The marvelous queer interiors of The House of the Seven Gables

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Abstract

"Marvelous" The House of the Seven Gables is obsessed with law. In his preface, setting out the distinction between novels and romances, Hawthorne associates the former with realism, in which imagination, denied the possibility of fanciful transformation, becomes enslaved to "the probable and ordinary course of man's existence." Romance, on the contrary, need not "rigidly subject itself to laws," but, demonstrating "a very minute feeling" for "the possible," is able "to mingle the Marvelous" (ii: 1) with the probable events of everyday life. "Law" functions here for Hawthorne on several levels. Most immediately, he means "convention," the things "normal" people expect to happen in a "typical" day, life lived, not as a possibility for invention, but within the comfort of predictable pattern. Yet Hawthorne also attaches convention to more recognizable legal constructs, such as contracts: the preface itself takes on a contractual tone, establishing the terms that, if readers agree to them, will enable the romance to be understood and enjoyed. Hawthorne also invokes the legal protection of property, "by laying up a street that infringes upon nobody's private rights, and appropriating a lot of land which had no visible owner, and building a house of materials long in use for constructing castles in the air" (ii: 3). In the preface, then, Hawthorne attaches the juridical functions of law (the contractual protection of property rights) to the conventions of everyday life (the predictable life-patterns carried out, presumably, within the privately owned home), both laws represented in the plot by the officious, grasping, and literal-minded lawyer, Jaffrey Pyncheon.

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Queerness, Romance, Everyday Life, Lawyers, Legal Protection, Novel, Plot, Realism, Reader, Visible, Invention, Property Rights
Hawthorne's moral for "The House of the Seven Gables," taken from the Preface, accurately presages his story. The full weight of the gloomy mansion of the title seems to sit on the fortunes of the Pyncheon family. An ancestor took advantage of the Salem witch trials to wrest away the land whereon the house would be raised but the land's owner, about to be executed as a wizard, cursed the Pyncheon family until such time as they should make restitution. Now, almost two centuries later, the family is in real distress. The real crisis arrives when the Judge, who strongly resembles the Colonel Pyncheon who built the house so many years ago, steps up his demands on Hepzibah and Clifford and unwittingly triggers the curse. (Summary by Mark F. Smith).

Familiar as it stands in the writer's recollection,—for it has been an object of curiosity with him from boyhood, both as a specimen of the best and stateliest architecture of a long-past epoch, and as the scene of events more full of human interest, perhaps, than those of a gray feudal castle,—familiar as it stands, in its rusty old. IN September of the year during the February of which Hawthorne had completed "The Scarlet Letter," he began "The House of the Seven Gables." Meanwhile, he had removed from Salem to Lenox, in Berkshire County, Massachusetts, where he occupied with his family a small redwooden house, still standing at the date of this edition, near the Stockbridge Bowl. "I sha'n't have the new story ready by November," he explained to his publisher, on the 1st of October, "for I am never good for anything in the literary way till after the first autumnal frost, which hasso