ENG II Honors

**Feminism and *The Scarlet Letter***

*Read the following passages and annotate using a feminist lens—that is focus on how women are represented throughout. Then answer the questions that follow.*

**From Chapter 2**

It was a circumstance to be noted on the summer morning when our story begins its course, that the

women, of whom there were several in the crowd, appeared to take a peculiar interest in whatever penal

infliction might be expected to ensue. The age had not so much refinement, that any sense of impropriety

restrained the wearers of petticoat and farthingale from stepping forth into the public ways, and wedging

their not unsubstantial persons, if occasion were, into the throng nearest to the scaffold at an execution.

Morally, as well as materially, there was a coarser fibre in those wives and maidens of old English birth

and breeding than in their fair descendants, separated from them by a series of six or seven generations;

for, throughout that chain of ancestry, every successive mother had transmitted to her child a fainter

bloom, a more delicate and briefer beauty, and a slighter physical frame, if not character of less force and

solidity than her own. The women who were now standing about the prison-door stood within less than

half a century of the period when the man-like Elizabeth had been the not altogether unsuitable representative of the sex. They were her countrywomen: and the beef and ale of their native land, with a moral diet not a whit more refined, entered largely into their composition. The bright morning sun, therefore, shone on broad shoulders and well-developed busts, and on round and ruddy cheeks, that had ripened in the far off island, and had hardly yet grown paler or thinner in the atmosphere of New England. There was, moreover, a boldness and rotundity of speech among these matrons, as most of them seemed to be, that would startle us at the present day, whether in respect to its purport or its volume of tone.

“Goodwives,” said a hard-featured dame of fifty, “I’ll tell ye a piece of my mind. It would be greatly

for the public behoof if we women, being of mature age and church members in good repute, should

have the handling of such malefactresses as this Hester Prynne. What think ye, gossips? If the hussy

stood up for judgment before us five, that are now here in a knot together, would she come off with such

a sentence as the worshipful magistrates have awarded? Marry, I trow not.”

“People say,” said another, “that the Reverend Master Dimmesdale, her godly pastor, takes it very

grievously to heart that such a scandal should have come upon his congregation.”

“The magistrates are God-fearing gentlemen, but merciful overmuch--that is a truth,” added a third

autumnal matron. “At the very least, they should have put the brand of a hot iron on Hester Prynne’s

forehead. Madame Hester would have winced at that, I warrant me. But she--the naughty baggage--little

will she care what they put upon the bodice of her gown! Why, look you, she may cover it with a brooch,

or such like heathenish adornment, and so walk the streets as brave as ever!”

“Ah, but,” interposed, more softly, a young wife, holding a child by the hand, “let her cover the mark

as she will, the pang of it will be always in her heart.”

“What do we talk of marks and brands, whether on the bodice of her gown or the flesh of her forehead?”

cried another female, the ugliest as well as the most pitiless of these self-constituted judges. “This

woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die; is there not law for it? Truly there is, both in the

Scripture and the statute-book. Then let the magistrates, who have made it of no effect, thank themselves

if their own wives and daughters go astray.”

“Mercy on us, goodwife!” exclaimed a man in the crowd, “is there no virtue in woman, save what

springs from a wholesome fear of the gallows? That is the hardest word yet! Hush now, gossips for the

lock is turning in the prison-door, and here comes Mistress Prynne herself.”

1. To what social standard is Hawthorne referring when he writes: “The age had not so much refinement, that any sense of impropriety restrained the wearers of petticoat and farthingale from stepping forth into the public ways”?
2. What is Hawthorne suggesting about the “evolution” of the female gender when he writes, “…throughout that chain of ancestry, every successive mother had transmitted to her child a fainter bloom, a more delicate and briefer beauty, and a slighter physical frame, if not character of less force and solidity than her own.”
3. Who is the “the man-like Elizabeth,” and in what ways could she be said to have been “man-like”?
4. What is significant about the fact the Hawthorne would use an expression like “man-like” to describe this Elizabeth?
5. How does the physical description of the women indicate their attitude as it is revealed in this passage?