

thing; and if he were, the story could still not be read as an attack on science, for the author's concern is with a man who misunderstands the possibilities of human perfection and errs in his noble but misguided striving. On the authority of these stories and others like them, Hawthorne has been made to oppose science and industrial development. Such an interpretation misrepresents them and their author, and it illustrates an error often made in our attempts to enlist earlier authors to bolster our own views about affairs in our time. The danger of confusing elements of the present culture with elements of an earlier culture is a hazard never absent from American Studies.

The full possibilities of American Studies are not realized from a simple gathering of factual records which the

social sciences can provide, nor is the full contribution of literature realized if it is assessed merely as a social document. Hawthorne's works have something to offer American Studies at the literal level, for he mentioned on his pages most of the topics which interested his contemporaries, but for such factual information other sources would be more rewarding than Hawthorne's books. Hawthorne's greatest contribution to the study of American culture is distinctive to him, and it is a major one. It grows from his peculiar questioning of contemporary affairs, the play of his skeptical, speculative mind on events and attitudes around him. His is the quiet voice heard beneath the chatter of the enthusiasts, and the one which may sound the particular note required to give its distinctive quality to the culture of his time.

## Arthur Miller's "The Crucible"

HENRY POPKIN

ALTHOUGH *The Crucible* is set in seventeenth-century America, Arthur Miller intended it as a comment on American life of his own time. For several years before the play opened in 1953, public investigations had been examining and interrogating radicals, former radicals, and possible former radicals, requiring witnesses to tell about others and not only about themselves. The House Committee to Investigate Un-American Activities evolved a memorable and much-quoted sentence: "Are you now, or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?" Borrowing a phrase from a popular radio program, its interrogators called it "the \$64 question."

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Senator Joseph McCarthy built his international fame on his presumed knowledge of subversion in government and added a new word to our vocabulary—"McCarthyism," meaning ruinous accusation without any basis in evidence. A few months before *The Crucible* reached Broadway, McCarthy had helped to elect a President of the United States, and, two days before the premiere, that President was inaugurated. The elections had made McCarthy chairman of an important congressional subcommittee; his power was greater than ever. The film and television industries gave every sign of being terrified by McCarthyism—but by the atmosphere that McCarthy created, more than by his own subcommittee. Show business found itself of more interest to the House Committee to Investigate Un-American Activities than

to Senator McCarthy's subcommittee. Blacklists barred certain actors and writers from working in the popular media. Actors who refused to give testimony disappeared both from the large film screen and the small television screen, but "friendly witnesses" continued to work. On the other hand, the New York stage, since it was and still is a relatively chaotic enterprise, was comparatively unmanaged and untouched. Nevertheless, *The Crucible* was a bold as well as a timely play, written at a time when the congressional investigators had the power to do considerable damage. Senator McCarthy's personal authority wilted in the following year, but Miller was a somewhat unfriendly witness before a congressional committee in 1956. He described his own flirtation with Communism but refused to give the names of Communists he had known. He was ultimately absolved of the charge of contempt of the committee.

*The Crucible* dramatized the phrase that was popularly being used to describe the congressional hearings—"witch hunts." In the Salem witch trials, Miller chose an unmistakable parallel to current events. He has never permitted any doubt that the parallel was deliberate. In his introduction to his *Collected Plays* and in his interpretative remarks scattered through the text, he calls attention to the play's contemporary reference and invites comparisons between the two widely separated hearings.

The Salem witch trials are, equally, a historical event. In 1692, in Salem, Massachusetts, twenty people were found guilty of witchcraft and hanged; others who had been accused saved themselves by confessing to witchcraft and accusing others. As in the unhappy occurrences of the 1950's, naming others was taken to be a guarantee of sincerity and of a laudable desire to tell all. Also, the witchcraft scare was violent, alarming, and brief, like an epidemic and, again, like the Communist scare of the 1950's. It

will be easy enough to discover and to expound still other parallels as we examine the play, but one preliminary difficulty needs to be stated: the parallel fails at one important point. There is such a thing as Communism; there is no such thing as witchcraft. This distinction indicates that the psychological state of the victims of the Salem trials is somewhat different from that of the victims of the investigations of the 1950's. Of course, people suffered equally in both centuries, and, while it may seem callous to weigh one anguish against another and to say that one man's suffering means more than another's, it is necessary to observe that the situation of our own time is more complex and therefore potentially more useful to the artist.

The distinction I am making is the same one that Aristotle made in our first treatise on literature, the *Poetics*. Aristotle writes that we are appalled by the suffering of the entirely blameless; such suffering, says Aristotle, is too disturbing to be a suitable subject for tragedy. Instead, we expect our tragic characters to exhibit some weakness, some sort of flaw. Scholars have disagreed for centuries as to the kind of flaw that Aristotle meant, but it is safe to say that the tragic hero is somehow imperfect and that his imperfection has some connection with his tragic catastrophe.

The unfortunate condemned innocents of Salem did nothing to bring on their ruin, nothing, at least, that had anything to do with the charge against them. Let me qualify that statement: it is conceivable that one aged eccentric or another actually thought she was in communication with the devil. That delusion is too special—not to say too lunatic—to be a very likely, interesting, or useful state of mind for a serious character. Miller seems to be of this opinion, since the only person in *The Crucible* who believes herself to be a witch is Tituba, who is not fully developed as a character and

remains a minor figure. Furthermore, she confesses and is not executed; she need not suffer any pangs of conscience over her presumed witchcraft. If she thinks she has been a witch, she must also think she has atoned by confessing. The others, the true martyrs of Salem, had the consolation of knowing that they were innocent. Certainly, they were heroic in maintaining their innocence at a time when false confession was likely to save their lives. But to be heroic is not necessarily to be the complex, dramatic character who gives life to drama.

The events of the 1950's provided a more logical connection between character and fate. The American Communist Party existed, and, for a long time, its legality was unquestioned. It was perfectly possible and legal to join it—for any of a variety of reasons, both good and bad—for idealistic reasons, out of a desire for power, out of an instinctive interest in conspiracy, out of a general dissatisfaction with society, or even, as many later said, in order to offer effective opposition to Fascism. It was possible for many, like Miller himself, to have some association with Communism and Communists without joining the party. Great numbers of those accused in the 1950's came from the ranks of these party members and their non-member "fellow traveler" associates. Still others among the accused had no connection with the Communist Party; for the purposes of our comparison, they are exactly like the innocent victims of the Salem trials.

I have set up these elementary categories in order to demonstrate that the actor or director who was blacklisted and so lost his job in the 1950's was likely to have made some commitment in the 1930's that affected his subsequent fate. This was not necessarily so, but it was likely. He had not made a commitment to Satan, and few will now say that such a man deserved to be banished from his profession because of his past or present

politics, but, in his case, we can say that character and fate roughly, very roughly, fit together, that there is a meaningful connection between what the man did and what later happened to him. Life is not always so logical, as the Salem trials tell us. The witchcraft trials in Salem were wild, unreasonable offenses against justice; they present intrinsic difficulties for any dramatist who wants to make an orderly drama out of them. Art tends to be neater and, superficially, more logical than the history of Salem. In contrast, the corresponding events of the 1950's have a cruel and inaccurate logic; their injustice is, in a sense, logical, even though the logic is reprehensible.

If we were not able to point out that the historical parallel in *The Crucible* is imperfect, we might still justifiably object that the impact of a sudden and undeserved punishment upon entirely innocent people is a difficult subject for drama. Aristotle's criticism of the entirely blameless hero continues to be valid. In apparent recognition of this principle, Miller has constructed a new sort of guilt for his hero, John Proctor. In the play, Proctor has been unfaithful to his wife, and Miller goes out of his way to assure us directly that his infidelity violates his personal code of behavior. The girl whom he loved, jealous and resentful of being rejected, accuses Proctor's wife of witchcraft, and so Proctor, who has, in this peculiar fashion, caused his wife to be accused, has a special obligation to save her. In trying to save her, he is himself charged with witchcraft. So, he does suffer for his guilt—but for a different guilt, for adultery, not for witchcraft.

But it must be remembered that a play is not merely an exercise in ideas or even in characterization. It is a creation that moves forward in time, catching interest and creating suspense. While the historical context is useful to any preliminary understanding of a play, any full understanding and any proper evaluation

must follow a close look at its plot. The plot presents to us an ebb and flow of argument and incident, an alternation of crises, turning, in *The Crucible*, about the issue of witchcraft.

*The Crucible* begins with a crisis, a moment of excitement that shows the false witnesses in full cry—one child on stage and another of whom we are told, both of them displaying the different but equally convincing symptoms of demonic possession. We note a number of fatuous adult responses to the children's behavior, and then the adults conveniently leave the stage to the children, who effectively clear up any mysteries by frankly discussing their deceitful actions. They incidentally, and very usefully, provide us with Abigail's special motive, her jealous hatred of Elizabeth Proctor. Directly upon this cue, John Proctor enters, and, perhaps a bit improbably revealing too many intimate secrets in the presence of a child feigning possession, he and Abigail tell us most of what we need to know about their love affair and its present consequences. In quick succession, then, we have seen the central disorder of the play, demonic possession, and the explanation for it; in the children's malice, we have also noted a particular form of malice that is to breed results to come—Abigail's jealousy. The main exposition has been effected, and the main lines of action are ready.

At once the skeptic, Proctor, clashes with Parris, the believer in witchcraft. The argument between the skeptical and the credulous, and the ensuing effort to convince the community dominate all of the play. Like other works by Miller, *The Crucible* has something of the quality of a trial, of a court case, even before the formal hearings begin. Throughout, the exponents of both views are arguing their cases, making their points, and, inadvertently, revealing their real motives. Proctor and Parris now engage in just such a dispute, showing us their own

personal hostility and helpfully bringing in some additional exposition concerning the land war, the rivalry over ministerial appointments, and the issue of Parris's salary. These are the real, underlying issues that motivate the men of Salem.

Once the local prejudices have been established, we have reached the appropriate moment for the arrival of the guileless outsider, the idealistic seeker of witches, John Hale. In theory, Hale is perfectly equipped to combat witchcraft, and he even enters carrying visible evidence of his qualifications, the heavy books that have enlightened him. In practice, he is as helpless as a child, much more helpless than the children of the play. He is totally unequipped, precisely because he is an outsider with a load of irrelevant academic knowledge, precisely because he has missed the informative conversations that just precede his entrance. He has pursued the wrong study; instead of demonology, he should have applied himself to economics, the psychopathology of children, and eavesdropping. Hale is the simple, eager man of good will, the human *tabula rasa* upon whom the experience of the play will write. His simplicity makes him the ideal audience for the wholesale charges of witchcraft that begin to be made as the curtain falls upon the first act. As we should expect, these charges proceed inevitably from the circumstances that the previous action has painstakingly interpreted.

After some preliminary exposition of the cool relationship between John Proctor and his wife, the second act provides, in order, Elizabeth Proctor's interrogation of her husband, the Proctors' joint interrogation of Mary Warren, and, finally, the real goal of the scene—Hale's examination of the Proctors. One incidental effect of this repeated use of courtroom technique is to show us that Elizabeth Proctor's justice to her husband is as lacking in mercy and understanding as

the public justice of Salem. The crime of adultery that Elizabeth continues to probe and to worry over has already been adequately punished and repented for, but Elizabeth will never permit herself to forget it.

Following the troubled exchange between the Proctors comes the only courtroom procedure that brings out the truth, the Proctors' joint examination of Mary Warren. A suitable rigor on the part of the questioners and the threat of a whipping bring the whole truth out of her fast enough. Then Hale takes the initiative, less successfully. He is a sufficiently experienced investigator to hunt out a crime, but, without knowing it, he has found the wrong crime—adultery, not witchcraft. He causes Proctor to miss the seventh commandment and evidently takes that failure as a sign of the man's general impiety when it is really a sort of Freudian slip, an unwilling confession of his infidelity. In addition, Hale rightly sniffs out the general atmosphere of guilt and notes "some secret blasphemy that stinks to Heaven." He is responding to the chilly atmosphere that Elizabeth Proctor maintains and to the shame that it produces in John Proctor. His suspicion has an ironically appropriate result: it is Elizabeth herself who is the victim of her own heavy insistence on the reality of guilt. In a sense, Hale is right to arrest her. She is guilty of pharisaism, which is a more serious charge than witchcraft or adultery, and Miller gives the unmistakable impression that he considers pharisaism a very serious offense indeed. (Pharisaism appears again and is again made to seem obnoxious in a later play of Miller's, *After the Fall*, where it is once more the trait of a wife whose husband has been unfaithful.)

The third act revolves about John Proctor's effort to save his wife; when the accusation is at last directed against him, the principal forward action of the play has come to an end. The charges of

witchcraft have begun by hitting out blindly in all directions, but then, in accordance with the painstaking preparations that informed us of Abigail's jealousy of Elizabeth, the accusations fix upon Elizabeth. Proctor tries to reverse them by charging Abigail with adultery, but, in consequence, he is himself accused of witchcraft. Up to this time, slander has been spreading in all directions, attaching itself at random to one innocent victim after another, but now it finds its true and proper target. The real, the ultimate victim in this play is John Proctor, the one independent man, the one skeptic who sees through the witchcraft "craze" from the first. As if instinctively, in self-defense, the witchcraft epidemic has attacked its principal enemy. This is a climactic moment, a turning point in the play. New witches may continue to be named, but *The Crucible* now narrows its focus to John Proctor, caught in the trap, destroyed by his effort to save his wife, threatened by the irrationality that only he has comprehended.

The third act has an incidental function; it is climactic for Hale as well as for Proctor. Hale first appears as a zealous specialist; in the second act, he is shown going industriously about his work; in the third act, shaken by the obvious injustice of what he has brought to pass, he denounces the hearings. That is the crucial step for him, and, from that moment, his personal drama does not take any new direction, just as the general development of the play takes no distinctive new steps following these turning points for Proctor and Hale.

In addition, the third act is a carefully organized unit of argument and counter-argument. Concerned to protect their authority, the judges promise a long period of safety for Elizabeth Proctor, and, when this stratagem fails, they start bullying the turncoat Mary Warren. Proctor counterattacks with the same low tactics that his enemies use—charging

Abigail, the primary accuser, with the crimes that do her reputation the most damage; they are specifically anti-Puritan crimes, laughing during prayer and dancing. These are curious accusations from a skeptic, but he is learning, too late, to play his enemies' game. Abigail responds by attributing witchcraft to Mary Warren. This give-and-take continues when Proctor calls out "Whore! Whore!" After three acts of fencing, the real truth is out; the burden of establishing it rests with the one person whose truthfulness can be fully guaranteed—Elizabeth Proctor. All attention goes to her as she is asked the critical question. And, for once, in a moment of high excitement and suspense, this model of truthfulness lies because she values something more than the truth—her husband's good name.

The value Salem attributes to a good name has been indicated previously in the play; it becomes critically important in the last act. From the beginning, Salem has been presented as a community in which mutual evaluation is a generally popular activity. Prying, slander, and recrimination are unpleasant but persuasive testimonials to the value that attaches to a good name. Living in this environment and sharing its values, Elizabeth Proctor must value reputation even more than truth. This decision has disastrous results, for Mary Warren, facing serious punishment as a turncoat and possible witch, must defend herself by making a new charge—against the man who got her into this sorry mess, John Proctor. The path of the accusations has been circuitous, but Proctor is, in effect, being punished for his hostility to Salem's obsession with sin—in particular, his wife's obsession with adultery and the community's obsession with witchcraft. We may suspect a tacit hint that the two fixations are closely linked.

In the last act, public opinion has shifted: Andover is in revolt, even Parris is shaken, and more pressure is being

applied to obtain confessions. Proctor can be saved only by a dishonest confession to witchcraft. Life is sufficiently dear for him to make the confession, but he will not let it become a public document. The issue is, once again, his good name. Previously preferred over truth, his good name is now preferred to life itself. This issue seems now to dominate the play, but, as we have observed, it has been prominent throughout, for accusations of witchcraft are harmful to the reputation as well as to the individual life. The citizens of Salem have been concerned with scoring points against one another, with establishing their own superior virtue and the depraved character of their enemies. To use the word "depraved" is to remind ourselves that this state of affairs is well suited to the Puritan theology, which held that divine election was the one balm for innate human depravity. Reputation served as an indispensable guide to the state of grace, for it was an outward sign of election. As a result, Proctor is not only expressing a characteristically modern concern for his good name, a concern equally important to the twentieth-century protagonist of Miller's next full-length play, *A View from the Bridge*; he is exhibiting a typically Puritan state of mind.

Proctor dies, then, for his good name; but to return to the troubling issue, his good name was not, in the most serious sense, threatened by the charges brought against him. His good name was, in fact, being threatened by his fear of death and by his knowledge of his own adultery, but it was shaken only in the most superficial way by the charge of witchcraft. Proctor is not merely innocent; he is *an* innocent, and his guilt as an adulterer is irrelevant, except insofar as it supplies Abigail with her motive for slandering his wife. We can see why Proctor's adultery had to be invented; surely it came into existence because Miller found himself compelled to acknowledge the

Aristotelian idea that the blameless, unspotted hero is an inadequate protagonist for a serious play.

This problem may be further illuminated by reference to some of Miller's other works. In his first two Broadway successes, a relatively unsullied hero (played in each case by an actor named Arthur Kennedy) is present, but he does not have the leading role. The chief character in each of these plays, *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*, is a guilty older man, who has lived by the wrong values. In this last respect at least, he resembles Hale of *The Crucible*, but he is more complex and more serious. Now, however, in *The Crucible*, the younger, unsullied hero (again played in the original production by Arthur Kennedy) moves into the foreground. Of course, Proctor is deeply conscious of his infidelity to his wife, but this fact does not affect his fundamental freedom from guilt; in a sense, he is unsullied, significantly less guilty than the sinful older men of the earlier plays. We are obviously expected to apply a modern "psychological" judgment to him and say that he was driven to adultery by a cold wife and by the irresistible attraction of the conscienceless girl who seduced him. Abigail is not made "a strikingly beautiful girl" (in the stage directions) for nothing. We must exonerate Proctor, just as we are required to exonerate a similar character in a later play by Miller, another man who stands between a cold, complaining wife and an irresistible child-woman—Quentin in *After the Fall*. (Eddie Carbone in *A View from the Bridge* is another married man fascinated by a child-woman, but he is exonerated in another way: he is "sick.")

Miller expresses regret, in the Introduction to his *Collected Plays*, that he failed to make his villains sufficiently wicked; he thinks now that he should have represented them as being dedicated to evil for its own sake. I suspect that

most students of *The Crucible* will feel that he has made them quite wicked enough. For one thing, he has established their depravity by inserting a number of clear references to the investigators and blacklists of his own time. He has made Proctor ask, significantly: "Is the accuser always holy now?" To the automatic trustworthiness of accusers he has added the advantage of confession (always efficacious for former Communists), the necessity of naming the names of fellow-conspirators, the accusation of "an invisible crime" (witchcraft—or a crime of thought), the dangers threatening anyone who dares to defend the accused, the prejudice of the investigators, the absence of adequate legal defense for the accused, and the threat that those who protest will be charged with contempt of court. Most of these elements constitute what might be called a political case against the accusers and especially against the magistrates, Danforth and Hawthorne. Miller builds an economic case as well, suggesting that the original adult instigators of the witchcraft trials were moved by greed, particularly by a desire for the victims' lands. The whole case is stated only in Miller's accompanying notes, but much of it is given dramatic form.

The viciousness of the children, except for Abigail, is less abundantly explained. We are evidently to assume that when they make their false charges they are breaking out of the restrictive forms of proper, pious, Puritan behavior to demand the attention that every child requires. The same rebelliousness has led them to dance in the moonlight and to join in Tituba's incantations. The discovery of these harmless occupations has led then to their more destructive activity. Curiously, Miller chooses not to show us any good children—a category to which the Proctors' offspring surely belong. We hear of "Jonathan's trap" for rabbits, but these children are as

absolutely banished from the stage as the protagonists' children in Shaw's *Candida*. Most modern dramatists are less self-conscious about presenting children than Shaw was, but Miller makes a similar omission in *After the Fall*. At a climactic moment, Quentin is confronted with his written statement that the only person in the world whom he has ever loved is his daughter, and yet this child is never seen in the play.

Over against the bad individual, the vengeful adults, and the lying children, Miller sets the basically sound community, in which the saintly Rebecca Nurse's benefactions are known even to the stranger Hale. At best, Salem is a bad, quarrelsome place; the good community is more warmly depicted in Miller's earlier plays, but even in Salem it exists, and it furnishes twenty honest souls who will not confess to witchcraft, even to save their lives. The underlying presence of the good community, however misruled it may be, reminds us that Miller, even in face of his own evidence, professes to believe in the basic strength and justice of the social organism, in the possibility of good neighbors. If he criticizes society, he does so from within, as a participant and a believer in it.

The deliberately antique language surely reflects Miller's self-consciousness regarding his emphatically heroic hero and the extreme situation in which he finds himself. Issues are never made so clear, so black and white in any of Miller's other plays. And so, naturally, the statement of these issues must be colored, must be, to use Bertolt Brecht's term,

"alienated" by quaint, unfamiliar ways of speech. Certainly, the peculiar speech of *The Crucible* is not a necessity, even in a play set in the seventeenth century. (Christopher Fry's fifteenth-century Englishmen in *The Lady's Not for Burning* speak a language closer to our own.) The purpose of the quirkish English of *The Crucible* is not only to give the impression of an antique time, although that is part of it; the purpose is to alienate us, to make us unfamiliar in this setting, to permit distance to lend its enchantment to this bare, simplistic confrontation of good and evil, and also to keep us from making too immediate, too naive an identification between these events and the parallel happenings of our own time. The issues are too simple, much more simple than the modern parallels. Language imposes a necessary complexity from without.

Any final comment must dwell upon *The Crucible* as a play of action and suspense. It falls short as a play of ideas, which is what it was originally intended to be. It falls short because the parallels do not fit and because Miller has had to adulterate—the pun is intentional—Proctor's all too obvious innocence to create a specious kind of guilt for him; he is easily exonerated of both crimes, the real one and the unreal one, so easily that no ideas issue from the crucible of this human destiny. And yet, *The Crucible* keeps our attention by furnishing exciting crises, each one proceeding logically from its predecessor, in the lives of people in whom we have been made to take an interest. That is a worthy intention, if it is a modest one, and it is suitably fulfilled.

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