



HUGO PRATT'S AND MILO MANARA'S *INDIAN SUMMER*

An Italian “Source” for *The Scarlet Letter*

Hugo Pratt's and Milo Manara's *Indian Summer* as a source for *The Scarlet Letter*? Let me be honest: unfortunately, I have not discovered a hitherto unknown Italian manuscript that might displace surveyor Jonathan Pue's “small package, carefully done up in a piece of ancient yellow parchment” from its legendary status (Hawthorne, 1991: 41). There is, in other words, no ‘source,’ no Italian story—whether published or unpublished—that served as inspiration for Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. On the other hand, Pue's papers, too, never existed, being only one of the many imaginary “newly found” manuscripts that writers—from antiquity to postmodernity—have created “in order to legitimize their work” (Farnetti, 2006: 22). In a way, the creators of the Italian graphic novel *Tutto ricominciò con un'estate indiana* (translated into English as *Indian Summer*) are playing the same sort of game. They too wish to legitimize their work—“to demonstrate its authenticity or at least dissimulate its inauthenticity” (Farnetti, 2006: 22)—by invoking, in a reversal of the usual move, the authority of the published text in order to sustain not only their own work's veracity but, perhaps most importantly, its cultural value. The graphic novel under discussion, written by Hugo Pratt (Italy's most famous graphic novelist, and arguably one of the most famous worldwide) and illustrated by Milo Manara (only slightly less known, perhaps), is extremely well-researched historically. However, it is a story invented by Pratt and not based—as he claims in his conclusion, in a rather explicit imitation of Hawthorne's discovery in “The Custom House”—

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on a manuscript left behind by an Italian by the name of Cosentino. This Cosentino, according to Pratt, served as secretary of a number of Puritan ministers and, after enjoying “a special relation with Anne Hutchinson” in his old age was supposedly even involved in the Salem witchcraft trials (Pratt and Manara, 2013: 155).¹ Pratt argues that his and Manara’s story is a faithful rendition of Cosentino’s document, still available in the Salem library. Even though Pratt stops short of claiming that Hawthorne, too, must have perused the Cosentino manuscript, the numerous traces of *The Scarlet Letter* disseminated throughout *Indian Summer*, along with the explicit mention of Hawthorne’s work in the final pages of the graphic novel, leave no doubt as to what Pratt’s strategy is. He wishes the reader—or, at least, the well-read reader—to situate the story told by him and “splendidly illustrated” (Pratt’s own words) by Manara, against the backdrop of Hawthorne’s classic. I will return to this point in my final remarks. First, however, a few words to introduce the two authors of *Indian Summer*.

Inducted in 2005 into the Will Eisner Award Hall of Fame, and best known for his 1967 masterpiece *Una ballata del mare salato* (translated into English as *Ballad of the Salt Sea*), featuring his most famous character, Corto Maltese, Hugo Pratt dominated the Italian comic book scene for decades. He also achieved recognition abroad, especially in France and Germany, as well as in the English-speaking world. Seeing his talent recognized in the US, in particular, must have pleased him immensely, considering that American literature and culture have always held a special place in Pratt’s personal and professional life. Besides Robert Louis Stevenson and Joseph Conrad, Pratt cites James Oliver Curwood, Zane Grey, James Fenimore Cooper, Herman Melville, and Jack London as major influences, along with cartoonists Lyman Young, Will Eisner, and Milton Caniff (“Hugo Pratt”). Artist and comic book writer Milo Manara also enjoys celebrity status both in Italy and abroad, especially in France, though in his case his reputation is somewhat controversial. In the summer of 2014, he made headline news, at least in Italy, due to his cover

1 All references are to the Italian edition I have used. Translations into English are mine, unless otherwise indicated. All reproductions by kind permission of the Author of the images. I wish to thank Masturah Alatas for discussing at length with me all the major points of this essay, and for her careful editing of the text.

illustration for the upcoming first issue of Marvel Comics' *Spider-Woman* (see fig. 1). As reported in *The Guardian*, the complaint was that his drawing blatantly sexualizes Spider-Woman and reinforces the notion that "superhero comics are for horny men only" (Flood, 2014). On the other hand, many noted that Marvel must have known what they were going to get. Manara—who is famous for having collaborated not only with Pratt but with Federico Fellini and other major artists like Neil Gaiman and Alejandro Jodorowsky, among others—has a reputation for drawing women in various states of undress, and often portrays both women and men engaging in explicit sexual acts. His eroticism is both celebrated for its masterful sensuality and condemned as sexist. Having said that, I should add that the graphic novel under discussion is considered unanimously one of the best both Manara and Pratt have ever created.



Fig. 1. Milo Manara's controversial cover for Marvel Comics' new *Spider-Woman* series.

Tutto ricominciò con un'estate indiana was originally serialized in Pratt's own magazine *Corto Maltese* between 1983 and 1985. It has been recently republished and translated into English by Dark Horse Comics in Volume 1 of *The Manara Library*, with the title *Indian Summer*, though the literal translation would have been "Everything began again with an Indian summer." Most of the story takes place in 1630s Puritan New England, and both Pratt and Manara have stated

in interviews that Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter* was a major influence (though, as I already noted, the graphic novel itself makes a different claim). Let me state at the outset, however, that I do not wish to suggest that *Indian Summer* may be considered in any sense an *adaptation* of Hawthorne's work. As Linda Hutcheon has noted, to count as such, an adaptation's intertextual engagements with the source text must be "extended ones, not passing allusions" (Hutcheon, 2013: 21). One might say—resorting to Noam Chomsky's well-known distinction between "rule-governed"

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and “rule-changing creativity”—that an adaptation must follow a set of basic rules making the presence of the original text felt for most of the narration, as opposed to one where elements of the former are freely lifted and recombined in the new text, regardless of the original’s storyline. The latter is exactly what happens with *Indian Summer*. The graphic novel tells a story so different from Hawthorne’s that, hoax aside, no one would mistake it either as an adaptation nor much less as the graphic version of a “source” for *The Scarlet Letter*. However, by the same token, no careful reader of Hawthorne would miss what Hutcheon, in her discussion of adaptation as more than an “extensive, particular transcoding,” identifies as “creative reinterpretation and palimpsestic intertextuality” (Hutcheon, 2013: 22). Pratt and Manara use Hawthorne’s novel literally as a palimpsest—they may be said to scrape the original text off the page to write on to it a whole new story so that the previous text is perceptible, as it were, the way a faded print is when a cloth is held against the backlight.

Notwithstanding the significant and manifold differences between the two stories, I believe it can be argued that not only some of Pratt’s and Manara’s characters are very liberal, creative reinventions of Hawthorne’s figures—they might be seen as spin-offs of Hawthorne’s narrative—but in many ways *Indian Summer* is also thematically close to *The Scarlet Letter*. Both tales feature dominant, though largely cowardly and perverse, male figures, intent on subjugating courageous, resourceful, rebellious women. More generally, Pratt’s and Manara’s story brings to the fore two marginalized or perhaps downright repressed elements in Hawthorne’s romance. The first one is, of course, the sexual one. The second is the American Indian presence.

Though I have just listed them as separate, one might wish to argue that these two aspects of Hawthorne’s narrative are to a significant degree one and the same. As Tracy Fessenden, Nicholas Radel, and Magdalena Zaborowska write in their introduction to *The Puritan Origins of American Sex*, “Although far outnumbering the colonists in the environs of seventeenth-century Massachusetts Bay, Native Americans are mere shadows and ghosts in *The Scarlet Letter*, which links their presence outside

the Christian settler community to Hester's transgressive sexuality" (Fessenden et al., 2001: 9). *Indian Summer* returns Indians (vaguely identified as belonging to Squando's tribe) to their rightful place as protagonists rather than extras of early American history, and this, I believe, should be considered as a narrative move of no small merit (see fig 2).²



Fig. 2. Manara's Indians

Without romanticizing them—there are several indications, for example, that Native American treatment of women could be as brutal as the colonists'—and by painting them as complex human beings, *Indian Summer* shows the actual interconnection of the white and red worlds. Though the story is largely one of Indian warfare, there are many indications that the two communities could exist in a state of balance, profitable for both, at least until the fateful Indian summer in which “everything began again.”³ However, when it comes to the way Pratt and Manara reinvent “Hester's transgressive sexuality”—not to mention how they reinterpret the Puritan clergy's persecution of Hester—I assume many would find the graphic novel disturbing and sexist, though I hope

2 Pratt spells the name “Squando” throughout the text. The reference is unmistakably to the historical Squanto. I have never seen the name spelled with a “d” anywhere else, but I assume it is Pratt's way of suggesting to Italians the English pronunciation of the word.

3 There is a nice irony in the way the Indian braves are represented in the story. They often appear as young loafers, “hanging out” in the wilderness or near the beach (see fig. 2 above), and often they remark jokingly about their “warrior” status. Pratt and Manara, in striving for historical accuracy, render the Indians fully human.

most readers would also grant that the truly admirable figures of the book are Abigail Lewis and her daughter Phillis, whom I see as creative reinventions of Hester and Pearl, respectively. But before analyzing these two figures and their sufferings in more detail, let me say something about Manara's artwork.

Imagine that one sunny day beautiful Hester would take to the woods, and, to let Hawthorne himself speak, due to "the exhilarating effect [...] of breathing the wild, free atmosphere of an unredeemed, unchristianized, lawless region" (Hawthorne, 1991: 159), she were to draw up her skirts and step into a pool to freshen up a bit. Or imagine that, rather than being shipped off to Europe, in one of the novel's less felicitous moments, Pearl remained in America to develop her impish, "nymph-child" nature, roaming in the woods that were her "playmate" (Hawthorne, 1991: 161), and on a hot day she were to dip into her favorite brook to cool off. Would either of them look like the young woman drawn by Manara for the cover of one of the book's many Italian editions (see fig. 3)? The woman portrayed as she walks into the water, with bare legs and a generous décolleté is Phillis (more on her in a moment), and she may be said to typify Manara's provocative art of drawing beautiful women within eroticized contexts. In particular, what is worth noting is the relation this drawing sets up between the Indian coming out of the woods and the woman. At one level, the scene is in line with several other tables in the book, which do not simply present us with sexy women—scantly dressed or completely undressed—but also explicitly construct these beauties as objects of a male gaze. This has a somewhat unsettling effect. To the extent that the reader concentrates her vision on what the drawing constructs as the object of sexual attraction, her gaze may be considered as overlapping, more or less, with that of the onlooker in the picture, and, depending on the context, this may have disturbing implications, as we shall see shortly.⁴

4 I realize that it may be confusing to follow the by now well-established convention of using the female pronoun and possessive adjective to identify the general reader, after stating that the drawings construct women as objects of a *male* gaze. However, while I follow Laura Mulvey's well-known identification of woman as the subject-to-be-looked-at, I also wish to resist seeing the reader of Manara's drawings as exclusively male.

Even in this case, indeed, one might say that the drawing is ambiguous in its erotic implications. The grinning Indian is visibly aroused, and considering that the novel opens with a rape scene, there is a hint that visual pleasure may be on a continuum with outright physical violence—a point that, as we shall see, is raised more than once in the novel. On the other hand, Phillis is caught in the motion of turning her pretty face around. She is aware of being watched and it is unclear from her expression whether she is alarmed or not. She may be a bit startled, but one could also say that she is at home in the woods as much as the Indian is—an interpretation that the reading of the novel supports—and that the erotic tension generated by the scene does not necessarily suggest violence but some sort of barely perceptible complicity.



Fig. 3. Milo Manara's cover for *Tutto ricominciò con un'estate indiana* (Panini Comics 2013 edition)

Most importantly, however, in terms of *Indian Summer's* relation to *The Scarlet Letter*, I wish to suggest that in this drawing Manara—whether consciously or unconsciously I cannot tell—registers in his own, unique, particular style the way Hawthorne's narrative aligns Hester's (and—to a lesser extent—Pearl's) “freedom” to that of “the wild Indian in the woods.” To my mind, this cover may be read as Manara's visualization

of one of the most celebrated passages in Hawthorne's novel, where the narrator muses on Hester's mental and moral condition after years of being both “estranged” and “outlawed” from the settlers' community, precisely by resorting to a set of vivid images.

She had wandered, without rule or guidance, in a moral wilderness, as vast, as intricate, and shadowy as the untamed forest [...]. Her intellect and heart had their home, as it were, in desert places, where she roamed as freely as the wild Indian in his woods. For years past she had looked from this estranged point of view at human institutions, and whatever priests or legislators had established; criticising all with hardly more reverence than the Indian would feel for the clerical band, the judicial robe,

the pillory, the gallows, the fireside, or the church. The tendency of her fate and fortunes had been to set her free. The scarlet letter was her passport into regions where other women dared not tread. Shame, Despair, Solitude! These had been her teachers—stern and wild ones—and they had made her strong, but taught her much amiss. (Hawthorne, 1991: 157)

Even though the woman Manara portrays is not Abigail (the character who bears the closest resemblance to Hester) but her daughter Phillis, the drawing reflects the way in which Pratt's script literalizes and narrativizes what Hawthorne had left at a purely symbolic level. While Hester in *The Scarlet Letter* is only metaphorically aligned with the wilderness and the world of the Indian, Pratt and Manara turn metaphor into reality by positioning not only Abigail but also the whole Lewis family on the border between white and Indian societies. Manara, moreover, elaborates the transgressive quality of Hester's sexuality in an explicitly erotic direction, though I would not consider this a violation of the original text. Manara's cover is to a large extent a legitimate transcoding of the erotic connotation of Hawthorne's "wildness" and "wilderness," which have been often commented upon by critics, and which are evident in both *The Scarlet Letter* and other stories, beginning of course with the highly sexually charged atmosphere of a tale like "Young Goodman Brown."

While thematically and historically the two narratives cover a somewhat similar territory, in terms of plot, differences between *The Scarlet Letter* and *Indian Summer* are substantial. Pratt's and Manara's story opens with the rape of a young white woman by two members of Squando's tribe, both of whom are killed by the young colonist Abner as they bathe in the sea after the violence. Abner is the son of Abigail Lewis, also known to the Indians as "the devil woman," who lives with her two sons, one daughter, and an adopted child in a house by the sea (fig. 4), after having been expelled from the nearby Puritan villages of historical Salem and fictional New Canaan. She is the Hester avatar: after the horrible sufferings inflicted on her by both the elder and the younger reverend Black—she too, like Hester, has met the Black man!—she is eventually branded with an *L* on her cheek (fig. 5), the *L* standing

for Lilith, Adam's fabled, first rebellious wife, and forced to leave the community.⁵



Fig. 4. The Lewis' log cabin, between white and Indian villages



Fig. 5. Abigail Lewis

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In a long flashback section, we discover that, while Abner is the son of Elder Black who repeatedly raped Abigail, her daughter Phillis is the child of the younger Pilgrim Black, who also abused her mother in all sorts of ways. Elijah, the elder son, is the only offspring of a true love story. Abigail conceived him after meeting a French Huguenot hunter, who disappears well before the birth of his son. Abner's revengeful killing of the Indian rapists triggers a war with the Natives that ends in the destruction of New Canaan. In the final panels, Phillis—often criticized for her loose sexual mores—in a heroic (if a touch melodramatic) display of courage and deep care for others, makes a desper-

5 As is well known, Hawthorne most likely took the surname Prynne from William Prynne, the Puritan author and political figure persecuted by Archbishop Laud, who was fire-branded with the letters S and L, as a *Seditious Libeller*.

ate run to bring a barrel of gunpowder to a house under siege, only to be shot down by an Indian. She is buried in the forest, in a common grave with the Indian Natan, a son of Squando who grew up with the Lewis children and who did his best to protect the Lewis family from his fellow tribesmen's thirst for revenge. The ending of the graphic novel thus registers the tragic falling apart of the dream of inter-ethnic understanding and cultural hybridity that the Lewis family—until the story's fateful Indian summer—in several ways embodied. At the same time, the story resists any Manichean logic, as the events cannot be contained either in a good colonists versus savage Indians plot or in its automatic reversal, whereby victimized noble Indians clash with white savages (to use a term Benjamin Franklin once employed).⁶ Both groups are at once victims and aggressors, and both harbor noble as well as ignoble characters. One might argue that the greatest evil described in the narrative, and the root cause of much of the violence in the colony, lies with the hypocrisy and the two-faced attitude, especially in sexual matters, of the Puritan clergy. Yet, as we shall see, the last image of the story, carrying a kind of distorted echo of Hawthorne's romance, may be read as a call to forgive even what a reader has identified as “the Machiavellian monster” of the graphic novel (Comic Booked Guest Writer, 2016).⁷ All in all, regardless of the rather different plots, *Indian Summer* shares with *The Scarlet Letter* a sense of the deep ambiguity not only of the historical and political world of colonial America, but of its connection to the more universal themes of love, passion, justice, and truth.

The Pratt and Manara character that owes most to Hawthorne's text is Abigail Lewis. Besides living in a marginal log cabin by the sea and being branded with a sign of infamy and shame, she resembles Hester also in other ways. She cares for the poor

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6 See Franklin's *Narrative of the Late Massacres in Lancaster County of a Number of Indians, Friends of this Province, by Persons Unknown* (1764). One must note, however, that the opening rape scene seems to suggest that the first attacker is “the Dutchman,” a blond “Indian” who is most likely a white man of Dutch origin who has “gone Native.”

7 I cannot agree, however, with the notion that Pilgrim Black masterminded the assault on his niece. Other than the fact that he later enjoys it as pornographic fantasy (see below), I can find no sign of this in the graphic novel.

and the desperate, she provides counsel to the afflicted, she raises her children with no man's help, and she is associated not only symbolically with the wild Indians—she actually lives with them for a while and constantly relies on their help. Most importantly, she is the victim of patriarchal power, as is, in many ways, her daughter Phillis, whom we may consider to be a psychologically, sexually, and emotionally developed Pearl. Besides being herself the unacknowledged daughter of a Puritan minister, who refuses to face up (very much like Dimmesdale) to his fatherly responsibilities, Phillis enjoys (like Pearl) running wild in the woods. There, also like Hester's daughter, she loves to look at her features reflected in the brook—though, to be fair, she might “flirt” with something more than her image (see fig. 6)—as well as to collect herbs, flowers, and berries (Hawthorne, 1991: 163). In short, one might well say of Phillis, too, that “the mother-forest, and these wild things which it nourished, all recognized a kindred wilderness in the human child” (Hawthorne, 1991: 161). This feeling is captured by Manara in tables infusing an almost Disneyan quality in the wild natural world surrounding Phillis, whose sensuality may be far from the *Snow White* of 1937, but less so from the *Pocahontas* of 1995.



Fig. 6. Phillis in the woods

One may like or dislike the way in which Manara transmogrifies the sense of sexual freedom Hawthorne associates with the wilderness, but there can be hardly any question that the forest in *The Scarlet Letter* is a place of sin as much as one of erotic disclosure. It is in the woods that, in a famous chapter, Hester takes off

the formal cap that confined her hair, and down it fell upon her shoulders, dark and rich, with at once a shadow and a light in its abundance, and imparting the charm of softness to her features. There played around her mouth, and beamed out of her eyes, a radiant and tender smile, that seemed gushing from the very heart of womanhood. A crimson flush was glowing on her cheek, that had been long so pale. Her sex, her youth, and the whole richness of her beauty, came back from what men call the irrevocable past, and clustered themselves with her maiden hope, and a happiness before unknown, within the magic circle of this hour. (Hawthorne, 1991: 159-160)

In light of the fact that women are, in *Indian Summer* as much as in *The Scarlet Letter*, always seen as subject to patriarchal authority, it is not surprising that Phillis would pursue a sense of sensual gratification in the forest, the only place where, at least momentarily, she can escape masculine control.

Phillis' self-reliant attitude is also visible in another feature she shares with Pearl. Hawthorne describes Hester's daughter as a child who, even at age three, "could have borne a fair examination in the New England Primer, or the first column of the Westminster Catechisms, although unacquainted with the outward form of either of those celebrated works" (Hawthorne, 1991: 97). Yet, when asked by Governor Bellingham who "made" her, she chooses to reply, "that she had not been made at all, but had been plucked by her mother off the bush of wild roses that grew by the prison-door" (Hawthorne, 1991: 97). Phillis confronts the religious wisdom of New Canaan with an equally bold mindset, though in her case, rather than rejecting catechism in favor of pagan lore, she invokes the Bible itself in defense of her views on sexual relations among family members. Accused of incestuous behavior, she replies, "The sacred texts are replete with incestuous persons. Anah, the descendant of Esau, was the son of his father's mother [...]. So you see, even the Scrip-

tures speak of forbidden love" (Pratta and Manara, 2013: 109).⁸ Her spirited defense of her views (and implicitly of her own quite liberal sexual mores) is consistent with her Pearl-like alternation of both charming and aggressive moods: Phillis can be as sweet as she can be full of rage. Moreover, though "naughty" in ways that would have deeply shocked Hawthorne, Phillis too acutely desires her father to recognize her. She is well aware of the horribly lascivious nature of Pilgrim Black, and yet even proud Phillis, who shortly before had threatened the reverend with an axe when he had called her a sinner (a literal case of the pot calling the kettle Black!), feels pity for her biological father when an Indian arrow strikes him in the shoulder. The graphic novel may not describe the ambiguous relation that Pearl entertains with Dimmesdale with the same subtlety, but on the other hand, it forcefully throws into relief both the daughter's sense of loss and the ruthlessness of the father's denial of her.

The various intertextual allusions to Hawthorne's work I have mentioned so far must be placed against a narrative interest shared by both *Indian Summer* and *The Scarlet Letter*. Both works wish to call attention, in their own different ways, to the oppression of women in Puritan New England. This thematic angle is rather unusual in the Italian comics tradition of Western adventure, which not only has usually focused on the male hero, but also has reserved little or no room for female figures, even in ancillary roles. The centrality of this concern in *Indian Summer* is testified by the way Pratt and Manara revisit a historical figure whose story I have never seen discussed in relation to Hawthorne's work—the story of Dorothy Talbye. According to the available historical record, Talbye, originally a respected member of the Salem church, changed into a delusional, aggressive woman, who turned violent against her children and her husband, and eventually broke the neck of her daughter Difficult. At her trial, she claimed God instructed her to do so, though Winthrop, who wrote about this incident in his *Journal*, obviously thought she was under demonic possession. Interestingly enough, however, Winthrop also dutifully took note of the fact that Dorothy claimed she had to kill her

8 Here I am quoting from the published English translation for Dark Horse Comics, as quoted in Starr.

three-year-old daughter because that was the only way to spare her “from future misery” such as she herself had suffered (Winthrop, 1908: 283). There is, therefore, some historical basis for making of Talbye a sort of feminist heroine, however problematic.⁹ In *Indian Summer*, she is described as a woman who “committed the crime of believing that the rights of women are equal to those of men” (Manara and Pratt, 2011: 98). It is no accident that Talbye turns out to be the only woman willing to befriend Abigail after she is ostracized for having two children out of wedlock, and in fact Abigail ends up being branded with an *L* following Talbye’s trial and execution, precisely on account of being close to her. Content-wise, there can be no question that *Indian Summer* wishes to denounce the oppression and exploitation of women in early seventeenth-century New England. However, many readers might argue that Pratt’s story, and especially Manara’s visual rendering of the events, contradict this self-evident purpose by exploiting women’s bodies both visually and conceptually.

For example, when Abigail narrates in flashback the brutal sexual assaults she suffered at the hands of the two Black men of the tale—and this applies as well to other scenes of sexual subjugation in the novel—Manara’s drawings still present the woman’s body in intentionally tantalizing ways. Rather than trying to hide this representational and ideological contradiction, the narrative may be said to explicitly call attention to it. One way the text does this is through the troubling character of the young Jeremiah Lewis, Abigail’s adopted son. Jeremiah gets visibly excited anytime he hears a story featuring sex and violence. His response is not so much immature as bordering on the pathological, as for example when he gets aroused on hearing about the rape of Pilgrim Black’s niece, or even the story of her own adoptive mother’s sexual enslavement to the Blacks. Indeed, Jeremiah’s sexual arousal prefigures Black’s own. When the depraved minister abuses his niece, he asks her to give him the full details of her rape, thus turning tragedy into sexual fantasy. At least one reader finds

9 In *Beloved*, of course, Toni Morrison refers to a remarkably similar historical incident: that of Margaret Garner, who, in 1856 escaped from slavery in Kentucky and murdered her child when slave catchers caught up with her in Ohio.

all this both disturbing and revealing, as it would actually expose “the true face of the reader who enjoys Manara’s exact detailing of sexual violence and gratuitous slaughter” (Comic Booked Guest Writer, 2016).

However, this alignment between the reader and the lascivious reverend may be read also in a less deterministic way. Let us consider what many would find one of the most offensive and troubling tables in the novel, one in which Manara emphasizes the hypocrisy of the prelate on the one hand, while on the other he titillates the reader by exposing the subjugated female body after which Pilgrim Black lusts (fig. 7).



Fig. 7. Abigail abused by Pilgrim Black

As Jason Michelitch has intelligently noted, this and other moments in the story, “while described as abominable by the text, are depicted with a heavy dose of erotic allure” (Michelitch, 2012). Michelitch acknowledges that this is problematic, but he also goes on to add that, “There is an upfrontness to the eroticism in *Indian Summer* that borders on confrontational with the reader. It demands recognition, and it demands an effort of reading that the casual sexism of mainstream comics does not” (Michelitch, 2012). In particular, when reading a panel like the one I have just called attention to, to the extent that the reader might be excited

by the woman's nakedness, she would be sharing the depraved minister's point of view. As Michelitch concludes,

Manara's erotic imagery implicates the reader in the abominable acts on display through arousal [...] and the combination of arousal and revulsion forces the reader to leave behind simplistic moral judgments and engage critically with the text, with questions such as: Why is this arousing when it is also abhorrent? Is it okay to be aroused by fictionalized sexual violence? Is a denial of this arousal moral, or complicit with the repression of the Puritan minister in the story, who claims to despise all sexual impulses yet acts on all of his basest whims? (Michelitch, 2012)

What makes asking these questions possible is, I think, the fact that, after all, as readers, we do not simply look at what Pilgrim Black looks at, even though the table situates the point of view of the reader behind the minister's back. As readers, we also look at someone looking, and since the gazer in the table is also an immoral, false, and violent man, we have the opportunity to question what it means to look at such representations of sex and violence.

I am aware that these are complicated and thorny issues, which in manifold ways intersect the long and multi-faceted discussion concerning the representation and appropriation of the female body in literature, the arts, and especially the cinema. In particular, the debates about eroticism and pornography that have engaged many feminist scholars over the last two or three decades have complicated Laura Mulvey's seminal insights about the construction of woman as either fetish or source of voyeuristic pleasure by focusing on the "contradictions" and "tensions" of texts formerly perceived as blatantly sexist and pornographic. This is not the place to return to these debates, nor would I be qualified to intervene in any significant way on their merits. I can only observe that *Indian Summer* is a text which, to quote Michelitch again, "forces a conversation with the reader over the uncomfortable confluence of desire and violence" (Michelitch, 2012). Given the comparative scope of this essay, however, my major concern is not to pass judgment on the sexual politics of Pratt's and Manara's graphic novel. What is more important for my purposes is to ask whether we may find any legitimacy in the authors' claim that their emphasis on sex and sexual perversion is related to, if not directly inspired by,

the events narrated in *The Scarlet Letter*. As an insightful reader has noted, one could argue that, “the primary concern of *Indian Summer* is male ownership over females. Through physical force, religious persecution, and genuine love, every prominent female within the narrative is subject to male ownership in one form or another, in life and death” (Starr, 2012). Hence, what Shari Benstock has written about *The Scarlet Letter*—that it “focuses attention on representations of womanhood, with special emphasis on Puritan efforts to regulate female sexuality within religious, legal, and economic structures” (Benstock, 1991: 290)—could be said also of *Indian Summer*. Of course, we must also observe that, while Hawthorne constructs the Puritan “regulation” of sexuality mostly as repression, Pratt and Manara believe that public condemnation of illicit sex can be a cover-up for the most vicious exploitation of women’s bodies. However, we must wonder whether, at bottom, Dimmesdale’s outlook is substantially different from that of the graphic novel’s lascivious ministers. As several critics have remarked, unlike Hester, Dimmesdale is utterly incapable of seeing what he and Hester did in the forest as anything other than evil. Dimmesdale’s response to sin may be read as a violent rejection of his sexual impulses—a denial that constructs sex itself as something dangerous, lewd, and perverted by default. It is no accident that in the two instances in which, as Nina Baym has written, “the minister’s conscious mind becomes a passive receiver for images and impulses projected from lower mental depths” (Baym, 1986: 76), his mind becomes the theater of forbidden sexual fantasies. In the night-time hallucination he experiences on the scaffold in Chapter 12, he dreams of giving scandal to the young virgins of his parish who had made a shrine for him “in their white bosoms; which, now, by the by, in their hurry and confusion, they would scantily have given time to cover with their kerchiefs” (Hawthorne, 1991: 124–125). To quote Baym again, “his suppressed sexuality turns the young women of his parish into half-clothed groupies” (Baym, 1986: 77). Later on, as he returns from the forest after meeting Hester and having entertained the possibility of rebellion, Dimmesdale feels an urge, “to do some strange, wild, wicked thing or other, with a sense that it would be at once involuntary and intentional; in spite of himself,

yet growing out of a profounder self than that which opposed the impulse” (Hawthorne, 1991: 169–170). In particular, he is seized by the desire to make a lewd proposal to a young and attractive parishioner. In short, the main difference between Dimmesdale and the Blacks lies in the fact that, while the former manages somehow to suppress his dark impulses, the latter act them out.¹⁰ However, they do so privately, while continuing all along to enjoy among the community a reputation as virtuous men, just the way Dimmesdale does. Moreover, one could argue that, by continuing to abuse Abigail over an extended period of time, the elder and junior Black provide an objective correlative of what, in Dimmesdale’s case, is a more abstract, though no less severe, reiteration of his sin due to his lack of courage in confessing it.

If one wished to insist on establishing a stronger correlation between *Indian Summer* and *The Scarlet Letter* than the one I am arguing for here, I suppose one might see the transition from Dimmesdale’s mental self-torturing to sensationalist, pornographic story as obeying the needs of an inter-semiotic transposition from one sign-system to another. Personally, I think it is safer to trust Pratt and Manara themselves when they state that their story’s “atmosphere” owes something to *The Scarlet Letter*, but it was also influenced by several other texts, both historical (Hubbard’s *Narratives of the Indian Wars*, for example) and fictional (Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans*, but also the now largely, and perhaps undeservedly, forgotten frontier novels of James Curwood). The recourse to these latter sources was most probably Pratt’s way of coming to terms with what, in a discussion of the 1995 filmic “adaptation” of *The Scarlet Letter*, Sacvan Bercovitch identifies as “a problem in the novel.” The “problem” is that, in the novel,

10 Pratt’s choice to call the villains of the story “Black” is quite likely indebted to Hawthorne’s own association of Dimmesdale with the “Black Man.” In *The Scarlet Letter*, the term Black Man is usually applied either to the devil or to the demonic Roger Chillingworth, but in the Chapter “A Forest Walk,” both Pearl and Hester use it in reference to Dimmesdale. Indeed, Hester, implicitly referring to her forbidden sexual encounter with Dimmesdale, declares, “Once in my life I met the Black Man! [...] This scarlet letter is his mark!” (148).

[...] nothing *happens*. Confined as they are by their Puritan setting, Hawthorne's characters think and feel; love, hate, interpret, and speculate, but they rarely *do* anything. The film solves that problem with the customary stand-bys, sex and violence: a massacre, a wife-beating, a murder, graphic physical torture, equally graphic self-mutilation, a scalping, a suicide, an attempted rape, several even more detailed love-scenes, and (to parallel the early swimming episode)¹¹ a long bathing scene, featuring Demi Moore attended by her black Caribbean companion, Mituba. (Bercovitch, 1996)

Even though—let me repeat it one more time—*Indian Summer* never wished to be perceived as an adaptation of *The Scarlet Letter*, nearly all the sensationalist material mentioned by Bercovitch is also featured in Pratt's and Manara's narrative. There are minor differences, of course. There are no suicides in *Indian Summer*, for example, and indeed, for all the sexiness of many of its tables, no love scenes. We have, however, not one murder, but a whole war, with plenty of killing, scalping, and cruelty.

For all that, I would argue that Roland Joffé's movie, "freely adapted from Nathaniel Hawthorne," as the screen credits dutifully acknowledge, tells a very different kind of story from that of *Indian Summer* (Joffé, 1995). To be sure, both narratives cast, for the most part, a decidedly unfavorable light on a Puritan clergy intent on victimizing and vilifying (in different ways) both Abigail and Hester (and women in general). Yet, while as Bercovitch notes, "The movie Puritans are an incipiently progressive community under an oppressive regime, a society at odds with its own most liberal possibilities," *Indian Summer* holds no hope of a return to the pre-existing balance between white and Native communities (Bercovitch, 1996). The burning down of the Lewis household, liminally situated between white and Indian spaces, marks the end of any utopia. Joffé's film culminates in a happy ending, one in which "the flight to freedom of self-reliant individuals" is actualized as Hester, Arthur, and Pearl ride off towards the new promised land (Bercovitch, 1996). *Indian Summer* ends in tragedy. Not only is the war not over by the story's end, but in the final pages, we also witness two deaths we feel to be particularly unjust. One, as mentioned above, is that of Phillis, as she courageously

11 In which Hester peeps through the bushes at Arthur bathing in the nude.

does what others—and especially men—are afraid to attempt. The second is the murder of Natan, Squando's son, who had grown up with Elijah Lewis and continued to be his close friend and hunting partner until the war broke out, and who does his best to get the Lewis family out of harm's way. One may find these deaths more melodramatic than tragic. Phillis and Natan are no graphic-novel equivalents of Cleopatra or Oedipus, but they are not, by any means, akin to the stereotypical "good guys" played by Demi Moore and Gary Oldman in Joffé's film. Both Phillis and Natan are complex characters with good hearts who are also contradictory and self-divided, at least from the reader's perspective. Natan, like the other Indians, believes in revenge, and while he saves the lives of both Abner and Sheva Black (with whom Abner is in love), he murders and scalps Pilgrim Black before his niece's eyes. Phillis, on her part, may be disliked for her excessively liberal (some would call them "loose") sexual mores, but what makes her interesting is the fraught relation she entertains with her morally abominable father. She appears ultimately incapable of hating the man who is, after all, largely responsible for her family's ostracization.

I said earlier that both *The Scarlet Letter* and *Indian Summer* focus on the lives of women oppressed by the rigidity of patriarchal institutions. Yet I must qualify that statement by adding that Hawthorne's Hester is not simply a victim but an adulteress as well, both in the eyes of the community and in those of the author. Moreover, by refusing to disclose the name of the man she sinned with, she shares with Dimmesdale and Chillingworth a certain degree of hypocrisy. Likewise, Dimmesdale is no unreconstructed coward but a self-tortured and contradictory figure. Even Chillingworth, the most villainous character in the tale, turns out to be Pearl's benefactor and even his malice, in Hawthorne's own words, may in the end amount to a form of "golden love" (Hawthorne, 1991: 199). Pratt's and Manara's characters are not equally well rounded and subtle, but neither are they uncomplicated figures. Abigail is in no way responsible for her sexual enslavement—she is a servant and an orphan, and because of her class position (quite different from Hester's), she has no chance of escaping from the brutality heaped upon her. Like Hester, however, she keeps her secret,

perhaps out of shame and, perhaps, also to protect her children. It is only under the tragic circumstances of all-out war that she reveals what has befallen her to the rest of the family. Even the arch-villains of the story show signs of ambiguity. The elder Black, Abigail narrates, would first beat and rape her, and force her to “confess these sins even as he committed them” (Pratt and Manara, 2013: 94). The tables that represent such violence, moreover, indicate “a fetish for sexually charged confessionals which also seems to have been passed on to his son, Reverend Black” (Starr, 2012). In short, the Blacks are no mere hypocrites: they also engage in a form of (figural) self-beating that has some resemblance to the paradoxical situation of Dimmesdale’s, who, though “gnawed and tortured by some black trouble of the soul [...] had achieved a brilliant popularity in his sacred office” (Hawthorne, 1991: 117). In sum, though one could easily condemn Pratt for having injected—like Joffé with his film—a good deal of sensational material in the story, and Manara for having produced “bracingly bawdy art” (Michelitch, 2012), the world of *Indian Summer* is similar to that *The Scarlet Letter* in its rejection of any simple-minded reading of both history and human relations.

In a comment on the famous first paragraph of the novel, Bercovitch argues that in Hawthorne’s view “The immigrants [...] were right to begin their enterprise by ‘allotting a portion of the virgin soil’ to a cemetery and a prison [...]. Mortality and imperfection are the limitations we must confront, and the sooner the better, if we aspire to the good society” (Bercovitch, 1996). Even though it would be foolish to maintain that Pratt and Manara meant their story as an inquiry into the national origins of the United States of America, mortality and imperfection are very much a part of the tale they tell. There is an abiding sense of loss and regret pervading the entire narrative and, in particular, its bitterly ironic conclusion. A teenage militiaman shoots Natan in the back, the Indian who most cares for the Lewises, when the attackers have decided to stop for the day. Phillis, arguably the most self-reliant, perhaps even anarchic, character in the book, dies serving a community she considers bigoted, hypocritical, and corrupt. *Indian Summer* not only shares Hawthorne’s pessimism regarding the future of “whatever Utopia of human virtue and happiness”

(Hawthorne, 1991: 53) the founders of the colonies had imagined, but also qualifies such pessimism as rooted in the tragic falling apart of the “middle ground” best exemplified by the Lewis household, strategically positioned between New Canaan and the Indian village of Squando.¹² In Hawthorne’s tale, whatever moral triumph Hester may achieve by returning to Salem and voluntarily resuming the scarlet letter can hardly redeem the “sombre” atmosphere of the “legend” told. In Pratt and Manara’s story, similarly, Phillis’ sacrifice is a noble display of her love of others, but brings no peace and is, ironically, useless, as she is killed only minutes before the Indians decide to retire. It is no accident, I think, that both stories end with an image of burial grounds. Hawthorne ends his tale by describing a tombstone on which appeared the semblance of an engraved escutcheon. It bore a device, a herald’s wording of which may serve as a motto and brief description of our now concluded legend; so sombre is it, and relieved only by one ever-glowing point of light gloomier than the shadow: “ON A FIELD, SABLE, THE LETTER A, GULES” (Hawthorne, 1991: 201).

Pratt and Manara rewrite this imagery in interesting ways. The final drawing of the text offers us a “corroded and dark” tombstone (Manara and Pratt, 2011: 156), with only the word “Black” inscribed on it, and no date. The “gloomy” picture, however, is also in this case “relieved” by the fresh wildflowers that, mysteriously, can always be found adorning the slate. If what “gules” in *The Scarlet Letter*’s final image is a reminder of both Hester’s passion and its sinful nature, in *Indian Summer*, by virtue of being the very last item mentioned in the text, the wildflowers—symbolically associated with Phillis—appear to overcome the “blackness” of the tale’s most villainous creatures.

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12 I use the term “middle ground” in the sense in which Richard White has theorized and employed it in his classic study of white-Indian, inter-white, and inter-Indian relations in the Great Lakes region from 1650 to 1815. The middle ground is not a “compromise between opposing interests.” “A middle ground is the creation, in part through creative misunderstanding, of a set of practices, rituals, offices, and beliefs, that although comprised of elements of the group in contact, is as a whole separate from the practices and beliefs of all of those groups” (White, 2010: xii-xiii). My impression is that Pratt conceives the Lewis household as a hybrid formation, where both Native and white practices and beliefs are combined in ways that both groups would not recognize as entirely legitimate, but which serve as a sort of link between the two communities.

One may even go so far as to claim that the authors meant to extend a kind of posthumous forgiveness, however undeserved, to such reprehensible figures as if they, too, like Hawthorne with Dimmesdale and Chillingworth, wished to see the “earthly stock of hatred and antipathy transmuted into golden love” (Hawthorne, 1991: 199).

In light of what I have been arguing in this essay, I must disagree with those who see the bizarre claim that the Cosentino manuscript would stand behind Hawthorne’s romance as nothing but a way to dignify a sordid story of sex and violence. On the one hand, one must note that Pratt puts forth this notion with a considerable dose of self-irony. After registering that Hawthorne claimed that the inspiration for his story came from a manuscript he found in the Salem Custom House, Pratt goes on to add that “it is well-known that writers make up strange stories to give an air of truth to their works, and this might have been the case with the Salem custom-house manuscript. And yet the Cosentino manuscript is there, in the municipal Salem library” (Pratt and Manara, 2013: 155). By drawing attention to a writer’s fakes, Pratt is admitting his own. Still, as I have argued elsewhere apropos a Dylan Dog adaptation of *Moby-Dick*, when a mass cultural work paradoxically claims primacy vis-à-vis an older high cultural text, this outrageous proposition can be read as an allegorical way of calling into question both the border between “low” and “high” culture and the notion of originality itself (Mariani, 2013). It is as if the supposedly inferior, bastardized popular text were to enact a revenge of sorts on the unapproachable sublimity of its modernist progenitor by declaring that, in the fluid world of postmodernist mass culture, your stories no longer exist, as they have been well-nigh obliterated by the endless proliferation of appropriations, adaptations, distortions, and reinventions. Yet, just as the modernist masterpiece is fond of evoking its dependence on some humble origins (the imaginary manuscript), postmodernist mass cultural foundlings like to claim noble descent. They often have a right to do that—after all, *Indian Summer* may well be the only Italian attempt to introduce the “atmosphere” of *The Scarlet Letter* to a popular audience in ways that are, in my opinion, far superior to those of Joffé’s film, and owe much to the complex, fraught, and rich genius of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s masterpiece.

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