

The Scarlet Letter

Synopsis:

Convicted of adultery, Hester Prynne is sentenced to wear a scarlet “A” affixed to her bosom as a mark of her shame. Governor Bellingham implores her to name her secret lover, the man who fathered her illegitimate daughter Pearl, but Hester refuses. Then a newcomer, Roger Chillingworth, enters the town. Chillingworth is in reality Hester’s long-lost husband who had been presumed dead, lost at sea. When Chillingworth discovers his young wife’s infidelity, he is determined to discover the name of her lover and forces Hester to keep his own identity a secret while he investigates. Meanwhile, Hester’s minister, Arthur Dimmesdale, becomes ill. While attending to him, Chillingworth becomes certain that Dimmesdale is the culprit he seeks. Hester, determined to save Dimmesdale, offers to run away with him to England. Dimmesdale agrees, but on the day they are to sail he changes his mind. He climbs onto the scaffold and confesses to the whole town, then dies in Hester’s arms.

Setting: Boston, 1649 -1656.

Set: The scaffold on the town square, two benches

Cast size: 6 (three men, three women)

Cast – in order of appearance

Goody Younger – a goodwife in the town of Boston

Goody Elder – a goodwife in the town of Boston

Beadle – an officer of the court

Hester Prynne – a young woman accused of adultery

Governor Bellingham – the Governor of Massachusetts

Reverend Dimmesdale – a young, handsome minister, father of Pearl

Roger Chillingworth – an elderly physician, Hester’s presumed-to-be-dead husband

Old Scratch – the Puritans’ version of Satan

Pearl – Hester’s daughter

Mistress Hibbins – the town witch

NOTE: The following roles are doubled:

Goody Younger/Mistress Hibbins

Goody Elder/Pearl

Bellingham/Chillingworth

Beadle/Old Scratch

SETTING: *Boston's town square - 1649. A large scaffold is located upstage center. Downstage in front of the scaffold are two simple wooden benches. The upstage bench is taller than the downstage bench. Together they form the steps to the scaffold. The whole atmosphere should reflect the depressing sternness of the Puritanical era.*

AT RISE: *The day of Hester Prynne's trial. A bell starts to toll. REVEREND DIMMESDALE enters. He sees the scaffold then crosses down stage, kneels and prays. Suddenly we hear the sounds of an angry crowd. DIMMESDALE hastily stands up. GOODY ELDER and GOODY YOUNGER enter, arguing. They are followed closely by the BEADLE and GOVERNOR BELLINGHAM. Bringing up the rear is HYSTER PRYNNE holding an infant wrapped in a scarlet blanket. Attached to the bodice of her dress is a vibrant scarlet "A".*

BEADLE

Make way, good people! In the King's name, make way for Governor Bellingham! A blessing on the colony of Massachusetts, where iniquity is dragged into the sunshine.

BELLINGHAM

Hester Prynne, as governor of this colony, I find you guilty of the crime of adultery. You are hereby sentenced to stand three hours upon this scaffold with a scarlet letter "A" affixed to the bodice of your dress so that all who see you may know your sin.

ELDER

Three hours on the scaffold hardly seems a sufficient punishment...

BEADLE

(To ELDER)
Quiet!

BELLINGHAM

You shall wear it three hours on the scaffold – and then for the remainder of your life.

(BELLINGHAM *exits.*)

BEADLE

Make way! Come along, Madam Hester, and show your scarlet letter in the market place.

(BEADLE leads HESTER to the scaffold. She climbs onto it alone.)

ELDER

(To YOUNGER)

Governor Bellingham shows too much mercy. At the very least he should have tortured her a bit...

(YOUNGER steps forward and shouts at HESTER.)

YOUNGER

This woman has brought shame upon us all and ought to die! That is what the law calls for!

(DIMMESDALE steps forward.)

DIMMESDALE

Mercy, goodwife, mercy!

ELDER

Governor Bellingham has shown too much mercy! Let him be blamed, then, when other wives and daughters go astray!

YOUNGER

(Pointing at HESTER)

Just look at her – the naughty piece of baggage! Little does she care what they put upon the bodice of her gown.

DIMMESDALE

There is not a stitch of that letter that she has not felt within her heart. She suffers greatly...

ELDER

As well she should! Adulteress!

ELDER/YOUNGER

Adulteress! Adulteress! Adulteress! Adulteress!

DIMMESDALE

(Over top of them)

Please, goodwives, I beg you, mercy! Mercy!

(As DIMMESDALE strives to quiet the women, CHILLINGWORTH enters opposite. He spies HESTER on the scaffold and stares at her a long moment.)

CHILLINGWORTH

Hester!

(HESTER turns to face him. When she sees him, she gasps in horror. CHILLINGWORTH crosses to the BEADLE, who is standing near the foot of the scaffold.)

I pray you, good sir – who is this woman? And why is she set here upon this scaffold?

BEADLE

You must be a stranger to Boston, friend.

CHILLINGWORTH

I have only just arrived. Therefore, if it pleases you, tell me of this woman's offences.

BEADLE

Hester Prynne was the wife of a certain English gentleman who, some two years ago, decided to cross the ocean and cast in his lot with those of us in Massachusetts. He sent his wife before him while he remained in England to look over some necessary affairs. Well, sir, in all the time this woman has dwelt in Boston, no word has been heard of her husband. His young wife, being left to her own devices...

CHILLINGWORTH

Ahh. I see. And the father of the babe she holds in her arms – who is he?

BEADLE

That remains a riddle. Hester Prynne absolutely refuses to name him. For all we know the guilty one stands here among us.

CHILLINGWORTH

Perhaps – her husband – should come here himself and look into the mystery.

BEADLE

Were he still alive! Governor Bellingham thinks it more likely that her husband lies at the bottom of the sea. In pity, he has not sought the penalty of death. Instead he has sentenced her to wear the scarlet "A" upon her bosom for the rest of her life.

CHILLINGWORTH

A wise sentence. Still, it irks me that her partner in sin should not, at least, stand on the scaffold by her side. But he will be known...

(He starts to back up, his eyes locked with Hester's.)

CHILLINGWORTH (cont.)

He will be known. He will be known...

*(CHILLINGWORTH exits, HESTER watching him the whole time.
ELDER approaches the scaffold.)*

ELDER

Tell us who the father is, hussy!

DIMMESDALE

Goody Elder, please...

YOUNGER

Reverend Dimmesdale, you are Hester Prynne's minister. Surely you can convince her to reveal the father's name.

ELDER

You must make her confess!

DIMMESDALE

To force Mistress Prynne to reveal her secret in broad daylight and in the presence of so great a multitude would be to wrong the very nature of women. I will not do it!

YOUNGER

The shame lay in the commission of the sin, not in confession of it...

ELDER

That's right. The responsibility of her soul lies with you. Make her speak!

(DIMMESDALE considers then hesitantly approaches the scaffold.)

DIMMESDALE

Hester Prynne!

(HESTER turns and looks down on him.)

The crowd demands that you name the father of your child. Be not silent, for your silence will only *compel* him to add hypocrisy to sin. He has not the courage to grasp salvation for himself.

(Beat. DIMMESDALE takes a step closer to her.)

DIMMESDALE (cont.)

Speak his name, Hester.

(The baby in Hester's arms begins to cry. HESTER looks down at the baby then back at DIMMESDALE then shakes her head.)

ELDER

Hussy! Speak out the name!

HESTER

Never! And I pray I might endure his agony, as well as my own.

YOUNGER

Speak and give your child a father!

HESTER

My child must seek a heavenly Father, for she shall never know an earthly one!

DIMMESDALE

She will not speak! Wondrous generosity of a woman's heart. She will not speak...

DIMMESDALE/ELDER/YOUNGER/BEADLE

She will not speak...

(They start to back up.)

She will not speak... She will not speak... She will not speak...

(They all exit. HESTER is left standing alone on the scaffold. A bell begins to toll. CHILLINGWORTH enters and watches her. HESTER steps down from the scaffold and starts the long walk home, crossing stage right and circling behind the scaffold. CHILLINGWORTH crosses to the scaffold, picks up the bench that makes up the lower step, and follows HESTER off. HESTER reenters from behind the scaffold upstage left and starts to cross down. CHILLINGWORTH follows her and sets the bench down with a "thud". The bell stops tolling. HESTER turns around to face him, startled. They look at each other a long moment, then...)

CHILLINGWORTH

Hello, wife.

HESTER

I thought you were dead.

CHILLINGWORTH

You thought wrong.

(HESTER doesn't reply. The baby begins to cry again.)

Your daughter cries, madam. Have you nothing with which to soothe her?

(HESTER remains silent. CHILLINGWORTH reaches into his coat and pulls out a small bottle with a cork.)

My old studies in alchemy, as well as the time I spent with the Indians this last year, have made me a better physician than many that claim the medical degree. Here. This will calm the child.

(He uncorks the bottle and holds it out to her. HESTER pulls back.)

HESTER

Would you avenge yourself on an innocent babe?

CHILLINGWORTH

Foolish woman! Why would I hurt a miserable and misbegotten baby? Here...

(He holds out the bottle again. HESTER takes it and administers the medicine to the baby.)

What is the child's name?

HESTER

I call her "Pearl".

CHILLINGWORTH

Pearl...

(The crying stops. HESTER hands the bottle back to CHILLINGWORTH.)

HESTER

Thank you.

(CHILLINGWORTH sticks the cork back in the bottle and puts it back in his coat pocket. Beat.)

What happened?

CHILLINGWORTH

There was a storm. Our ship broke apart and all hands were lost at sea. I myself drifted about on planking for two days. On the morning of the third, I awoke and found myself on land, surrounded by half-naked savages. Indians. They made me their prisoner. For over a year I lived amongst them. It was... difficult. Many times I was tempted to give up – and I might have, if not for the hope that I would one day make my way back to you. When the opportunity finally presented itself, I escaped. I faced countless adversities to get here and what do I find upon my arrival but my wife, standing upon the scaffold, holding another man's baby...

(He stands up and moves away from her.)

I might have foreseen all this. When we met I was a man already an old man whose best years had passed. What right had I to a youth and beauty like your own?

HESTER

I was always truthful with you. I never told you I loved you. I never pretended...

CHILLINGWORTH

I know. And yet... how I hoped you would love me. Was it so wild a dream?

(HESTER remains silent.)

I am a fool.

HESTER

I have greatly wronged you.

CHILLINGWORTH

We have wronged each other. The scales between us hang fairly balanced. But, Hester, the man lives who has wronged us both. Who is he?

HESTER

Ask me not, husband, for you shall never know him.

CHILLINGWORTH

“Never”, you say? I shall *never* know him? Believe me, Hester, there are very few things on earth that remain hidden from the man who devotes himself entirely to seeking them out. You may cover up your secret from the prying multitude, from the ministers and magistrates. But I have senses they do not possess. I shall seek this man...

(He takes his seat on the bench and leans in close to HESTER.)

CHILLINGWORTH (cont.)

And someday I shall pass him on the street and sense his trembling, and feel within me a shuddering response and then, Hester, he will be mine.

(He stands up.)

One thing more. You refuse to reveal your lover's name. I bid you now to keep my identity a secret as well.

HESTER

Why would you want this? Why not announce yourself openly and cast me off?

CHILLINGWORTH

I have my reasons. Let the world believe that your husband is dead. I will be known to all as "Roger Chillingworth". Breathe not the secret, above all, to the man who shares your disgrace. Should you fail me in this, beware! His fame, his position, his life, are in my hands. Beware!

HESTER

I will keep your secret, as I have kept his.

CHILLINGWORTH

Swear it!

HESTER

I swear.

CHILLINGWORTH

Now, Hester Prynne, I leave you alone – alone with your child and the scarlet letter...

(He touches the letter and smiles at her.)

HESTER

Why do you smile at me that way? Are you in league with Old Scratch, who haunts the forest around us?

(OLD SCRATCH enters behind them and watches them.)

Have you enticed me into a bargain that will prove the ruination of my soul?

CHILLINGWORTH

Not your soul, Hester...

(A bell begins to toll. CHILLINGWORTH starts to back up.)

CHILLINGWORTH (cont.)

Not yours...

(OLD SCRATCH *as* CHILLINGWORTH *continues to back up.*)

Not yours... Not yours...

(HESTER *watches* CHILLINGWORTH *exit. The tolling bell fades. HESTER tries to exit and finds herself face to face with the* OLD SCRATCH. *Accompanied by the appropriate music, she tries to escape him in one direction – he cuts her off. She tries the other direction. Again, he cuts her off. A chase ensues around the bench until finally she eludes him and runs off. The OLD SCRATCH picks up the bench and crosses downstage center with it. He sets it on end so it becomes a tree in the forest. He picks up the other bench in front of the scaffold and places it up on end to form another tree. The scene shifts to the forest. DIMMESDALE enters carrying a bible. OLD SCRATCH confronts him. DIMMESDALE tries to escape, first one way then the other but OLD SCRATCH cuts him off. DIMMESDALE holds up his Bible like a shield. OLD SCRATCH somersaults backwards, landing on the ground on his belly. As DIMMESDALE tries to stride past him OLD SCRATCH grabs his ankle and trips him up. Both men scramble to their feet and face each other. DIMMESDALE tries to use the Bible as a weapon but OLD SCRATCH knocks it out of his hand. OLD SCRATCH then points accusingly at Dimmesdale's chest. DIMMESDALE clutches his chest in agony and starts to sink to his knees. OLD SCRATCH keeps pointing his finger until DIMMESDALE lies helpless on the ground. CHILLINGWORTH enters, crosses to DIMMESDALE, helps him to his feet, then hands him his Bible. They exit. HESTER enters, carrying the baby in her scarlet blanket. She crosses downstage and unfurls the blanket to reveal no infant is there. PEARL enters behind her wearing a dress of the same scarlet material. It is now five years later. PEARL and HESTER play together for a moment then HESTER notices OLD SCRATCH and pulls PEARL off – but not before PEARL sees OLD SCRATCH and waves. MISTRESS HIBBINS enters. OLD SCRATCH turns to face her. HIBBINS curtsies. OLD SCRATCH bows. They come together, join hands and twirl in the center. PEARL enters and watches them. They each extend a hand to her. PEARL runs to join them. They start twirling in a circle again and then they break apart. PEARL and HIBBINS keep dancing as OLD SCRATCH twirls off. HESTER enters.)*

HESTER

Pearl!

(The music halts. HESTER crosses to PEARL and takes her arm.)

Have I not strictly forbidden you, daughter, from wandering into these woods alone?

PEARL

I am not alone, Mama. Mistress Hibbins is with me. We were making merry together.

HIBBINS

Good morning, Mistress Prynne.

HESTER

Mistress Hibbins.

(She turns back to PEARL and starts to pull her off.)

Come, Pearl. Let us return to the village where you might make merry with the other children...

(PEARL pulls away from HESTER.)

PEARL

Nay! I have no wish to play with them. And they have no wish to play with me.

HESTER

Pearl...

PEARL

I speak true, Mama. The children in our village stare and fling mud and point their fingers at me. The same way they point their fingers at your scarlet letter. I only find pleasure in their company when I throw stones at them.

HESTER

Pearl!

(HIBBINS laughs.)

HIBBINS

Your daughter is correct, Mistress Prynne. The children of our village are a vile bunch. There is nary a one who would not benefit from being brained with a rock. Pearl is far better off in these woods.