

# SCARLET LETTERS

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# Scarlet Letters

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## Fictions of Adultery from Antiquity to the 1990s

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**This book is dedicated to the memory of Marie Maclean**

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Was I a mere imitator and fool that I needed that *third person* in order to write about the fate of two people who were making life hard for each other? How easily I fell into the trap! I should have known, of course, that this third person who pervades all life and literature, this ghost of a third person, who never existed, does not mean a thing and ought to be denied. He is one of the pretexts of nature, which is always trying to distract people's attention from its deepest secrets. He is the folding-screen behind which a drama is played out. He is the noise at the entrance to the voiceless site of a real conflict. You might say that everyone has simply found it too difficult to speak of the two people who really mattered; the third, precisely because he is so unreal, is the easy part – the part they could all manage. From the very beginning of their plays one can feel their impatience to get on to that third person, they can hardly wait for him. The moment he appears all is well. But how tiresome if he is late, nothing can happen without him, everything halts, hesitates, waits. And what would happen if that was where it stayed, stock-still and blocked? What would you do then, Mr Dramatist, or you, the enlightened public who know all about life, if he just went missing, the popular man-about-town or arrogant youth who fits into every marriage like a master-key? What if the devil took him, for example? Let's just see. All at once the theatres become unnaturally empty; they are bricked up like dangerous holes; only the moths from the edges of the boxes tumble unstoppably through the empty space. Playwrights no longer enjoy their villas in the smart suburbs. All the public Detective Agencies are busy searching far-flung corners of the world for the indispensable one without whom there was no plot.

Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, 1910  
(trans. Naomi Segal)