

THE SCARLET PROFESSOR  
a new opera

music by Eric Sawyer  
words by Harley Erdman  
based on the book by Barry Werth

[Note: Dialogue in italics = overlapped singing.]

SCENE 1

*(Projection: Washington, DC. 1960. Postmaster General Arthur Summerfield leads a group of concerned citizens through a collection of confiscated material.)*

SUMMERFIELD

Come this way, my friends, into my chamber of horrors.  
You will not want to gaze, my friends, but you must, my friends, you must.  
Your family mailbox has fallen prey  
to pornographic pestilence.  
Yes, merchants of filth, purveyors of slime  
violate the sanctity of the sealed envelope,  
So that obscenity in its extremity  
may cross the threshold of your homes.  
The brown wrapper of the common magazine  
cloaks the place where lewdness and lasciviousness begin  
to warp the minds of your beloved children.  
So be brave, my friends, this is my chamber of horrors.  
Lay your eyes on exhibit one.

*(SUMMERFIELD shows them a page from a magazine, which we see in projection. Could be something like:)*



CHORUS

Goodness!

We cannot look, we cannot gaze,

We are disgusted and amazed.

To think that our neighbors know such things.

What smut, what filth, the mailman brings!

SUMMERFIELD

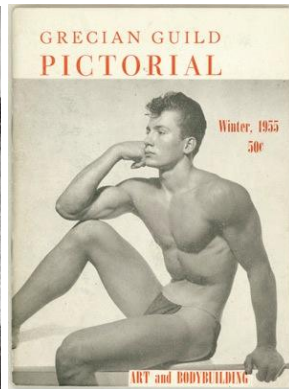
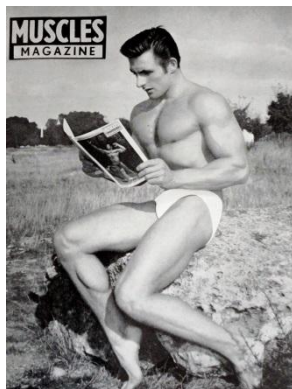
You are scandalized, my friends. So am I.

But this is only step one.

Your children, reeled in by smut like this,

proceed to the next level of perversion:

*(SUMMERFIELD shows them another page, also seen in projection.  
Could be something like one of these:)*



CHORUS

Mercy me!

SUMMERFIELD

Is that what “neither snow nor rain nor heat  
nor gloom of night” has come to in this day and age?”

CHORUS

This makes us sick, this makes us rage.  
We are disgusted and amazed.  
To think that our children see such things.  
What smut, what filth, the mailman brings!

*SUMMERFIELD*

*Nor snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night  
shall stay these couriers from their appointed rounds....*

*CHORUS*

*To think that our children, our neighbors, can see this smut.  
It makes us sick, it makes us sick, it makes us sick...*

SUMMERFIELD

But save your outrage, my friends, for this.

*(SUMMERFIELD shows them another page, also seen in projection.  
Could be something like:)*



CHORUS

We are outraged beyond belief!

SUMMERFIELD

By now, your Johnny’s addiction to depravity is complete.

Scarlet Professor libretto

May 2016

These are the images he now craves, and his parents cannot compete.  
Don't look away, my friends. Do not look away.  
This is the world we live in today.  
This is the world we live in today.

*(Scrolling through more beefcake images, which are projected.)*

*And this. And this. And this. And this. And this....*

**CHORUS**

*No more. Please no more. No more images please. Stop! Stop!*

I run the biggest business in the world  
and I will not stand to see it abused  
by liberal pawns as subterfuge  
in the name of freedom of the press,  
dragging our country into this cess;  
how many campuses at this moment,  
rife with intellectuals and pink professors  
are threatened by men of different stripes  
than our beloved red, white, and blue?

**CHORUS**

We stand together against this incursion,  
we stand as one to prevent the perversion  
of the U.S. Male.

**SUMMERFIELD**

Pink professors, pink professors.  
Brook no bunk from patsy, commie pink professors.

**CHORUS**

Pink professors, pink professors.  
Brook no bunk from patsy, commie pink professors.

**SUMMERFIELD**

I deplore the prating of these mimsies  
and the intolerable tolerance of those Kinseys  
who adduce that homosexuality  
is a state that can be statistically induced,  
that psychic masochism is a condition

Scarlet Professor libretto  
to which one in three males must simply get used.  
Is it no wonder that Soviet minions  
seek at this moment to collude  
with intellectuals and pink professors  
with whom they would communistically commune?

CHORUS

We stand together against this incursion,  
we stand as one to prevent the perversion  
of the U.S. Male.

SUMMERFIELD

Pink professors, pink professors.  
Take no guff from namby pamby pink professors.

CHORUS

Pink professors, pink professors.  
Take no guff from namby pamby pink professors.

SUMMERFIELD

And should these namby pink professors  
attempt to kink and shrink our youth  
with defty lefty airy fairy  
scary pages, sick, uncouth--

CHORUS

Let them face the light of truth!

*(As the mad dance of the Pink Professors continues, we see REGAN, off to one side, in counterpoint.)*

REGAN

I live my life for the state.  
I work overtime each day to do what's right.  
Decency. That's what I believe in.  
Deviants in my experience are begging to be caught.  
If you arrest one,  
you see the look of relief in his face,  
and the anguish of a lifetime going away.  
I mean to deliver every deviant from that torment.

Scarlet Professor libretto

May 2016

It has nothing to do with the political circus in Washington, DC.  
It's a matter of decency, plain and simple.  
Decency. That's what I believe in.

SUMMERFELD, CHORUS

Pink professors, pink professors.  
Brook no bunk from patsy, commie pink professors.

*SUMMERFIELD*

*Take no guff, brook no bunk.*

*CHORUS*

*Should these patsy pink professors  
think that they can somehow hide  
their kinky, stinky commie finky  
pinkness from our nation's pride –*

SUMMERFIELD, CHORUS

The Postal Service is on your side!

*(Lights fade on them all.)*

SCENE 2

*[Projection: "State Hospital. Northampton, Massachusetts. Fall 1960.]*

*(Lights up on a transformed chorus: a group of students and interns being escorted by a woman DOCTOR around the mental ward.)*

CHORUS

And what do we find on this ward, doctor?  
What will you teach us? What can you show?

DOCTOR

I have for you a number of most interesting cases.  
Those who suffer torment and shame,  
those who strayed across society's bounds  
and felt how indecent they became.

CHORUS

Scarlet Professor libretto  
We walk where society hides its secrets,  
we walk where society hides its shame.

May 2016

DOCTOR  
*(indicating a patient)*  
Here you see a wife and mother.  
You have heard of her perhaps?

CHORUS  
What malady afflicts her mind?

DOCTOR  
In the barn behind her house  
she took many lovers  
and then went to raving,  
regressing to much like a little girl  
when her infidelity was discovered to the world.

CHORUS  
Can she be freed from this disease?

DOCTOR  
She is almost nearly cured,  
straightened out by our latest modern methods.

WOMAN PATIENT  
I am almost nearly cured.

DOCTOR  
*(indicating another patient)*  
A young man of seventeen.  
You have heard of him perhaps.

CHORUS  
What malady afflicts his mind?

DOCTOR  
Caught touching himself, on a playground swing,  
at a bathroom at school, at the back of a train,  
a bush in a park, a bus stop in the rain,  
and then he went to raving,

Scarlet Professor libretto  
falling into a strange depression  
when asked to give up his obsession.

May 2016

CHORUS  
Can he be freed from this disease?

DOCTOR  
He is almost nearly cured,  
straightened out by our latest modern methods.

YOUNG MAN PATIENT  
I am almost nearly cured.

DOCTOR  
*(indicating Arvin)*  
And now you see our latest guest.  
You have heard of him, I'm sure,  
and news of his arrest.

CHORUS  
Is this the famous Newton Arvin?

DOCTOR  
A professor at the college for girls,  
a literary critic known around the world  
for his eloquence on the books  
of our dear New England,  
particularly Nathaniel Hawthorne—  
and did I mention he once kept company  
as an intimate friend of Truman Capote?

CHORUS  
Now he is branded with shame and scorn.

DOCTOR  
But look, he seeks our help.  
He has recently admitted himself  
for personality disorder and depression.  
We have him on suicide watch night and day.  
One day we will have him cured.



*CHORUS*

*You will free him from this disease,  
you will free him from this disease.  
Now he is branded with shame and scorn.  
You will free him, you will cure him of this disease.*

*DOCTOR*

*One day we will have him cured, have him cured,  
straightened out by our modern methods.  
One day we will have him cured.  
The tour now ends, my friends. Good day.*

*(The Chorus exits.)*

*DOCTOR*

May we talk, Professor Arvin?  
I see the pain you're in. I'm here to help.  
Talking is good. It can put one at peace.  
You have so much to live for, Professor Arvin.

*(ARVIN is uncertain whether to respond. But eventually rebuffs her,  
turning away.)*

*DOCTOR*

I will leave you to yourself.

*(She exits, leaving him alone.)*

*ARVIN*

The Dismal Chamber. So Hawthorne called it!  
The lonely room under his mother's eaves,  
where he labored, ten years, alone,  
nursing his talent in guilty solitude,  
a shadowy island amid the stream of life.  
What were his failings? Why, they were legion!  
Not to find fellowship with his fellow men,  
not to make himself human, a social being,  
not to give his personality full voice.  
He failed to achieve roundness and roughness as a man.  
And his life became a centrifuge, as did his work --  
a dramatization of all those forces in our nation

Scarlet Professor libretto  
that lead to fragmentation, disunion, isolation, despair.  
And so did I, like Hawthorne before me.  
build my own Dismal Chamber.  
My solitary fortress under lonely eaves—  
what a pleasant sanctuary for me!  
Finding refuge in imagination,  
I read and read, and wrote and wrote,  
and if I finally sought a little fellowship...?  
Now I turn sixty. My life is over.  
My shame has escaped from that dark room.  
What can I do but retreat once again  
into the darkness corner of my heart,  
into the coldest and remotest part  
of the Dismal Chamber?  
My soul a candle about to flicker out,  
but my body bound in public pillory!

### SCENE 3

*(Fluidly from the above, we enter Arvin's imagination: the world of The Scarlet Letter. Lights up on HESTER PRYNNE in pillory. Chorus now becomes her taunters.)*

### CHORUS

Heed the fearful mark of shame upon thy breast, o Hester Prynne.  
Know that eyes forever gaze upon the letter of thy sin.  
Scarlet tis, and scarlet shall until the end of days proclaim  
The evil act, the secret thrall, in which thou sullied thy good name.

### HESTER

I heed the fearful mark of shame  
And recognize the evil act  
Of lust within my unclean heart.  
Twas not a weakness felt but once  
But passion over many months  
Unto a man who slaked my thirst  
And fed my needs and made me whole.  
When we are parched, who gives us drink?  
When we are empty, who fills our cup?  
And when we cry for tender mercy,

Scarlet Professor libretto  
Who is He who grips our heart?  
Only the Lord, only the Lord –  
Or so alas it must be.  
And thus I heed the fearful mark  
Of shame upon my wicked breast  
Forever.

ARVIN  
*(observing her)*  
Hester Prynne, a stunning creation.  
How did one man's imagination  
foretell our troubled world?

CHORUS  
Speak to the woman, Reverend Dimmesdale.

ARVIN  
*(now as if Dimmesdale)*  
Willst thou not name, o Hester Prynne,  
Thy fellow partner in this sin?  
We are punished not for our shame but for our secrets.

HESTER  
I cannot name the man.  
I shall not name the man.

ARVIN  
Thy silence only tempts him toward  
Further acts against our lord.  
Free for once the shameful man from this dark secret.

HESTER  
I cannot name the man.  
I shall not name the man.

*(Enter REGAN.)*

REGAN  
Hester Prynne, you can hide your secret from these masses  
But not from me. You'll see.  
I shall expose your partner in crime. You'll see.

Scarlet Professor libretto

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And he will join you on this damn pillory.  
*And God help that indecent shameful monger of sin and deceit!  
Sooner or later he will be mine!*

*CHORUS*

*O Hester Prynne, know that eyes forever gaze  
Upon the letter of thy sin.  
Heed the fearful mark of shame  
Upon thy breast, O Hester Prynne.*

*HESTER*

*I cannot name the man.  
I shall not name the man.*

*ARVIN*

*We are punished not for our shame but for our secrets.*

*CHORUS*

*Heed the fearful mark of shame, O Hester Prynne.*

#### SCENE 4

*(Enter HELEN BACON, [shown in by the DOCTOR?], interrupting  
ARVIN's reverie.)*

HELEN

Arvin? Hello, Arvin?  
Look at me, Arvin.

ARVIN

Helen? I said, no visitors.

HELEN

So this is your latest "dismal chamber"?  
Your sanctuary from the world?  
I could call it cowardly,  
I could accuse you of one thousand things –

ARVIN

And I could ask you, Helen, to leave.

Scarlet Professor libretto  
Doctor?! --

May 2016

HELEN

Listen, we're terribly worried about you down at the college,

ARVIN

I don't care about the college.

HELEN

The fact is, the college cares about you.  
I'm lining up the Dean, the President too,  
don't think for a moment you lack support,  
not just your English department, my faculty in Classics--  
I called a meeting, and at that meeting I called a vote,  
and in that vote the hands up in outrage were unanimous  
over this violation of your basic rights,  
which is saying, they had no right  
to raid your place, unannounced, that morning—  
to confiscate those magazines –  
it's a matter of principle.

ARVIN

I don't care about principles.

HELEN

Well, other people do.  
Men have the right to read what they wish  
in the privacy of their own homes-

ARVIN

And I have a right to privacy too.  
For God's sakes, leave me alone.

HELEN

I cannot, I will not, I refuse.  
Not only do I care about you,  
but two young men's lives and careers are at stake --  
Which is saying –  
You have a trial coming up,  
And all our eyes will be upon you.

Hester Prynne in your Scarlet Letter,  
They branded her with the letter of shame.  
But when they made her mount that pillory,  
Yes, when her hour finally came,  
She never named a single name,  
She never named a single name.

We all recall the days of McCarthy,  
And what our nation almost became  
But when the brave ones took the stand,  
Yes, when their moment finally came,  
They never named a single name,  
They never named a single name.

Take a stand, take a stand,  
When you take the stand.

I understand – the raid was sudden,  
I understand – you were under duress.  
I understand – the shock and the anger  
I understand – some names were said.  
I understand – I understand –

But Newton Arvin, professor of English,  
Your moment finally is at hand.  
When you stand before the public,  
Yes, when you rise to take the stand,  
Will you bravely take a stand?  
Will you bravely take a stand?

Take a stand, take a stand,  
When you take the stand.

ARVIN

How are they doing, Helen? The others?

HELEN

What a relief, you finally asked!  
Poor Joel Dorius, how he suffers – a young man like that,  
they've put him on academic leave, we hope he gets his nerves together,

ARVIN  
And Ned?

HELEN  
You know Ned well, Arvin, Ned's a fighter,  
he's got that spark, that appeal, that flame,  
which is saying – he had it from the moment I met him,  
that's why I hired him –  
I remember that night when I introduced you to him –  
at your place, yes? A few Decembers ago....

*(Transition to 1957: Arvin's apartment. NED appears.)*

HELEN  
...Our newest lecturer in Latin.  
Ned Spofford.  
He comes to us with sterling recommendations  
and great promise as a shaper of young minds.

ARVIN  
Ah, another one of Helen's brilliant young bucks?  
Madame Chairwoman, you have done well.  
Classics outshines our English department.  
The college girls will be mad for you, Mr. Spofford.

NED  
Oh, I don't know --

ARVIN  
So Latin's your thing, young man?  
What can I serve you? Scotch and soda?

NED  
Wine would be fine.

HELEN  
I'll take the scotch.

ARVIN  
What's your love, Spofford?

Scarlet Professor libretto

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I mean, your pleasure among Roman wordsmiths?  
Plautus? Terence? Things dramatic?

NED

I like Ovid.

ARVIN

The Art of Love.

NED

But I love Catullus.

ARVIN

“Quaeris, quot mihi basiationes tuae...”<sup>1</sup>

What do you think? A bit too scurrilous?

NED

I'd call that erotic.

ARVIN

A man of discrimination.

I see this is no mere meeting

but a meeting of minds.

HELEN

Arvin is a wit.

ARVIN

Don't overestimate Helen's, either.

Her love of the Greeks is inestimable.

HELEN

Hesiod. Pindar.

NED

Great writers.

ARVIN

Sappho as well.

---

<sup>1</sup>“Do you know how many of my kisses....”[...would satisfy my hunger?]



HELEN

There are a great many lovers of Sappho on our campus.

NED

I admire your work on Melville.  
Bursting with verve, vitality, the whole nine yards.  
But your volume on Hawthorne –  
well, that's astonishing.

ARVIN

I wrote it many, many years ago.

NED

When will you write one like it again?

ARVIN

More wine? Come on.  
*(serving him anyway)*  
Come on. As the Greeks knew –  
and your illustrious leader will bear me out –  
wine is the portal to intellectual fraternity,  
and given the benighted town we live in, this Plato's cave  
reeking of bland young pink things primping for husbands,  
we must use our greatest human gift, our imagination,  
to escape into literature's evergreen groves,  
a place more joyous, a place less dismal –

HELEN

Then this dismal chamber of yours, Arvin?  
Which is saying --

ARVIN

Which is saying – as you like to say, Helen --  
which is saying....

When true minds meet, there's nothing like it:  
The give and take of words and ideas.  
Undying passion for beauty's splendor,  
Giving oneself in sweet surrender --  
Whether in English, Latin or Greek --

Scarlet Professor libretto  
I live for the moment when true minds meet.

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HELEN

When true minds meet, it's quite exciting:  
Bringing together brilliant men,  
Who take positions and fiercely hold them,  
Who take young minds and firmly mold them --  
These sorts of souls make life complete:  
I love these moments when true minds meet.

NED

I'm new to this meeting of minds myself,  
I'm not sure exactly what you both mean,  
But I like meeting people, I like camaraderie,  
And I certainly like trying new things.

ARVIN

When true minds meet, there's nothing like it:  
The give and take of words and ideas.  
Undying passion for beauty's splendor,  
Giving oneself in sweet surrender --  
Whether in English, Latin or Greek --  
I live for the moment when true minds meet.

HELEN

When true minds meet, it's quite exciting:  
Bringing together brilliant men,  
Who take positions and fiercely hold them,  
Who take young minds and firmly mold them --  
These sorts of souls make life complete:  
I love these moments when their true minds meet.

NED

I'm new to this meeting of minds myself,  
I'm not sure exactly what you both mean,  
But I like meeting people, I like camaraderie,  
And I certainly like trying new things.

HELEN, ARVIN

When true minds meet, it's downright thrilling:

NED

When true minds meet, it must be thrilling:

ARVIN, NED

The effervescence of kindred souls.

HELEN

With effervescent kindred souls

ALL

Let them disparage our ivory tower:

No one who's climbed it and felt its power

HELEN

Would deny this joy we seek.

ARVIN, NED

Would deny us this joy we seek.

ALL

We come alive in these moments

When true minds meet.

*(They drink and dance and spin around. Transition back to the present day: 1960. HELEN is about to leave ARVIN.)*

HELEN

Remember, Arvin: be strong for us.

Take a stand, take a stand

When you take the stand.

*(Exit HELEN.)*

## SCENE 5

*(Fluidly, we move into Arvin's reverie again: flashback to a moment in his apartment. ARVIN and NED. The scene is after dinner.)*

NED

It changed my world, your book on Hawthorne.

Scarlet Professor libretto  
Every page, new inspiration.  
Every paragraph, a fresh perception.  
Like you've crawled inside the soul of the man.  
So much poetry, so much passion,  
but the prose – so damn precise!  
You put to shame all those deathlike tomes  
sinking beneath the weight of notes,  
The junk they taught us write in school.  
You made me wonder:  
why can't criticism soar as well?

ARVIN  
I'm touched to find an admirer.

NED  
But I must tell you, I don't see Hawthorne as you do.  
Who's to say he was some lonely recluse  
with a heart half-hidden to the world?

ARVIN  
You've spent too many hours with Greeks and Romans,  
those happy, hearty sensualists.  
How little you know our dour New England.

NED  
This is a man who held public office,  
a man who became a U.S. consul,  
a man who lived in loving union  
with the girl of his dreams till the day he died.

ARVIN  
Then how do you explain *The Scarlet Letter*?

NED  
Great art is mysterious, don't you think?  
Things happen, and you can't explain them –  
somehow there's a spark – there is no theory –  
something beyond explanation –

ARVIN  
Is anything beyond explanation?

NED

Love is beyond explanation.  
Desire is beyond explanation.  
Or just the passion of two people, poles apart,  
colliding in the need to hold someone.  
Don't you know what I mean?

*(ARVIN leans over to kiss NED. NED rebuffs him, turns away.)*

ARVIN

God, I'm sorry –

NED

No –

ARVIN

You must think me disgusting –

NED

No –

I like men too.

I've known more than a few.

ARVIN

So we share this inversion after all,  
this lamentable curse, this eternal shame.

NED

For God's sake, Newton,  
will you banish this idea of shame  
from that brilliant brain of yours?

Don't talk to me of lamentable curses.

Don't moan to me about eternal shame.

Don't try to cast their shadows on me.

Once when I was seventeen  
some buddies and I went out for a drive,  
just a bunch of kids having a high, old time.  
across the state line with a case of beer.

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It must have been two or three a.m.  
When I and a boy came back to my place,  
and he and I went up to my room  
and he touched me and I touched him.  
God, what pleasure! God, it felt good!  
Nothing to fear and no one to blame,  
I knew in my heart there was no shame.  
And I'd guard that truth every day I'm alive.

I don't mean to say I'm some naïve fool.  
I play my part, I'm pretty wise  
but I perform awaiting the moment  
when I can cast off my disguise,  
when like the Greeks of ancient days,  
society comes around and says:  
"Love who you want to love.  
Love without fear, love without blame."  
I know in my heart there was no shame.  
And I guard that truth every day I'm alive.

So don't talk to me about lamentable curses.  
Don't moan to me about eternal shame.  
They will never cast their shadow on my way.

ARVIN  
So to you I'm just some haunted ghoul?

NED  
I love you, Newton.  
As a father. As a friend.  
Friends who live life a certain way.

ARVIN  
Friends with a quest for beauty?

NED  
Like the Greeks of ancient days.

ARVIN  
So we can share ideas about life and art?

NED

Now you're seeing things my way.

ARVIN

There is so much we two can share.

*(ARVIN brings over magazines, which he shares with NED over the following dialogue.)*

ARVIN

It's amazing what the US mail can bring  
in the guise of muscle-building magazines.

NED

I see.

ARVIN

Yes, great art is mysterious.  
Some of this stuff is really first-rate.

NED

I see.

ARVIN

If a bit tame.

NED

Yes.

ARVIN

I've become an avid collector these last few years.

NED

Much as I like art and abstractions,  
I'm one for physicalities.  
May I ask where might one go?

ARVIN

Nowhere in this benighted town!  
But Springfield's just a bit down the road.  
A good place for two collectors on the hunt

Scarlet Professor libretto  
to be sure of finding attractive prey.  
They've got a bar there called The Arch –

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NED  
You'll be my guide to this underworld?

ARVIN  
I'll be your Dante to that inferno.  
You may just find it paradise.  
But first let me play you something beautiful.  
Have you heard this new recording of Schubert?

NED  
Fischer-Dieskau? I love it.

ARVIN  
The grief and rage of a rejected lover  
facing the cold of coming winter,  
journeying to an unknown land.

*(ARVIN plays the Schubert for him.)*

*DANCE INTERLUDE: ARVIN AND NED'S SEXUAL ADVENTURES IN  
SPRINGFELD. OUT OF THIS COMES....*

SCENE 6

*(The forest.)*

HESTER  
I wait in this forest beyond all bounds  
Far from the closed and craven town –

I wait to warn the man who loves me.  
The man I long for, the man I adore.  
Will he find me as he wanders  
Or retreat behind the oaken door?

I wait for him, I wait for that man,



Scarlet Professor libretto  
I wait for my desire,  
My heart forever a heart of scarlet,  
My heart of raging fire.

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*(Enter Arvin to her, as Dimmesdale.)*

ARVIN  
O Hester Prynne, is it thou?  
Art thou in life?

HESTER  
As such life as has been mine, Reverend,  
These seven years since we last met.

ARVIN  
Thy beauty has not faded, Hester.  
But why dost thou cower in this dark forest?

HESTER  
Dost thou see me cower, Reverend?  
Does the wide universe lie within  
The compass of our sickly town?  
Whither lies the forest track  
That we now both gaze upon?  
Deeper it goes, and deeper too  
Into a boundless wilderness.  
Doth it not have shade enough  
To hide a heart from the eyes of the world?

ARVIN  
It doth, but with what deathly shade:  
The inviting shade of eternal sleep.

HESTER  
Speaketh not of eternal sleep!  
Choose the vibrant course of life.  
Heed my warning, Arthur Dimmesdale:  
There is a man who lives among us,  
A man whose breath is rank with hatred,  
And who means to do you harm.

ARVIN

I know-this man of whom you speak.

HESTER

There is a simple path to take:  
The broad path of the open sea

ARVIN

And leave behind all that I know  
For some unknown freedom?

HESTER

Leave this wreck and ruin behind.  
Begin anew! Begin anew!  
Exchange thy false and fitful life  
For one that shines, for one that is true!

ARVIN

There is not the strength or courage left me  
To venture into this strange and wild and difficult world alone.

HESTER

O Reverend, look me in the eyes!  
Thou shalt not go alone!

*(She throws herself into his arms. He tries to repel her.)*

HESTER

Do not look back! The past is gone!  
With this symbol, I undo it all  
And make it as if it had never been.

*(She throws down the scarlet letter.)*

*(Enter Truman Capote to Arvin.)*

CAPOTE

What's this diddling and dawdling, my boy?

ARVIN

Truman!

CAPOTE

Take her away for god's sakes,  
Gallop away with the gal.  
On some dashing white horse, would be nice.

ARVIN

You know it's not how the novel ends –

CAPOTE

Who gives a fig how the novel ends?  
Novels are novels and life is life.  
Until we start putting more life in novels,  
Let's not get huffe puffed by their precious conceits.  
This one in particular is overwrought mush –  
Can anyone read the darned thing anymore?

ARVIN

It's a stunning creation.

CAPOTE

Of 1832.

ARVIN

1850.

CAPOTE

Pardonnez moi  
For casting aspersions on its cutting edge modernity.

ARVIN

Dimmesdales' failures, and Hawthorne's,  
Are the perpetual failures of our lands.

CAPOTE

Don't get me started on Hawthorne's failures.  
They're all there to see, right on page one.  
Have some courage, reach out and touch –  
And take – and take – and take –  
The one who loves you. Look at her pleading.  
God look deep at those glorious eyes and drink them in.

Scarlet Professor libretto

May 2016

I loved you once, more than I ever loved.  
Take the hand of the one you love  
And go out bravely into the world.

*HESTER*

*I beg you, Reverend, mark the danger!  
Beware the man who means you harm.*

*ARVIN*

*If I were to cross a thousand seas,  
My shame would be with me still:*

*CAPOTE*

*Take the hand of the one you love  
And go out bravely into the world.*

*(Capote leads Hester to Arvin – or Arvin to Hester. Hester reaches out to touch his hand. Arvin cannot bring himself to take her. Enter Regan, placing cuffs on Arvin.)*

*(Lighting change: we are now in Arvin's apartment, and Capote and Hester disappear.)*

*REGAN*

*(arresting Arvin)*

I hereby place you under arrest  
Chapter Two-Oh-Two,  
Section Twenty-Nine,  
Of Massachusetts law  
Making it a crime  
To deal in obscenity  
And deviant material.  
Look me in the eye, Professor Arvin.  
I'm here to help you.

*ARVIN*

I've been waiting for you my whole life.

*(During this, Regan's minions ramshackle the apartment.)*

*REGAN*

Scarlet Professor libretto  
I believe you, professor.  
It's never too late to wipe the slate clean.  
We know you're not alone in this.  
Who else is part of your little ring?  
Who are others with who you've been sharing these things?  
*(showing diary)*  
We found your diary, after all.

Tell the truth.  
That's all I ask.  
You have everything in the world to gain.  
Who's J.D.?

ARVIN  
Joel Dorius.

REGAN  
Joel Dorius? Who's he?

ARVIN  
A Shakespeare man on the English faculty.

REGAN  
I see.  
Anyone else? Another professor.  
I know you need to get it off your chest.  
Not for me, professor. For yourself.  
N.S.?

ARVIN  
I'm not certain --

REGAN  
Yes? Yes?

ARVIN  
A young fellow in the classics department.

REGAN  
Yes? Yes?  
Tell me. For your own good, Professor.

ARVIN  
Ned Spofford.

SCENE 7

*(Arvin's naming of Ned invokes the Chorus, who enter the stage as the scene transitions to the trial.)*

CHORUS

Have you read the papers?  
(Scandal! Scandal!)  
A ring of professors.  
(Scandal! Scandal!)  
We can't believe what we're hearing,  
Is this what they're sharing?  
Is this what they teach, what they're teaching our daughters?

Of course they are innocent  
(Scandal! Scandal!)  
Until proven guilty.  
(Scandal! Scandal!)  
Though we've always suspected  
Things went undetected  
Behind the fancy red brick, the red bricks of that college.

Shouldn't these men be teaching art and beauty?  
Shouldn't these men inspire great ideas?  
Shouldn't these men convey a moral duty  
To live up to the highest ideals?  
Shouldn't these men convey a moral duty?  
Shouldn't these men have a sense of shame?  
And why aren't these men, men?

Have you seen the papers?  
(Scandal! Scandal!)  
Have you seen the papers?  
(Scandal! Scandal!)

A ring of professors?

(Scandal! Scandal!)

We can't believe what we're hearing,

Is this what they're sharing?

And what will come out, what will come out at the trial?

*(Ned is led in, in handcuffs, from one side of the stage, and Arvin from the other. Ned tries to get his attention. Arvin looks away. Regan takes the stand, to testify. His testimony is in response to unheard questions.)*

REGAN

I do.

Sergeant John Regan, Massachusetts State Police, anti-smut unit.

Just another flyspeck: that's what we thought,

A loner, a loser, a nobody, a homebody.

What did we discover? So help me God.

A trove of filth, a treasure of smut,

The lifetime collection of a connoisseur,

Magazines, movie reels, memorabilia.

Young men, muscle men – various poses.

Your so-called daisy chain.

Your so-called daisy chain.

And then the journals, dozens and dozens,

In which the accused alludes to others, named by initials,

With whom and through him he was sharing this smut.

With whom and through him, so help me God.

Forays too, adventures, activities

Of a perverse and peculiar nature.

And then it suddenly dawned on me:

This wasn't some lonely invert, no –

No flyspeck, nobody, loner, loser,

But a vulture, a scorpion, a spider,

A network of spiders, webs of spiders, webs and webs of pink tarantulas --

An interstate ring, a thing,

Spinning among us with its deceit,

We have a sickness deep among us.

What we know is not what we know.

We do not know ourselves. Now we're starting to know.

Even *he* knew that, his own deceit.

He knew his own sickness, so help me God.

Scarlet Professor libretto

May 2016

He coughed up those names pretty easily.  
But who knows who else is involved.  
So help me God,  
I swear to you today, so help me God,  
In this court of justice  
In this court of judgment,  
So help me God, so help me God, so help me God.

*(Regan leaves the stand. Ned tries to address Arvin.)*

NED  
Newton? Newton?  
You don't have to look me in the eye.  
I just need to know:  
Why did you give them Joel's name? And mine?

ARVIN  
I could not go through this alone.

NED  
I understand. I guess I do.  
And you're not going to go through this alone.  
This outrage will be our glue  
When we take this thing where it needs to go.

ARVIN  
*Ned, there's nowhere to go.  
The road ends here, Ned.  
We're at the brink,  
They've pried their way into my dismal chamber  
And the now world sees the sickness in our hearts.  
I can't go forward, I can't retreat.  
Will you take my hand and walk into the shadows?  
Will you be brave and be with me forever?  
Will you, Ned Spofford, die with me?*

NED  
*You drive me crazy, Newton.  
This 'die with me' nonsense. It's crap.  
We're going to fight this,*



*In the highest chamber, in the greatest court.  
The world will see the rightness of our cause,  
And a little bit of justice will be engraved up on our laws.  
Stand with me, Newton. Will you, Newton, stand with me?*

*(Arvin ignores him. Transition to Arvin's testimony.)*

ARVIN

Yes, Professor of English Literature at Smith College for Girls.

I am guilty of everything you say.

I am the man therein described.

I am the vulture, the scorpion, the spider.

I have been this way my whole life.

I did obtain those materials of which you speak,

I did compose every word which you have read,

I did partake in acts of disease

On many many a day and night,

I did lead others to view daisy chains

Yes, I am guilty of everything you say.

I am guilty.

*(itals: spoken?)*

*Yes, Professor Joel Dorius. On a number of occasions.*

*Yes, Ned Spofford. Professor Edward W. Spofford. Yes, on many, many occasions.*

*So help me God.*

*(Arvin gets off the stand, looks away from Ned.)*

## SCENE 8

*(We lapse out of courtroom/chorus. Back to the reality of the mental hospital, and ARVIN. We see the DOCTOR, showing in Helen and Ned.)*

HELEN

Lift your head up and look at us, Arvin.

Not that we particularly wanted to come, but we thought you should hear the news, firsthand.

You've been dismissed, all three of you, kicked off the faculty,

contracts terminated, sent proverbially packing --

I made the case on your behalf --

how beloved as teachers, how brilliant as minds, etcetera, etcetera --

bless them the faculty, they stood strong,

but that pusillanimous Board of Trustees –  
that reactionary toxic mix of Fifth Avenue socialites and Edwardian relics --  
you should have heard them! --

“How could a college of such reputation tolerate blah blah blah now proven to be guilty doubt  
blah blah blah and so on and so on.”

Thank you, Arvin, thank you, thank you  
for everything you did on behalf of our cause  
the day that you opened your mouth in that court.

ARVIN

I'm terribly sorry.

HELEN

Terribly sorry? That's a fine thing to say. I'm terribly sorry? Terribly sorry?!  
You've published your books, enjoyed your career, had your fun, made your name,  
And you know the college owes you a comfortable pension,  
for your damned happily ever after, here or wherever.

Not so Joel, not so Ned.

They are ruined – everything they worked for – two young men –  
Where will they go? What will they do?

And all because of you, Newton Arvin,  
the lowly worm who had only his back in the end.

How can you live with yourself?

Well, I'm through this damned campus, can't see myself here another day --

I'm finding myself another fucking job –

Pardon the Latin.

So we are here, your closest friends, here to wish you a fond farewell

*(Ned comforts her.)*

ARVIN

Say something, Ned.

NED

What can I say?

You said everything right there in court.

Now I'm out in public as a fag.

My face is plastered in the national papers.

So are all the sordid details of a life that once was mine.

And my family -- they know every last thing.

There's not a shred of privacy left to me, or dignity, or an income.

Scarlet Professor libretto

May 2016

And who in hell is ever going to hire me?  
Sometimes I want to strangle you by the neck –  
Sometimes I just wish we never had met.  
But in the end, you, who were once my friend –  
I'm sad for you, Newton. I really am.  
I really am sad for you.

HELEN

Leave him, Ned.  
Our world's not one of hopeless romantics,  
scarlet letters, anguished souls, tragic endings, and the like --  
our world's more stoic, courageous, direct --  
our ancients were never ones to shirk from a fight.  
Things can change, and change for the better.  
And this case of Joel's and Ned's – I won't call it yours –  
may be the pebble that starts the whole pond to ripple.

A million chains are breaking, are breaking in the jails of this land,  
A million hearts are aching, aching, are aching to take a stand.  
A million minds are meeting, are meeting in cities and small towns –  
And the walls, the walls, the walls will crumble and come down.

HELEN, NED

A million chains are breaking, are breaking in the jails of this land,  
A million hearts are aching, aching, are aching to take a stand.  
A million minds are meeting, are meeting in cities and small towns –  
And the walls, the walls, the walls will crumble and come down.

A great parade is forming, is forming where the land meets the sky,  
And soon it will be storming, be storming with throngs of faithful passing by  
You can join in our journey, our journey or ignore its joyous sound –  
But the walls, the walls, the walls will crumble and come down.

To count up to ten million, ten million, you have to start at one.  
So open up your eyes, your eyes, so you can see the sun.  
Yes, open up your eyes, your eyes, and let yourself be found:  
For the walls, the walls, the walls, the walls,  
will crumble and come down.

NED

This will not end here.

Scarlet Professor libretto

May 2016

I'm taking this up with the Supreme Court of Massachusetts,  
And every ast court in the country if I have to.  
Goodbye, Newton.

ARVIN  
Ned!

*(They exit.)*

*(Alone in the ward, Arvin hears these words from The Scarlet Letter:)*

CHORUS  
Be true! Be true! Be true!  
Show freely to the world, if not your worst,  
yet some trait whereby the worst may be inferred!"

SCENE 9

*(DOCTOR approaches ARVIN.)*

DOCTOR  
Professor Arvin? Do you hear me?  
This letter just came for you.  
*(hands him letter; despondent, he does not look at it right away)*  
I'm so sorry to hear about the outcome of your trial.  
Deeply sorry. I can only imagine –  
I hope one day we live in a world  
Where your affliction is seen as clinical illness,  
A disease in the tissues of the brain that issues  
Not from some personal failing  
But the happenstance of faulty electric charges  
In the neurons and cranial lobes.  
Not some sort of moral sickness –  
Nothing to be ashamed about.  
Professor Arvin? Professor Arvin?

ARVIN  
I am finally ready to be cured of it all.

DOCTOR

Scarlet Professor libretto

May 2016

Professor Arvin! Professor Arvin!  
Oh my goodness! Professor Arvin!  
Willingness is always the first step!  
I will be back very shortly  
So we can start our session.

*(Exit the DOCTOR. ARVIN, alone, gathers up bed sheets and starts to fashion them into a noose. Then notices letter that the DOCTOR has brought him. With interest. He opens it. CAPOTE appears to him.)*

CAPOTE

You terrible coward.  
It's not becoming, besides, it makes you look a mess.  
Who's to respect some neurotic old pansy  
Who was such a psychic wreck  
That he went ahead and did himself in?  
Gosh, it makes me want to wring you by the neck!  
Sorry for that.  
You're s0 much more handsome, Newton Arvin,  
When you hold your head up high.  
*(offering him the book The Scarlet Letter)*  
Even your Dimmesdale, that bloviating fart,  
Finds a little courage in the end –

ARVIN

You know the way the novel ends.  
With Dimmesdale's death scene.

*(The Chorus appears. It includes Regan, Summerfield, Doctor.)*

CHORUS

Speak to us, Reverend Dimmesdale!  
Reverend Dimmesdale, we await your words!

CAPOTE

Are we fated by what we read?  
You're a critic – criticize!  
Dimmesdale dies heroically of his shame?  
How preposterous!  
And our great hero leaves his dark-eyed beauty  
To languish among the sneers and jeers

Scarlet Professor libretto  
Of that miserable New England town?  
As if we're to think his death some moral redemption,  
Some apotheosis, some epiphany?  
What high-toned moralistic sniveling hiffle-piffle!  
And you're just fine with that?

May 2016

CHORUS  
Speak to us, Reverend Dimmesdale!

CAPOTE  
Go ahead. Speak to them.

*(Capote unbuttons a few buttons of Arvin's shirt.)*

CAPOTE  
I don't see any scarlet letter on your chest, my love.  
Just the proud heart of a brilliant man.

*(Capote kisses Arvin – then retreats to watch the scene.)*

CHORUS  
Speak to us!

*(Arvin mounts the scaffold to speak. On the way Hester addresses him privately.)*

HESTER  
Shall we not meet again?  
Shall we not spend our immortal life together?  
Surely, surely, we have ransomed one another with all this woe!

ARVIN  
People of New England,  
Ye that deem certain acts unholy,  
Ye that despise certain ways of the heart,  
Ye that would brand some human behavior  
With the scourge of a scarlet letter --  
Behold me now --  
A man no less and no more sinful than any of you.  
I stand upon the spot where years ago  
I should have stood, here with this woman.

Scarlet Professor libretto  
Join me here now, Hester Prynne!

May 2016

*(He embraces/kisses Hester.)*

CHORUS

We cannot look, we cannot gaze!

ARVIN

Why must we never talk in the market place  
Of what happens to us in the forest?  
Why are kisses never to be given  
In the market place?

CHORUS

We cannot look, we cannot gaze!  
We are disgusted and amazed!

*(A moment's pause while he contemplates these questions.)*

ARVIN

I will not leave you to these beasts. The world awaits us.

*(He rips the scarlet letter off her breast and leads her off the scaffold. As he leads her away, the Chorus sings.)*

CHORUS

*(as they go)*

Return at once unto this place!  
Return and pay for your misdeeds!  
Stand before us in disgrace!  
Return to this dismal place  
And wear our scarlet letter!

*Meanwhile, as they sing:*

*Arvin goes over to Doctor, hands her the sheets he has made into a noose.*

*Arvin goes over to Summerfield, and grabs the magazines from him, to Summerfield's surprise.*

*Arvin escorts off the scaffold. She departs.*

*Everything else fades away. The final moment: Arvin, alone, leaves the hospital. He stands in the light of day.*

END