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ARTHUR MILLER
THE CRUCIBLE

EDITED BY SOYICA DIGGS COLBERT

The Crucible

Arthur Miller was born in New York City in 1915. After graduating from the University of Michigan, he began work with the Federal Theatre Project. His first Broadway hit was *All My Sons*, closely followed by *Death of a Salesman*, *The Crucible* and *A View from the Bridge*. His other writing includes *Focus*, a novel; *The Misfits*, first published as a short story, then as a cinema novel; *In Russia, In the Country*, *Chinese Encounters* (all in collaboration with his wife, photographer Inge Morath) and 'Salesman' in *Beijing*, non-fiction; and his autobiography, *Timebends*, published in 1987. Among his other plays are: *A Memory of Two Mondays*, *After the Fall*, *Incident At Vichy*, *The Price*, *The Creation of the World and Other Business*, *The American Clock*, *The Ride Down Mt. Morgan*, *The Last Yankee*, *Broken Glass* and *Resurrection Blues*. His novella, *Plain Girl*, was published in 1995 and his second collection of short stories, *Presence*, in 2007. He died in February 2005 aged eighty-nine.

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With commentary and notes by

SOYICA DIGGS COLBERT

Series Editor: Susan Abbotson

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1988, to be identified as author of this work.

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Chronology

- 1915 Arthur Asher Miller born 17 October in New York City.
- 1928 Miller has his bar mitzvah at the Avenue M temple.
- 1934–1938 Miller enters University of Michigan to study journalism, switches to English after receiving the university's Hopwood Award in Drama for *No Villain*.
- 1938 Joins the Federal Theatre Project (FTP).
- 1939–1946 Miller writes a number of radio plays that are aired on US radio shows.
- 1940 Marries Mary Grace Slattery.
- 1944 *The Man Who Had All the Luck* premieres on Broadway but closes within the week, though receives Theatre Guild National Award. Not produced in UK until 1960.
- 1945 *Focus* (novel) published.
- 1947 *All My Sons* premieres. The director, Elia Kazan, becomes a close friend.
- 1949 *Death of a Salesman* premieres and wins Pulitzer Prize. *The New York Times* publishes 'Tragedy and the Common Man' (essay).
- 1952 Miller travels to Salem, Massachusetts to research *The Crucible*.
- 1953 *The Crucible* premieres.
- 1955 The one-act *A View from the Bridge* premieres in a joint bill with *A Memory of Two Mondays*.
- 1956 Divorces Mary Slattery. Subpoenaed to appear before House Un-American Activities Committee

- but refuses to inform on others. Marries Marilyn Monroe. Revises *A View from the Bridge* into two acts to premiere in UK.
- 1957 Miller found guilty of contempt of Congress. He is sentenced to a \$500 fine or thirty days in prison and has his passport revoked. Film version of *The Crucible* produced in France.
- 1958 Contempt conviction overturned. Elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters.
- 1961 Divorced by Marilyn Monroe.
- 1962 Marries Inge Morath.
- 1964 *After the Fall* and *Incident at Vichy* premiere at the new Lincoln Center, New York City.
- 1965 Miller elected president of PEN International, an international literary organization.
- 1968 *The Price* premieres.
- 1987 Publishes *Timebends: A Life* (autobiography), which appeared as a Book of the Month club popular selection.
- 1994 *Broken Glass* premieres.
- 1999 *Death of a Salesman* revived on Broadway with Brian Dennehy for the play's fiftieth anniversary, and wins Tony Award for Best Revival of a Play.
- 2002 Death of Inge Morath.
- 2005 Miller dies of heart failure in his Connecticut home on 10 February.

Introduction

Historical, social and cultural contexts

In 1952, Arthur Miller travelled to Salem, Massachusetts to research the witch trials, using the information he uncovered to create many of the *The Crucible's* characters and situations. He travelled to the New England town in April, after visiting his longtime friend, collaborator and director Elia Kazan. As Miller details in his autobiography *Timebends*, the playwright stopped to see Kazan and inquire if he planned to cooperate with the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Established in 1938, the House of Representatives charged the Committee on Un-American Activities and Propaganda (known at the time as the Dies Committee as it was chaired by Martin Dies Jr.) to explore political extremism. The committee, later called HUAC, first investigated un-American activities in federal agencies, including the federally funded Works Progress Administration (WPA) arts programme. As a part of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal programme, artists had federal support to create their work. By 1939, Congress voted to stop funding the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) in part over concerns that the work generated therein had communist leanings. Miller had been working for the FTP at that time. By the 1950s, HUAC's focus shifted to individual citizens, including well-known artists, especially those working in film.

From the end of the Second World War until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the Cold War unfolded between the United States and its allies and the Soviet Union with their allies. The height of the second Red Scare (1947–1957), led by senator Joseph McCarthy, directed investigations of un-American activities from federal employees to private citizens. During this period, members of the entertainment industry were called before the committee and asked whether or not they were members of the Communist Party and if they had friends that were members of the Party. Following Miller's visit to see Kazan, Kazan testified before HUAC and cooperated with their investigation into suppression of leftist thought in the New York theatre scene and Hollywood. Kazan admitted to being a

member of the Communist Party unit and named eight actors that were also members. In *The Crucible*, Arthur Miller struggles to come to terms with the McCarthy-era political landscape, which reveals some uncomfortable resonance with the nation's colonial past and contemporary present, but his play has wider implications than the two historical periods most often associated with the work. *The Crucible* explores the founding history of the United States to expose cracks in the political structures that need repair lest they spread and threaten the stability of the entire structure.

As Miller coped with his political present, he noticed that the atmosphere of hysteria that fed the Salem witch trials seemed similar to the contemporary energy contributing to the Red Scare, a term used to describe the fear of communism becoming the dominant economic system in the United States. Although an exemplary of his concerns, as Miller explained to Brooks Atkinson for a 1958 piece in *The New York Times*, the central theme of *The Crucible* is the 'handing over of conscience to another, be it woman, the state or terror', marking the historical purchase of his play beyond the contemporary period. Although critical engagement with the play often focuses on the McCarthy era, the play continues to resonate with audiences because it calls attention to weakness in society that may allow citizens to creep towards authoritarianism in times of crisis.

The Crucible shows how fiercely individuals will fight to maintain power gained through deception and quickly become swept up in deceit. Both the Salem witch trials and the HUAC hearings reflected an all-consuming fear about a belief system that seemed to threaten the American majority. In Salem, the settlers' Christianity could not abide the potential threat of witches. During the Cold War, the United States and its allies fought against communism within the United States and abroad.

Miller turns to colonial Massachusetts to decipher mid-twentieth-century political anxieties, making *The Crucible* a play about the presence of the past in the present. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries witch hunts broke out in Europe and North America. In 1692, the best-known North American outbreak occurred in Salem, Massachusetts. As historian Alison Games explains in *Witchcraft in Early North America*, 'Salem Town was, in

the seventeenth century, a major commercial center, oriented toward the sea whose shores it hugged and toward the commercial opportunities afforded by trade relations with other parts of the English Atlantic world – the West Indies, Newfoundland, and Europe.’ The economic conditions provided great opportunity but the living conditions for settlers included new sicknesses, food scarcity, and unpredictability, which led them to recall their belief in witches as one cause among many for their misfortunes.

In addition to the social mixing produced by economic conditions of the town, cultural differences bred fear. In colonial North America, the mixture of white people, Native Americans, and Black people created a different rationale for the presence of witches. Games continues:

North America became a place of expanded evil. Indians who linked sickness with malevolence lived in a transformed world, with far more witches in it than had been the case before the arrival of Europeans . . . Enslaved Africans found their ideas about evil power similarly altered by the expansion of malevolent forces in American slave societies. Christian Europeans believed in the Devil as surely as they believed in God, and the Devil had loyal helpers – witches – especially in North America, a land European theologians regarded as the last bastion of Satan.

Although vast cultural differences separated white people, native Americans, and Black people in colonial New England, the shared belief in witchcraft formed an ideological similarity that enabled fear to spread like wildfire. While causes differed, North American colonial inhabitants shared the notion that witchcraft could contribute to communal disruption.

In *The Crucible*, the community members first attribute the presence of witchcraft to the only community outsider, Tituba. According to the play, Tituba is enslaved and has travelled from Barbados with Reverend Parris to New England. The belief in the perpetuation of witchcraft among other community members, however, begins to reveal the pressure of economic and social conditions for the colonists as they jockey for stability in an unpredictable world. Survival instinct also emerges in Miller’s

tender description of Kazan in *Timebends*: '[Kazan] had always said he came from survivors and that the job was to survive.' The same need drives the actions of the accusers in the play.

Miller wrote *The Crucible* because his contemporary experiences with the Red Scare reminded him of the conditions in the colonial period that provided fertile ground for the Salem witch trials. While the specific use of hearings as a mechanism to evaluate guilt or innocence paralleled the Salem trials and HUAC hearings, the underlying conditions point to the potential for structural weaknesses in American democracy. The trials and hearings magnified for Miller the potential threat of fascism and totalitarianism, as have other moments in American and Western history.

Genre and themes

Innocence and guilt

Written in a realist style, *The Crucible* extends Miller's investigation of quotidian tragedy and his ideas about the American tragic hero begun in *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*. In 'Tragedy and the Common Man', Miller explains, 'the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing – his sense of personal dignity'. In classical terms, the tragic hero represents communal fears but instead of adding to the terror, he or she produces empathy. The transformation of anxiety, frenzy, and panic into compassion enables the tragic hero to make an impact on the community. Miller transformed the idea of the high-born tragic hero from Ancient Greek drama and Shakespeare to everyday men and women. In his essay, Miller further clarifies, 'The thrust for freedom is the quality in tragedy which exalts. The revolutionary questioning of the stable environment is what terrifies. In no way is the common man debarred from such thoughts or such actions.' *The Crucible* explores the idea of the tragic hero as society's metaphorical canary in the coal mine. From the founding colonies to the contemporary period, the tragic hero of Miller's drama asserts the importance of everyday interventions into sustaining the commons. The shared responsibility

leaves a measure of guilt for those who choose to shirk their responsibilities.

Early on in the play we learn that John Proctor had an affair with Abigail Williams and that Abigail has misdirected her attraction for Proctor to destruction of his wife Elizabeth. The animosity between Abigail and the Proctors builds throughout the play, but only acts as a catalyst for an examination of Proctor's ability to take responsibility for his actions. Proctor serves as a tragic hero because he is flawed but, nonetheless, does not deserve to be hanged for committing adultery. Proctor functions as a martyr in the play to expose the tyranny of power in the hands of a few versus the many. That he does so willingly makes him a hero.

Gender, race and social roles

The play explores the operation of power at different levels of society and how they work together as a whole. Due to the social hierarchy, the women and girls in the play gain power through manipulation. In the opening scene, Reverend Parris attempts to discern what ails his daughter. At the same time, he tries to not draw attention to his niece, Abigail, who has been frolicking in the woods. Abigail's woodland activities are a violation of Puritanical communal norms. The competing motivations, to help his daughter and not expose his house to scrutiny comes to a head when some of his adversaries, Ann and Thomas Putnam, visit. Under scrutiny, Abigail, later joined by her friends, must respond to accusations that something she has done in the woods caused her cousin's illness.

Having no easy explanation for her activities, Abigail turns on the one member of the community more vulnerable than her, Tituba. She does so, however, invoking the very power that subordinates women more generally; Abigail accuses Tituba of being a witch. Perceptions about women in colonial New England specify the impact of Abigail's accusation, and as Games suggests, 'Attitudes toward women and especially about women's bodies and sexuality persuaded people that women were predisposed toward witchcraft. Medical ideas, derived from Aristotle, regarded men and women as binary opposites; women were wet and cold, men were warm and dry . . . Aristotelian medical theories, moreover, held that the male

body was the norm; the female body was a corrupt variant.’ Throughout the play, Abigail uses the structures that subordinate her – gender and social hierarchies – to gain power. By accusing others of witchcraft, she motivates the powerful men in the community to attack other women, including her adversary, Elizabeth.

Power, ideology and judgment

The play hinges on the ability of Abigail and the other young women in the village to manipulate the power structures that subordinate them. In the play, a few powerful men hold the power to judge and sentence community members to death. The societal structure, of locating power in the hands of a few, puts the Salem community at risk for abuse. When the young women tested the system by accusing social outcasts, Tituba and two women known for transgressive behaviour, of being witches, the men exercised their power harshly. Notably, the very social contexts that make Abigail vulnerable enable her to fool the men in her community.

While the initial trials of Tituba, Sarah Osborne and Sarah Good reflect the shortsightedness of Reverend John Hale, Judge Hathorne and Deputy Governor Danforth, the judgment reflects an ideological investment rather than malevolence. Once Abigail accuses Elizabeth and threatens Mary Warren in open court, Reverend Hale suspects that the proceedings are false. Although he tries to convince Hathorne and Danforth to suspend the proceedings, the stakes of the cases have shifted from exercising power to maintaining it. If Hathorne and Danforth admit that the accusers are being untruthful then they would have to explain to the community the basis of their prior judgments. Ultimately, Proctor dies at the end of the play to cast a verdict on the system of injustice.

Morality and integrity

The play offers a nuanced depiction of how imbalances in power exacerbate individual fallacies and community prejudices to create corruption. While the play does offer an opportunity for Proctor’s redemption it does so after exposing his lapse of integrity. The tragedy stems from a redemption requiring his death. Similar to the

ending of Miller's *All My Sons*, Proctor must provide a future for his family through his death. The future depends on him paying for his society's wrong doing.

Although Proctor does confess to try to save his life, he ultimately cannot sign his name to the false confession because he knows that a public display will serve to preserve a system that has failed. While leaders often make decisions having limited information, the play suggests that once additional information emerges, a leader with integrity will change course if necessary. In the play, Hale attempts to change course but is not able to convince Hathorne and Danforth to do so as well. As a result, Hale understands that he too contributes to the tragedy that unfolds.

As the actions of Proctor and Hale demonstrate, the power of the individual does not usually have the capacity to overturn collective sentiment. Leadership has a great responsibility because it must exercise judiciousness in wielding the power that has been given by the community. At the same time, community members trust the leaders to offer unbiased assessments of conditions, particularly ones that are threatening to the whole.

Play as performance

The Crucible bridges the personal and the social through a conflict between three characters: Proctor, Elizabeth and Abigail. Their personal antagonism ignites a latent and mass hysteria in Salem. While Miller notes that he considered rendering the dynamic between the central characters and larger community 'impressionistically', the play still calls for directors and artistic teams to account for the feeling of a crowd on stage overtaken by mob mentality. Sweeping the audience into the action, the courtroom scene may inspire the energy of attending a political rally or a rock concert. In production, the play has the opportunity to create the political fervour that it questions.

Throughout the play, the young women and girls' ability to appear to be under a spell must resonate with the audience. In act one, while it is unclear what ails Reverend Parris's daughter, the collusion among Abigail and her friends to mislead the adults about what happened in the woods invites the audience into the deception.

The intensity of the play mounts as power shifts from one group to another. Following the first set of accusations against Tituba, Sarah Osborne and Sarah Good, Mary returns to the Proctors' home to update them on the case and to inform Elizabeth that Abigail accused her in the hearing. She also shows the Proctors the doll she sewed during the hearing. Although at first only showing minor concern about the accusation, Elizabeth and Proctor plan to respond to the claims but before they are able to do so, Elizabeth is arrested. Following the arrest, Proctor convinces Mary to clear Elizabeth's name and admit the fits of possession are a hoax. Out of loyalty to her employees, Mary agrees to confess. The resolution seems to offer some reprieve until the courtroom scene.

The action of the play shifts in the courtroom scene from misdirected acts of self-preservation to an outright malicious use of power. After Mary testifies, Abigail claims that Mary is a witch and she is casting a spell. As the young women turn on Mary, Proctor realizes he is losing and physically attacks Abigail. Throughout the scene the power shifts from Proctor to Abigail, inviting the audience not to believe in witchcraft but rather in the spellbinding power of political machinations. The court scene also calls the audience to consider how individuals may manipulate evidence to support a false claim. In an age of unprecedented access to information and the pervasive spread of disinformation, the play's use of a prop to demonstrate how fact and fiction blur has great importance.

Abigail accuses Elizabeth of casting a spell using a doll, which results in Elizabeth's arrest. In the courtroom scene, Mary admits ownership of the doll and yet she is still unable to sway Danforth. Although Hale sees through the false accusations against Elizabeth, he cannot redirect the hearing because doing so would cost Hale, Hathorne and Parris enormous political power. The courtroom scene gives the audience a bird's-eye view into misdirected political power gone astray and may remind American audiences of the 6 January 2021 attack on the Capitol. The play reveals the fissures and fragility of democracy throughout history. The courtroom scene produces shock and terror because it reminds the audience of how quickly social contracts fall apart.