

“Making Light”: The Lost Letters of Hester Prynne

A CHORAL READING BASED ON
THE SCARLET LETTER

(with apologies to Nathaniel Hawthorne)

by

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DESCRIPTION

A spoken word/recitation piece based on the short story Hester.

CHARACTERS

- Hester Prynne
- Three WOMEN of varying ages
- Narrator

NOTE: Unless otherwise noted, NARRATOR is part of all group-spoken lines.

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A simple set-up: music stands or chairs. NARRATOR enters.

NARRATOR

“Excerpts from the letters of Hester Prynne to her daughter Pearl, now deposited with the Essex Historical Society, and an account, in part, of Hester’s subsequent sojourn among the people of Boston.” I have a certificate of authenticity from the Essex Historical Society itself—

(holds up paper)

—you’ll be glad to know. We hold ourselves to the most scrupulous research here.

"The letters were found by Pearl's son upon her death in 1727 in Tetuán, Morocco, where Pearl had embraced Islam. The small mahogany box containing the letters was the only possession Pearl had, aside from her clothing. Pearl's remains are still in Tetuán and still revered by the inhabitants."

WOMEN enter.

NARRATOR

See—authentic in every detail. What we are about to show is the truth, so, shall we begin? Good. May, in the spring. Dearest Pearl. I have returned.

HESTER
(overlapping)

I have returned.

NARRATOR

The house is no different, only older—like myself.

HESTER
(overlapping)

Like myself.

NARRATOR

I cannot say—

NARRATOR & HESTER

I cannot say—

HESTER

I return with joy or even fondness—

WOMAN 1

So, then, why come back at all?

NARRATOR

The very question you handed me as I boarded the ship. And the only honest answer is—

HESTER & NARRATOR

I do not know why.

NARRATOR

I only know that in the anger and hatred I feel for this place I seek
a flame worth seeing the light of—I still hope to hear him call my
name.

NARRATOR & HESTER

If that flame does not burn in me here—

NARRATOR

It will never burn at all. And so, here I am. This letter must needs
be short—I have—

NARRATOR & HESTER

—much to do—

NARRATOR

—to get this house—

HESTER

And myself—

NARRATOR & HESTER

Aright.

NARRATOR

But I must also tell you that about Boston, not a thing has
changed.

HESTER

They still believe that—

NARRATOR & WOMAN 3

—whenever they [we] are uncomfortable they [we] are doing the
work of God!

WOMAN 1

And their attitude toward women—

WOMAN 2

—has not shifted.

Suggestion: WOMAN 2 is this woman in the following words of NARRATOR

WOMAN 1

Just the other day, a woman was whipped for repulsing the attacks of one—

ALL WOMEN

—John Wedg—

WOMAN 1

—who was deemed not in control of himself because he was provoked by her—

NARRATOR & WOMAN 3

—“attention to lascivious detail”—

WOMAN 1

She had done nothing but wear—

NARRATOR & WOMAN 1

—the looks God gave her—

NARRATOR

—yet, in that God’s name, they crushed her dignity. I am glad I am freed from that hypocrisy—I have no need anymore to suffer—

NARRATOR, HESTER & WOMAN 1

—the false pride of false men.

NARRATOR

I am filled with you, Pearl.

NARRATOR & HESTER

Much love always.

* * * * *

NARRATOR

June. Whatever year it is. Time slips—

NARRATOR & HESTER

—by.

NARRATOR

I visited his grave today. I will try to tell you, with my poor words,
what fire moved through me, what debt I have to this length of
ground which laces me as hard as a sailor's reef. The grave—

WOMAN 1

—is tucked away—

WOMAN 2

—in a corner—

NARRATOR & WOMAN 3

—how fitting—

WOMAN 3

In him, old men found—

WOMAN 1

—lighter hearts, old women—

WOMAN 2

—renewed their nipples, young girls—

WOMEN EXCEPT HESTER

—throbbed with piety.

NARRATOR

But when The Good Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale showed them
himself, they—

NARRATOR & WOMAN 1

—Judas-kissed him and—

WOMAN 2 & WOMAN 3

—ditched him in this grave.

WOMAN 1

Grave—

WOMAN 2

Grave—

WOMAN 3

Grave.

NARRATOR

He haunts my thoughts.

HESTER

Rales in my blood.

NARRATOR

And I can almost sense his taut back and thighs against my hands.

HESTER

No darkness in the passion that created you.

NARRATOR

I barely tasted the man myself, but it was enough.

WOMAN 2 & WOMAN 3

Enough.

WOMAN 1 & NARRATOR

Enough.

HESTER

Enough.

NARRATOR

Pearl, we must never allow any creed to—

WOMAN 3

—call—

WOMAN 1

—our agony—

ALL

—justice.

NARRATOR

Men seem to like such—

ALL
—sicknesses—

NARRATOR
—but let's not drag the women along—we have much better business to do.

WOMAN 1
I miss my grandchild—

WOMAN 2
Is he walking yet?

WOMAN 3
Put him on the right paths early—

NARRATOR
—or he might get religion and be forever crawling.

HESTER
Much love.

* * * * *

NARRATOR
Your packet of letters rained down today—ah, such sweetness to read and re-read them.

NARRATOR & HESTER
My grandson a hellion, you say?

WOMEN EXCEPT HESTER
I wonder where he gets that from?

NARRATOR
I have much to keep me busy here now that I have picked up my needle again.

HESTER
Babies are born—

In chorus.

WOMAN 1
Babies are born—

WOMAN 2
Babies are born—

HESTER
Aristocrats die—

WOMAN 3
Babies are born—

WOMAN 1
Aristocrats die—

HESTER
Brides wed grooms—

WOMAN 2
Aristocrats die—

WOMAN 3
Aristocrats die—

NARRATOR
And my needle eats through thread—

WOMAN 1
Brides wed grooms—

WOMAN 2
Brides wed grooms—

NARRATOR
—like a hog through scraps.

WOMAN 3
Brides wed grooms—

NARRATOR
And though you would hate this, I have made the letter visible
again—not out of—

NARRATOR & HESTER
—shame or deficit but—

WOMAN 1
—to annoy—

WOMAN 2
—and to announce—

WOMAN 3
—and to prick these Puritans—

NARRATOR & HESTER
—between their categories—

NARRATOR
The young ones think I wear the coat-of-arms of a noble woman.

ALL WOMEN
I do—

HESTER
“A” for Arthur—

NARRATOR & HESTER
—and they are the ones I play to.

NARRATOR
Allow me my barbs; I shall soon lose my teeth anyway, though not the willingness to bite.

HESTER
And I will not return to you—

WOMEN
—at least not yet—

NARRATOR
There is still much to do here.

* * * * *

HESTER

A curious, curious thing has taken place.

NARRATOR

One night—a timid knock on the door. I paid it no attention.

WOMAN 1

Then—

WOMAN 2

—again—

WOMAN 3

—the sound—

HESTER

Enter.

NARRATOR

And into the light stepped Goody Johnson—

WOMAN 2

—the deacon's wife—

WOMAN 1

—one who had baited me—

WOMAN 3

—as you walked to the scaffold.

WOMAN 1 & WOMAN 2

Goody Johnson.

NARRATOR & WOMAN 3

May I?

NARRATOR

I need—

WOMAN 3

Help—

WOMAN 1 & WOMAN 2

Your help—

NARRATOR

Stay if you wish, I said—

WOMAN 3

And down I sat—

WOMAN 1

No prelude—

WOMAN 2

For old enemies—

NARRATOR

She said I was the best available.

HESTER

For an hour we mulled it over—

WOMAN 2

Small problem—

WOMAN 1

Really—

NARRATOR

And she left with some—

NARRATOR & WOMAN 3

—happiness bottled in her bosom.

HESTER

Pleasure—

WOMAN 1

And irony—

WOMAN 2

Connected—

WOMAN 3

Shared time with a woman—

NARRATOR

Not embittered or terse—

NARRATOR & HESTER

And I had been of some help.

NARRATOR

My stodgy old convictions about men and women were, for the moment, pleasantly upset. If it had only been Goody Johnson—

WOMEN

But it wasn't—

NARRATOR

Before long other ladies came at all hours to unload their donkey hearts on my wharf.

HESTER

I am suddenly—

WOMAN 3

the Alexandrian library—

ALL

—for the ills of women.

HESTER

And always the same story—

WOMEN

Variations on a theme.

WOMAN 3

My husband's ardor has cooled and his eye licks over the fresh virgins—

NARRATOR

What can I do?

WOMAN 2

I am pregnant, again—it will kill me—

NARRATOR

What can I do?

WOMAN 1

I find my heart does not turn towards men but to women—

ALL

What can I do?

NARRATOR

And I counsel them as best I can—

HESTER

And always dose them with myself.

NARRATOR

Because they always want to know—

WOMEN EXCEPT HESTER

What happened?

HESTER

And I tell them the—

NARRATOR & HESTER

—truth—

NARRATOR

That no laws could have held back the waters of what I felt to be right.

HESTER

I tell them—

WOMAN 1

I should not be ashamed of what I feel—

WOMAN 2

That who I am—

WOMAN 3

Does not come from a book—

NARRATOR

—written by men wandering in a desert—

ALL

—our souls body forth—

NARRATOR

—sensations and intuitions full of wonder and delight and mystery.

WOMAN 1

Most are silent—

WOMAN 2

Some protest—

WOMAN 3

But none stays away for long.

WOMEN EXCEPT HESTER

In our silent ways—

HESTER

—we undermine the foundation.

NARRATOR

This revolutionary talk is hard work, daughter!

HESTER

All I can do is point—

NARRATOR & HESTER

I can't make the journey for them.

WOMAN 3

That is where Christ was wrong.

NARRATOR

Really?

WOMAN 2

He should have stayed a fisherman—

WOMAN 1

Who spoke uncommon good sense—

WOMAN 3

Rather than a Messiah trying to do all the sinning for others.

NARRATOR & HESTER

Really?

WOMAN 3

They have too much fun doing it themselves to give it over to one man.

NARRATOR

Good.

HESTER

Good.

NARRATOR

My best to all.

* * * * *

NARRATOR

June.

HESTER

By the time this missive meets you—

NARRATOR

I will be fresh in the ground—

HESTER

Buried near your father.

WOMAN 1 & WOMAN 2

I hope only hope that heaven—

WOMAN 3 & WOMAN 1
—is not boring—

WOMAN 3 & WOMAN 2
—or run by men—

WOMEN EXCEPT HESTER
—or both.

HESTER
Imminent death gives me leave to make light—

NARRATOR
Make light—now there is an interesting phrase. I wait for his voice to call me.

HESTER
At night, when the moon slices through the sky—

NARRATOR
And the sky's throat bleeds stars—

WOMEN EXCEPT HESTER
I wait for him.

NARRATOR
I want to pass on a philosophy to you, like a compost heap—

WOMAN 3
But only this comes—

NARRATOR
Life is meaningless, even with a God—

WOMAN 3
So it is important to do something, not just mean to do it.

HESTER
My one great sin was having meant to help your father. After that—

ALL WOMEN

Nothing.

HESTER

It has been good being alive—

NARRATOR

But it is not recommended for one's health and recreation.

NARRATOR & WOMEN EXCEPT HESTER

Re-creation!

HESTER

Interesting.

NARRATOR

I wait for him, there is no doubt I wait for him, even though I know that no matter what I convince myself to believe, it all comes down to this clay infused with breath that will wither in a fragile bluster of pain and then be no more. I cannot fool myself. I know he will not be there on the other side. Nothing will be there.

And yet—perhaps all wrong. He may well be there, his face and figure still strong and bracing, and my old woman's body shivers like a lake after a thousand geese leave it at once. Yes, I believe in a total dissolve, but a small part hopes I am wrong. Perhaps he is speaking to me through that, his soft voice breaching my defenses, as it did once before.

The next line is done as a round. Each person begins after the phrase "My old woman's body" and goes in this order: WOMAN 3, WOMAN 2, WOMAN 1, NARRATOR, HESTER.

ALL

My old woman's body shivers like a lake after a thousand geese leave it at once.

NARRATOR

I end the letter here. All my life long you have been my constant companion. I owe you much, daughter, and even though you are not here—

NARRATOR & WOMEN

I do not die alone.

NARRATOR

I give up a claim to this life.

HESTER

Cling to yours and those of your husband and son.

WOMAN 2

Much of life is like smoke from a fire—

WOMAN 1

—a straight column of ascending emptiness—

WOMAN 3

and then nothing at all.

HESTER

Give it meaning.

NARRATOR & HESTER

Give it meaning.

ALL

Give it meaning.

End.