

Passion, for Better and for Worse

And others are those sown among the thorns; these are the ones who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing.
(Mark 4:18–19)

In these communities of sinners, one of the sinners is called pastor and given a designated responsibility in the community. (Eugene Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity*)¹

Words in the English language are always on the move: rising and falling in connotation and denotation. One of the intriguing alterations over the centuries involves the word *passion*. We still remember—or we should—that passion indicates in its original Latin form suffering, and has come to mean strong emotion or enthusiasm; it also signifies anger and, important to the Christian story, is associated with the final agony and ecstasy of Christ. But in our century the word has come to mean, most immediately, sexual passion, and even an English professor like myself recalls first hearing the title of Mel Gibson’s famous 2004 movie and muttering to myself, wide-eyed, “*The Passion of the WHAT?*” Why, I wondered, would he make a movie about *that*?

A pastor once steadfast in ministering to the soul’s needs who ends in ministering to the body’s desires: this fall has been told many times. This might be the clerical tale that gains our attention most readily, or has

1. Peterson, *Working the Angles*, 2.

more staying power. In this chapter I would like to talk about the passion of the priest, but also bear in mind a balanced notion of what passion is. In a way, passion is a neutral concept, although it never feels neutral because it is by definition so exciting. But passion can be beneficial or distracting, an appetite that leads to fulfillment and joy or a draining ardor that drags restlessness and aching yearning in its wake. In chapter 8 I will deal more precisely with the fallout of destructive lust in clerical stories, but in this chapter I hope to stay in a less destructive but nevertheless equivocal site—the place where passion, defined broadly, grips a clerical character and either nourishes a ministry or damages it.

In 2004, while still Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams delivered a lecture called “The Christian Priest Today,” full of invigorating injunctions about the difficulties faced by and virtues sought in Church of England priests of the twenty-first century. One of Williams’s most stimulating ideas is that “[The priest must be] a place where lines of force intersect, where diverse interests and passions converge.”² One can see why the Archbishop felt the need to press this point, since many Christians have come to regard clerics as a separate class, an elite detached from the concerns of ordinary church members. Williams uses, boldly I think, the word *passion* here, encouraging us to accept the fully human qualities of ordained ministers. But before we revel too much in the flesh-and-blood qualities of our pastors, he cautions us:

Priests need detachment—not from human suffering or human delight, but from dependence on human achievement. . . . To be a point where lines of force converge and are knitted together, there must be a level of stillness in us that allows this to happen.

This seems to me an almost impossibly challenging commission for a mortal creature: to be a place where passions converge and yet a site of detachment and tranquility.

Extravagant Romance

The urtext for pastoral passion gone awry is *The Scarlet Letter*, a novel published by Nathaniel Hawthorne in 1850 and revealingly subtitled *A Romance*. Hawthorne was one of the architects of the nineteenth-century Romance, and the important detail to remember is that this type of

2. Williams, “Christian Priest.”

Romance has nothing (or little) to do with amorousness or sexual longing. For Hawthorne and other literary innovators of his generation, the Romance was supremely about imagination, about stretching the human ability to conjure, embroider, dream, and desire. Hawthorne's Romance is more about quest, adventure, and trial than it is about interpersonal relations. And there is, peculiar to Hawthorne, always a kind of wildness, even a hint of supernatural confusion, which forces us to read his tales carefully. Hawthorne is a moral writer, but the lessons are (in my opinion) not in the least straightforward. Horton Davies cautions us, for example, to note the combination of "fascination and repulsion" in Hawthorne's attitude to Puritanism.³ *The Scarlet Letter*, an extravagantly written and demanding book, is still widely read, especially in the United States, and frequently set as a school text even now. But it is also, I think, widely misread. This characterization of the adulterous couple, Arthur Dimmesdale and Hester Prynne, is all too typical.

The clergyman epitomizes purity, goodness, perfected religious faith, and social/spiritual power. . . . Hester plays the perfect seductress—sultry beauty, sensuality, hauteur, and grace—she also reveals in her character all the temptations against which the "city upon the hill," and particularly its apostles, had to steel itself against.⁴

If *The Scarlet Letter* were only a tale of seduction, it would not occupy such an elevated place in the literary canon. Nor should it simply be read as a metaphor of the Puritan settlers' relationship with the American environment (although this must be allowed as a consideration). Hawthorne is a sophisticated writer, and when his narrator goes on about sin or the devil, for example, it is not always clear whether the narrator is mimicking the complacent attitude of the community or being candid. Subtle ironies abound in the novel: while we are never to take Hester Prynne's adulterous sin lightly, she is the most admirable character, marked by compassion, independence, intelligence, and courage. She is also the most fully-rounded character, replete as she is with sinful pride and explicitly aware of her physical attractions and irresistible aura of mystery. The Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale is described throughout as brilliant but flawed; pale, intellectual, overly sensitive, physically weak. We only encounter Hester and Arthur after their "fall," observing the

3. Davies, *Mirror of the Ministry*, 24.

4. Prioleau, "The Minister and the Seductress," 2.

aftermath of their sexual union, but it is reasonable to assume that Dimmesdale has always been an overly ambitious, cerebral, anemic man. It is not only his sexual shame but a pre-existing sense of inadequacy that leads to “the fasts and vigils of which he made a frequent practice, in order to keep the grossness of this earthly state from clogging and obscuring his spiritual lamp.”⁵ The narrator encourages our sympathy for several of the characters, but particularly for Dimmesdale, who is granted the adjective “poor” at least a dozen times: “Poor, miserable man!” (133).

Adultery is just one aspect of the passion which wraps up these strange characters—not only Hester and Arthur, but also their child Pearl and Hester’s estranged husband Roger Chillingworth. The infamous “A” that Hester must wear on her gown signifies adultery at the start, but soon the letter transforms and shifts, both to reflect the complexity of Hester’s character and the characters around her who are no less sinful (or even more so). Pearl, for example, dressed in gorgeous scarlet, is deliberately created by Hester as an incarnate “A” for all to see; she is both Hester’s burning shame and the object of her obsessive love.

She is my happiness—she is my torture, none the less! Pearl keeps me here in life! Pearl punishes me, too! See ye not, she is the scarlet letter, only capable of being loved. (100)

Those who do not know Hester’s story believe the letter stands for “Able” because of her tireless service in the community; it is also said that after time passes “the scarlet letter had the effect of the cross on a nun’s bosom” (145, 146). When Dimmesdale late one night believes he sees an ominous “A” burning as a message for him in the sky, others interpret the celestial message innocently, as “Angel” (142). When the town allows that Hester need no longer bear the sign of her punishment, she refuses to remove it. Among her reasons are that the letter is for Hester a “discipline to truth” (156) that she profoundly values and also her realization that the letter gives her fellow feeling with other sinners, “a sympathetic knowledge of the hidden sin in other hearts” (76–77). In proximity to sin, the letter burns; Hawthorne slyly makes it clear that the letter burns even in the vicinity of Christian ministers—and he does not mean Dimmesdale. Hester’s “A” could also represent courageous Action; she tries to transfer her daring to Dimmesdale in a rousing line: “Act! Do anything, save to lie down and die!” (180).

5. Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*, 107. References to subsequent passages are given parenthetically.

I make so much of the interpretive possibilities bound up in the scarlet letter in order to point out how many varied passions are embodied within Hester and Dimmesdale, for good or ill. And the narrow, cold, self-righteous colony needs their passions; most particularly, the puritanical church needs an injection of passion. “Meagre, indeed, and cold, was the sympathy that a transgressor might look for, from such bystanders, at the scaffold” is the description of the clergy at Hester’s sentencing (43), and the narrator goes on:

They were, doubtless, good men, just and sage. But, out of the whole human family, it would not have been easy to select the same number of wise and virtuous persons, who should be less capable of sitting in judgment on an erring woman’s heart, and disentangling its mesh of good and evil, than the sages of rigid aspect towards whom Hester Prynne now turned her face. (57)

It could be said that Arthur Dimmesdale’s one night of passion with Hester Prynne was the most likeable thing he ever did. It had been “a sin of passion, not of principle, nor even purpose” (200). All his other acts are compelled by the “framework of his order” that “inevitably hemmed him in.” Hawthorne tell us that even an ordinary clergyman of the day would be “at the head of the social system” but Dimmesdale is no ordinary minister: he is the most highly regarded preacher of the colony. None of the others have anything like his homiletic fire, but his success arises not so much from his outstanding intellect as from his sorrows; “his power of experiencing and communicating emotion,” we are told, was “kept in a state of preternatural activity by the prick and anguish of his daily life” (127). In other words, his powerful awareness of passion and sin enriches and enhances his preaching.

Arthur Dimmesdale manages a confession and a redemptive moment with Hester and Pearl just before he dies; his death results from the psychic and bodily damage he does to himself in attempting to hide his fully human self from the public eye. Hester, however, in her freely confessed sin, lives a long and worthy life. It is not the adultery which damns either of them; abused and mistreated passion on Dimmesdale’s part ruins his life, while Hester achieves contentment because she owns her emotions, her principles, and her flaws.

Grief and Repentance

Arthur Miller's 1953 play *The Crucible* explores a similar era in American history as Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*. Although the clerical characters in *The Crucible*, Reverend Parris and Reverend Hale, are secondary, they are significant in that they represent the tyranny of the Salem witch hunts at the beginning of the action but switch their allegiance to the innocent victims of the trials at the conclusion. They know in the final act (Parris slower to come to realization than Hale, but then no less ashamed) that they have been instigators of injustice and are terrified at what they have unleashed. Hale in act 3 realizes that hysteria, lies, and greed are in play, not witchcraft, and in a highly dramatic moment at the end of the act shouts "I denounce these proceedings."⁶ Unfortunately the campaign that the church instigated could not be stopped by the church once the legal system, such as it was in seventeenth-century New England, got under way.

It is refreshing to see clerical characters as rigid and unpromising as Parris and Hale learn so much about honesty and conciliation within the literary time frame of *The Crucible*. Parris looks like our villain from the start when the play's uneasy hero, the plain-speaking John Proctor, explains why he has ceased to attend church (and thus attracted the censure of the community):

I have trouble enough without I come five mile to hear him preach only hellfire and bloody damnation. Take it to heart, Mr. Parris. There are many others who stay away from church these days because you hardly ever mention God any more. (26)

Parris is a harsh and inadequate minister who is nevertheless a good man trying to manage the town and his own spirit; throughout the play he is running scared because his daughter is one of the first girls to enter into a state of hysteric catatonia that is mistaken for bewitchment. Hale, on the other hand, while as rigidly dogmatic as Parris and apparently inflexible in his pursuit of devils, is accorded serious respect in Arthur Miller's stage directions:

His goal is light, goodness and its preservation, and he knows the exaltation of the blessed whose intelligence, sharpened by

6. Miller, *The Crucible*, 115. References to subsequent passages are given parenthetically.

minute examination of enormous tracts, is finally called upon to face what may be a bloody fight with the Fiend himself. (33)

In the stage directions Miller also notes that the following speech from Hale has never received a laugh from the audience, which recognizes that the cleric's pursuit of evil is based on the best intentions and a sharp intelligence:

Now let me instruct you. We cannot look to superstition in this. The Devil is precise; the marks of his presence are definite as stone, and I must tell you all that I shall not proceed unless you are prepared to believe me if I should find no bruise of hell upon her. (35)

The Devil *is* precise, but by the end of the play the viewers and readers will identify the devil's marks in the governor's office and in the bitterly mischievous hearts of bored or rejected girls, not in the supposed sins of any of the condemned. Certainly Hale and Parris recognize this shift, and they stand aghast as witnesses of murderous injustice. Their passionate goodness and concern for the moral well-being of the Puritan community has been turned against them; they realize they are at fault in persecuting innocence, but they have been swept up in political and economic complaints that they had not realized would be so entangled in a supposedly spiritual matter.

Passion in Plain Sight

A. N. Wilson, writing the introduction to the 1992 *Faber Book of Church and Clergy* said one astonishing thing: in editing the anthology he felt he was "compiling a portrait of a largely obsolete world."⁷ Most of the works that piqued his interest were Victorian. Similarly Douglas Alan Walrath in a recent study of American clerical fiction can find little after 1930 that interests him. God and his representatives, fictional and real, have been "displaced," specifically by the cultural forces of modernism and post-modernism, Walrath claims; there has been a "cultural discrediting of Christian faith."⁸ While I do not dispute that the scores of clerical novels in the nineteenth century have no current counterparts, that is not necessarily a bad thing. Even such a well-regarded author as Harriet Beecher

7. Wilson, "Introduction," *The Faber Book of Church and Clergy*, ix.

8. Walrath, *Displacing the Divine*, 272.

Stowe could write some fairly overcooked nonsense, like *The Minister's Wooing* (1859). Today illuminating novels and plays involving the church are still being written, and tales of clerical passion can be located if you are even mildly attentive. In England Wilson should have been aware of David Hare's 1990 play *Racing Demon*, for example, and that play's sympathetic portrayal of clerical commitment and anguish is all the more intriguing since Hare is known for his political dramas and not at all for his approval of religion.

Racing Demon exposes some of the same clerical dilemmas as in Hawthorne's and Miller's works, but given the location of an inner city London parish in the nineteen-eighties, the plot will not involve scaffolds or witchcraft. Hare's four Anglican priests, all trying to make a difference in a difficult ministry, show in their diverse approaches a passionate commitment to goodness. They also demonstrate the myriad ways in which that wholesome passion can be undermined, exploited, misrepresented, and pulled to pieces. The character who changes the most during the play is Tony, young, idealistic, and increasingly embittered that good Sunday morning attendance brings in "one percent of our whole catchment area."⁹ Feeling that their team ministry is increasingly involved in social work, he longs to be representative of a supernatural religion and interferes aggressively with a parish family whose violence he believes he can combat with worship and prayer. Speaking to God, as many of the characters do in the play, Tony says in exasperation:

I mean, can you tell me, is anything *right* with the Church? I mean, is the big joke that having lived and died on the Cross, Jesus would bequeath us—what?—total confusion, a host of good intentions, and an endlessly revolving Cyclostyle machine? (22)

The other three members of the pastoral team, Lionel, Streaky, and Harry, are faithful and effective pastors in their way, but Tony sees them as complacent. He cannot apprehend how impressive is the loyalty among the other team members, nor how valiant their attempts to be peacemakers. Tony believes he has a responsibility to parishioners "to give them some sense of joy" (10), but his methods become extreme; he instead causes great unhappiness, particularly for Lionel, victimized by the church hierarchy for not being charismatic enough, and for Frances, Tony's rejected girlfriend, pronounced a distraction in his new zealotry.

9. Hare, *Racing Demon*, 17. References to subsequent passages are given parenthetically.

This being an English play about an old denomination tied inextricably to the state, one of the issues in *Racing Demon* is that habitual reserve and institutional inertia can make it difficult to identify passion that is indeed present. Harry, for instance, utters a very plain statement about what the priest's job is: "There is people as they are. And there is people as they could be. The priest's job is to try to yank the two a little bit closer. It takes a good deal of time" (71). This is not uttered in exciting or inspirational language, but combined with other statements by Harry, we are able to identify how absolute is his love for the ministry: he is, he says, "only the channel through which God's love can pass. That makes me, as a person, totally irrelevant. As a person, nobody should even be conscious I'm there" (24). Donald "Streaky" Bacon is even less able to be expressive about his love of the ministry. He is unaffectedly happy and decent. "The whole thing's so clear. He's there. In people's happiness," he declares to himself. "The whole thing's so simple. Infinitely loving. Why do people find it so hard?" (63)

If there are villains in *Racing Demon*, they are the bishops, fearfully fighting against female ordination and taking out their frustrations on the priests. And the priests are pummeled additionally by church members.

It can be pretty punishing. It gives you pause. You have to think all the time about what the job is. Mostly, in fact, it's just listening to the anger. One reason or another. . . . I've had three couples in the last week. They need somewhere to express their frustration. Everyone does. They don't realize it. But that's why they're drawn to a priest. They're furious. At their lives. At the system. At where they find themselves. And the vicar is the one man who can never hit back. (34-35)

Lionel believes the old Church has died and "the new Church is having its troubles being born" (32). His strategies for the new church are simple and viable but do not look inspirational enough to Tony and the bishops. For example, Lionel states artlessly that "The doors should be open. A priest should be like any other man. Only full of God's love" (67-68). The disgruntled ones want ministry that shouts success and smacks of intensity, and they cannot see the quiet but rather inarticulate passion that is already in place.

There's Sin and There's Sin

In 1994 British film director Antonia Bird created a gritty and realistic portrayal of contemporary Roman Catholic priests in Liverpool. *Priest* was well-received in the United Kingdom, but in the United States some Roman Catholics were offended by the film's frankness, especially in reference to the active sexuality of priests. For the film's star, Linus Roache, the story was not about sex but instead "compassion and forgiveness."¹⁰ Father Greg, played by Roache, arrives in his rough new parish confident that he will encourage his people toward new heights of moral responsibility. Impatient with his fellow priest, Father Matthew (Tom Wilkinson), who leans left, dresses informally, and amiably encourages people to be open and discover their potential, Greg insists instead on the dignity of his office. "There's just sin," he says to Matthew; proceeding with precision to do his duties Father Greg quickly finds himself baffled and shut out by parishioners.¹¹

Greg is hard on Matthew who, it turns out, has been for years sleeping with his housekeeper. Then in the confessional Greg is handed a miserable scenario he does not know how to act upon: a young girl is being repeatedly raped by her father, but the child refuses to report him and Father Greg cannot break the confessional's seal. Trying to drop hints to mother and teachers and thus solve the problem in the correct manner gets him nowhere, and he feels useless. The father threatens him. In a scene that is possibly one of those that certain viewers objected to, Father Greg weeps and yells at a Crucifix. Greg's obedience to the law of the church is, he realizes, ruining a girl's life. If he has decided at this juncture to break the rules of the confessional, it is too late; the mother has discovered the incest and hates the priest, damning him to hell in a very public scene.

Running parallel to this plot is the one involving Father Greg's hidden homosexuality. Taking off his collar one night when he is acutely lonely, he visits a gay bar, meets Graham (Robert Carlyle) and goes home with him. Greg thinks he can keep this aspect of his life behind locked doors, but his self-imposed rules (you can imagine him creating an inner set of justifications as he carefully removes his clerical collar and puts it in a drawer before setting out) are not nearly adequate. He and Graham

10. Lambert, "Father Figure."

11. *Priest*, directed by Antonia Bird, written by Jimmy McGovern (this and all subsequent quotation is my own transcription from the film).

fall in love; Graham demands openness and even comes to Eucharist but Greg refuses him. Humiliated by exposure as a gay priest in the tabloid papers, Greg attempts suicide. His bishop visits him, throws some grapes on his hospital bed, and says: “You say you want to carry on serving God. Well, that’s good. The best way for you to serve God is to disappear. The best way you can serve God is to piss off out of my diocese. Is that clear?”

The people who want to stand with Greg are the other sexual sinners: Matthew and his lover, and Graham. Matthew (who has broken down Greg’s door and prevented his suicide) insists that the only way to meet the scandal is to serve Eucharist together and weather this out. This is indeed what happens at the end of the film, although half the congregation abandons them and the only person who will take the host from Greg’s hand (the communicants line up in front of Matthew) turns out, after a long hesitation, to be Lisa, the sexually abused girl he has felt such guilt about.

There is so much ostensible concentration on sex in this film that one could be excused for focusing on that issue—there are not one or two, but three instances of sexual wrongdoing in the scenario. But the very prevalence of sexual sin clears the way for the movie’s real meaning. Antonia Bird demonstrates that sinful desires of all sorts are going to occur within human situations, but what signifies is patience, forgiveness, love, and humility. The sexual lives of both priests do involve love, not just sex, but there is no appropriate way that love and desire can be made known. In each case Greg and Matthew have been counseled to leave the church, but they do not want escape from this problem. Each recognizes their imperfection but each also wants to remain a priest. They love their work and love God, and they are both, in their contrasting ways, effective pastors—smart and resilient, even wise. Pledged to a nearly impossible vocation, the priests are expected to comply with standards of holiness that a person cannot attain every single day of his or her life.

Bird’s use of the third plot strand—the one involving incest—helps to clarify the sexual issues in the film. Compared to the intimidating and hateful abusive father, Greg’s and Matthew’s sins are less destructive. No coercion is involved, no children are damaged. What is damaging is concealing normal human sexual desire; the furtiveness of the sexuality will eventually make these well-meaning and loving Catholics embittered and angry. Greg’s own human fallibility, and the passions—wicked and virtuous—he discovers within himself make him, like Dimmesdale, a better

pastor. He has been stiff and correct, but experience of pain brings him into true communication with God. The film's best speech bursts out of Greg as he tries to explain his frustrations to his lover Graham:

He wasn't human enough, the son of God. He had certainty. Heaven, everlasting life, he knew it all with absolute certainty. Well, give me that, fine, no problem; you can crucify me as well. All the agonies of the world, no bloody problems whatsoever. Because I'd be certain that God exists. But I'm not certain. All I've got is faith. Something evil comes along. Grinning, sickening evil. And faith just runs away in terror.

It is possible that Greg's ministry could be saved by having a domestic partner to listen to such anguished speeches and a ministry partner like Matthew to offer loyal support. At the film's end, we do not know what will happen to these characters. The last scene of the film shows Greg gripped with violent weeping; the passion that he manifests here may be turned in several directions, positive or negative, or perhaps he will lock the passion away again.

As with *The Scarlet Letter*, *Priest* might first appeal to us because, to put it bluntly, we will always be interested in sex, and what could be more titillating than thinking about the sexual desires of high-minded clerics? The clash of longing and purity is irresistible as literary fodder. But as Arthur Miller is careful to demonstrate in *The Crucible*, if the combination of sex, religion, and morality makes a terrible mess, such conjunctions can hardly be avoided. The sexual passion of Arthur Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter* is not separate from his other attributes but is inextricably bound up with them—he is a man of immense feelings and high thoughts. To thwart or crush such emotions and ideas is to ruin not only a human being, but also a ministry. In most of the works under scrutiny in this chapter, the ministry has been sound, even in Dimmesdale's case electrifying.

While some qualities of ministry in *Priest* or *Racing Demon* might make us uncomfortable, all the better. Candid contemplation of the pastor's ideas and character is necessary. The necessity of frankness, even bluntness about religion was reinforced for me recently when I was

singing a hymn from the Iona Community. Their words for “Praise with Joy the World’s Creator” insist that each member of the Trinity be seen in unexpected or even outrageous ways: Jesus Christ is an iconoclast, not only healing the sick but upsetting religion, and the Holy Spirit is associated with sacred foolishness. The hymn celebrates the variety of attributes that the Triune God enjoys. It is a passionate hymn to a passionate God. If pastors of honest passions are hounded from the church, then the church lies open to careerists and hypocrites—the subject of the next chapter.

SAMPLE