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Children's Literature

VOLUME 17

"If We Have Any Little Girls among Our Readers": Gender and Education in Hawthorne's "Queen Christina"

Laura Laffrado

The strong, dark women who live in Nathaniel Hawthorne's major romances invite us to view their author as sympathetic to what Nina Auerbach has called "the complex life of woman in culture" (2). Hester Prynne, Zenobia, and Miriam all shine as "female representatives of the human creative and passionate forces" (Baym 124). Indeed, Hawthorne's depiction of women and his attitude toward feminist ideas in the romances is strongly sympathetic. Because of this sensitivity, the negative presentation of the title character in the earlier children's story "Queen Christina," part of the *Biographical Stories for Children* collection, raises troubling questions about Hawthorne's handling of genre and gender.

In the preface to *Biographical Stories* Hawthorne stated his belief that to acquaint children with the childhood of "eminent personages of times gone by" (213) would encourage an attachment to the history and literature that surrounded them and would stimulate further learning later in life. Hawthorne thus saw his children's stories, unlike his other writing, as tools for education. This educational intent has set his writings for children apart from his romances and, for the most part, has precluded their consideration in the critical literature.

Biographical Stories, first published 1842, features an authoritative adult, Mr. Temple, telling stories about the childhood of famous people to his son Edward, whose eye disorder keeps him confined, eyes covered, in a darkened room. The audience also includes the boy's mother, Mrs. Temple, his adopted sister Emily, and his older brother George. In the course of the book, Mr. Temple tells stories of Benjamin West, Sir Isaac Newton, Samuel Johnson, Oliver Cromwell, Benjamin Franklin, and finally Queen Christina of Sweden, all of which are meant to enliven Edward's confinement and to

Children's Literature 17, ed. Francelia Butler, Margaret Higonnet, and Barbara Rosen (Yale University Press, © 1989 by The Children's Literature Foundation, Inc.).

educate and entertain the family audience and the book's intended youthful readers.

The last sketch of the collection is markedly different from previous sections, both because its featured historical figure is female and because the story of her youth and adulthood is told in completely negative terms. Earlier stories spotlighted the relationship of father with son, sons who grew to be famous and admired men;[1] this story centers on a girl whose womanhood is best ignored, says Mr. Temple, "for it is neither pleasant nor profitable to think of the many things that she did, after she grew to be a woman" (282). The purpose of this tale, paradoxically, is to entertain "quiet little Emily," who "would perhaps be glad to hear the story of a child of her own sex" (275). Despite Emily's placid exterior, we are forced to conclude that, quiet and small though she may be, she must need the tale of Christina's life, a tale "chiefly profitable as showing the evil effects of a wrong education, which caused this daughter of a king to be both useless and unhappy" (275).

Unlike the boys, who were shown what they could grow up to be, Emily must learn in negatives and somehow locate herself in the stories of several famous men and one—at least in the eyes of a Mr. Temple—infamous woman. And, although Emily has been almost silent during the earlier stories, Mr. Temple apparently cannot rely upon her silent judgment, as he qualifies his understanding of her potential reaction by saying that she would "perhaps be glad." These early admonitory signs color the story to come with similarities to cautionary tales. Jonathan Cott has pointed to "the excrescence in the seventeenth century of the malignant 'Joyful Deaths' tradition of life-denying Puritan children's books" (3), and collections of English translations of German cautionary tales were equally graphic in showing an extreme punishment always exceeding a transgression at which an adult has first expressed disgust and horror. Thus, in *Struwwelpeter*, a German collection of cautionary rhymes, a boy who sucks his thumbs is first warned and then ("Snip! Snap! Snip! the scissors go") has his thumbs clipped off (16). In "Queen Christina," a girl who is not taught the eternal feminine virtues not only dies but dies unloved, unmourned, and without "a single flower upon her grave" (283). Even Hawthorne's spare transition from frame to sketch, "here follows the story" (275), carries an ominous tone, as though something dreadful were to come.

Christina is presented at birth as "remarkably plain" and "by

no means beautiful" (276).[2] With "remarkably" and "by no means" stressing her lack of beauty, Christina's appearance apparently borders on the ugly.[3] This ugliness matters a great deal to her mother, so much so that her mother's affection is withheld because of it: "The Queen, her mother, did not love her as much as she ought; partly, perhaps, on account of Christina's want of beauty; and also because both the King and Queen had wished for a son" (276). The Queen's desire therefore was for a son of any physical appearance or, as a distant second choice, a beautiful daughter. Christina's ugliness matters to her mother because Christina, as a female, is a tiny mirror image of her mother and thus should reflect her mother's beauty. From the start, then, Christina and her mother form a sisterhood that is both bound and divided by genes and gender.[4]

Their struggle is intensified when, as a child, Christina is taken ill. The illness solidifies her relationship with her father, who becomes "exceedingly fond" of her and thereafter takes her with him on "all the journeys . . . through his kingdom" (276). As the father-daughter bond is cemented, the Queen subsides into a permanently peripheral role. Cast as an unloving (wicked) mother from the start, the Queen is placed in competition with her daughter for the King's love; when she loses that struggle, she is virtually banished from the story. Christina's socialization, however, becomes even more unorthodox after the Queen's defeat. Having displaced her mother in the King's affections, Christina now becomes a consolidation of the King's desires and is portrayed as a substitute wife as well as a makeshift son.

With the Queen in the background, the King determines to educate Christina "exactly as if she had been a boy, and to teach her all the knowledge needful to the ruler of a kingdom, and the commander of an army" (277). Lest the reader have more than a moment to contemplate such an education for a girl, the King's intention is immediately followed by the narrative admonition, "But Gustavus should have remembered that Providence had created her to be a woman, and that it was not for him to make a man of her" (277). The father's blessing on the child's potential transformation is subordinate here to the rigid gender boundaries established by Providence or the Nature of Things. Gustavus ignores these boundaries, deriving "great happiness from his beloved Christina" (277) as they are shown playing and dancing "along the marble floor of the palace —this valiant King, with his upright, martial figure, his war-worn

visage, and commanding aspect" (277–78). Indeed, Christina's rule over her father is such that "she could disarm Gustavus of his sword, which was so terrible to the princes of Europe" (278). Shown together like father and son, husband and castrating wife, Gustavus and his daughter Christina only temporarily avoid the sociosexual consequences of overt defiance of gender and familial restrictions.

When Christina and her father must part so that he can go to war, the King's "greatest affliction was the necessity of parting with his child," and "Christina, too, was so afflicted that her attendants began to fear that she would actually die of grief" (278). Soon after, when the King is killed in battle, Christina is proclaimed a child Queen. Even without her father's misguided influence her education continues, according to Mr. Temple, to go wrong: "All this time, though Christina was now a Queen, you must not suppose that she was left to act as she pleased. She had a preceptor named John Mathias, who was a very learned man, and capable of instructing her in all the branches of science. But there was nobody to teach her the delicate graces and gentle virtues of a woman. She was surrounded almost entirely by men; and had learned to despise the society of her own sex. At the age of nine years, she was separated from her mother, whom the Swedes did not consider a proper person to be entrusted with the charge of her" (281). Her growth affected by the loss of the same-sex parent (a loss that also affected Hawthorne deeply in both his childhood and in his reflections in later years), Christina is left isolated from the virtues that Mr. Temple sees as gender-based. "Separated from her mother," Christina is the orphan she appeared to be as a baby, and without a female model her accomplishments continue to be inappropriate: "She learned to read the classical authors of Greece and Rome, and became a great admirer of the heroes and poets of old times. Then as for active exercises, she could ride on horseback as well as any man in her kingdom. She was fond of hunting, and could shoot at a mark with wonderful skill. But, dancing was the only feminine accomplishment with which she had any acquaintance" (281).

If little Emily is listening closely, she has learned what accomplishments lead to female goodness and happiness. Knowledgeable, athletic, and skilled as Christina may be, only her dancing will be allowed to aid her as she moves from girlhood to womanhood. Even Christina's dancing, which Mr. Temple categorizes in general as a "feminine accomplishment," was portrayed earlier in the story as an

enactment of her inappropriate relationship with her father. This somewhat tainted skill, therefore, is insufficient to sustain her on her journey to womanhood since Christina "grew up, I am sorry to say, a very unamiable person, ill-tempered, proud, stubborn, and, in short, unfit to make those around her happy, or to be happy herself" (281), as Mr. Temple triumphantly relates. As a woman, Christina's first duty is to "make those around her happy" before she can "be happy herself."

Unlike Christina, other little girls have "been taught self-control, and a due regard for the rights of others" (282). Like Clara in *Grandfather's Chair*, another one of Hawthorne's children's collections, good little Emily rarely speaks and always listens. The education received from either Grandfather or Mr. Temple imposes a female sense of identity made up of exclusions, because both men tell stories featuring men only or featuring women negatively. Like Lewis Carroll's White Queen, girls must learn backwards or not learn at all, and also like the White Queen they must try to adjust to the restrictions of their world: "The White Queen is trying to justify the intolerable, as if she were master of the world and as if the rules were her own invention. . . . (The White Queen) is in fact inventing the rules, rather as the White Knight invents anklets for warding off sharks, because she is not at all the tyrant in her world, but the victim. The first rule is that there will be punishments; that goes along with 'never jam today'" (Sale 120). Having learned from Mr. Temple's introduction that there will indeed be punishments, Emily must view Christina's behavior from the beginning as deserving of those punishments. In this way, like the White Queen, she can align herself with those in authority.

Although at age eighteen Christina is "a young woman of striking aspect, a good figure and intelligent face," her eyes reveal "a very fierce and haughty look" (282). This physical evaluation of Christina is almost approving, even if her eyes—which, unlike Edward Temple's, are not bandaged—hold emotions antithetical to a good and happy woman. Such a favorable description reveals Hawthorne's latent sympathy with Christina, showing her as an attractive woman on guard against the world. This sympathy is temporary, however, and immediately afterward—as if to make up for such a lapse—we are led by Mr. Temple into a paragraph that sags under the weight of gender distinctions and stereotypes: "When she had worn the crown a few years, she began to consider it be-

neath her dignity to be called a Queen, because the name implied that she belonged to the weaker sex. She therefore caused herself to be proclaimed King, thus declaring to the world that she despised her own sex, and was desirous of being ranked among men" (282). Categories of men and women, kings and queens, a stronger sex and a weaker sex all bump up against one another in the renewed narrative zeal to denounce Christina.

Born a daughter instead of the desired son, and a plain, sickly daughter at that, Christina had been marked from the start for exclusion from conventional gender categories. As a child she is lost between gender distinctions (a girl raised as a boy), and the gap widens as she ages until she finally falls through it. Mr. Temple's use of "proclaimed," "declaring," and "despised" lends a royal quality to his condemnation. Christina finally becomes a sexless monster, a denier of treasured stereotypes and so an anti-woman. Such labels, harsh though they may seem, are fully exemplified by Mr. Temple's final emphasis on Christina's personal appearance once she resigns the throne at age twenty-eight, escapes her enclosures, and devotes herself to traveling: "She is described as wearing a man's vest, a short gray petticoat, embroidered with gold and silver, and a black wig, thrust awry upon her head. She wore no gloves, and so seldom washed her hands, that nobody could tell what had been their original color" (283).

Ultimately, despite her knowledge, skills, and independence that leads her to resign her throne, Christina must be judged, as she was at birth and at age eighteen, on her appearance. That appearance—masculine, unclean, and ridiculed—is represented as in keeping with Christina's maverick life, as is her death: "None loved her while she lived, nor regretted her death, nor planted a single flower upon her grave. Happy are the little girls of America, who are brought up quietly and tenderly, at the domestic hearth, and thus become gentle and delicate women! May none of them ever lose the loveliness of their sex, by receiving such an education as that of Queen Christina!" (283). Mr. Temple's exclamatory epitaph for Queen Christina serves as a form of intimidation, intended to frighten "the little girls of America" into delicacy, in case the attractions of traditional feminine virtues prove insufficient lure.

In his desire to re-create Christina's place in history solely as a cautionary tale for girls, Mr. Temple's final words return to Christina's education as the catalyst for what he sees as her unfortunate

life. Much of his tale, however, has strayed from that education and has stressed that Christina was by nature not gentle, delicate, quiet, tender, or lovely. Mr. Temple wishes that Christina had died rather than have become a woman, especially a woman such as this one. Her birth in plainness marks her as a violation and she continues by her very presence to interfere, to disrupt, and to age, as she displaces her mother in her father's affection, displaces her father as king, and displaces various visions of femaleness. Despite the blame leveled at Christina's education, it is in reality her very existence that Mr. Temple finds disturbing.

"Emily, timid, quiet, and sensitive" seems "shocked at the idea of such a bold and masculine character" (283). "With that love of personal neatness, which generally accompanies purity of heart," Emily tells Mrs. Temple that it troubles her "to think of her unclean hands!" (283). Emily's only other comment on the story, also directed to Mrs. Temple, is, significantly, "I never could have loved her" (283). Despite the sexism, moral bigotry masquerading as piety, anger, and sexual frustration that fuel the telling of the Christina story, the possibility of love has not been banished from Emily's mind. Emily recognizes another woman, another little girl, and considers responding to her with the love that was denied Christina both in her lifetime and in this story. But Emily's judgment is limited by the stereotypes of femininity. She has not been "spoiled" by an overintellectual education as Christina has; she believes instinctively that Christina ought to have pleased those around her by being lovable, that is, clean and neat. Emily's education has been so narrow and ill-managed that, finally, she cannot love Christina because, like Mr. Temple, she believes that character is reflected in unclean hands.

What Emily has learned from the story, however, amounts to more than a rejection of Christina's life. Mr. Temple has unwittingly furthered Emily's education by underestimating the volatile role that history—in this case the history of Christina of Sweden —can play in person's self-knowledge. The story of Christina of Sweden, despite its negative presentation, teaches Emily what one woman has done and thus what a woman can do. Indeed, Christina opens herself to be read (in her behavior and her clothing) and at the same time resists being read, in that she demands a new way of reading. Neither Emily nor Mrs. Temple is capable of that new reading, but their post-story comments reflect the beginnings of a newborn and shared knowledge.

Earlier stories in the collection had received little more than perfunctory commentary from Mrs. Temple. Christina's story, however, prompts her beyond platitudes. Though she disparages Christina as "a sad specimen of womankind indeed," she also maintains that "it is very possible for a woman to have a strong mind, and to be fitted for the active business of life, without losing any of her natural delicacy. Perhaps, some time or other, Mr. Temple will tell you a story of such a woman" (283–84). Perhaps he will, but given the tenor of the story he has just told, it is doubtful, and Mrs. Temple, purposely vague with "perhaps" and "some time or other," is not strong enough even to request that story directly. Emily will have to hear "a story of such a woman" from another woman or create one herself, since Mrs. Temple has not yet learned to be an author and defers the job to her husband. This deference, however, need not be overrated. After all, now that she has heard about Christina's life, Mrs. Temple is able to envision a new sort of biographical story, one that offers revisionist implications with its stress on a strong-minded woman "fitted for the active business of life." Too blurry about the edges to be able to begin to tell this story herself, Mrs. Temple has progressed nevertheless on the path to author-ity.

Unlike the other sketches in *Biographical Stories*, Christina's story refuses to allow an authoritative man, a father and a king, to judge what is proper in his child's transformation; Gustavus's fulfilled wish to educate his daughter as a boy is a transgression that is punished by his death and Christina's monsterhood. It is convenient for the purposes of Hawthorne's story that Gustavus of Sweden was indeed killed during his daughter's youth. Thus, in this version of Christina's life, her historical orphaned state—father dead, mother banished—can be used against her with the implication that she is alone and unloved because she is a plain, masculine, atypical woman, and against her father, because he was responsible for her miseducation.

But the life of Christina overcomes the gender-based rigidities of the story and insists upon visibility. It challenges its modern readers to read it in a new way, to decode it properly, as it may have challenged its nineteenth-century female readers who were not selectively blinded to its implications by the dominant culture.

Despite the questionable female portrayals in "Queen Christina," at the time Hawthorne wrote the story he himself had much in common with little Emily. Like her, he had to locate himself in a world of negatives, a world where a man who worked at the Boston

Custom House or wrote for a living did not earn enough money and respect to sustain himself. In such a world, as the White Queen would have known, there were punishments. By creating a narrator such as Mr. Temple and allowing that narrator to condemn Christina, Hawthorne, like Emily, aligned himself with those in authority, made himself appear as one with the monied, properly employed, unartistic men of the world, the men who seemed to be everything he was not. Indeed, Mr. Temple's harsh treatment of Christina can be seen as a product of Hawthorne's frustration at his own inability to affirm himself as someone eccentric, someone atypical, a creator strong enough to move from alienation and isolation to a declared, defiant identity. In Mr. Temple he externalizes the societally determined figure he feels guiltily he should be.

By turning to children's literature, Hawthorne could change his focus from what he saw as the restrictive expectations of his adult audience. Writing for children allowed him to concentrate on education, and the freedom gained from this genre switch, combined with his "deep sense of responsibility" concerning what he cast "into the fountain of a young heart" (preface 214), resulted in his telling a personal truth: that miseries awaited one whose education led toward estrangement from society, perhaps as an artist, perhaps as a woman.

In his zeal to educate and his temporary genre-based liberty, Hawthorne was free to give children a strongly biased history lesson, free to make that lesson angry and full of displaced hostility in order to convey the urgency of his meaning, the frustration of his life. So much more withdrawn than the woman whose history he told, he could not bring himself then to admire openly the unconventionality in her that he was reluctant to acknowledge in himself and in his writing. The creation of Mr. Temple to narrate and condemn the problematic course of Christina's life allowed him to mediate his ambivalence toward Christina's social estrangement. Hawthorne's sympathy with Christina in her frustration is revealed in his admiration-charged description of her at age eighteen, in his exhaustive catalog of her many accomplishments, and in Mrs. Temple's commentary on the story. After Hawthorne's marriage, the death of his mother, and his attainment of success as an author, he sympathetically portrayed women not unlike Christina and greatly diluted the authority of their male narrators or associates.[5] These portrayals were possible once he had defied the expectations of society that had chafed him for so long.

In this children's story aimed at educating its youthful readers, the combination of genre and subject matter worked to educate the author himself. The history of Christina's life added to Hawthorne's self-knowledge, prepared him not only for his later portrayals of women and his recognition of their complex role in culture, but for his own eventual and overdue break from the cultural expectations that had impaired his art and his life. In writing "Queen Christina," Hawthorne sat in his enclosure, his own form of the darkened room and bandaged eyes, and, like the White Queen, tried to justify the intolerable. Instead of the White Queen's "never jam today," Hawthorne's justification was his pious and harsh glorification of the restrictions he saw preventing his own transformation from bachelor to husband, from unknown writer to literary figure. In "Queen Christina," for the last time Hawthorne savagely refused himself and the future artists, the future women, in his audience the invention of a world that would allow for the unconventional, that would allow a Christina or a Zenobia, the full possibilities of her biographical story.

Notes

1. The corresponding male portraits in *Biographical Stories* are notable for their absence of women. Mothers or mother figures are rarely mentioned, and wives are not mentioned at all. The relation of father with son or, for Oliver Cromwell, of uncle with son, consumes all of Hawthorne's attention in these stories. The guidance given by the fathers consistently results in their sons' achievements later in life.

This steady stream of masculinity is deformed once Hawthorne reaches Christina and Gustavus. Gustavus's masculinity—the masculinity that shapes Christina—is presented as misguided, defiant, inappropriate, and a clear violation of cultural and almost religious restrictions. ("Providence had created her to be a woman, and that it was not for him to make a man of her.") Christina's masculinity—her identification with her father, separation from her mother, physical appearance, and putative denial of her own sex—is also a deformed version of the male responses to fathers in the earlier stories. That Hawthorne chose to highlight Gustavus's and Christina's masculinity negatively helps to reveal his own recoiling from overt masculinity in his art and in his life.

2. Christina's appearance at birth seems to have been noted in virtually all records of Gustavus's reign. Christina herself almost cheerfully corroborates this description, remarking in her autobiography that her mother's classification of her as "a girl and ugly . . . wasn't far from wrong because I was as dark as a little Moor." There is no reason to suspect that Christina's autobiography was Hawthorne's source of information, however. Walter Hart's *The History of Gustavus, King of Sweden* is a much more likely candidate. A copy of Hart's book was withdrawn from the Salem Athenaum in Hawthorne's name twice in 1827 (Kesselring 53). Hawthorne was no longer living in Salem in 1841 while he was writing *Biographical Stories*, and no record of his having consulted Hart's book during that time has been recovered. The skeletal information in "Queen Christina" is close enough to that in Hart's book (which subscribes to commonly held views of Christina as both plain and eccentric) to render it likely that this was Hawthorne's source.

3. Christina's appearance here is at odds with the nineteenth-century view of children with which Hawthorne was clearly familiar. Hawthorne's portrayals of children throughout all his fiction correspond closely to the nineteenth-century ideals of cherubic, flowerlike children. The child auditors featured in the frame tales of *The Whole History of Grandfather's Chair*, *Biographical Stories*, and *A Wonder-Book* fit this mold without exception. Hawthorne's inclination toward sentimentalism of childhood reaches its peak in *A Wonder-Book* where all the children have flower names (Primrose, Periwinkle, Sweet Fern, and Dandelion, for instance) that emphasize their decorative role as listeners and their innocent, natural condition. (See Mary Lynn Stevens Heininger for a discussion of the progression of the sentimentalism of the image of childhood.) Christina's plainness, then, violates the depiction of children that nineteenth-century Americans found necessary to their view of themselves and their world.

4. Christina's relationship with her mother was actually more complicated than Hawthorne probably knew. Georgina Masson, in her biography of Christina, recounts that midwives at Christina's birth, "buoyed up by the predictions of astrologers . . . believed her to be a boy . . . since Christina was born with a caul which enveloped her from her head to her knees, leaving only her face, arms and lower part of her legs free; moreover she was covered with hair." Maria Eleonora, Christina's mother, "was in no condition to be told the truth and they waited several days before breaking the news to her" (20–21).

5. The juxtaposition of the first-person narrator Miles Coverdale and his attraction for and description of the darkly beautiful Zenobia in *The Blithedale Romance* (1852) mimics to some extent the roles of Mr. Temple and Christina. Zenobia is presented as a powerful, strong, queenlike woman of untraditional beauty. The story of her life and death is explored, related, and judged by Miles Coverdale, dilettante writer. Coverdale's authority is undercut virtually from the beginning of the book, and Hawthorne differentiates so clearly between himself and his narrator that there is little chance for the reader to invest Coverdale with Hawthorne's authority.

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