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Sohui Lee

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and the American Public:
A Godwinian reading
of 'The Scarlet Letter'

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Sohui Lee

The Guillotine and the American Public: A Godwinian reading of *The Scarlet Letter*

While the politics of *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) have been traced to Hawthorne's Salem Custom House dismissal in 1848, this essay argues that Hawthorne situates his experience among deeper institutional problems that shape existing American polity, and that his treatment is analogous to William Godwin's critique of British government in *Things as They Are; or the Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1793). Hawthorne avidly read Godwin, who was popular in America. In 1820, the young author wrote enthusiastically to his sister, 'I have read Hogg's Tales, Caleb Williams, St. Leon & Mandeville. I admire Godwin's novels, and intend to read them all [...] Next to Waverly, I like Caleb Williams.'¹ Godwin's appeal to Americans was amazingly catholic, reaching both moral readers and politically conscious audiences. Decades before pilgrimages to Wordsworth and Carlyle were in vogue, an American traveller visited Godwin in Somerstown and reported that the author's 'nicest moral feelings' did correspond to the tone of his works.² In 1832, a prominent American scholar Samuel Knapp ranked Godwin's *St. Leon* and *Caleb Williams* alongside Johnson's *Rasselas* and Scott's *Waverley* romances, arguing that Godwin emanated the 'power of the genius' and ushered the era of popular romances.³ Even nationalist writer John Neal admitted in 1828 that 'the powerful energetic and philosophizing Godwin' had inspired him to write *Rachel Dyer*.⁴ Also inspired by the 'author of "Caleb Williams,"' Poe credits Godwin's genius in the forming of mystery

¹ MS. October 1, 1820 to Elizabeth Hawthorne. Jane Lundblad, *Nathaniel Hawthorne and European Literary Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1947), 35.

² Excerpt from MS. 15 May [1802?] from William Austin, *Letters from London* (Boston: W. Pelham, 1804); excerpted in *Cyclopaedia of American literature*, eds. Evert and George Duyckinck, 2 vols., 1854, (Philadelphia: Wm, Rutter & Co.; rpt. Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1965), 1: 687.

³ Samuel Lorenzo Knapp, *Advice in the Pursuit of Literature* (New York: J. K. Porter, 1832), 16.

⁴ 'Preface' to *Rachel Dyer*, 1828 (New York: Prometheus Books, 1996), iii.