several of the river towns. Pynchon took these allegations very hard and used his influence in Boston to ensure that Springfield soon became a part of Massachusetts and not the Connecticut colony. This move ensured Pynchon's relative autonomy and also gave him critical distance from his enemies in Hartford. William Pynchon's conflict with government arose from a powerful desire for autonomy and independence, and this desire was expressed repeatedly by his unwillingness to pay taxes. Pynchon developed a record of resisting taxation: even in the early days in Roxbury he was fined for refusing to pay his share of the Roxbury assessment; he was reluctant to pay the Connecticut assessment of his debt for prosecuting the war against the Pequods because he had fortified his own settlement of Agawam. In a much more serious dispute, in 1641, Pynchon refused to pay excise duty on goods passing through the Connecticut port of Fort Saybrook; Hartford argued that since he had the advantage of the fortifications at Saybrook he must pay the requisite duty; Pynchon argued that the imposition of intra-colonial taxes was an unnecessary burden. Eventually, the matter was resolved in 1649 when Massachusetts threatened to impose a counter-tax on all goods passing through the port of Boston (using Hartford's argument about the value of fortification but now in relation to the Castle) and then the Hartford authorities backed down and allowed Pynchon to have his own way.¹⁴

The image of William Pynchon that emerges from his colonial activities – as patentee, pioneer and founder, entrepreneur – is of a rather maverick figure, restless in his pursuit of profit, energetic in the development of Springfield and the entire Connecticut Valley region, and something of a thorn in the side of colonial authorities among whose numbers he was counted.

Pynchon was many things, but a conservative promoter of orthodox ways was not one of them. In contrast, Nathaniel Hawthorne's colonial ancestors were orthodox and conservative in the extreme. William Hathorne, long-time magistrate of Salem and assistant to the General Court at Boston during the period of Pynchon's magistracy, was notorious as a persecutor of Quakers in Essex County. Hathorne operated a system of spies or informers who reported to him individuals who neglected their church and civil duties. Failure to observe the Sabbath, absence from church on fast-days and election days and the like, were reported to William Hathorne who prosecuted these cases vigorously. Perhaps the most notorious case arose from Hathorne's prosecution of a well-known and peaceful Salem family who were imprisoned for harbouring Quakers at their home. When finally brought to trial, they were fined not only for the period during which they were guilty of harbouring these Quakers but also for the period of their imprisonment awaiting trial. When they were unable to pay the accumulated debt, Hathorne seized the couple's children intending to sell them into slavery in the West Indies to offset their parents' debts.¹⁵ Only an intense outcry from the community of Salem on behalf of the children, and the severity of sentence meted out to individuals who had been law-abiding and peaceful citizens up to the time of their arrest, prevented Hathorne carrying out his scheme.

The difference between the colonial Pynchons and Hathornes is dramatically revealed in their attitudes towards witchcraft. Pynchon heard one of the earliest cases in New England: Edward Johnson describes in *Wonder-Working Providence* how "[t]here hath of late been more then one or two in this Town [Springfield] greatly suspected of witchcraft, yet have they used much diligence, both for the finding them out, and for the Lords assisting them against their witchery, yet have they, as is supposed, bewitched not a few persons, among whom are two of the reverend Elders children [Martha and Rebecca Moxon]".¹⁶ Pynchon expressed no opinion that has survived about this case or witchcraft in general; he simply performed his duty as set out for a magistrate in such circumstances. William Hathorne's son John, however, embraced the witchcraft hysteria that seized Salem and gained a notorious reputation as a "hanging judge." John Hathorne became as closely associated with the harsh treatment of accused witches as Cotton Mather, the unrepentant individual who so nearly orchestrated the witchcraft controversy. The Hathornes, as stern administrators of a harsh Puritan justice, contrast more completely with William Pynchon the heretic. In 1650, Pynchon was ordered to appear before the General Court to account for the heretical work published under his name, *The Meritorious Price of Our Redemption*¹⁷ Copies of the book were ceremonially burned on Boston Common and Pynchon was summoned to answer the heretical arguments put forward. He claimed in that work that Christ had not suffered man's guilt incurred at the Fall, rather Christ's perfect obedience answered Adam's act of disobedience and atoned for it. Pynchon's book was especially controversial for a number of reasons; firstly, it flew in the face of a law passed in 1646 condemning to fine and exile anyone who should entertain such heresies as "denying that Christ gave himself as ransome for our sins";¹⁸ secondly, Pynchon was a prominent and influential member of the colonial government, and so an eminent divine – John Norton – was commissioned to debate with him and persuade him to acknowledge his error and publicly recant. Instead, Pynchon gave ambiguous signs that he would co-operate and meanwhile arranged to transfer all his business interests to his son John so he and his wife could return to England. Interestingly, William Hathorne was one of a few deputies who dissented from a unanimous verdict; why Hathorne refused to find Pynchon guilty of heresy is unknown, since all agreed to keep the details of the debate from the public record.

One possible explanation lies in the business dealings between the Pynchon and Hathorne families that developed in the course of the 1650s. In 1650, Governor Styvesant wrote to the United Colonies at Hartford to complain about the volume of the Pynchon fur trade; he claimed that Pynchon was exceeding the New England sovereignty and further complained about recent English legislation to prohibit Dutch traders from trading with Indians inside New England.¹⁹ As furs became scarce in Massachusetts, the Hudson River Valley was increasingly tempting as a new

source of beaver and other pelts upon which the Pynchon fortune crucially depended. In 1659, William's son John entered into formal partnership with William Hathorne in a venture called The Hawthorne Company. The aim of the company was to establish trading routes along the upper Hudson River, but they informed the Dutch authorities that they wanted specifically to supply the Dutch outposts, such as Fort Orange (Albany), with cattle raised by a small settlement to be established between Springfield and the Hudson River.²⁰ Though the Hawthorne Company had the support of the Massachusetts General Court, the anticipated objections by Dutch traders and Governor Styvesant were more unyieldingly put than the company and the General Court expected and eventually John Pynchon withdrew from the enterprise. The settlement Pynchon made as he withdrew his interests from the Company is detailed in his account book. During the period 1659-62, John Pynchon and William Hathorne had extensive dealings and travelled together a number of times on company business. For instance, Pynchon also claims from the Company costs incurred on journeys to Fort Aurania and to Ausatinnoag.²¹

To return, then, to the questions with which I began: what did Hawthorne achieve by erasing the differences between the colonial Hathornes and the colonial Pynchon family? And what are the differences that Hawthorne obscures as he constructs a monolithic edifice that is New England Puritanism? It is apparent that the colonial Pynchons and Hathornes were radically contrasting Puritan families; however, they also shared interests and found themselves frequently in contact through business, political, legislative, and personal relationships. The Pynchons do conform in some respects to the image of litigious, pedantic Puritans found in Nathaniel Hawthorne's writings. However, the image of orthodox conservatives who are concerned with adherence to the letter of the law – spiritual and civil – relates much more closely to the career of the colonial Hathornes rather than the Pynchons. *The Scarlet Letter* embodies Hawthorne's best-known representation of the stern and gloomy Puritans that characterize the colonial New England of his fiction. And in the prefatory tale, "The Custom House," Hawthorne discovers in the Puritanism of the Massachusetts Bay colony a point of origin for the contemporary American culture he criticizes. Puritanism is therefore not only represented as monolithic, allowing only one interpretation of itself and its significance, it is also the absolute foundation of subsequent American history. Hawthorne at once elevates the importance of New England in the historical development of the United States (at the expense of other colonies and other regions) whilst he reduces the complexity of colonial culture and theological debate by simply denying that any such sophistication ever existed. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's fiction, figures of Puritan authority act as the colonial Hathornes acted; heretics are represented in Hawthorne's fiction as exceptional individuals, and subversives are always defeated by the overwhelming forces of orthodoxy. Anne Hutchinson, for example, is described as "a woman of extraordinary talent and strong imagination" in Hawthorne's 1830 sketch, and in *The Scarlet Letter* she provides the historical and ethical context for Hester Prynne who walks in "the footsteps of the sainted Ann [sic] Hutchinson."²² Thus, within the context of Nathaniel Hawthorne's representation of orthodox Puritanism, the historical Hathornes are rendered invisible and uncontroversial; fiction takes on the seductive allure of fact, and only the historical examples of individuals like the colonial Pynchons continue to prick the metaphorical flank of Hawthorne's historical self fashioning.

NOTES

1. For the standard account of this controversy, see Norman Holmes Pearson, "The Pynchons and Judge Pyncheon," *Essex Institute Historical Collections*, 100 (October 1964), 235-55.
2. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Letters* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1985), 435-36. Hawthorne to Fields, 23 May 1851.

3. Ibid., 436.
4. Ibid., 443.
5. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *American Notebooks* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1972), 154-55.
6. *Letters*, *ibid.*, 446.
7. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851; London: J. M. Dent, 1995), 20.
8. William Pynchon, *The Diary of William Pynchon of Salem, 1723-1789*, Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society. Reprinted as Fitch Edward Oliver, ed., *The Diary of William Pynchon of Salem: A Picture of Salem Life, Social and Political, a Century Ago* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin & Co./Riverside, 1890), vii-viii.
9. Ibid., 259.
10. Ibid., 175.
11. Ibid., 176.
12. Ibid., 176.
13. John Winthrop, *Winthrop's Journal: History of New England, 1630-1649*, ed. James Kendall Hosmer, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908), 11, 344.
14. Ebenezer Hazard, ed., *Historical Collections; Consisting of State Papers, and other authentic documents; intended as materials for an history of the United States of America* (Philadelphia: T. Dobson, 1794), 1, 142.
15. See the account given by Vernon Loggins, *The Hawthornes: The Story of Seven Generations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1951).
16. Edward Johnson, *Wonder-Working Providence, 1628-1651*, ed. J. Franklin Jameson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910), 237.
17. William Pynchon, *The Meritorious Price of Our Redemption* (1650). Old Library, Magdalene College, Cambridge.
18. *Records of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay*, ed. N. B. Shurtleff. 6 vols. 1628-86 (Boston: 1853-54), II, 177.
19. See *Records of the Colony of New Plymouth in New England*, ed. David Pulsifer (Boston: William White, 1859), ix, 171-80; Hazard, 1, 154-60.
20. *The Pynchon Papers*, 2 vols., ed. Carl Bridenbaugh (Boston: The Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1982, 1985).
21. John Pynchon, *Account Books, c. 1651- c. 1694*, 6 vols. Connecticut Valley Historical Museum,

Springfield, 143-45.

22. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Selected Tales and Sketches*, ed. Michael J. Colacurcio (New York: Viking Penguin, 1987), 15. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850; New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1962), 40.