



## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Paisley Green for the degree of Master of Arts in English presented on May 5, 2017.  
Title: Rational Madmen: Monomania in Hawthorne's "The Birthmark" and  
Stedman's "How Old Brown Took Harpers Ferry"

Abstract approved:

---

Peter J. Betjemann

In this project, I explore the use of monomania as a literary and rhetorical device that pathologizes deviance from certain norms—in this case, sexual and political norms—and allows for contradiction, dissonance, and reform. Using Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Birthmark" and Edmund Clarence Stedman's poem "How Old Brown Took Harpers Ferry," I explore monomania's role as a literary and rhetorical device and argue that the diagnosis was a way to target aberrant behavior for a "return to the senses": altering behavior to fit socially acceptable norms.

©Copyright Paisley Green  
May 5, 2017  
All Rights Reserved

Rational Madmen: Monomania in Hawthorne's "The Birthmark" and Stedman's  
"How Old Brown Took Harpers Ferry"

by  
Paisley Green

A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the  
degree of

Master of Arts

Presented May 5, 2017  
Commencement June 2017

Master of Arts thesis of Paisley Green presented on May 5, 2017

APPROVED:

---

Major Professor, representing English

---

Director of the School of Writing, Literature, and Film

---

Dean of the Graduate School

I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

---

Paisley Green, Author

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Any graduate student knows that a project of this size is buoyed by both academic and emotional support structures; I am no different. I want to thank Peter Betjemann, for his astute guidance in pointing out the diamond in a white quartz mine (i.e., my argument) and for encouraging me to just keep going in the writing process. I also want to thank my committee for their immensely helpful feedback on my drafts: David Robinson, Lily Sheehan, and Guy Wood. I also express sincere gratitude to every one of the professors I have encountered at Oregon State University; without you, I would not have grown half as much as an academic—or as an individual. Thank you for helping me shake off my impostor syndrome one class at a time. And finally, thank you to Karen J. Renner at my alma mater, Northern Arizona University, for making me a strong writer and for inspiring me to continue with this topic beyond my undergraduate career. This thesis would not exist without you.

I have found incredibly sustaining friendships in my two years here, and I thank every co-worker, friend, and roommate that I've been able to interact with here in Corvallis. In particular, gratitude is due to Emily McLemore and Athena Lathos for lending their careful eye and their advice to many iterations of this project. Deep thanks are also due to Tim Jensen; the second chapter of this thesis would not exist at all without him forcing me to eke it out four pages at a time.

But friendships aren't just for reading each other's theses; it was in the moments outside of class and writing that were the most special and ineffable. There isn't enough space to thank you all in this page alone. Finally, thank you to Brian Wagman, for keeping me sane throughout this year, for offering your ear for complaining and your room for writing, and for just being a person outside of the department to escape to. This thesis would have gotten done without you, but it was damn fine to have you along for the ride.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
Introduction: Monomania as a Diagnosis of Social Control . . . . .	2
Rhetoric, Pathology, and Queerness in “The Birthmark” . . . . .	9
“A Wild Fanaticism”: Monomania and the Figure of John Brown . . . . .	38
Conclusion: Beyond Ahab and Towards an Expansive Reading of Monomania . . .	59
Bibliography . . . . .	63

RATIONAL MADMEN: MONOMANIA IN HAWTHORNE'S "THE BIRTHMARK"  
AND STEDMAN'S "HOW OLD BROWN TOOK HARPERS FERRY"

*"I believe everybody more or less insane—at times." —Frederick Douglass*



### Introduction: Monomania as a Diagnosis of Control

From the 1820s to the 1880s, one psychiatric diagnosis changed the way society viewed insanity, jurisprudence, politics, and literature: monomania. In 1827, the French psychiatrist Jean-Etienne Esquirol coined the term to describe a “partial lesion of the intelligence, affections, or will” characterized by an obsession with a single object (or set of objects). Critically, he noted that “aside from this partial delirium, [those afflicted] think, reason, and act like other men” (Esquirol 319). Esquirol further contrasts monomania with lypemania (also known as melancholia or depression) and mania, constantly emphasizing the *partial* nature of monomania as its distinctive element. Furthermore, monomania could be partitioned nearly infinitely, depending on the object of one’s obsession (322). If someone were to believe they could communicate with God beyond the acceptable confines of prayer—or to believe he *was* God—he would suffer from theomania. Obsession with fire: pyromania. Obsessed with stealing: kleptomania. Obsession with a love interest: erotomania. Obsession with sex: nymphomania, if female, or satyriasis, if male. Several cases detail hysterical monomania, in which a woman’s symptoms were attributed to menstruation and its accompanying insanity. Most famously, homicidal monomania—obsession leading to murder—dominated legal debate during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, giving rise to the insanity defense in court. In many cases, monomania was diagnosed insofar as the patient’s behavior was deemed irrational, strange, or otherwise socially unacceptable.

The diagnosis of monomania quickly spread from France to the rest of Europe and to the United States, but it enjoyed a short vogue in the medical community; Jan Goldstein notes that by 1870, no newly admitted Salpêtrière patients were diagnosed as monomaniacs (Goldstein 389). However, between 1820 and around 1880, monomania took powerful hold of people’s

literary and political imaginations, which persisted beyond its diagnostic decline. In literature and political discourse of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, monomania was used as a device to pathologize divergent points of view or perceived deviance from social norms. In literature, monomaniacal characters' obsessions served as the locus of their deviance; in antebellum periodicals, people writing on either side of the slavery debate often characterized their ideological opposition as monomaniacs. However, because the key component of monomania is its "partial lesion," these instances left space for change, positioning a "return to the senses" as a return to the fold of society. Therefore, using monomaniacal characters as a literary device or labeling a political opponent as a monomaniac *did* pathologize and marginalize those individuals, but it also left some room for reason and reform. Furthermore, understanding monomania not as a medical diagnosis but as a rhetorical device invites a re-reading of myriad American literary and political texts to allow for contradictions, especially with regard to the idea of a partial lesion.

Given that monomania died out as a diagnosis before the 20<sup>th</sup> century began, why use it as a focal point for this project? First, it is important to study literary texts in a historical-cultural contextual framework. For 19<sup>th</sup>-century writers and politicians, monomania was a popular and useful discursive tool, able to identify and separate deviance along ideological and identity lines. To ignore it merely because it is currently irrelevant to psychiatry is to ignore its relevance to texts and discourse of the day. Second, the idea of a partial lesion holds fascinating implications for literary studies in particular. When reading a text with an unreliable narrator—say, Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart"—most assume the narrator's justifications are equally as irrational as his crimes and therefore may be dismissed. But if we understand that the narrator may "think, reason, and act like other men" with the exception of his obsession with the eye, then these two contradictions can be held together without causing dissonance. Particularly in

political discussions, a *partial* lesion on one's sanity allowed room for a change in behavior or thought that conforms more to socially acceptable norms, as opposed to a wholesale dismissal for the individual. Monomania—and particularly its definition as a partial insanity—allows tensions and contradictions to coexist, and invites scholars to re-read a number of 19<sup>th</sup>-century American literary and political texts. Finally, a more capacious view of monomania's rhetorical function in early American culture helps us to think about how “madness” or other such aberrance was used to discredit marginalized populations along racial, gender, sexual, and ideological lines.

This project addresses a dearth in scholarship on monomania, and there is plenty of room to expand its scope past these pages. Nineteenth-century American literature is filled with monomaniacal characters, most notably Melville's Captain Ahab, about whom most literary criticism on monomania is written. Scholars have written many articles on Ahab's obsession with the whale from the 1950s onward, perhaps because the word “monomania” appears roughly a dozen times in the novel. However, in 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>-century literary studies, there is sparse scholarship on monomania as a historical categorization of madness or as a literary-rhetorical device of 19<sup>th</sup> century literature, especially in American literature. Some substantive scholarly discussions of monomania can be found in journals of historical-legal history that explore monomania as a legal defense; a few articles on monomania in French opera or literature; scattered chapters on monomaniacal characters in British Victorian novels; and Marina Zuylen's monograph *Monomania*, which discusses the *idée fixe* in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-century Europe. Numerous articles mention monomania in passing, but so far there has been no sustained analyses of monomaniacal characters in literature, let alone studies on monomania's place in (anti-) slavery discourse. Part of this can be attributed to scattered resources or the relative

insignificance of the term today, but this lack of study on monomania in antebellum America is surprising. Clearly, the scholarship on monomania and its potential literary ramifications is piecemeal and Eurocentric, despite the potential of the topic.

In the two chapters that follow, I explore the use of monomania as a literary and rhetorical device that pathologizes deviance from sexual and ideological norms and allows for contradiction, dissonance, and reform. This project aims not to uncover every instance of monomania in 19th-century American literature, but to trace two case studies to consider how monomania and its partial lesion function as a rhetorical tool in both literature and politics. Using Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Birthmark" and Edmund Clarence Stedman's poem "How Old Brown Took Harpers Ferry," I explore monomania's role as a literary and rhetorical device and argue that the diagnosis was a way to target aberrant behavior for a "return to the senses": altering behavior to fit socially acceptable norms. I primarily synthesize historical and cultural background with close readings of the texts. In discussing the rhetorical use of monomania to marginalize various populations, my project is informed by Michel Foucault's work on the connections between discourse and power. By explicitly labeling certain behaviors and beliefs as deviant or mad, 19<sup>th</sup>-century American writers and thinkers largely contributed to the sedimentation of acceptable social norms along the lines of race, gender, sexuality, and political beliefs. But beyond that, Foucault was much more interested in how power and the state evolved from killing and executing deviant individuals to managing them and hoping to reform them. Instead of taking punitive measures, modern society uses scientific discourse to manage and preserve life; this room for transformation and focus on life forms the backbone of my project. This thesis examines two instances of marginalized or punished monomaniacs to

demonstrate how individual characters' monomania often served as a focal point for national anxieties about deviance while still leaving room for reform.

The first chapter uses Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1843 short story "The Birthmark" to examine how monomania is used to characterize the protagonist's potentially queer desire as deviant, a product of insanity. In the story, the main character, a scientist named Aylmer, becomes obsessed with his wife's red, hand-shaped facial birthmark shortly after they are married, making negative comments and even fantasizing about cutting it out of her face. Once his wife asks him to remove the mark for the sake of peace, Aylmer gives his wife a potion to erase the mark, which ultimately proves fatal. In this chapter, I first explicate how 19<sup>th</sup>-century medicine pathologized queerness or same-sex desire, both broadly and with the specific diagnosis of monomania. After briefly reviewing existing scholarship on "The Birthmark," which neglects his monomania, I argue that counter to these scholars, Aylmer should not be read as a stereotypical male figure upholding patriarchal ideals precisely because his monomania, coded as queer, disqualifies him from belonging to the heterosexual, masculine norm of 19<sup>th</sup>-century America.

To support this claim, I establish the mark as a symbol for feminine sexuality and menstruation and Aylmer's vehement repulsion towards it as a marker of anxiety around heterosexual reproduction. Then, reading Aylmer against Georgiana's other suitors and his lab assistant, Aminadab, I argue that Aylmer should be read as deviating from masculine norms of the time. Finally, using Hawthorne's own journals about his encounters with sculpture in Italy, I trace the references to marble sculpture in "The Birthmark" to argue that Aylmer's treatment of Georgiana as a statue reinforces his queerness instead of representing an archetypically masculine desire to perfect women's bodies. In this chapter, my study of monomania's function

as a literary device is focused on one individual—Aylmer—and how Hawthorne presents him as aberrant from normative masculinity, heterosexuality, and reproduction. Throughout, I examine the role of the narrator, who condemns Aylmer’s anxious obsession with the mark and describes him as non-traditionally masculine, as a voice of normativity calling for his reform into a conventional picture of masculinity.

The second chapter examines how monomania was rhetorically deployed on a larger scale, specifically in the heated political debates after John Brown’s 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry, taking Edmund Clarence Stedman’s “How Old Brown Took Harpers Ferry” as a case study. John Brown, a well-known abolitionist and revolutionary, successfully took over a federal armory in an attempt to foment a massive slave rebellion. In this chapter, I discuss the proliferation of periodical responses to the raid from both Southern and Northern sources, also tracing the tendency to label political opponents as monomaniacs in the debate over slavery. Whereas one might expect the South to label Brown as a lunatic (and they did, to an extent), it was mainly the North that denounced his violence as the work of an “abolition monomaniac.” Using Stedman’s poem as a case study, I argue that labeling Brown a monomaniac was a rhetorical tactic to position him as an everyman with whom to identify and to denounce his violence as deviant. By doing this, Northern rhetoricians positioned Brown’s abolitionist moral imperative as desirable and rational and framed his violence as a deviance that could be changed. Unlike “The Birthmark,” which was concerned with an individual character’s deviance, Stedman’s poem, which circulated in several major newspapers, upheld abolitionist belief while trying to preserve a tenuous national peace. Hawthorne and Stedman are case studies for this project, but applying monomania to other literary and political texts is a fruitful way to understand how pathology,

discourse, and literature worked together to preserve social norms in a time of social and political tumult.

## Rhetoric, Pathology, and Queerness in “The Birthmark”

### Monomania and the Suppression of Queer Desire

On a practical level, monomaniacs were diverse. Some exhibited symptoms reminiscent of modern-day diagnoses: schizophrenia, dissociative identity disorder, violent urges, kleptomania, and so on. However, other diagnoses would be considered obsolete today because of the ways they attempted to pathologize, contain, and suppress deviance according to norms of gender, sexuality, and class. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the nebulous nature of a monomania diagnosis meant that many mental hospital patients were labeled as such. Lennard J. Davis notes that in the UK, monomania was the most widespread diagnosis at the Charenton asylum between 1826 and 1829, accounting for 45% of patients, and other European asylums reflected similar numbers (Davis 68). Exact numbers of American patients admitted for monomania are hard to find, but the percentages likely resembled British statistics. Though symptoms were diverse, the only consistent hallmark of a monomania patient was the idea of a “partial lesion”--in other words, their reason, affect, and intellect were considered discrete parts that could be individually diseased without affecting the others.

With the rise of anatomical study, phrenology, physiognomy, and other medical specializations, psychologists attempted to articulate connections between specific parts of the body or brain and manifestations of madness in order to target, treat, and control the patient. One consequence of this turn was the tendency to pathologize individuals who deviated from normative sexuality and gender expression, supplanting a religious rhetoric of sin with a medical rhetoric of abnormality, insanity, and deviance. In particular, the move to label same-sex desire (and antecedents to what we would today call queerness) as a curable insanity served to suppress and control difference. It then anticipated explicit pathologies of homosexuality in the 20<sup>th</sup>



century.<sup>1</sup> By queerness, I mostly am referring to a gender or sexual identity expression that does not strictly adhere to heteronormative standards, though I acknowledge that the word “queer” can signify a much more complex interplay of identity and affect than my working definition might allow. This chapter seeks to articulate how antebellum medical rhetoric attempted to suppress and control queer desire and behavior, using Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Birthmark” as a case study. By diagnosing or describing queerness as the product of monomania, the narrator simultaneously condemns nonconformity to gender and sexual norms and leaves room for a “cure” of compulsory heterosexuality as a way to rejoin normal society.

Because the term “homosexual” was coined in 1869, assembling a corpus of early 19<sup>th</sup>-century cases of monomania that target deviant sexuality or gender is difficult. However, medical literature of the time demonstrates that discourses about homosexuality not only existed in the field of psychology, but also were deployed to highlight the supposed dangers of sexual deviance. For example, in 1840, British psychologist Alexander Morison wrote *The Physiognomy of Mental Diseases*, which classified different types of mania, monomania, imbecility, and insanity, using case studies to support his categories. One chapter, “Monomania with Unnatural Propensity,” diagnoses same-sex desire and sex as “the effect of cerebral disease” marked by “an irresistible propensity to the crime against nature” (Morison 157). Morison’s chapter lays bare the process of translating crimes against the church to crimes against normalcy, sanity, and morality when he notes that this form of monomania has historically been referred to as “peccatum illud horribile, inter Christianos non nominandum”<sup>2</sup> and can lead to crime, child abuse, and suicidal ideation. Morison never overtly defines “monomania with unnatural lust” as

---

<sup>1</sup> Identifying and pathologizing queerness began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with the coining of the word “homosexual” and reached its peak as a tool of medicalized control when the first Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM), a tool for diagnosing and treating mental illness from the American Psychological Association, listed homosexuality as a form of mental illness in 1952. This official diagnosis persisted until its discontinuance in 1973.

<sup>2</sup> Trans. “That horrible crime not to be named among Christians.”

sexual desire between men, but the interplay of religious allusion and euphemism clearly point to a trend in medical discourse of pathologizing queerness (157).

Morison's five case studies are fascinating: they render the patients literally visible to the reader through a series of plates and sketches, but they also obscure explicit references to homosexual behavior, only describing it as "the propensity" (159-167). Of the five cases, only the last one approaches overt description of the patient's deviant behavior, though Morison adds another layer of obscurity through Latin; the patient's crime is said to be "contra natura ordinem rem habuit veneream et carnaliter cognovit" (167).<sup>3</sup> Each of these men were patients—presumably at Bethlem Royal Hospital (colloquially, Bedlam), where Morison served as Consulting Physician since 1835—who were often placed in solitary cells for "attempting to commit the crime" with other patients (159). Their desires are framed in terms of monomaniacal obsession and compulsion, but unlike many monomaniacs, who responded to treatment within a year or so of being committed, these case studies show persistent patterns of behavior over decades, indicating a more settled identity rather than a temporary, curable disease. Although Morison and his patients were British, his writings and case studies are typical of transatlantic 19<sup>th</sup>-century medical discourse's move to specifically label same-sex desire and behavior as a form of monomania.

Medical literature targeted homosexuality because the behaviors were easier to identify, but other case studies in American medical journals connect monomania with a more expansive notion of queerness—that is, not necessarily same-sex desire, but a broader non-participation in gender or sexual norms. An 1833 article in the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* attempts to link insanity and phrenology as it maps monomania's partial lesions onto specific parts of the brain. When the author discusses patients who "display an excessive venereal instinct," he

---

<sup>3</sup> Trans. "Sexual intercourse against the order of nature."

blames overdeveloped cerebella for hypersexuality, nymphomania, and satyriasis, diagnosing the “excessive tendency” to seek sex as “insanity.” Later, he describes specific examples of this deviance:

In many curious cases of this affection, women have believed themselves pregnant; nay, men have also fancied themselves so. Many are persuaded of change of sex, etc. Now in these alienations, Gall views an aberration of the action of the peculiar parts of the brain which he believes to direct the venereal instinct and the love of offspring. (“Anatomical Pathology” 3)

Describing non-normative gender and sexuality expressions as cases of “mental alienations” signals a desire for conformity to certain expectations for behavior. In particular, the anonymous author labels excessive libido, ideations of pregnancy, and gender fluidity as aberrant; these ideas and behaviors threaten norms of gender, sex, and reproduction. The remedy, it would seem, would be to return these patients to their “proper” gender roles, with the attendant expectations surrounding sex and procreation. The fascination with the social implications of mental illness did not end at the asylum door or the courthouse record; many 19th-century authors used monomaniacal characters as a vehicle to explore the limits of societal norms and those considered to be askew, deviant, or queer.

One such character can be found in Hawthorne’s 1843 short story “The Birthmark.” The story focuses on an accomplished scientist, Aylmer, who leaves the solitude of his laboratory to marry the young and beautiful Georgiana. Soon after they are married, Aylmer becomes increasingly obsessed with a small, red, hand-shaped birthmark on his wife’s cheek. He frequently comments on its imperfection, despite the mark’s attractiveness to other men, and fears it as a symbol of mortality. Georgiana also grows to hate her birthmark, and she becomes increasingly upset about the mark and Aylmer’s reactions to it. Georgiana begs him to remove

the mark, even at the cost of her life, after Aylmer dreams of cutting out the mark from her face and heart. Aylmer then brings Georgiana to his laboratory, which is full of failed experiments to create or prolong life. Aylmer gives his wife a potion that removes the birthmark, but it kills her in the process. From time to time, the narrator intrudes with moral commentary, concluding that Aylmer does not possess the “profounder wisdom” to embrace “the perfect future in the present” (“The Birthmark” 19). Aylmer’s obsessive fixation on his wife’s birthmark, the “tyrannizing influence acquired by one idea over his mind,” and the violence he employs to find peace all fit the definition of monomania (8). This chapter is interested in how Aylmer, like the patients described in the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*, is pathologized as a monomaniac in the story because he displays an absent or abnormal “venereal instinct and love of offspring” (“Anatomical Pathology 3). Thus, we can read Aylmer as a queer figure in the text as opposed to an archetype of the oppressive heterosexual male.<sup>4</sup>

Currently, no scholarship frames “The Birthmark” specifically in terms of monomania; while some critics refer to Aylmer’s “obsession” with the birthmark or to his “obsessive pursuit,” there is no in-depth treatment yet. These passing references to obsession typically center on Aylmer’s pursuit of knowledge and fulfillment of the mad scientist archetype rather than his relationship with Georgiana, whose birthmark is the object of his obsession. For example, scholar Nicholas Bromell positions Aylmer as a mad scientist figure because “in [his] single-minded pursuit of the spiritual, the beautiful, and the immortal, [he] ignore[s], repress[es], or destroy[s] what is beautiful in the human condition of mortality” (Bromell 544). Kary Skredsvig writes that the story “revolves around a major concern of mid-nineteenth century U.S. society, the role of science in humans’ lives” (Skredsvig 99). Aylmer’s obsession with the mark is

---

<sup>4</sup> I suggest reading Aylmer as a queer character, as opposed to a homosexual one, because his rejection of normative sexuality and masculinity do not automatically mean he experiences same-sex attraction; in fact, the text is full of ambiguity with regard to Aylmer’s potential (a)sexuality. “Queer” offers a much more expansive set of possibilities.

reflected in his scientific pursuits, but there needs to be more of a scholarly emphasis on Aylmer's monomania, specifically as it crystalizes his sexuality and gender expression.

If we apply the idea of a "partial lesion" to reading this story, Aylmer's intense obsession with the birthmark and the extreme lengths to which he will go to remove it can coexist with his rational, intellectual side. The narrator consistently refers to Aylmer as a "man of genius" with a "higher intellect"; once Aylmer's obsession appears, he notes that the mark has "taken a pretty firm hold of [his] fancy" ("Birthmark" 14, 5, 7). Aylmer's affect is clearly the afflicted faculty because when he views the mark, he experiences extreme emotional responses: a "convulsive shudder" and intense anxiety (8, 16). Furthermore, early in the story, the narrator describes Aylmer's growing obsession with the mark in terms that echoes Alexander Morison's work on physiognomy, the idea that mental faculties could be determined by facial expression: "Aylmer sat gazing at his wife with a trouble in his countenance that grew until he spoke" (5). In physiognomical terms, Aylmer's troubled face seems to reflect his turbulent emotions regarding the mark.

Crucially, Aylmer *cannot* represent a typical or normal man because by virtue of his monomania, he deviates from the picture of ideal health. Furthermore, his all-consuming obsession causes him to reject Georgiana and the potential of a happy heterosexual marriage. This queerness, both in his desire for areproductive, scientific posterity and in his rejection of normative sexuality, disqualify him from being a paragon of the patriarchy or a fulfillment of a masculine ideal. Instead, the narrator criticizes him for rejecting Georgiana and normative marriage, sexuality, and reproduction. The characterization of Aylmer as a monomaniac pathologizes his queer rejection of Georgiana and all that she, as a heterosexual partner, represents for a normative society. As a corollary, the story proposes a "cure": by following

these norms of sexuality and masculinity, Aylmer could find “the perfect future in the present” (“Birthmark” 19). Thus, the conservative narrator, who upholds social norms, does not wholly condemn Aylmer or indicate his insanity is incurable; instead, the partial lesion of monomania leaves room for cure and reintegration into society through heterosexual attraction and behavior.<sup>5</sup>

This chapter seeks to analyze how Aylmer’s monomania distances him from norms of masculinity and heterosexuality, as well as how the narrator’s criticism reflects a broader medical rhetoric pathologizing queerness. First, I analyze Aylmer’s obsession with and hatred toward the mark--itself a symbol of mortality, sexuality, and menstruation--in terms of his anxieties about heteronormative reproduction. In particular, his failed laboratory experiments exemplify his desire to supplant biological reproduction with scientific control over control life and death. Second, I compare Aylmer with the other male characters in “The Birthmark” and use labor statistics to demonstrate how Aylmer, the “pale philosopher,” deviates from the average man and, by extension, normative masculinity (9). Additionally, his interactions with Georgiana and other men suggest a rejection of heteronormative marriage and possible attempts at homosocial bonding. Finally, I explore references to marble sculpture in the story, the history of sculpture in America, and Hawthorne’s own anxieties about sexuality and art to demonstrate that Aylmer’s treatment of Georgiana as a work of art reinforces his queerness, not his archetypically masculine desire to purify women’s bodies. Throughout, I maintain that the narrator, who harshly criticizes Aylmer’s obsession and actions, serves as a voice of normative expectations for gender, sexuality and marriage in the 19th century--standards that Aylmer does not fulfill.

---

<sup>5</sup> Of course, the narrator’s idea of a cure is problematic, as it predates contemporary ideas that homosexuality can be “cured” through various therapies, tortures, or conversions. Still, the idea that aberrant sexuality could be reformed evokes the goal of Foucauldian biopolitics: to manage, rather than kill.

### Abortive Experiments: Co-Opting Heteronormative Reproduction

A discussion of Aylmer's monomaniacal obsession must begin with understanding the multiple layers of symbolic meaning attached to the mark. The birthmark has strong connotations of mortality, sexuality, and reproduction; the former interpretation is provided by the narrator, while the latter readings stem from feminist scholarship on "The Birthmark." I argue that we can and should synthesize these readings; doing so shows that Aylmer's obsession with the mark, and all its attendant symbolic resonances, actually reveals anxieties about heterosexual marriage and reproduction. Furthermore, Aylmer's pathology and unhappy fate reveal the deep conservatism of the narrator, who considers queer desire or the rejection of sexual and family norms to be aberrant—but potentially reformable.

One way to interpret the birthmark is as a representation of Georgiana's sexuality. For instance, Georgiana's birthmark appears "very soon after their marriage" and is like "a crimson stain upon the snow" ("Birthmark" 1-2). This language evokes the marital expectation of a sexual relationship between husband and wife, and the language of stained snow evokes a passage from Isaiah 1:18: "saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." Evoking Old Testament verses about sin in conjunction with Georgiana's red birthmark suggests that in Aylmer's eyes, sexuality is sinful and should be rejected in favor of a sexless, colorless relationship. Furthermore, when Georgiana blushes—an action associated with emotion or sexual arousal—the birthmark becomes less pronounced; when she pales, it stands out even more against her white skin (2). White could represent virginity, sexual purity, and girlhood, while red might symbolize desire, sexual encounters, and womanhood. Notably, Aylmer, who is also associated

with a kind of desexualized paleness, wants to rid his wife of this one trace of color, symbolizing a removal of her sexuality and any responsibility he might feel for consummating his marriage.

Other evidence for the mark as a symbol of sexuality comes when the narrator explains the different responses to the mark from Georgiana's youthful suitors and from her husband. To Georgiana's suitors, the mark is desirable, exotic, and almost magical, whereas to Aylmer, it is repellent. The narrator emphasizes these last two descriptions by referring to the "smallest pygmy size" of the hand-shaped mark, further noting, "Georgiana's lovers were wont to say that some fairy at her birth hour had laid her tiny hand upon the infant's cheek . . . in token of the magic endowments that were to give her such sway over all hearts" (6). These suitors seem eager for "the privilege of pressing [their] lips to the mysterious hand," and their attraction specifically to the mark suggests that for many men, the mark is attractive, almost magnetic. Much of Georgiana's desirableness as a potential sexual partner is specifically bound to her red birthmark. Unlike the suitors, Aylmer is completely repulsed by the mark; whenever he looks at the hand, Aylmer experiences a "convulsive shudder" and his "spirit recoil[s]" (10, 18). It is telling that Aylmer's obsessive hatred of Georgiana's mark only begins *after* they are married (and, presumably, expected to consummate the marriage). Aylmer's monomania takes hold, suggesting a powerful correlation between Aylmer's anxieties about heterosexual encounters and the partial lesion of his fancy.

Feminist scholars interpret Aylmer's rejection of the mark and of Georgiana's sexuality as a cruel irony: men who cannot sexually possess women pursue them relentlessly, but once they succeed, the woman is tainted in some way. They further argue that because Aylmer hates and attempts to eliminate the mark, as a symbol of sexuality, he is representative of hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal subjugation of women's bodies. For them, a man's obsession with a



woman's body is dangerous: for example, Esther A. López criticizes Aylmer's "obsessive mania" of controlling Georgiana and mastering her body (López 24). Judith Fetterley views Aylmer's desire to erase the birthmark as a fulfillment of the patriarchal "great American dream of eliminating women" (Fetterley 1). Jennifer Putzi also interprets Aylmer as an oppressive character, embodying the idea that "white men have the right to the 'conquering gaze' that interprets, subdues, and ultimately erases those female bodies that happen to be marked" (Putzi 85). Every feminist treatment of "The Birthmark" views Aylmer as the paragon of destructive normative masculinity, with Georgiana as the misogyny-internalizing victim. In other words, Aylmer's supposed desire to control Georgiana's body, and its fatal conclusion, indicate that he is a typical or normative male figure in the story, allegedly representative of other 19<sup>th</sup>-century men and their desire to control women. My interpretation of the mark shares common ground with these critics: the mark *is* a symbol of Georgiana's sexuality. However, counter to their claims that Aylmer's hatred of the mark correlates to his patriarchal hatred of women, I contend that Aylmer's intense obsession with and revulsion towards the mark, especially in light of the other suitor's attraction to it, actually causes him to reject compulsory heterosexuality and reproduction altogether. Thus, his monomania marks him as deviant from the heterosexual norm of masculinity, not as representative of it.

In addition, we can read the mark as a symbol of menstruation and, by extension, reproductive capability; this view dovetails with the interpretation of the mark as a symbol of sexuality. Although not all heterosexual sex is necessarily reproductive, the emphasis on the mark as a *birthmark* reflects Aylmer's anxieties about sex and reproduction, enacted on the site of Georgiana's body. In the story, Georgiana's mark is most explicitly related to menstruation through associations with blood: the "bloody hand" only disappears when she blushes in a

“triumphant rush of blood” (6). More abstractly, Georgiana’s mark threatens Aylmer’s scientific attempts to create life; when she walks into his lab, he grabs her and exclaims, “Would you throw the blight of that fatal birthmark over my labors?” (16). Obviously, the word “labors” evokes images of birth, but in this case, the woman is absent and unwelcome, implying that his experiments are a way to supplant heterosexual reproduction.

Jules Zanger, who argues that Aylmer’s disturbance about the mark post-marriage has roots in Hawthorne’s own recent marriage, further connects the mark with menstruation by first quoting an excerpt of Pliny’s *Natural History* that describes the blighting effects of menstrual blood, then arguing that Aylmer enacts the idea that menstruating women are unclean. He writes, “Aylmer isolates Georgiana in a ‘magic circle,’ cut off from the light of day and from social interaction until her ‘imperfection’ is cured. . . . The particularizing of Georgiana’s ‘imperfection’ by the image of a ‘crimson stain’ is linked to Hawthorne’s response to the menstrual aspect of woman’s biological life” (Zanger 369). For Zanger, Aylmer’s revulsion towards the mark represents typical male surprise about menstruation and rejection of the “unclean” menstruating woman. While reading of the mark as representative of menstruation and reproductive potential is helpful, I again argue that Aylmer’s revulsion towards the mark is less about Georgiana’s perceived uncleanness than his own aversion to reproduction because the mark is *also* associated with her sexuality and attractiveness. Instead of having children, he tries to create posterity through the “labors” of his scientific experiments, though he always fails to leave a permanent mark. When Georgiana intrudes on his laboratory, for instance, Aylmer grabs his wife, and his grip leaves “the print of his fingers” on Georgiana’s arm, creating a secondary red, hand-shaped mark (“Birthmark” 16). This act could be read as a replication of the symbol for reproduction, but removing the traditional means of achieving progeny through sex and

woman's childbearing. Still, the fading of his phantom hand indicates that any attempt to break away from heteroreproductive norms will not endure; this transience could be the narrator's comment on the futility of rejecting heteronormative values of marriage, sex, and reproduction.

Finally, the birthmark can operate at yet another level of symbolism: a reminder of mortality. According to the narrator, Aylmer hates and fears the mark because it is a "symbol of his wife's liability to sin, sorrow, decay, and death" (2). To this end, the story frequently employs imagery of death: the mark is a "spectral hand that wrote mortality" (2), there are frequent instances of sleep or fainting, and Aylmer is described as deathly pale when viewing the mark or working in his lab. We can read the mark-as-memento-mori and the mark as a symbol of Georgiana's sexuality, menstruation, and reproductive potential simultaneously, which illuminates the queer potential for understanding Aylmer as a monomaniac. Aylmer's monomaniacal obsession shifts the hand on Georgiana's cheek from a *birthmark* to a harbinger of death, indicating that his vehement rejection of it is abnormal and inverts the "natural" order of language, interpretation, and husband-wife interaction. Aylmer's hatred of the mark even takes on religious undertones when he considers it "the fatal flaw of humanity" and "the ineludible grip in which mortality clutches the highest and purest of earthly mould" (6). Given the connections between the mark and female sexuality and reproduction, these Edenic allusions—and the way Aylmer conflates the mark with sin—point to monomania as the cause for Aylmer's rejection of *the* archetypal husband-father role. Connecting Aylmer's anxieties about sex, reproduction, and death is not difficult. For traditional families, children represent a symbolic immortality, carrying the parents' genes and teachings and passing them down in turn. However, Aylmer's monomania causes him to imagine the mark as a symbol of his own unhappiness, decline, and mortality, synonymous with societal expectations to produce

biological progeny. Possibly, the thought of participating in heterosexual reproduction feels like a death in itself to Aylmer. Therefore, controlling a symbol of death might replace the need for the “immortality” of having children; thus, for Aylmer, science represents a way forward for areproductive posterity.

Aylmer’s desire to co-opt reproduction is critiqued by the narrator’s description of his studies and experiments. After describing the scientist’s interest in geological and biological sciences, the narrator notes Aylmer’s primary frustration: “our great creative Mother . . . is severely careful to keep her own secrets and, in spite of her pretended openness, shows us nothing but results. She permits us, indeed, to mar, but seldom to mend, and . . . on no account to make” (9). In order to replace heterosexual reproduction, Aylmer wants to control and understand the creative capabilities of a feminine power—Mother Nature—in order to areproductively supplant it. When Georgiana enters her husband’s laboratory, she discovers several experiments that have one thing in common: they represent Aylmer’s failures to create, capture, or prolong life, let alone “lay his hand on the secret of creative force” in his laboratory (5). Through his scientific experiments, Aylmer attempts to co-opt traditional heterosexual reproduction and replace children with areproductive posterity. The narrator, who upholds traditional sexual and gender norms and who blames Aylmer’s monomania for his unhappiness, frames these experiments in succession and highlights their failures, implicitly condemning any attempt to break away from the “correct” mode of reproduction.

Aylmer’s experiments can be roughly broken into three categories: reviving the faint, creating an ethereal semblance of life, and trying to create life. In each instance, the narrator highlights Aylmer failure to manipulate life, suggesting that his monomaniacal pursuit to eliminate his wife’s birthmark—and, by symbolic extension, her sexuality and reproductive

capabilities—renders him impotent. Upon seeing Aylmer’s revulsion at the birthmark, for example, Georgiana passes out, and Aylmer’s incense “recall[s] her from her deathlike faintness”; she awakens in a room so grand that “it might be a pavilion among the clouds” (10). Georgiana’s revival from a “deathlike” state places Aylmer, her reviver, in an all-powerful, godlike position; the description of his room as heavenly and palatial reinforces the ties between Aylmer and the heavenly. Aylmer’s constant association with the ethereal and the intellectual, as opposed to “normal” male characters’ earthiness, reinforces his removal from normative sexuality and reproduction.

Still, this brief godlike comparison is undermined when Aylmer tries to show off his “power” over life and death through his other experiments. Although Aylmer does not express interest in producing children, his “labors” in the laboratory create a celestial semblance of life. He shows Georgiana “airy figures, absolutely bodiless ideas” who dance for her, “imprinting their momentary footsteps on beams of light” (11). Like himself, Aylmer’s creations are associated with the ethereal, made of the same substance as he. In particular, the “bodiless ideas” indicate that through his monomania and the “partial lesion” on his affect, the intellectual Aylmer rejects the body and its desires, including heterosexual desire. The emphasis on the beings’ transience could also point to the prevailing medical idea of the time that monomania could be cured; if that were the case, Aylmer’s monomania is temporary and he could return to his “acceptable” masculinity by embracing his wife. After showing Georgiana the dancing figures, he projects “scenery and the figures of actual life” onto a screen; these optical illusions almost make Georgiana believe that “her husband possess[es] sway over the spiritual world” (11). In both cases, Aylmer creates a semblance or shadow of real life but fails to actually replicate it. Despite his best attempts, Aylmer is only really capable of creating temporary

representations of life, and his obsessive attempts to manipulate “actual” life prove disastrous. The narrator’s condemnation of the fatal obsession emphasizes the queerness of Aylmer’s monomania, and the underlying promise of a cure looks ahead to how 20<sup>th</sup>-century medicine specifically pathologized non-normative sexual desires.<sup>6</sup>

The next experiment is an instance of failed replication, which actually seems to be “successful” insofar as Aylmer’s monomania drives him to create life areproductively and, barring that, reject reproduction altogether. He shows his wife a small pot of soil that contains a phoenix-like plant, quickly growing, blooming, and withering; at Aylmer’s insistence, Georgiana touches it, and the flower blackens in the “abortive experiment” (11). The word “abortive” contains deep significance for Aylmer’s anxieties about reproduction and frames this experiment as a potential success in light of his mission to co-opt or eliminate heterosexual reproduction. The plant, which mimics the cycle of life and death that is central to the narrative of reproduction, is solely Aylmer’s creation, but when Georgiana comes into physical contact with it, it dies. Even though the narrator frames this encounter as a failed experiment, Aylmer creates an experiment that renders Georgiana (and her touch) abortive. Instead of failure, this experiment could be understood as a success for Aylmer, since his obsession drives him to create a world that eliminates or aborts reproduction.

After the flower dies so dramatically, Aylmer takes a crude daguerreotype of his wife, but this too fails: the portrait is “blurred and indefinable,” and “the figure of a hand appeared where the cheek should have been” (12). This experiment is less about creating actual life than “fixing” it in time and trying to preserve it, but his attempt to make Georgiana’s image static only results in reminding him of mortality, as evidenced by the prominent mark. If he were successful in

---

<sup>6</sup> It is also ironic that the narrator pathologizes Aylmer and indicates that his monomaniacal obsession could be cured, when it is Aylmer who thinks he is “curing” Georgiana of her birthmark.

making her static, rendering her a piece of art instead of a flesh-and-blood woman, then Aylmer would be free of the pressure to reproduce with his wife. Instead, his experiment just reflects his greatest source of anxiety and hatred back at him, reminding him of his own mortality and, symbolically, the expectation of defeating mortality through reproduction. At every turn, Aylmer's attempts to control death or manipulate life fall short, indicating the futility of queer reproduction in a society that maintains rigid expectations for masculinity and marriage.

The section on Aylmer's failed experiments comprises a significant part of the text, highlighting the narrator's harsh judgment of Aylmer's attempts to replace reproduction with scientific control over life and death. For the narrator, the scientist's monomaniacal obsession and experiments are aberrant and threaten the established order of heterosexuality and the perpetuation of society through reproduction. "Had Aylmer reached a profounder wisdom," the narrator argues in the story's conclusion, "he need not thus have flung away the happiness which would have woven his mortal life of the selfsame texture with the celestial" (19). Here, the diagnosis of monomania offers a reparative solution to deviant sexuality: if Aylmer had embraced his wife's mark—and, symbolically, her sexuality and reproductive capability—then he might have found happiness in heterosexual structures of desire and family.

#### Desperate Swains and Men of Clay: Aylmer's Deviance from Normative Masculinity

Throughout "The Birthmark," the narrator highlights and criticizes Aylmer's failures at creating reproductive posterity, pathologizing his monomania as a way to critique his aversion to heteronormative expectations. Furthermore, the story establishes that his monomaniacal obsession distances him from traditional standards of masculinity, in terms of his essence, obsession, and desire. For instance, Aylmer's alienation from normative masculinity is reflected

in the narrator's descriptions of him as intellectual, ethereal, and godlike, as opposed to the more physical and sexually aggressive men in the story. This section aims to trace the story's sense of typical masculinity and how Aylmer deviates from that norm, in appearance, in attraction, and in behavior.

First, it is worthwhile to examine what the story considers to be normal male-female interaction, as evidenced by the brief mentions of Georgiana's other suitors and Aylmer's assistant Aminadab. Early in the story, the narrator describes Georgiana's "sway over all hearts" of men. For these suitors, Georgiana's hand-shaped mark is a "magic endowment" placed by a "fairy at her birth hour," indicating that these men see her sexuality as a powerful, magical, magnetic force (6). By contrast, women react much more negatively to the birthmark, describing it as a "bloody hand" that mars Georgiana's beauty and "render[s] her countenance even hideous" (6). These divergent descriptions reflect the differences in sexuality between the two (presumably heterosexual) groups of observers, but it raises complications for Aylmer. If Georgiana and her birthmark are attractive to these "masculine observers," then Aylmer's hatred of the mark places him apart from the masculine majority and closer to the feminine. His repulsion could indicate shock at encountering menstruation in a relationship for the first time, as Jules Zanger claims, or a masculine desire for a perfect woman, as many others argue. However, I argue that Aylmer should be read as moving *away* from ideal of heterosexual masculinity because unlike the other men who encounter Georgiana, he does not desire her.

Two kisses between Georgiana and Aylmer roughly bookend the text and emphasize Aylmer's atypical expressions of sexuality. After he dreams of literally cutting the birthmark out of his wife's face and agreeing with Georgiana's pleas to remove it, Aylmer chastely kisses her on the cheek--but not the one bearing the birthmark (9). This is the first description of intimacy



between the married couple: sleep and the marriage bed are poisoned by violent dreams, and “all the seasons which should have been their happiest, he invariably . . . reverted to this one disastrous topic [the mark]”(7). Throughout the story, Aylmer cannot even look at his wife’s mark without viscerally shuddering, and he only kisses her unblemished cheek, indicating that even in their most intimate moments, he symbolically rejects her sexuality and reproductive capabilities.

The other kiss, however, holds far more interesting significance for interpreting Aylmer as a queer figure in “The Birthmark.” When Georgiana drinks the fatal potion and falls into a deep sleep, Aylmer observes her mark and shudders, just as before, but then “once, by a strange and unaccountable impulse he pressed it with his lips” (18). Even though he is repulsed directly afterwards, the decision to kiss the birthmark is anomalous from his previous disgust. But Aylmer does not find happiness by embracing the mark, his wife, or the expectations of reproduction within marriage; even after attempting to embrace these things, he recoils. Notably, the birthmark disappears and Georgiana dies directly after this episode, raising the question of whether the potion or the kiss kills her. Most would point to the potion, but it is significant that once Aylmer embraces, but ultimately rejects, the symbol of mortality and reproduction, Georgiana is rendered superfluous and literally disappears from the narrative. The narrator criticizes Aylmer for discarding “the happiness which would have woven his mortal life . . . with the celestial,” indicating that embracing his wife and normative masculinity would have brought transcendent happiness (19). However, the brief kiss indicates that even when Aylmer tries to participate in norms of heterosexual intimacy, his “spirit recoil[s]” and cannot find joy in the act (18).

One could also interpret the second kiss as a way to figuratively inhabit the space of Georgiana's suitors, who embrace the mark, and, in doing so, feel an indirect eroticized connection with them. Adopting Eve Sedgwick's idea of homosociality, I argue that Aylmer's second kiss could be read as an attempt to attain homosocial bonds with those suitors through Georgiana's mediating body. Sedgwick uses René Girard's ideas of the erotic triangle as a foundation to explore how "the bond that links two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved" (Sedgwick 21). Even though the lovers are likely strangers to Aylmer and the rival relationship is never explored in depth, the early competition between the men for Georgiana's affections qualify them as rivals. While Aylmer is repulsed by the mark, his kiss is a way to connect and identify with the men who are attracted to it. Other parts of the story describe Aylmer's obsession with removing the mark as a secret that should be hidden, one that provokes guilt; these descriptions resemble the guilt or shame associated with being a sexually "closeted" individual. The presence of homosocial desire and the "secrets that perchance belong to a deeper [life]" ("The Birthmark" 7) hint that Aylmer may not just reject heterosexuality, but also experience homosexual desire.

In addition to the suitors, Aylmer's assistant, Aminadab, offers another example of normative masculinity that Aylmer does not fulfill. For one, Aminadab resembles Georgiana's suitors much more than Aylmer does: in the lab, he "mutter[s] to himself, 'If she were my wife, I'd never part with that birthmark'" (10). Like the "desperate swains," who are aligned with masculinity and heterosexual desire, Aminadab views Georgiana's mark as desirable and, presumably, would not shy away from the expected responsibilities of marriage and reproduction to which Aylmer is subjected. Beyond their divergent responses, Aylmer and Aminadab seem to be composed of totally different substances. The narrator explicitly establishes a mind/body

binary between Aylmer and his assistant: “With his vast strength, his shaggy hair, his smoky aspect, and the indescribable earthiness that encrusted him, he seemed to represent man’s physical nature; while Aylmer’s slender figure and pale, intellectual face, were no less apt a type of the spiritual element” (10). Whereas Aylmer is aligned with the intellectual and spiritual, Aminadab is aligned with the physical and manual. Unlike Aylmer, who is a “spirit *burdened* with clay,” Aminadab is called a “man *of* clay,” indicating that their fundamental natures are radically divergent (14, 15, italics mine).

If Aminadab’s attraction to Georgiana indicates that he is more traditionally masculine than Aylmer, then his physical description also resembles the norm for men of the time. As discussed below, most men of the time were agricultural laborers; Aminadab’s “earthiness” evokes the soil tilled by those workers. His “shaggy hair” potentially represents the growing trend of hairy men; according to a history of facial hair in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “Men in the 1830s, and even more so in the 1840s, cultivated bushy sideburns” and other fashions (Oldstone-Moore 10). Additionally, the narrator’s description of Aminadab as a “man of clay” alludes to the archetypal Biblical man, Adam, and attendant associations with heterosexuality. By contrast, Aylmer’s pale, slim body physically differentiates him from a typical man’s appearance, mirroring his emotional and sexual deviance from normative masculine expectations. Attitudes of the time also suggest that pale men were perceived as lesser men precisely because they were farther from their physical nature. In an analysis of 19<sup>th</sup>-century discourse on physical education, for example, Roberta J. Park quotes an 1826 volume of *American Annals of Education* that correlates masculinity and “the preservation of the animal system”: “The time we hope is near when . . . literary men shall cease to be distinguished by a pallid countenance and wasted body” (Park 15). If physical exercise is the prescription to counter weakness and paleness, then it

follows that Aminadab, who is aligned with the physical, would exemplify an ideal man rather than Aylmer, the “pale philosopher.”

Aminadab’s status as a manual laborer, a “human machine,” places him with the majority of working men in the early 19th century (“Birthmark” 15). According to census estimates and labor statistics provided by the National Bureau of Economic Research, the majority of laborers in the 19th century were engaged in agricultural work--in fact, that number would not drop below 50 percent until 1880 or so. In 1830, 70.5% of the nearly four million laborers in the United States were in the agricultural sector; by 1840, the total number of laborers increased to five and a half million, but the percentage of farm workers remained relatively the same, at 68.6% (US Census Bureau 63). Those not working in agriculture were likely still manual laborers of some kind, working in the growing industrial or railroad industries. Employment in non-manual labor, such as trade or academia, was comparatively rare. In terms of labor, then, Aylmer is removed from the majority of male laborers and the attendant expectations of masculinity, desire, and family. Aylmer’s fundamental “otherness” from normal men in terms of labor, substance, and reproductive desire reinforces the way that his monomaniacal obsession with the birthmark transforms him into a deviant or queer figure.

#### “No Longer a Naked Animal”: Sculpture, Sexuality, and Queerness

Art offers another way to interpret Aylmer's monomania or "partial lesion" as a queering force that repels him from heteronormative expectations of attraction, sexuality, and reproduction. In the story, Georgiana is frequently compared to a marble statue. For instance, the narrator describes the vividness of the mark on the “marble paleness of Georgiana’s cheek,” adding that it stands out “like a bas-relief of ruby on the whitest marble” (“Birthmark” 18, 7).

More specifically, the narrator compares Georgiana to two major works of art: Hiram Powers' *Eve Tempted* and Pygmalion's carved woman. When discussing jealous women who think the mark mars her beauty, the narrator comments, "It would be as reasonable to say that one of those small blue stains which sometimes occur in the purest statuary marble would convert the Eve of Powers to a monster" (6). Later, when Aylmer reveals his plan to eliminate the mark, he exclaims, "I shall have corrected what Nature left imperfect in her fairest work! Even Pygmalion, when his sculptured woman assumed life, felt not greater ecstasy than mine will be" (9). Critical conversations about "The Birthmark" point to Aylmer's frequent comparisons of Georgiana to a marble sculpture as further evidence of his trying to create an "ideal woman," much the same as Powers, Pygmalion, or other sculptors did in their figures. However, the descriptions of Georgiana as a cold, white marble statue could be interpreted as a mark of Aylmer's *aversion* to female sexuality--indeed, the aesthetic allusions to Greek mythology and classic sculpture also evoke same-sex desire. Instead of reading these sculptural comparisons as an aestheticization of an "ideal woman," these comparisons serve to distance Aylmer from his wife and from normative masculinity. Exploring the story's connections to marble sculpture and art featuring abandoned women further emphasizes Aylmer's alienation from traditional norms of heterosexuality.

Very few critics have written extensively about Hawthorne's references to sculpture in "The Birthmark." The vast majority of those who mention the descriptions of Georgiana as a white marble statue do so briefly to emphasize their reading of Aylmer's mission as an archetypal patriarchal mission to subdue and perfect women's bodies. In their interpretation, Georgiana is just another aestheticized object to be controlled and shaped by a domineering male "genius" figure, and her paleness is read as an ideal standard of sexual purity that the red

birthmark mars. For instance, John Lammers argues that Aylmer “treats his wife as a thing to be perfected . . . [by] favorably comparing a statue to Georgiana” and reads the comparison to Powers’ *Eve Tempted* as a desire for a physically and spiritually unblemished woman, simultaneously attractive and chaste (Lammers 42). Many feminist scholars echo these sentiments, calling Aylmer’s supposed mission to perfect Georgiana dangerous. For instance, Judith Fetterley conflates the mark with Georgiana’s body and sexuality; her argument can best be summarized by her witty syllogism, “What repels Aylmer is Georgiana’s sexuality; what is imperfect in her is the fact that she is female; and what perfection means is elimination.” (Fetterley 24). Esther Alvarez López connects the sculptural references to patriarchal ideals for women: “In order for Georgiana not to turn from an ‘Eve of Powers’ into ‘a monster,’ she must be physically and spiritually unblemished . . . if she is to be valued as a true, flawless woman” (López 28). However, none of these critics account for the possibility of monomania, of abnormality or deviance, in Aylmer’s interactions with his wife. Further, the story’s narrator, who could be read a stand-in for Hawthorne or readers holding mainstream, traditional values, harshly judges Aylmer’s obsession and actions over the course of the story.

Hawthorne’s own notebooks from his travels in France and Italy further emphasize the reading of Georgiana-as-statue as a marker of Aylmer’s distance from normative sexuality. Although Hawthorne journeyed to Europe in 1858, long after he wrote “The Birthmark” in 1843, he clearly was aware of the growing neoclassical resurgence in American sculpture in the 1830s and ‘40s. He frequently toured the Boston Athenaeum in his hometown, which featured “American sculptural works produced abroad in the European neoclassical tradition” from 1839 onwards (Ferne 1). Even his allusion to Hiram Powers’ *Eve Tempted* in “The Birthmark” reveals his knowledge of the famous artists of the day: Powers was elected to Boston’s academy in 1841

for *Eve*, even though the statue, cast in Florence, didn't even tour the United States until 1851. Hawthorne's later accounts of his travels through Europe reveals his pleasurable enjoyment of art and sculpture but also his distaste for both nude and tinted sculptures.

Hawthorne's critiques of nudes and colored statues reveals anxieties about sexuality and propriety in relation to art, which are echoed in Aylmer's treatment of Georgiana. Frequently, in his journals Hawthorne expressed concerns about the need for nudity in sculpture, favoring clothed or "chaste" figures. For instance, upon viewing a sculpture of Eve in a friend's Italian studio, he criticized the figure's "poor nudity" and the "frightful volume of thighs and calves," concluding: "I do not altogether see the necessity of ever sculpting another nakedness. Man is no longer a naked animal; his clothes are as natural to him as his skin, and sculptors have no more right to undress him than to flay him" (*Notebooks* 171). This quote is representative of multiple critiques of nude statues in the *Notebooks* and reflects Hawthorne's contempt for overexposed figures. The only nude that Hawthorne seems to exalt is the Venus de Medici, which depicts the goddess of love as a marble-white woman with curly hair and a placid expression in the act of modestly covering herself with her hands. Hawthorne's notebook entry from June 11th heaps ecstatic praise upon the statue, criticizing other works in the process: "I mean no disrespect to Gibson or Powers, or a hundred other men who people the world with nudities, all of which are abortions as compared with her; but I think the world would be all the richer if their Venuses, their Greek Slaves, their Eves, were burnt into quicklime" (302). Hawthorne's praise of the statue indicates his aversion to highly sexualized sculpted figures--tellingly, he contrasts the "tender and chaste" Venus de Medici with Titian's "naked and lustful" painting of Venus in the same room (292).

More than that, Hawthorne's particular description of the statue has substantial thematic connections to "The Birthmark." Referring to nude sculptures as "abortions," rather than objects of desire or representations of sexuality, evokes a strong association with failed reproduction and recalls Aylmer's "abortive experiment[s]" in which he attempts to create posterity through science rather than reproduction. In particular, the allusions to Powers and Gibson hold great significance for Aylmer's treatment of Georgiana. Notably, Hawthorne directly compares Georgiana not to Venus but to the "Eve of Powers" ("Birthmark" 6), an "abortion" compared to the white, chaste Venus de Medici. Furthermore, the mark of color on Georgiana's face could be compared to Gibson's tinted sculpture of Venus, another "abortion." This critical comparison between these statues and Georgiana indicates not a desire to perfect or purify women, as many have argued, but rather a tendency to react to sexualized female figures with anxiety and revulsion. Furthermore, the word "abortions" in relation to the nude denies both sexuality and reproduction, replacing these nude replications with "chaste" or absent figures. Hawthorne's comment about dissolving these statues into quicklime also evokes the dissolution of the corporeal, the killing of bodies and their physical representations. Aylmer's frequent association with the intellectual, the ethereal, and the noncorporeal, as well as his desire to eliminate the *birthmark* and reject heterosexual reproduction, echo this provocative imagery.

Hawthorne's preference for chasteness and propriety extended to his views on the use of color in neoclassical sculpture. In his notebooks, he agrees with Hiram Powers' assertion that "whiteness [in marble] removed the object represented into sort of a spiritual region, and so gave chaste permission to those nudities which would otherwise be licentious. I myself have felt the truth of this in a certain sense of shame as I looked at Gibson's tinted Venus" (286). Whiteness serves as a distancing tool from sexuality and perceived impropriety for Hawthorne. In this



instance, the whiteness of marble abstracts the sculpture from an actual nude body, enough to shut down an eroticized response in the viewer. In his encounters with the work of American sculptor John Gibson, Hawthorne critiqued the practice of tinting white marble statues, arguing that it made the nude sculptures too lifelike and sexual. In particular, he was enthralled and repulsed by Gibson's marble statue of Venus, whose eyes, hair, and skin were lightly tinted. The lifelike appearance shocked viewers; no longer was this nude figure abstracted through cold marble whiteness. Hawthorne, who feels a "certain sense of shame" when he beholds the statue, further comments on the role of color in infusing the marble with sexuality:

I must say, there was something fascinating and delectable in the warm, yet delicate tint of the beautiful nude Venus, although I should have preferred to dispense with the coloring of the eyes and hair . . . this lascivious warmth of hue quite demoralizes the chastity of the marble, and makes one feel ashamed to look at the naked limbs in the company of women. (150)

For Hawthorne, an ideal encounter with sculpture would be an intellectual, aestheticized one that placed chaste beauty on display rather than sexual desire—and, notably, an encounter that occurs with no women present. This adherence to some standard of propriety extends to color: the cold, white marble distances viewers from warm-blooded desire, especially in regard to the female sculpted objects. Indirectly, Hawthorne's anxieties about sexuality and art relate to Aylmer's similar anxieties about Georgiana's appearance and desirability in "The Birthmark"—namely, his repulsion towards her marble statue-like appearance. Whereas other scholars interpret Hawthorne's ambivalence towards colored statues as a rejection of modernity, as a metaphor for artistic production, or as inflected with subtle racial critique (Staley 131-136), I want to focus on the productive connections between colored sculpture, sexual desire, and anxiety in "The Birthmark," particularly as it pertains to Aylmer's monomaniacal obsession.

By comparing Georgiana to a marble statue, Aylmer may further express his queerness. Aylmer's hatred of the red birthmark, coupled with the frequent allusions to his wife's paleness, echo Hawthorne's discomfort with the inherent eroticism of tinted marble. At several points in the text, Georgiana is compared to a white marble statue; when she pales, her mark stands out "like a bas-relief of ruby on the whitest marble" ("Birthmark" 7). Aylmer's obsession with the (dis)coloration of Georgiana's birthmark--and the suffusion of life and sexuality it provides--points to his aversion to heterosexual desire. Like Hawthorne viewing Gibson's tinted Venus, Aylmer's experience with Georgiana's red mark is marked by negative emotions: fear, disgust, and, to a certain extent, shame. His "ideal woman" is not a sexually attractive and reproductively viable one, but a cold, colorless, desexualized marble woman. Consequently, Aylmer's monomaniacal obsession with removing the mark could be read not as a patriarchal desire to conquer and sexualize his wife's body, but instead as the exact opposite: a desire to evacuate heterosexual attraction and reproduction.

Furthermore, the allusions to Greek mythology and neoclassical white marble sculpture could reveal a connection between Aylmer and homosexual desire. Although, on a broader level, "the nation's political need to be identified with the [Greek and Roman] origins of democracy was reflected aesthetically in its emulation of classical art," the connections to Greek and Roman society may also have been infused with an awareness of homosexual behavior in antiquity (Ferne 23). Indeed, Aylmer compares himself to Pygmalion when thinking about the "triumph" of "correct[ing] what Nature left imperfect" in Georgiana ("The Birthmark" 8-9). However, Aylmer is an inverted Pygmalion figure: instead of suffusing his sculpture with life and sexual attractiveness, he kills his wife, converting her "deathlike" paleness to a permanent state of death (10). By invoking and then inverting the Pygmalion myth, Hawthorne deploys Greek mythology

to reinforce Aylmer's rejection of normative heterosexuality. However, despite the connections to classical sculpture and mythology in "The Birthmark," Hawthorne may not have consciously tied these references to homoeroticism. Scholar Leland S. Person notes that during the 18th and 19th centuries, taste in sculpture changed and reoriented "the male gaze and its significance," especially in relation to sculpted male objects: "preferences for male nudes gave way before preferences for female nudes . . . at the same time that proscriptions against homoerotic behavior . . . increased" (Person 110). He echoes Henry James' critique of Hawthorne's experience with statues to suggest that Hawthorne exhibited an "early form of homosexual panic" (111), which may be echoed in the narrator's criticism of Aylmer's monomania.

The narrator, whose harsh judgment of Aylmer's obsession and actions reifies heteroreproductive norms, critiques Aylmer's rejection of the mark specifically using sculptural language. Directly after discussing the "desperate swains" and "masculine observers" who are attracted to the mark, the narrator excoriates Aylmer's view of the birthmark as a flaw: "it would be as reasonable to say that one of those small blue stains which sometimes occur in the purest statuary marble would convert the Eve of Powers to a monster" (6). For the narrator, it is reasonable and normal to view Georgiana, as "naturally" marked as blue-veined marble, as sexually desirable, just as the other men in the story do. However, Aylmer rejects these norms by obsessing over the mark and plotting its removal, thereby removing any symbolic trace of life and sexuality from his wife's body and leaving her as sexually non-threatening as possible. Instead of embracing his wife, with all of her warmth and color, he prefers a cold, pale, marble-like woman. By framing Aylmer as a monomaniac obsessed with eliminating his wife's sexuality and potential for reproduction, the narrator pathologizes queer rejection of heterosexual desire and reproduction as aberrant, irrational, and perhaps even dangerous to the propagation of the

American population. Like Hawthorne's vehement rejection of Gibson's tinted Venus, Aylmer sexualizes the trace of color on Georgiana's cheek; ultimately, both men desire to eliminate the color and therefore the response. Because Aylmer and Hawthorne share similar anxieties over nude women expressed through aesthetic experiences with sculpture, the socially conservative narrator cannot be so easily read as a stand-in for Hawthorne. Like Aylmer, Hawthorne is neither securely heteronormative *or* queer; the latter shares Aylmer's objection to sexualized statues like Power's *Eve* even as he reproduces it in the text through Georgiana. This connection further complicates a discussion of monomania in American literature and demonstrates the possibilities for multiple and complex interpretations of monomaniacal characters in both their pathology and their potential for reform.

### “A Wild Fanaticism”: Monomania and the Figure of John Brown

In the late 1850s, at the advent of the Civil War, the political rhetoric of slavery and abolition was highly contentious, and ideological opponents were sometimes labeled as monomaniacs for their political beliefs. Far from dismissing those individuals as uniformly crazy, these rhetoricians maintained the “partial lesion” understanding of monomania that left room for reason and reform. No figure was as contentious—and perhaps so pathologized—as John Brown. Brown, a passionate abolitionist, was already known for his leadership of anti-slavery militias in Kansas during the 1850s in what came to be known as “Bleeding Kansas.” However, he is most known for his incursions into the slaveholding South: on October 16, 1859, Brown led a small group of men to raid a federal armory in Harpers Ferry, Virginia, hoping to incite slaves to join him and fight for their freedom. In response, President Buchanan ordered Marines to retake the armory; they did so by October 18<sup>th</sup>, arresting Brown and his conspirators. Although the raid was a failure (compared to Brown’s liberatory mission, anyway), the psychological impact of the raid in the nation, already strained from tensions over slavery, cannot be understated.

The reactions to John Brown’s actions stemmed from a culture that more broadly used monomania as a rhetorical tactic to discredit political opponents on both sides of the slavery debate. Southern writers who wanted to preserve the institution of slavery positioned the desire to free slaves as totally deviant, targeting abolitionist activists and politicians as monomaniacs. Periodicals offer the greatest insight to these contentious debates. For instance, an 1832 article from *The Philanthropist* notes that Samuel Hanson Cox, a minister and prominent abolitionist, was critiqued specifically as a monomaniac for his anti-slavery ideas. The writer notes that “his avowal of abolition” sparked “accredited rumors of his monomania and insanity,” rumored to be

started by pro-slavery agitators; when Cox came to speak in Canandaigua, New York, he drew a crowd eager “to witness the interesting but painful phenomenon of a mind in ruins” (“The Whole Man” 1). This anecdote underscores several points: one, that the North was heterogeneous in its sentiments on slavery, as further evidenced by the 1834 anti-abolition riots in New York; two, that pro-slavery ideologues promoted the idea that abolitionists were mentally ill in order to discredit their work; and three, that monomania was the pathologizing epithet of choice to frame people as deviant from a perceived ideological norm.

Similarly, in the wake of the Harpers Ferry takeover, Southern periodicals rushed to label Brown’s associates as monomaniacs in order to delegitimize them. On November 11, 1859, the Louisiana *Times-Picayune* derisively diagnosed Gerrit Smith, an abolitionist and correspondent with Brown, as “insane” and “fanatical” for his beliefs. Further, the writer pathologizes Smith’s desire for “negro rights” explicitly in terms of monomania: “it got to be the one idea which dominated exclusively over all others, and made a fierce and bloody fanatic of him who was not naturally cruel by temperament” (“Gerrit Smith’s Insanity”). This article is a response to Smith’s voluntary commitment to a mental asylum shortly after his name was tied to Brown’s, where he was “too weak to read the daily papers or to converse on public affairs” (Frothingham 243). This episode raises questions about how Smith may have used discussions of mental illness to navigate his precarious political and legal position.<sup>7</sup> Notably, though, the *Times-Picayune* article pathologizes Smith as a monomaniac not for his ties to Brown, but for his passionate abolition activism.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the South’s rhetorical construction of abolitionists as monomaniacs extended beyond political ideology to include racially-charged ideas of anti-

---

<sup>7</sup> Years later, when asked about what he knew of Brown’s plans, Smith maintained an insanity plea: “When the Harper’s Ferry affair occurred, I was sick, and my brain somewhat diseased . . . From that day to this, I have had but a hazy view of dear John Brown’s great work” (Frothingham 244).

slavery activists and the slaves themselves. In an 1851 issue of *DeBow's Review*, a Southern pro-slavery periodical, the writer labels abolitionists as “fanatics” who believed “the negro contained all the elements of progress inherent in the white race,” even going so far as to blame riots on them (“Art. IX” 1). In addition to pejoratively labeling abolitionists as “negrophilists,” the writer favorably cites an 1851 work by John Campbell, *Negro Mania*, to argue that anti-slavery activists have no rational evidence to support their ideology.

In this 550-page tome, Campbell collects quotes from various philosophers, phrenologists, missionaries, and scholars to “evidence . . . that the negro is naturally inferior to the white” (Campbell 7). By presenting the arguments for racial stratification and slavery as rational, both *DeBow's* and Campbell indicate that abolitionists' reason is obscured by an excess of emotion for black individuals--in other words, that they have a lesion of the affect that overtakes rational thought. *Negro Mania's* title also ironically mocks the “Negro-maniacs” who claim that “the Negro is equal to the white” by presenting the object of their supposed obsession as inferior and therefore unworthy of sentimental attachment (547). Campbell further connects antislavery sentiment with monomania when he argues that abolition and equality are a “poison [that] runs through the mental system . . . until the patient becomes a rabid, raving fanatic” (546). Presenting the desire to free slaves as a product of monomaniacal obsession is one way that pro-slavery rhetoricians pathologized deviance from the perceived racial, political, and natural order.

Even more disturbingly, Southern institutions attempted to pathologize slaves who wanted to be free of bondage. Monomania, with its notion of the “partial lesion” upon an otherwise normal brain, found a new specialization in the Southern lexicon. In his infamous 1851 article “Diseases and Peculiarities of the Negro Race,” also published in *DeBow's Review*, physician Samuel Cartwright coined the term “drapetomania,” or “the disease causing Negroes

to run away” (Cartwright 331). The diagnosis was derived from two Greek words meaning “a runaway slave” and “mad or crazy,” and for Cartwright, escaping was “as much a disease of the mind as any other species of mental alienation, and much more curable” (332). The cure? Providing slaves with the “common necessities of life”—food, water, and shelter—and, failing that, “whipping them out of” their desire to flee (332).

Although the term “drapetomania” never caught on in a widespread manner, as evidenced the the lack of primary sources mentioning it by name, some slave owners tried to use the language of mental illness to describe deviant slave behavior. In their book, *Runaway Slaves*, John H. Franklin and Loren Schweniger describe several cases of runaway slaves being labeled as insane, irresponsible, or unstable: a boy named Little Charles, after being caught and whipped, was said to have suffered from “mental alienation” and sometimes “fits of insanity”; multiple runaway notices used language promising forgiveness if slaves came to their senses and returned “of their own accord”; and blame for escape was placed on “outside influences” on slaves’ minds, like free blacks and abolitionists (Franklin and Schweniger 274-277). Cartwright’s article is significant for its attempt to further pathologize the desire for freedom, this time in slaves’ minds and not abolitionists’. Not only was monomania and its more specific cousin used to suppress or control deviant political beliefs, as with abolitionists, but it was also used to subdue black bodies and minds, by force if necessary. For supporters of slavery, the desire for slaves’ freedom—whether originating in the slaves themselves or from abolitionists—posed a threat to the Southern way of life and thus had to be pathologized.

After the 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry, white slaveowners, who already lived in fear of slave rebellions, condemned the raid as the work of fanatics and feared similar violence from imitators. Many Democratic periodicals labeled the attackers as traitors and zealots from the



North, emphasizing the failed or “abortive foray” of the raid: “As a demonstration against slavery, the Harper's Ferry foray was a total failure,” wrote an editor of the Louisiana *Times-Picayune* days after the “failed plot” (“The True Lesson”). Certainly, the South had a political stake in framing Brown as a fanatic, a failure, and a product of Northern agitation of the slavery question. Indeed, in the two months between John Brown’s raid and his execution in December 1859, many Southern newspapers condemned Northern abolitionists for fomenting violent action. The *Times-Picayune* asserted that “the popular [Northern] mind has been heated to a frenzied hatred of the South, and their ignorant and desperate followed made to believe that they are doing a righteous work” (“The True Lesson”); The Charleston *Mercury* interpreted the raid as a “pregnant sign of the times” and “a concerted movement of abolitionists and their black victims in southern States” (“The Harpers Ferry Insurrection”); the Cincinnati *Enquirer* claimed that “Northern Abolitionists are implicated and are at the bottom of the Harper's Ferry conspiracy” (“Abolitionists of the North”); the Virginia *Enquirer* called for secession, claiming, “the Northern people have aided and abetted this treasonable invasion,” labeling then-senator William H. Seward as the “the great leader of the Ossawatimite Republicans” (“Harpers Ferry Invasion as Party Capital”). Rarely did Southern periodicals call Brown insane; it was far more politically expedient to label him as a fanatical abolitionist and failed zealot.<sup>8</sup> Overwhelmingly, the South was invested in discounting Brown, his conspirators, his financiers, and his ideological sympathizers as traitors. Only one periodical, the Frankfurt *Commonwealth*, explicitly diagnosed

---

<sup>8</sup> Still, some characterizations of Brown as insane appeared in Southern papers. The Louisiana *Times Picayune* describes some of these: “*The Baltimore Clipper* characterizes the affair as the “act of an irresponsible madman, aided by a few reckless desperadoes, who were infatuated by his strange fanaticism.” *The American*, of the same city, in its remarks upon this subject says: “Nothing but a wild fanaticism, amounting almost to insanity, could account for twenty men combining together in such a foolhardy enterprise.” *The Exchange* regards it “simply as an insane attempt” on the part of a few fanatics to run off a number of slaves. If the avowal of the ringleader is worth anything, this was his purpose. *The Patriot* says: “The insane attempt at servile insurrection at Harper's Ferry has been thoroughly crushed out, unfortunately not without the cost of life to valuable and honorable citizens” (“HF Affair”).

Brown with monomania, but the extremity of the proposed “cure” indicated an incurable danger best snuffed out: “He certainly is a monomaniac, but death is the only mode by which such a peculiar idiosyncrasy can be cured” (Frankfurt *Commonwealth*).

The use of monomania as a rhetorical device to pathologize and control political opposition, especially when it came to the fierce debates on slavery and abolition, was not unique to the South. In 1847, for example, the Massachusetts newspaper *Berkshire County Whig* profiled pro-slavery politician John C. Calhoun in order to critique his actions in the South and West. The article contrasts Calhoun’s reputation as a “man of judgment” with his desire to expand slavery; after discussing one of Calhoun’s pro-slavery speeches, the writer dryly notes, “One would almost fear the speaker was under a fatal monomania that was bearing him to a total deprivation of reason” (*Berkshire* 1). The writer refers specifically to Calhoun’s pro-slavery sentiments here and depicts them as symptomatic of monomaniacal obsession; logically, it would follow that a cure for this “deprivation of reason” would be a rejection of pro-slavery ideas and policies. To label John C. Calhoun, a distinguished statesman by that time, as a monomaniac seems extreme. However, rhetoric of monomania in the political sphere was not at all unusual; it was used by both abolitionists and pro-slavery rhetoricians to pathologize oppositional ideas and promote their own views as the healthy solution.

Rhetoric concerning monomaniacal individuals was also used to imagine the nation as similarly ill in its obsession with slavery. In 1842, the abolitionist periodical *Philanthropist* condemned the editor of the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, C.H. Brough: “[he] has become notorious for his anti-abolition hatred--a hatred assuming at times the character of monomania” (“Gems” 1). The writer contrasts the singular abnormality of pro-slavery sentiment with the norm of democratic ideals, claiming, “Intolerant in everything besides, he has displayed the utmost

liberality towards slavery.” Framing Brough’s pro-slavery sympathies as an aberrance stemming from monomaniacal obsession is an attempt to discredit and dismiss his ideas. Furthermore, the construction of pro-slavery ideas as a product of monomania undercuts the credibility of others who hold the same ideas, while offering the potential for a “cure” and a return to reason. The article, ironically titled “Gems from the Democracy,” highlights the hypocrisy of promoting slave-owning and the ideals of equality in the same breath, as Brough did in a July 4th, 1842 speech. The writer spurns comparisons of America to ancient Greek and Roman republics: “They held slaves in accordance with their principles. We hold slaves in violation of ours . . . if our heads have gone forward, our hearts have gone backward.” Again, the split between intellect (“heads”) and affect (“hearts”) echoes medical rhetorics of monomania, in which one’s emotions could be affected but the reason would be left intact. This *Philanthropist* article reflects how rhetorics of medicine and the individual body were broadened to envision the nation as a sickened body, obsessed with the question of slavery. To “cure” the split between the sickened body politic--with its affective lesion and subsequent focus on slavery--would be to embrace abolitionism and heal the body/nation.

Whereas Southern responses to Harpers Ferry were almost universally critical toward John Brown and his abolitionist beliefs, Northern reactions to the raid on Harpers Ferry between October and December 1859 were far more diverse. Unlike Southern writing, which framed Brown’s desire for abolition as the deviance or “lesion” on opponents’ minds, Northern writing generally framed Brown’s *violence* as a product of insanity. This distinction is crucial because it allowed abolitionist thinkers to agree with Brown’s moral crusade but condemn his actions in an increasingly tenuous national climate. Instead of the desire for freedom being an aberrance to be cured or killed off, it was violence; this rhetorical tactic preserved credibility for abolitionism.

Brown certainly had support from staunch abolitionists, such as Henry David Thoreau, whose speech “A Plea for Captain John Brown” lauded Brown as a martyr, hero, and man of common sense. Later elegies drew upon this language of martyrdom, especially from popular writers like Louisa May Alcott and John Greenleaf Whittier and painters like Thomas Hovenden. Despite some showings of support, Brown drew heavy condemnation from Northern newspapers, politicians, and activists, who often used language of insanity to distance him from their more “rational” abolitionist sentiments. For example, on October 19<sup>th</sup>, 1859, a *New York Tribune* editorial called the Harpers Ferry attack “the work of a madman” (“The Insurrection”); a day later, the *Chicago Press and Tribune* called Brown “an insane old man” whose attack was “the legitimate fruit of the repeal of the Missouri Compromise” (“Where the Responsibility Belongs”). Even William Lloyd Garrison, the president of the American Anti-Slavery Society and publisher of abolitionist magazine *The Liberator*, labeled the raid “misguided, wild, and apparently insane, though . . . well-intended” (“The Virginia Insurrection”).

One might expect pro-slavery advocates to label Brown as a monomaniac as a way to dismiss his ideology and mission as the ravings of a madman; surprisingly, it was Republican, abolitionist-aligned periodicals that did so. I argue that in doing so, his violence could be viewed as a “partial lesion,” a deviation from an otherwise rational and desirable ideology. Unlike the label of “fanatic” or “traitor” that could only be cured by death—the labels applied to Brown by Southern publications—“monomaniac” signaled an underlying rationality to abolitionist ideals, thrown out of balance by a diseased affect leading to violence. This crucial distinction left room for reform and management of deviance, as opposed to execution. In November 1859, the *Chicago Press* explicitly pathologized Brown as one whose “mania has overpowered his reason,”

a “monomaniac” since the death of his son in Kansas (“Capt. John Brown’s Monomania”).<sup>9</sup> This article was reprinted in *The Liberator*, further emphasizing abolitionists’ desire to simultaneously distance themselves from Brown’s violence and legitimize his overall desire to end slavery. The sheer number of instances pathologizing Brown specifically as a monomaniac are overwhelming: days after the raid, the *Republican Banner and Nashville Whig* labeled Brown “an abolition monomaniac” (“The Harpers Ferry Riot”); condemning his “lawless violence,” the Chicago *Press and Tribune* derided him as a “monomaniac who believes himself to be a God-appointed agent to set the enslaved free” (“Where the Responsibility Belongs”); the New York *Tribune* cited “an uncle of Brown” to trace over 20 years of “periods of insanity . . . partaking of the character of monomania” (“John Brown’s Insanity”).

In particular, the language used about Brown in the *Republican Banner and Nashville Whig* and the *Tribune* articles calls attention to newspapers’ understanding of the partial nature of monomania. Monomania was widely understood to be a “partial lesion” on one’s mental faculties, as had been discussed, but the phrase “abolition monomania” indicates yet another division of the whole—of the ideological mind of the nation. A large percentage of the US population supported the institution of slavery, or at least did not want to disturb the fragile (and increasingly troubled) peace between North and South. By using the noun “abolition” as a modifying adjective and creating a new sub-category of monomania, the *Banner* doubly relegates Brown’s mental state to the realm of “partial lesion” and positions the obsession with abolition as a problem that could be alleviated or cured. Similarly, the New York *Tribune*’s article is striking for its use of distancing or qualifying language when describing Brown’s

---

<sup>9</sup> Notably, this article also couches this diagnosis in terms of religious monomania, a commonly accepted sub-branch of monomania. Unlike other religious texts, the writer casts skepticism on Brown’s religious life: “He had *supposed himself* to be divinely appointed to free all American slaves . . . Often, we are told, during the Kansas disturbances, he would retire to a secluded place and (to use his own words) wrestle with the Almighty for hours . . . he *thought himself* appointed by heavenly favor.”

monomania. Rather than being wholly insane over his lifetime, Brown suffers from “*periods of insanity . . . partaking of the character of monomania.*” This triple use of qualifying language further emphasizes Brown’s monomaniacal obsession as a partial lesion, both temporally and qualitatively. Brown’s monomania and its culmination in Bleeding Kansas and Harpers Ferry was no less deadly for being partial, but the periodicals’ emphasis on the partiality of monomania positioned his violent acts as the deviance to cure, not necessarily his abolitionist alignments.

### John Brown, Monomaniac or Everyman?

John Brown has been a prominent figure of discussion not just in periodicals and literature of the late 1800s, but also in contemporary scholarship. In *The Black Hearts of Men*, a pivotal study of the “Big Four”—James McCune Smith, Gerrit Smith, Frederick Douglass, and John Brown, all major abolitionist figures during the 19<sup>th</sup> century—John Stauffer traces the short-lived Radical Abolition Party and their attempts to cultivate “black hearts” against ideas of white superiority (Stauffer 1). Labeling these men as extreme radical abolitionists, Stauffer asserts that they differed from other abolitionists “by encompassing *all* of America in their vision of a sacred, sin-free, and pluralist society, as well as by their willingness to use violence to effect it” (19). For Stauffer, by trying to include the entire nation in their anti-slavery crusade, the Big Four ironically occupied fringe, outsider positions relative even to their ideological comrades,<sup>10</sup> and especially to the nation as a whole. While the Big Four’s commitment to abolition was certainly radical, I argue that the post-Harpers Ferry, Northern representations of Brown as monomaniacal effectively framed him not as a fringe zealot but as an icon of the everyman whose curable “partial lesion” was his violence. The texts that further connect Brown to

---

<sup>10</sup> With regard to the Big Four and their 1855 Radical Abolitionist convention in Syracuse, prominent abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison scoffed, “Can anything more ludicrous than this [convention] be found inside or outside of the Utica Insane Asylum?” (qtd. in Stauffer 42.)

American history and values thereby do not vilify him, but allow white abolitionists to identify with him. With (peaceful) abolition would come a restoration of the senses—not just for the freedom-obsessed John Brown, but for the nation as well.

John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry was a flashpoint that inflamed the already-precarious tension over the slavery question; indeed, some scholars cite this event as one of the catalysts leading up to the Civil War.<sup>11</sup> This chapter is interested in the period of discursive production about Brown between his raid on October 16, 1859 to his execution on December 2, 1859. In these short six weeks, there was an intense burst of literary and periodical writing on Brown's raid, his guilt, and his alleged insanity. In an article about Northern reactions to the raid, Betty L. Mitchell argues that although authors like Thoreau, Emerson and Alcott were "extremist" in their praise of Brown, leading Southerners to "identify these individual sentiments with the main body of northern opinion," periodicals reveal that reactions were much more divided (Mitchell 65). Northern writers had to walk a tense line: they wanted to preserve Brown's moral imperative of abolition while condemning his violence, a rhetorical move to assuage Southern outcry.

One such literary response to the takeover of Harpers Ferry came from Edmund Clarence Stedman, a poet, lawyer, and post-war Wall Street banker. On November 12, 1859, he published the poem "How Old Brown Took Harper's Ferry" in the *New York Daily Tribune*, a Republican-aligned newspaper. In it, he simultaneously labels Brown a "madman" and rhetorically ties him to a lineage of Western heroism, various literary traditions, and American values of democracy and anti-elitism. Stedman's poem creates multiple points of access for readers to identify with John Brown and connect his mission to various geographies and time periods in the US. Though

---

<sup>11</sup> Brown's role in the Civil War continued beyond inflaming tensions; his body and ideology also sustained Northern sentiment during the war. It is well-documented that during the Civil War, Union soldiers and black individuals sang "John Brown's Body," a song praising his fight for abolition, to the tune of "Battle Hymn of the Republic."

the term “monomania” is not explicitly used in Stedman’s poem, I argue that because these literary tactics universalize Brown as a metonym not just for Bleeding Kansas but for American values dating back to the Revolutionary War, they prevent Brown from inhabiting the fringe of radical abolitionism. Because Stedman asks the reader to identify with John Brown, his madness could *only* ever be a partial lesion upon an otherwise rational, democratically-oriented consciousness—in other words, monomania. Here, monomania functions as an indictment more of Brown’s violence than of his zeal to end slavery, thereby rhetorically moving abolitionist sentiment from the fringes of radicalism to the vital center of American values.

Throughout “How Old Brown Took Harpers Ferry,” Stedman connects Brown to various geographies and a historical lineage of the United States in order to establish him as a universal figure embodying foundational American ideals of democracy, anti-aristocratic sentiment, and heroism. This rhetorical move begins by connecting elements of Brown’s biography and raid on Harpers Ferry to various geographic regions of the US, universalizing him as a figure with which to identify. From the first line—“John Brown in Kansas settled, like a steadfast Yankee farmer”—Stedman connects Brown to the Midwest and to the Northeast (Stedman 1). Further, the image of the “steadfast Yankee farmer” reflects the majority of the American population in the late 1850s, who engaged in agricultural labor. The figure of farmer Brown as “brave and godly” (2) also evokes Thomas Jefferson’s praise of the agrarian worker: “Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people, whose breasts He has made His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. . . . Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example” (qtd. in Krall 131). Characterizing Brown as an archetypal figure of Jeffersonian agrarianism and



virtue establishes his revolutionary and anti-elite ethos and therefore constructs him as a quintessentially American everyman with which to identify.

In line with historical events, John Brown is most closely tied in the poem to Kansas, given his participation in the “Bleeding Kansas” clashes of the mid- to late 1850s. The poem seems to imbue Brown’s words and actions with a constitutive power that shapes American history. After Brown “spoke aloud for Freedom . . . the Border-strife grew”; conversely, once Brown leaves Kansas, the “strife waxed milder, / Grew more sullen, till was over the bloody Border War” (Stedman 3, 45). Brown became widely known for his leadership in several of the violent conflicts, most notably the Battle of Osawatomie on October 30, 1856. When Stedman includes the title “Osawatomie Brown” in each stanza, he strongly emphasizes Brown’s ties to Kansas and the conflicts in the heartland of the US that were symptomatic of the conflict over slave versus free states in the antebellum period. Stedman’s use of metonymy posits “Osawatomie Brown” as a symbol not just for the Kansas conflicts, but for *the* American civil conflict over slavery in the geographical center of the nation, establishing him as a central or representative figure for antebellum America and its central conflict: slavery.

Furthermore, Stedman frames John Brown as a heroic figure who resists the cruelties of the aristocracy, as exemplified by the ruling Virginia elites, thereby connecting him to pro-republican, anti-oligarchic sentiment dating back to the Revolutionary War. Stedman connects the violence of pro-slavery forces in Kansas to the immorality of wealthy slaveholding Southerners through imagery of baiting, hunting, and sport. In Kansas, pro-slavery “ruffians” kill one of Brown’s sons and kidnap and torture another boy: “they loaded him with / chains, / And with pikes, before their horses . . . / Drive him cruelly, for their sport, and at last blew out his brains” (27-30). The phrase “blew out his brains” seems almost anachronistic in its gory

vividness, but the term can be traced back to the early 1700s, when firearms were becoming more accessible for defense and war in the American colonies.<sup>12</sup> Further, the images of chains and the hunt led by baying dogs clearly gesture to practices of slavery and hunting fugitive slaves, compounding the elite's characterization as cruel. Furthermore, this image locates a kernel of cruelty in Virginia elites, the same demographic likely to own slaves, and asks the audience to transpose their horror at the Kansas boy's treatment to that of Southern slaves.

The Kansas scene is echoed later, when the Virginia slaveholding elite help retake Harpers Ferry by killing Brown's conspirators: "Tallyho! the old Virginia gentry gather to the baying! / In they rushed and killed the game, shooting lustily away" (120-121). Both of these scenes resonate with each other, crossing geography to connect the cruelties of slaveholding elite with the British aristocracy's use of fox hunting as recreation. Stedman frames the victims of Kansas, of Harpers Ferry, and of slavery more broadly as animals hunted for sport not to dehumanize them, but to demonstrate how the elite dehumanizes and violates common men like John Brown and his agrarian compatriots, as well as slaves. Finally, Stedman names Virginia as the place "where the statesmen are all born," aligning the elected representatives in government with the elite (50). Against this oligarchic tradition, Stedman seems to align himself with Brown, the "madman" who cries, "The world shall see a Republic, or my name is not John Brown" (72).

Stedman's poem also aligns the aristocratic, anti-Brown forces with the destruction of the family and of temperance, which was a major issue of moral crusades in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For temperance crusaders, alcohol was seen as the root of immoral or violent behavior; consequently, many 19<sup>th</sup>-century literary texts, from temperance novels to Poe's "The Black Cat," are

---

<sup>12</sup> This phrase appears in several British texts in the context of urban crime, interrogation in Caribbean colonies, or other instances of violence facilitated by firearms: Britain's 1723 *Calendar on State Papers, Colonial Series*, Laurence Clarkes' 1737 *Exposition on Common Prayer*, and a 1753 volume of *The Political State of Great Britain*, to name a few.

concerned with the moral dilemma of alcoholism. In Stedman's poem, the ruling class uses alcohol as a tool to excite soldiers to violence, furthering the poem's critique of the elites' morality. When the Southern elites recruit troops to retake the armory, Stedman writes, "And the effervescent valor of Ye Chivalry broke forth / . . . So they hurried off to Richmond for the Government Marines, / Tore them from their weeping matrons, fired their souls with Bourbon whiskey, / Till they battered down Brown's castle" (105, 112-115). This elevated tone mocks the Virginian elites with flowery medieval language and implies that their valor, chivalry, and moral code is suspect. Further, the overly sentimental language describing their interactions with the Marines—ripping them from their crying wives and plying them with liquor—echoes the sensationalist temperance literature of the time, which blamed alcohol for domestic violence, financial imprudence, and broader declining morality. The poem's adoption of this sensationalist language suggests that the "gallant scion[s] of Virginia" are morally bankrupt, not just in their treatment of the Marines but also in their treatment of John Brown (83).

Still, though Brown is often aligned with US history and values in the poem, Stedman makes sure to critique the culmination of Brown's monomania, the raid of Harpers Ferry, echoing Northern periodicals' sympathy with his abolitionist sentiments and denouncement of his violence. In his armed takeover of the armory, Brown becomes like the very aristocracy he is fighting against. In the poem, he and his "eighteen other crazy men" take the armory "in the midnight, like the Emperor's *coup d'etat*," and establish a "new Republic, with himself for guiding star" (87-92). By "Emperor's *coup*," Stedman refers to Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte's 1851 coup to establish himself as emperor of France, thereby connecting Brown's "midnight"-led, clandestine act of violence with the worst of aristocratic, monarchic power. As the "guiding star" of this new state, Brown is configured as an emperor of the armory, ironically labeled a

“castle” by Stedman (116). Given the poem’s earlier associations of Brown with the Revolutionary War, it would initially seem logical to also connect Brown with the French Revolution and its goal of *liberté, égalité, and fraternité*. However, by comparing Brown to Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte—and the Harpers Ferry raid to the forcible takeover of a democratic nation—Stedman follows Northern sentiment in condemning Brown’s violence.

Just after criticizing Brown’s midnight raid, Stedman uses mock-heroic language to further condemn the violence and attribute such radical action to madness. Initially, there appears to be a gathering of troops rallying behind “General Brown” and his cause: “And the Martinsburg Sharpshooters and the Charlestown Volunteers / And the Shepherdstown and Winchester Militia hastened whither / Old Brown was said to muster his ten thousand grenadiers” (97-100). Here, the language of small militias hearkens back to the Revolutionary War and seems, at first, to be an extension of Brown’s alignment with foundational American values. The repetition of “and” also evokes a heroic ballad that centers “General Brown” as the leader of these abolitionist soldiers. Additionally, the ambiguous language of troop numbers reflects the uncertainty of details right after the raid, and the line “Behind [Brown’s] rampant banner all the North was pouring down” reflects Southern anxieties that Brown’s violence represented all Northern abolitionists.

However, Stedman allays these fears, undercuts the ballad stanza with irony, and critiques Brown’s actions. Directly after describing the gathering militia, he writes that the Virginia elites “learned that nineteen madmen had the marvellous assurance— / Only nineteen” (106-107). The term “madmen” and repeating the underwhelming figure of nineteen men deflates the previous stanza’s heroic language and rejects the idea that Brown’s raid is one to be admired or emulated. By framing the raid on Harpers Ferry as the endpoint of Brown’s

monomaniacal obsession, Stedman constructs Brown's violence as the "partial lesion" that must be cured or otherwise eliminated. Additionally, framing Brown and his compatriots as madmen allows Stedman to distance himself—and Northern abolitionists—from the raid. Whereas the South feared "all the North" gathering behind Brown's crusade, Stedman's poem firmly positions the raid as the work of a few. Therefore, supposedly rational abolitionists would not condone Brown's radical use of violence, though they might agree with his desire to free slaves.

Though the poem uses madness in one instance to denounce Brown's violence, the other descriptions of his monomania are less critical, indicating that Stedman's issue is more with Brown's violent act than his abolitionist zeal. After describing the killing of Brown's son and the kidnapping of another boy in Kansas, Stedman uses the language of becoming to describe Brown's madness: "*Then* his beard *became* more grizzled, and his wild blue eye *grew* wilder, / and *more* sharply curved his hawk's nose . . . . And Old Brown, / Osawatimie Brown, / Had *gone crazy*, as they reckoned by his fearful glare and frown" (42-48, emphasis mine). Just after these lines, Brown leaves Kansas to take on the Virginian aristocracy and raid Harpers Ferry. The language of temporality and change ("then," "became," "grew") reflects the idea of a partial lesion in a monomania diagnosis, as opposed to a stable state of being. Furthermore, this stanza's placement—after the cruelty of the Kansas "ruffians" and before rebelling against the Virginian "statesmen" and elite—indicates a sympathetic position toward Brown, even as he *becomes* mad in his anti-slavery fervor (21, 50).

Stedman's description of Brown's appearance also echoes the popular 19<sup>th</sup>-century medical philosophy of physiognomy, or the belief that one's face reflected their mental state or personality traits. This idea was propagated heavily by French psychologists Etienne Esquirol and Etienne-Jean Georget, who commissioned dozens of sketches of Salpêtrière monomaniacs'

physical features in the 1820s. Esquirol sought to “determine the variations that the different alienations give to the physiognomy,” projecting diagnoses onto corresponding facial features (qtd in Boime 82). The practice of physiognomy spread throughout Europe and the United States, and the idea found powerful resonance in literature as well as medical textbooks. British physician Alexander Morison, mentioned in the earlier chapter, extolled the study in his textbook *The Physiognomy of Mental Diseases*: “The appearance of the face is intimately connected with and dependent upon the state of the mind; the repetition of the same ideas and emotions . . . [and] of the muscles of the eyes and of the face give a peculiar expression” (Morison 1). The image of the disheveled madman is not unique to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century, but the rise of physiognomy in medical discourse and portraits of institutionalized individuals cemented the ties between appearance and one’s mental state in medicine and literature.

The philosophy of physiognomy is reflected in Stedman’s description of John Brown’s increasingly wild appearance. Indeed, the description of his wild eye, graying beard, and intense features precedes the declaration that Brown “had gone crazy,” mirroring the reader’s observations and subsequent conclusions about his wild features (Stedman 48). The language of becoming could also mirror the increasing tensions over slavery in antebellum discourse, where the body of the nation has become so “diseased” in its obsession over slavery that it has reached a breaking point, as exemplified by Brown’s raid. Stedman’s straightforward description of Brown’s increasingly intense features is less critical than the lines about the raid, suggesting a more sympathetic stance towards Brown’s monomaniacal obsession with ending slavery than his violent takeover of the Harpers Ferry armory. That Brown’s madness manifests *after* the events in Bleeding Kansas (in the poem, at least) reflects the idea that the ideological clashes over slavery, if not addressed or “cured” in the nation’s political body, could lead to violence.

Stedman's penultimate stanza, read two ways, further evokes a sympathetic leaning towards Brown's mission, if not the execution of it, and condemns the Southerners who would silence him. Stedman recounts Brown's trial, in which he "was placed, half-dying" on the floor to deliver "his grand oration," but then the poem employs an ellipsis or rhetorical aposiopesis: Brown's words are not replicated (129-131). Instead, Stedman's nimble syntactical confusion blurs the lines between the "brave old madman" and the judge who condemns him to hang: "What the brave old madman told them,--these are known the country o'er. / 'Hang Old Brown, / Osawatimie Brown,' / Said the judge, 'and all such rebels!'" (132-135). Initially, it would seem that the declaration belongs to Brown, perhaps wishing to atone for his crimes, perhaps ironically commenting on the size and elusiveness of "all such rebels" who agree with his abolitionism. On the other hand, these lines might subtly deflect the madness to the judge who wishes to execute Brown, implying that the South is equally as mad in *its* obsession with preserving slavery and eliminating any threats to the institution. In this case, the judge and his supporters might be read as mentally alienated from the rest of the nation, as the monomaniacs, pulling Brown away from a lunatic fringe and more towards an ideological majority.

The final stanza supports a reading of Southern slaveholders as the instigators of such a violent conflict and as the ideological minority in a nation in need of healing. Here, Stedman directly appeals to Southerners to forgo executing John Brown in an extended apostrophe: "Virginians, don't do it! for I tell you that the flagon, / Filled with blood of Old Brown's offspring, was first poured by Southern hands, / And each drop from Old Brown's life-veins, like the red gore of the dragon, / May spring up a vengeful Fury, hissing through your slave-worn lands!" (137-143). Here, the poem combines Old Testament language—a cup of blood poured out, representing vengeance or retribution for sins—with references to mythology and *Beowulf*

or other medieval texts to suggest that the South's sins are the violence committed against Brown's sons and the potential violence of an execution. As discussed earlier, the poem constructs John Brown's *body* as a metonym for the country's violent clashes over abolition. By extension, Stedman's treatment of Brown's obsession to some extent reflects his feelings about the nation's ideological, near-dysfunctional obsession with slavery. Condemning both Brown's violence and the South's desire to execute him, Stedman advocates for a nonviolent "cure" of this partial lesion and presciently warns that violence at the individual level (both the raid and the hanging) could beget violence on an larger, near-epic scale.

Stedman's poem is representative of many Northerners' fears about John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry. By necessity, it walks a fine line between exalting Brown's abolitionist zeal and condemning his violence, between framing Brown as an everyman with whom to identify and as a madman whose armory takeover must be denounced as a fringe or radical element of society. For Stedman and many others who wrote about John Brown, monomania was an effective rhetorical lens to position him as an ultimately redeemable figure, flawed insofar as he was violent. Indeed, I contend that John Brown would not have been such a polarizing or iconic figure in American history had the diagnosis of monomania *not* been applied to him, since the label allowed room for people to identify with his anti-slavery mission as reasonable, rational, and proper. Monomania was not just a useful rhetorical label for John Brown, but for the nation, as well. To label political opponents as monomaniacs, then, would be far more reparative than paranoid, leaving room for those with partial afflictions of their reason to return to the fold and be "cured," rather than completely exiled to the fringes of unacceptable society.

Understanding monomania as a rhetorical tool encourages us to re-read other political and literary texts with a critical eye. As discussed earlier, political discourse frequently



positioned ideological opponents as monomaniacs, suggesting that re-orienting their priorities would mean returning to reason, normalcy, and unity. Periodicals offer a rich archive for such historical study. Additionally, it could be worth tracing the evolution of labeling others as monomaniacs from the antebellum period through the Civil War and Reconstruction. Taking just John Brown as an example, it is telling that the heaviest concentration of monomaniac characterization falls before his execution in December 1859 and before the Civil War more generally, indicating a kairotic element to monomania. In other words, a use of the diagnosis in political rhetoric could be read as an attempt to seek out a “cure” for the nation’s obsession with slavery before violent conflict occurred. Civil War-era and postwar characterizations of John Brown, for instance, morphed from monomaniac to martyr, emphasizing the righteousness of his cause; examples range from a Louisa May Alcott poem to the folk song “John Brown’s Body.”

Additionally, understanding how monomania allowed for a return to reason in some cases could shed light on the gendered or racial implications of pathology at different points in history. For example, the “rest cure,” often prescribed for hysterical women and condemned in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,” indicates that for some pathologized individuals, a separation from others rather than a return to the whole was more desirable. As mentioned in the earlier chapter, homosexuality was considered a form of mental illness until 1973. Monomania illuminates the ways that medical discourse, literary production, and political tensions worked together to facilitate social control along the lines of pathology in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, thus positioning conformity to ideological and social norms as a return to health and sanity.

## Beyond Ahab and Towards an Expansive Reading of Monomania

Much has been written about the most famous monomaniac in American literature: *Moby Dick's* Captain Ahab, obsessed with his white whale. It is undeniable that monomania, as a literary and rhetorical device, occupied a significant role in 19<sup>th</sup>-century America, particularly from 1820 to 1860. Therefore, antebellum texts that use monomania deserve a much more extensive scholarly treatment than they have previously received. Any literary study of monomania would be incomplete without Ahab, but this project aims to add to that lone canonical figure. Significantly, this study considers the literary deployment of monomania against marginalized populations. From sexuality in "The Birthmark" to violent abolitionist desire in "How Old Brown Took Harpers Ferry," monomania was deployed to pathologize deviance from acceptable social norms, positioning that perceived aberrance as the partial lesion to be cured. These chapters use those texts as case studies to examine instances of pathologizing otherness and to gesture to the usefulness of studying monomania in other 19<sup>th</sup>-century American works.

One implication of this study is that we can re-read many 19<sup>th</sup>-century texts to make room for inconsistency as part of the story's craft and thematic resonance. An easily identifiable monomaniac in American literature, the narrator of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," demonstrates this application. After becoming fearfully obsessed with an old man's eye, hallucinating sounds and images reminding him of his own mortality, and murdering the man to find peace from the eye, the narrator imagines he hears the victim's heart and fears others will discover his crime. Throughout the short story, the narrator vacillates between asserting his sanity and recounting his hallucinations and violent actions towards the old man, which would seem incompatible. (Many Poe narrators make this same defensive move, as with the narrators of

“The Black Cat” and “Berenice.”) Understanding the narrator as a monomaniac, in which he experiences a “partial lesion” on his sanity, brings this tension together: the obsession and subsequent murder do not necessarily disprove the narrator’s insistence on his own sanity. Reading texts through this historical-cultural lens could allow readers to hold seemingly contradictory material in tension in antebellum texts, opening up interesting potential for new interpretations.

Additionally, further studies of monomania in early American literature could build upon this project by exploring more instances the complex and contingent ways that texts marginalize people through pathologizing them as monomaniacs, either in literature or in political texts. Because the diagnosis of monomania hinged upon a partial lesion, characterizing an individual as such allowed writers to criticize certain behaviors or beliefs but still leave room for reform and a return to the normative majority. As the second chapter demonstrates, even reputable political opponents could be labeled monomaniacs for a particularly egregious belief, indicating that monomania was used less as a paranoid tactic of uncovering and banishment than as a redirecting of belief and behavior. Admittedly, these chapters focus on texts where the object of criticism is a white male, which could be limiting; consequently, further scholarly study of monomania should include more texts that criticize deviance from socially sanctioned sexual, gender, and racial norms. To accomplish this, more work needs to be done to build a corpus of texts that feature monomaniacal characters, expanding beyond the canonical Melville, Hawthorne, and Poe.

When studying political texts or other pieces of nonfiction, it could be useful to look at instances where monomania was *not* rhetorically deployed, or inconsistently applied—and why. For instance, a comparative study of the post-insurrection treatments of John Brown and Nat

Turner could reveal the racialized deployment of monomania, where white wrongdoers could still be characterized as an identifiable, wayward everyman with commendable ideology and a reprehensible use of violence. Monomania was a widely known diagnosis at the time of Turner's 1831 slave uprising, yet periodical discussions of his rebellion would be unlikely to label him as only partially insane. Doing so would indicate that his desire for freedom was rational and his violence was deviant—a characterization given to John Brown—though as chapter two has shown, the desire for freedom in slaves was a dangerous notion to be dismissed wholesale. There is incredibly rich ground for exploring racialized differences in using monomania rhetorically, especially in the antebellum period.

A more extensive study of monomania's rhetorical and literary deployment could also reveal gender disparities in characterizing individuals as such, or even in treating perceived illness, madness, or deviance. Consider the rest cure, a remedy often used against women diagnosed with hysteria in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and most famously criticized in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1892 short story "The Yellow Wallpaper." On the surface, there doesn't seem to be a clear difference between Gilman's narrator's "temporary nervous depression" and monomania's hallmark partial lesion (Gilman 648). However, in literature and political writing of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the cure for monomania was a return to society, to normal behavior, and to the senses; in other words, it was rehabilitative. If the *idée fixe* made one aberrant, then returning to a social norm and acceptable interaction with others was healthy. For women diagnosed with hysteria and sentenced to the rest cure, as with Gilman's narrator, though, the cure was to be sequestered from everyday society. These double standards merit a deeper exploration of the gendered dimensions of marginalization and pathology in literature, medicine, and policy.

Although reading texts for their use of monomania or irrational obsession is useful to understand how writers pathologized deviance, there are limitations to applying my argument to certain texts. For one, the term “monomania” seldom appears in literary texts; a hesitance to read too much into a particular text may explain the dearth of scholarship on the subject. Even for those literary characters obsessed with a particular *idée fixe*, it may be hard for some to differentiate monomaniacal obsession—which leaves the person’s reason intact—from other forms of mania, paranoia, or madness. That being said, this project is a first step towards addressing a perceived gap in 19<sup>th</sup>-century American literary studies by considering monomania’s place in literary and political works. By no means is it a universal theory, though it is a useful historical-cultural lens through which to read several 19<sup>th</sup>-century texts.

Though its place in medicine was short-lived, monomania had a long, rich literary and cultural life in 19<sup>th</sup>-century America. The rhetorical deployment of monomania pathologized deviant behavior and belief, even as the central concept of a partial lesion left room for a return to the senses by adhering to racial, gender, and ideological norms. By studying monomania’s use in antebellum literature and expanding it beyond Ahab, we can think more capaciously about seeming inconsistencies or tensions in literature and understand how writers marginalized deviant behavior by pathologizing it as a product of monomania. At the same time, considering monomania’s use as a rhetorical device in political discourse offers something new for marginalizing narratives in literary studies: instead of completely dismissing aberrant beliefs, monomania’s signature partial lesion allowed space for reform and a return to normative society.

## Bibliography

- “The Abolitionists of the North Implicated in the Harper’s Ferry Insurrection.” *Cincinnati Enquirer*, 20 October 1859.
- “Anatomical Pathology of Mental Alienation--Concluded.” *The Boston Medical and Surgical Journal (1828-1851)* 8.14 (1833): 1–5. Print.
- Boime, Albert. “Portraying Monomaniacs to Service the Alienist’s Monomania: Gericault and Georget.” *The Oxford Art Journal* 14.1 (1991): 79-91.
- Bromell, Nicholas K. “‘The Bloody Hand’ of Labor: Work, Class, and Gender in Three Stories by Hawthorne.” *American Quarterly* 42.4 (1990): 542–564. Print.
- “Capt. John Brown’s Monomania.” *The Liberator*, 11 Nov. 1859. 45.
- Davis, Lennard J. *Obsession: A History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. Print.
- Drescher, Jack. “Out of DSM: Depathologizing Homosexuality.” Ed. Carol North and Alina Suris. *Behavioral Sciences* 5.4 (2015): 565–575. *PMC*. Web. 23 Jan. 2017.
- Fernie, Deanna. *Hawthorne, Sculpture, and the Question of American Art*. London: Routledge, 2011. Print.
- Fetterley, Judith. “Women Beware Science: ‘The Birthmark.’” *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction*. University of Massachusetts Press, 1978. 22–33. Print.
- Frothingham, Octavius Brooks. *Gerrit Smith: A Biography*. New York: Putnam and Sons, 1909.
- “Gems from the Democracy.” *Philanthropist (1836-1843)*, 6 Aug. 1842. p. 1-2.
- “Gerrit Smith’s Insanity.” *Louisiana Times-Picayune*, 11 November 1859.
- “The Harper’s Ferry Affair.” *Louisiana Times-Picayune*, 25 October 1859.
- “The Harper’s Ferry Insurrection.” *Charleston Mercury*, 19 October 1859.
- “The Harper’s Ferry Invasion as Party Capital.” *Richmond Enquirer*, 25 October 1859.
- “The Harper’s Ferry Riot.” *Republican Banner and Nashville Whig*, 24 October 1859.
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *Passages from the French and Italian Note-Books*. 1871. Boston: Houghton Mifflin and Company, 1883. Web.
- “The Insurrection.” *New York Tribune*, Oct. 19, 1859.

- Krall, Lisa. "Thomas Jefferson's Agrarian Vision and the Changing Nature of Property." *Journal of Economic Issues* 36.1 (March 2002): 131-150.
- Lammers, John. "Powers' Eve Tempted: Sculpture and 'The Birth-Mark.'" *Publications of the Arkansas Philological Association* 21.2 (1994): 41-58. Print.
- López, Esther Álvarez. "Man's Fantasy, Woman's Death: The Subtle Operations of Idealism in Nathaniel Hawthorne's 'The Birth-mark.'" *Nor Shall Diamond Die: American Studies in Honor of Javier Coy* ed. Carme Manuel and Paul Scott Derrick. Valencia: Universitat de Valencia, 2003. 21-32. Print.
- Mitchell, Betty L. "Massachusetts Reacts to John Brown's Raid." *Civil War History* 19.1 (March 1973): 65-79.
- Morison, Alexander. *The Physiognomy of Mental Diseases*. London: Longman and Co, 1840. Web. Accessed 20 January 2017.
- No Title. *Berkshire County Whig*, vol. 2 iss. 328, 17 June 1847. p. 2.
- No Title. *Frankfurt Commonwealth*, 11 November 1859.
- Oldstone-Moore, Christopher. "The Beard Movement in Victorian Britain." *Victorian Studies* 48.1 (2005): 7-34. Print.
- Park, Roberta J. "Biological Thought, Athletics, and the Formation of a 'Man of Character': 1830-1900." in *Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800-1940*. ed. J.A. Mangan and James Walvin. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987.
- Person, Leland S. "Falling into Heterosexuality: Sculpting Male Bodies in *The Marble Faun* and *Roderick Hudson*." in *Roman Holidays: American Writers and Artists in Nineteenth-Century Italy*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2005. Print.
- Putzi, Jennifer. "'Tattooed Still': The Inscription of Female Agency." *Identifying Marks: Race, Gender, and the Marked Body in Nineteenth-Century America*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2006. 77-86. Print.
- Rosenberg, Liz. "'The Best That Earth Could Offer': 'The Birthmark,' A Newlywed's Story." *Studies in Short Fiction* 30 (1993): 145-151. Print.
- Sedgwick, Eve. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Bonds*. 1985. Foreword by Wayne Kostenbaum. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. Print.
- Skredsvig, Kary Meyers. "Eve's Daughter, Mary's Child: Women's Representation in Hawthorne's 'The Birthmark.'" *Filología y Lingüística* 26.2 (2000): 95-105. Print.

Staley, Gregory A. "Hawthorne's Ovidian Transformations." *Classical Receptions Journal* 5.1 (2013): 126-143. Print.

Stauffer, John. *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002.

Stedman, Edmund Clarence. "How Old Brown Took Harper's Ferry." *New York Daily Tribune*, 12 Nov. 1859.

"The Virginia Insurrection." *Liberator* (1831-1865), 21 Oct. 1859. 166.

US Census Bureau. *Historical Statistics of the United States: 1789-1945*. Washington, DC: US Census Bureau, 1949. Print.

Weiss, Thomas J. "U. S. Labor Force Estimates and Economic Growth, 1800-1860." in *American Economic Growth and Standards of Living before the Civil War*, ed. by Robert Gallman and John Joseph Wallis. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. 19-78. Accessed 5 December 2016. <http://www.nber.org/chapters/c8007.pdf>

"Where the Responsibility Belongs." *Chicago Press and Tribune*, 20 October 1859.

"The Whole Man, vs. the Whole Hog: A True Story." *Philanthropist* (1836-1842), 28 Oct. 1836. p. 1-4.

Zanger, Jules. "Speaking of the Unspeakable: Hawthorne's 'The Birthmark.'" *Modern Philology* 80.4 (1983): 364-371. Print.