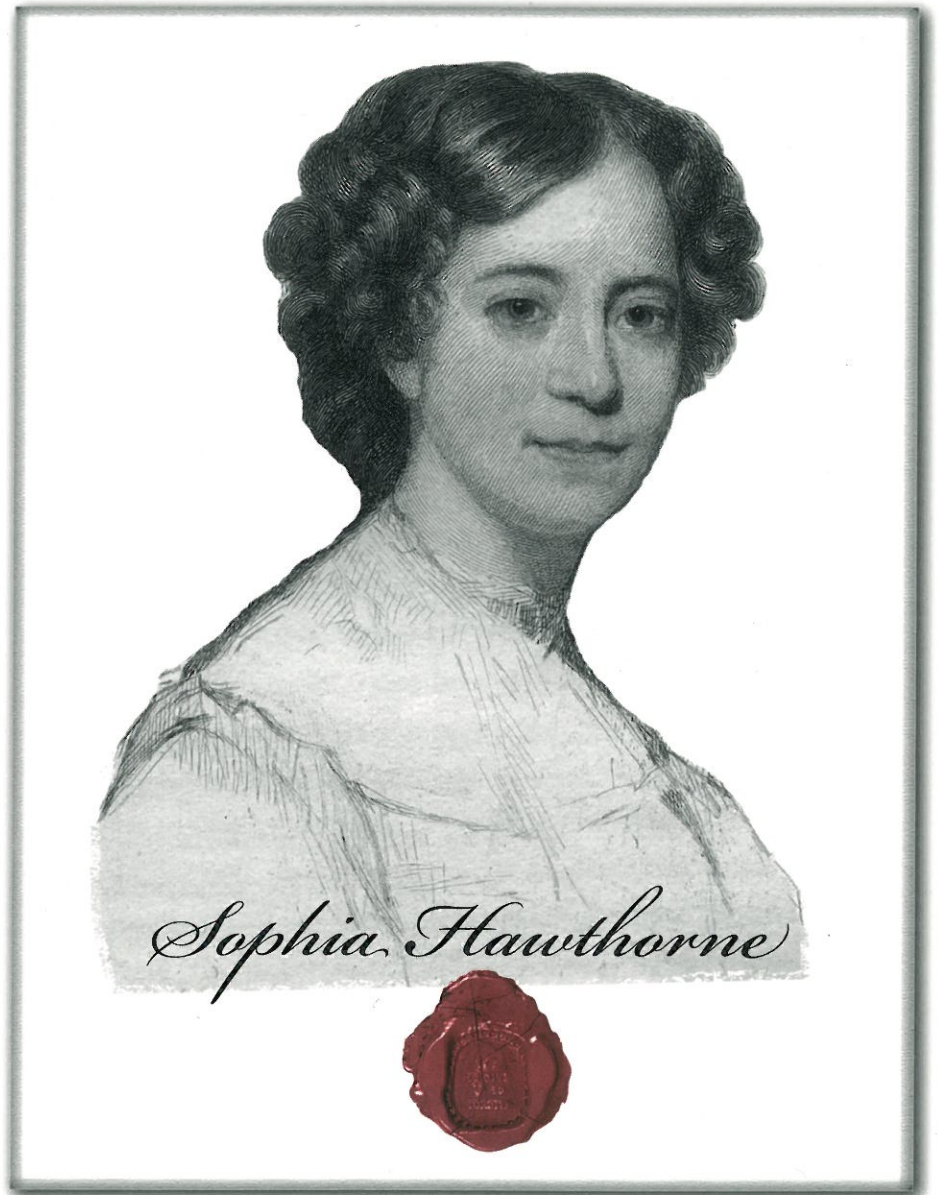


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Sophia's Crimson Hand

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No one who has read Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Birth-mark" can forget the story, briskly summarized by James Mellow in his biography *Nathaniel Hawthorne In His Times* as the "unromantic tale of the scientist-perfectionist gone wrong, a man so lacking in the common understanding of the heart that he destroys his young wife in order to remove a minor blemish" (Mellow 233). Aylmer is the scientist—aptly named, biographer Edwin Haviland Miller points out, for "he truly *ails*" (Miller 249)—and Georgiana is his young bride, a "living specimen of ideal loveliness," Hawthorne writes in the story's opening pages, were it not for the flaw "in the centre of Georgiana's left cheek": a "singular mark" in the shape of a human hand, "though of the smallest pigmy size" ("The Birth-mark" 38). Georgiana's natural rosy complexion in its "usual state" provides camouflage for the "deeper crimson" birthmark, and when she blushes, it becomes "indistinct," finally vanishing "amid the triumphant rush of blood, that bathed the whole cheek with its brilliant glow." But whenever "any shifting emotion caused her to turn pale, there was the mark again, a crimson stain upon the snow" (37).

The story's early paragraphs offer a catalogue of "impressions" of the "Crimson Hand," which "varied exceedingly, according to the difference of temperament in the beholders." Unlike Aylmer, some men find the mark to "heighten their admiration" of Georgiana, and "[m]any a desperate swain would have risked life for the privilege of pressing his lips to the mysterious hand." Others simply "contented themselves with wishing it away." Women envious of Georgiana's good looks refer to the mark as "the Bloody Hand," arguing that it "quite destroyed the effect of Georgiana's beauty, and rendered her countenance even hideous" (38). Close friends, however, "were wont to say, that some fairy, at her birth-hour, had laid her tiny hand upon the infant's cheek, and left this impress there, in token of the magic endowments that were to give her such sway over all hearts" (38). This is the interpretation Georgiana herself favors. When asked by her husband whether she has considered having the birth-mark removed, Georgiana says no, explaining: "it has

been so often called a charm, that I was simple enough to imagine it might be so" (37).

It is only Aylmer's "sombre imagination" that turns the birth-mark into "a frightful object, causing him more trouble and horror than ever Georgiana's beauty, whether of soul or sense, had given him delight" (39). For him, the mark is a "defect" that grows "more and more intolerable, with every moment of their united lives. It was the fatal flaw of humanity, which Nature, in one shape or another, stamps ineffaceably on all her productions, either to imply that they are temporary and finite, or that their perfection must be wrought by toil and pain" (38-9). The scientist determines to rid his wife's cheek of the "disastrous brilliancy" that has come "to scare away all their happiness," only to find he has killed her with his curative potions. Georgiana dies by Aylmer's own over-reaching "fatal Hand," which "had grappled with the mystery of life" (55).



When the story was published in March of 1843, in the third and last issue of James Russell Lowell's monthly magazine *The Pioneer*, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow professed to be "truly delighted" with the tale, recommending to Hawthorne that he "should have made a Romance of it, and not a short story only" (Mellow 233). More recently, "The Birth-mark" has held a fascination for biographers, who seem also to have recognized its narrative potential, variously noting that the story was written "a month after Sophia's miscarriage" (Miller 249); "during the happiest period of Hawthorne's life, his honeymoon at the Old Manse" (Mellow 232); and "not six months after his marriage, during Sophia's first pregnancy" (Wineapple 175). Biographers' interpretations have been as vivid and diverse as those of Georgiana's friends and "lovers" ("The Birth-mark" 38).

In *Salem Is My Dwelling Place: A Life of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, Edwin Haviland Miller observes that "The motions of the birthmark—'now vaguely portrayed, now lost, now stealing forth again, and glimmering to-and-fro with every pulse of emotion'—approximate the sexual rhythm, a natural, life-enhancing rhythm which terrifies Aylmer." The "Crimson Hand," according to Miller, represents "the power of Georgiana's natural desires," and Aylmer "projects his panic on the birthmark,

thus creating an excuse to return to his laboratory, where he feels secure and in control." Hawthorne's own "sexual panic and arrestment" are revealed in the story to become themes in Miller's book, surfacing again when Hawthorne's daughter Una reaches puberty (Miller 250). "After fourteen years of marriage," Miller writes, Hawthorne still "perceived the loss of virginity as violation, himself as a violator, and sexuality as an enduring 'stain.' He had not put to rest youthful anxieties and guilts, as well as misconceptions, and no more than Goodman Brown, Aylmer, Dimmesdale, or Coverdale, it seems, could he accept sexual union as part of the natural rhythm of life" (Miller 414).

Brenda Wineapple, who in *Hawthorne: A Life* had noted that the story's gestation coincided with Sophia Hawthorne's first pregnancy, complicates this tale of "sexual anxiety thinly disguised as cosmetology." "The Birth-mark," Wineapple asserts, is "also a murder story in which a man confronts marriage, and hence sexuality, with horror. Equally, he wants to prevent a birth. In this sense, Hawthorne's story is also a fantasy of abortion. The scientist kills his wife and what she produces so that he in some way can remain alone, untrammelled, asexual, and free from responsibility" (Wineapple 175).

In his portrait of the Hawthorne marriage, *Dearest Beloved: The Hawthornes and the Making of the Middle-Class Family*, T. Walter Herbert emphasizes the wife's collusion in Aylmer's deadly experiment, which indeed becomes a collaborative effort. Hawthorne's tale concludes with Georgiana's expressions of sympathy and admiration for her husband, even as she succumbs to his poisonous cure—"You have aimed loftily!—you have done nobly! Do not repent, that, with so high and pure a feeling, you have rejected the best that earth could offer" ("The Birth-mark" 55). According to Herbert, in the mid-nineteenth-century American middle-class family, "A pure woman aided men in retaining self-control by transmuting masculine lust into reverent admiration. Prompting her man to pay her adoring attentions that would not get her pregnant, this wifely virtue was a form of psychic birth control, necessary to limit family size and thus maintain middle-class status." Commonly, "[b]ecause the domestic angel did not seek her own pleasure, she did not become the target of her husband's self-disgust, which was projected upon such 'impure' women as might illicitly arouse him." But for Hawthorne, who "was fascinated all his life by the male psychodynamics

of feminine purity," Herbert argues, maintaining that double standard was impossible, at least in his fiction. The tales written "following his marriage," Herbert writes, "depict a male imagination for which sexual attraction is virtually indistinguishable from revulsion" (Herbert 145).¹



One of the signal pleasures in writing literary biography is the opportunity to reverse the usual process of composition and use a story, novel, or poem to write the life—or at least a few pages of it. Drawing on passages from "The Birth-mark" to give evidence of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "sexual panic," "sexual anxiety," or sexual "revulsion" may seem a suspect endeavor to some literary critics, but it is the bread-and-butter of biography. Yet the biographer has other sources. To shift to an Aylmerian metaphor, documents—hand-written manuscripts—are biography's life blood. Imagine a biographer's thrill when, as she sat in a reading room at the New York Public Library, poring over a file folder of letters written by Sophia Amelia Peabody, the future Sophia Amelia Hawthorne, a tiny hand appeared, stamped into red sealing wax, a crimson "stain" upon the snow-white page.

"The prettiness of this mimic hand" (38), to borrow a phrase from Hawthorne's story, was undeniable. About 4.8 centimeters in length, the hand was just one element of the red wax seal that had at one time protected the contents of this letter, written by Sophia Peabody to her sister Mary on July 28, 1832, and been delivered to her at Newport, RI, care of the Reverend Dr. William E. Channing. Beneath the hand—a left hand reaching open-palmed to the right—were imprinted as well the words "TO GIVE TO FORGIVE," along with an even tinier heart.²

Sophia Peabody would not meet Nathaniel Hawthorne for another five years after the date of this letter. Was there any chance he could have seen this image and thereby come to associate it with his bride-to-be? So few seals survive on any of Sophia Peabody's letters as anything other than shards of wax or red smudges. It was tempting to speculate that since I could hold this letter in my hand nearly two centuries after it was written and read the message of its thick wax seal, Nathaniel Hawthorne might have discovered it, too, on this or another letter of Sophia's, perhaps one of the many addressed to him that he later burned.

Such seals, I discovered in a survey of internet websites offering them for sale, were common enough in the 1830s for several with a tiny hand and the motto, "TO GIVE TO FORGIVE," to have survived into the twenty-first century.³ Judging from the pattern of indentations bordering the seal, Sophia's was likely made with a carved glass imitation gemstone, held in place by tiny metal prongs on a pendant fob, I learned from a dealer in jewelry made from antique signets of the Victorian era (Seidmann 143, 152).⁴ Women often collected signet fobs, sometimes cast in decorative shapes such as a tiny handbasket, birdcage, or other trinket, and worn on necklaces as charms, a fad that quickly passed with the introduction of the gum-sealed envelope after the advent of the adhesive postage stamp in the late 1840s. Even if Nathaniel Hawthorne didn't see Sophia's 1832 letter, another woman might have written to him, sealing her letter with a similar seal in the shape of a miniature outstretched hand. "[I]t has been so often called a charm," he wrote of Georgiana's birthmark, "stamp[ed] ineffaceably" in the "centre" of her left cheek. Contemporary readers of "The Birth-mark" might have recognized the image as an easily understood symbol of feminine greeting-and-concealment, as wax seals functioned on letters—if not the smiley face sticker of its time, then at least a familiar term in the era's visual lexicon.

Yet all this was conjecture. More important was the letter itself. What did it say about Sophia? What did Sophia say? This letter was no fiction. The words had been written by the actual woman who would become Nathaniel Hawthorne's wife, who inspired the man to confront such sexual anxiety, or panic, or revulsion as he may have possessed—and who may have been preparing to confront her own reluctance to enter into conjugal relations.

Sophia was twenty-two years old. She was writing to her older sister Mary—whom she addressed as "Molly," then a common nickname for "Mary"—from the home of her friends, the newlyweds Connie and Thomas Park in rural Roxbury, just outside Boston.⁵ While Mary worked long hours each day tutoring Rev. William Ellery Channing's young and often poorly behaved son and daughter in Newport that July, Sophia, with her recurring migraines, had given over her summer to

“travels,” visiting various friends, first Lydia Sears Haven, a sufferer from tuberculosis and a new mother. Sophia had attended Lydia unexpectedly during a premature birth at her home near Lowell, Massachusetts, and for ten days afterward she helped care for the baby boy, Foster, “that wee chicken—for it looks more like a chicken than a human form—it is so lean and long,” she wrote to Mary in the letter. The combination of Lydia’s “terrible hard, deep, loud cough which it was agony to hear . . . and the screaming of the baby,” who Sophia nevertheless managed to calm on walks outdoors, meant she’d come away with a headache that felt like “a coronet of thongs cutting into my brain.”

It is not known how Sophia became acquainted with the Parks, but the friendship with Connie was evidently quite close, and Sophia’s vacation with the blissful newlyweds was a vast improvement over her fortnight in Lowell. After arriving in Roxbury late in the day, “The whole evening was a dream of beauty,” Sophia wrote, “and there must have been much beauty to absolutely outbalance my bodily sensations. While I was sitting by the window, a humming bird flashed upon my sight, like a gorgeous messenger [sic] from fairy land, and for ten minutes hung on the wing while he thrust his beak into every tube of a sweet scented bell-flower. Then Thomas set that large musical box to playing and then Cornelia put a light into an immense and superb alabaster vase nearly three feet high with the head of a Bacchante sculptured upon it.”

Thomas Park had ordered “on purpose for my chamber, one of those luxurious, oriental easy chairs!” and soon Sophia was sleeping late and well. “I sometimes rise at half past twelve, and sometimes at ten, and never hear a rude sound—for Thomas creeps up and down stairs sans souliers—never speaks above his breath in the morning, and not a door is allowed to bang. Even the clock is stopped from striking!” Once awake, Sophia spent much of the day with Connie “in awful disabille [sic]” while Thomas went to work in Boston. At mealtimes, “I am fed upon ambrosia and nectar—if the most delicious raspberries [sic], plucked daily by Thomas from the garden, may be called ambrosia, and the softest, sweetest wine of France, forty years old, may be called nectar. On the whole I never was situated just so delectably in my life. The parlours are filled with spicy flowers and eglantine—reminding one of Araby.”



It is well known that Nathaniel Hawthorne fell in love with Sophia Peabody after reading her letters—those she'd written home from Cuba in 1834–35 and her mother had stitched into a journal. His story, "Edward Randolph's Portrait," was inspired by her account of cleaning a painting she believed to be a Murillo while visiting family friends in Havana. If he read her 1832 letter with the red wax seal, what inspiration might he have gleaned? Its opening scenes involving a repulsive premature baby, maternal drudgery and illness, contrasting sharply with later vignettes of marital bliss marked by material opulence and physical well-being might have provided fodder for a story like "The Birth-mark," with its protagonist's lethal ambivalence about conjugal relations and their outcome. It is even possible that the figure of Lydia Haven, the pale, tubercular young mother, whose "terrible" coughs likely yielded bloody sputum, might have served as model for an otherwise perfect wife tainted by a blood-red flaw that released its grip on her body only at death. By the time Nathaniel could have read the letter, Lydia Haven was dead.⁶ His fellow collegian Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's first marriage had ended in similar tragedy, as had the first marriages of other prominent men Nathaniel Hawthorne would come to know by way of Sophia Peabody and her sisters: Horace Mann and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Perhaps the author's vision of a fame-seeking scientist who effected his own wife's demise rather than risk disaster befalling him served to exorcize fears of a sudden loss, or of a fated reprisal by means of private tragedy for the public sin of ambition.⁷

For her part, Sophia could not have known, when she wrote her letter to "Molly," that within a decade the fortune that had enabled her Arabian nights with the Parks would be lost, the alabaster vase and elegant furnishings sold along with the Roxbury house, and Connie and Thomas separated by a continent, never to live together again. It wasn't sexual panic, but the financial Panic of 1837, that severed this nuptial bond. Thomas traveled to California looking for work and never sent for his wife. Connie lived briefly on her own in rooms on Beacon Hill where she hosted a memorable party attended by Nathaniel Hawthorne, Sophia Peabody, George Ripley and Margaret Fuller in October 1839, then moved to Ripley's community at Brook Farm (perhaps in the first

party of idealists that included Hawthorne) where, reverting to her maiden name "Hall," she became known as a medium and was said to give "remarkable dramatic readings" (Deese 324 n44).⁸

At the end of that decade Sophia herself would be married, set to embark on the kind of responsibilities that brought on such a fierce headache during her visit to Lydia Haven in Lowell, yet insisting that her household on the banks of the Concord River was an Eden on earth. Not unlike the Parks' residence in Roxbury, the Hawthornes' Old Manse was surrounded by a luxuriant garden and furnished as extravagantly as Sophia could manage, with a pine bedstead she'd painted with the outlines of Guido Reni's *Aurora*, her own landscapes and portraits on the walls, a borrowed music box in the parlor. As her husband Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote a story in which a mad scientist poisoned his beautiful young wife before she could give birth to a child, perhaps even before their marriage was consummated, Sophia, already pregnant, sketched Nathaniel as Endymion, the beautiful shepherd who fathered fifty daughters by the moon—in his sleep. Although Sophia's health never completely stabilized after her marriage, with a few notable exceptions, her headaches vanished—a not uncommon result when a female migraine sufferer becomes sexually active and bears children. In this story, the husband's love both cured his wife and kept her alive.

While the biographical import of "The Birth-mark" is bound to shift with each telling of Hawthorne's life, it may be safe to say that both Sophia and Nathaniel Hawthorne, like all expectant parents, understood that pregnancy, which at least temporarily removed a monthly crimson stain, would almost certainly lead to the life-altering arrival of a child. For creative individuals, the impending change could have seemed all the more frightening. The Hawthorne marriage did replicate the Aylmers' in this sense: after Una's birth, Nathaniel kept on writing, while Sophia died as an artist. Her painterly hand now rocked the cradle. Sophia's ambivalence about this fate, if she felt it, might have fueled a different story; never expressed, it may have been a source of the estrangement the couple suffered in later years.

Yet for the period of early motherhood, Sophia readily shifted her creativity into caring for her children, all of whom she taught to draw and to appreciate visual art. After nearly a decade of marriage and the births of three children, a time during which her only artistic output was

in painting decorative lamp shades and fire screens to boost the family income in Salem, Sophia wrote to her sister Elizabeth about a visit from a friend who “reproached me kindly for neglecting my powers, & declared it my *duty*” to “hire people to take care of the children & send them to school . . . & cultivate my gifts.” The friend offered to pay Sophia handsomely for “a picture of this scene”—the landscape surrounding the Hawthorne’s Red House in Lenox—and even more for “a room filled with my pictures.” Sophia appreciated the compliment and her friend’s generous offer, but demurred with a simple thank you:

It seemed impertinent to mention such insignificant matters as children & the proper culture of them being naturally & justly the first objects with a mother—Poetry, painting—for the present must go by the board—and what is more, shall go—I said in my heart—but not aloud. I shall paint better & write sweeter poetry by & by than I should now, with a sense of omission on my soul—Painting & poetry are my life now. From my children I gain new ideas, new suggestions which enrich me every day—They are the best pictures I ever painted, the finest poetry I could write, better poetry than I ever can write.⁹

As often happens with devoted mothers, that “by and by” never came. Would Sophia, like Georgiana, thank her husband for it—give and forgive?¹⁰

Notes

¹Although she is neither a biographer nor, like Herbert, a literary critic interested in probing biographical evidence, and her work lies beyond the scope of this study, Judith Fetterley has written powerfully on the story in “Women Beware Science: ‘The Birthmark,’” *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington and London: Indiana UP, 1978), 22–33. I refer readers directly to Fetterley’s tour-de-force analysis of this “story of how to murder your wife and get away with it” (35).

²The seal is affixed to a letter written by Sophia Amelia Peabody [Hawthorne] to Mary Tyler Peabody [Mann], 28 July 1832. Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

³I would like to thank Erica Hirshler, Croll Senior Curator of American Paintings at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston for directing me to the wax seals for sale as well as to several listings on eBay, also available through David Shaw Postal History, featuring a

hand and motto "TO GIVE TO FORGIVE," dated from 1830–1860. Hirshler's email to author, 12 August 2011.

⁴For information on the design and use of signet fobs I am grateful to Denise Couling of Couling's email to author, 15 August 2011.

⁵Sophia Amelia Peabody [Hawthorne] to Mary Tyler Peabody [Mann], 28 July 1832. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Sophia Peabody [Hawthorne] in this article are from this letter.

⁶According to a letter from Sophia's brother Nathaniel Cranch Peabody to her brother George Francis Peabody, dated 27 April 1836, "Our dear Lydia is dead." Antiochiana Collection, Antioch College. Lydia's son and only child Samuel Foster Haven, Jr., survived to serve as a surgeon in the Civil War, but was killed at Fredericksburg, 13 December, 1862. A poem "In Memory of Dr. S. F. Haven, Jr.," by David A. Wasson, of Worcester, Massachusetts, presumably present at the battle, was published in an unidentified newspaper and sent as a clipping to Elizabeth Palmer Peabody on February 8, 1864. Antiochiana Collection, Antioch College. Because of Wasson's use of hand and heart imagery in his poem, I quote the first three stanzas here:

With skillful touch he turned away
Death's wishful hand from wounded men;
But when was done that doleful day,
The living laid him with the slain.

Thy hurt to heal—O native land!
What mortal might he did and dared;
And when all service of his hand
Seemed not enough, his heart he bared,

And laid its life upon thy hurt,
By losing all to make thee whole;
But could not lose his high desert
And place on Memory's record roll.

⁷Both Longfellow, whose wife Mary died of complications of a late term miscarriage, and Mann, whose consumptive wife Charlotte may have been pregnant when she died, were known to have suffered guilt over not having paid enough attention to their young wives during their last illnesses. At least Aylmer didn't have that sin on his conscience.

⁸Cornelia Romana Hall Park married twice more, in 1847 to Henry Sumner (1814–1852) and to Alfred E. Ford (Dall 382 n44).

⁹Sophia Amelia Hawthorne to Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, 16 February 1851. Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

¹⁰The widespread notion that a woman was expected to be forgiving, in both small and large ways, was efficiently expressed in a letter from the Italian patriot Giuseppe

Mazzini to Margaret Fuller. He began the letter, composed in Rome during the 1849 siege, when Mazzini was directing troops and Fuller supervising a hospital for the wounded, with an apology for not having written sooner: "Will you be woman and forgive?" (Rostenberg 77). Fuller herself wore a signet ring given to her in 1838 by her friend James Freeman Clarke after she'd taught for a year at the Greene Street School in Providence, Rhode Island. The ring was inscribed with the motto "feed my lambs," and Fuller may have used it for sealing letters (Fuller 15, 307-8). Later she wore a signet ring with a red gemstone into which the image of a winged Mercury was carved. This second ring, which appears on her right hand in the only known portrait painted of Fuller, by Thomas Hicks, served as inspiration for one of her best known poems, "My Seal-Ring" (Howe 228).

My Seal-Ring

Mercury has cast aside
 The signs of intellectual pride,
 Freely offers thee the soul:
 Art thou noble to receive?
 Canst thou give or take the whole,
 Nobly promise, and believe?
 Then thou wholly human art,
 A spotless, radiant ruby heart,
 And the golden chain of love
 Has bound thee to the realm above.
 If there be one small mean doubt,
 One serpent thought that fled not out,
 Take, instead, the serpent-rod,—
 Thou art neither man nor god.
 Guard thee from the powers of evil,—
 Who cannot trust, vows to the Devil.
 Walk thy slow and spell-bound way;
 Keep on thy mask, or shun the day,—
 Let go my hand upon the way.

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