

# SALEM TRIALS (1692) IN HISTORY AND IN MILLER'S *THE CRUCIBLE*: INVESTIGATING TRUTH CLAIMS IN HISTORICAL NARRATIVES AND DRAMA

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**Abstract.** Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* is, in the first instance, a literary reconstruction of a historical event: the Salem trials that took place in the village of Salem in Essex County, New England (today Danvers, Massachusetts) in 1692. As Miller explains in his autobiography *Timebends* (1987), and as is clear from his introduction to the play, he not only carried out scholarly research in preparation for writing the play, he also reflected explicitly on how he had used the historical material to reconstruct a story. The central issue in this investigation is the position taken by the play with regard to writing history – historiography – and to the question: what is historical *truth*? How does the play relate to the issues of representing history and historical truth? To answer these questions, I will, in this research, give an extensive overview of the historical debates about witchcraft in order to situate Miller's position on this topic. Further, I will position Miller's work within more general debates about historiography and the historian's possibilities of rendering a historical 'truth'.

**Key words:** historiography, historical truth, representation, witchcraft, drama

## SALEM: ASPECTS OF THE CASE

In 1692 in Salem Village, which is slightly to the west of Salem Town, several girls in the household of the minister Samuel Parris became 'afflicted' and started suffering from fits and poor vision. An initial debate among the adults was followed by an examination by the local physician, William Griggs, about the cause of the seizures, who concluded that the girls were 'possessed by the Devil' and thus that the cause of their afflictions was 'unnatural'. Both the girls and their parents became convinced that they were 'bewitched' by 'the Evil Hand' or malign witchcraft (Hiltunen, 1996: 19). They sought help from Reverend John Hale of Beverly, a renowned expert in demonology in those days. The girls accused other townspeople of tormenting them with spectral forms – i.e., that

ghosts of other townspeople made them fall into convulsions and scream without obvious cause and, at times, afflicted and pinched their bodies (*ibid.*). In this context, Hale vitiated the doubts about the superstitious elements in the outbreak upon confirming: ‘Now let me instruct you. We cannot look to superstition in this. The Devil is precise; the marks of his presence are definite as stone’ (Miller, 2010: 36). Soon more people, especially women, became afflicted, and accusations spread in Salem village. Girls were also invited to the neighbouring Andover region to reveal the witches hidden there. They accused 49 people before local legal instances stopped issuing new warrants. In June, the governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony, Sir William Phips, set up a special court of ‘Oyer and Terminer’ (to ‘hear and determine’) to try the witches (Young, 1989: 240). Over 150 people were accused but the majority were spared because they confessed, repented or accused others to avoid capital punishment (Grund, 2007: 121). In the end, nineteen people were hanged for the crime of witchcraft (thirteen women and six men), two more died in jail, and Giles Corey was pressed to death for showing a recalcitrant attitude towards the prosecutions. Two dogs were also hanged on suspicion of being devils. On 29 October, in the face of increasing scepticism, governor Phips suspended the court. Upon reconvening, the court acquitted all remaining suspects due to criticism of the fairness of the trials (Reed, 2007: 212).

Scholarly interest in this historical episode has been immense. A study by James Arnt Aune distinguishes seven different types of interpretation of the historical event, each on the basis of a different methodological approach to history (Arnt Aune, 2003: 766–68). There are psychological/psychoanalytical, sociological, medical, religious, anthropological, feminist and political explanations of what happened. This variety of approaches is due to the complex nature of the phenomenon of European and American witchcraft. According to Thomas A. Fudge: ‘witchcraft historiography considers numerous topics including, but not limited to, history, anthropology, magic, popular superstitions, religion, theology, law, psychology, sexuality, gender, sociology, medicine, politics, language, popular beliefs, folklore studies, and popular culture’ (Fudge, 2006: 489). Yet, as Isaac Reed observes, the various approaches to witchcraft can be divided into two main strands (2007: 213). The first strand focuses on the systematic elements and structural factors in its explanation of the phenomenon, e.g., when witchcraft is understood in terms of large-scale economic and political developments. The second strand offers detailed descriptions of particular lives, communities and regions, and understands witchcraft in relation to the social development of various communities. Since the 1970s, as Reed points out, under the influence of social history, these two strands have been brought together, which led to the rise of what could be called the interdisciplinary field of ‘witchcraft studies’ (2007: 213). Witchcraft studies is a subfield within social history which came up during the late 1960s and which regarded witchcraft as a social and anthropological aspect of the given societies, including town study, patterns of property ownership and methods of litigation.

Religious explanations surfaced immediately after the end of the trials, in which diabolical malevolence was blamed for wreaking havoc in the communitarian Puritan

culture of religious conservatism and official piety. Chadwick Hansen argues that the witch hysteria was a historical reality in seventeenth-century Puritan social consciousness, and he discovered that there were actually practising witches in Salem (1969: 86). In his review of Hansen's work, Max Savelle explains that Hansen's main premise was that 'the Salem society believed in witchcraft and for a society that believes in witchcraft, witchcraft is terribly real' (1969: 180). However, real beliefs and fears did not necessarily mean that witches were real. In this respect, it was the disjunction between the theological and the magical conceptions of witchcraft that, according to Richard Godbeer, undermined the legal process (1992: 181). Godbeer suggested that the Salem witch hysteria was a manifestation of the community's predisposition to project the blame of their personal sufferings upon external causes (*ibid.*). The relationship between witchcraft, magic and Puritanism in Salem made it convenient for several parties to suspect outside forces had caused havoc in the northern colonies during the last quarter of the seventeenth century. The church and the patriarchal elite became very cautious as soon as they suspected a community's interest in Wicca and neo-pagan superstitious beliefs, such as displayed, according to the church, by some cunning people or 'pubescent girls'. Rossell Hope Robbins echoed this view in the twentieth century when he stated that the so-called vicious girls 'knew exactly what they were doing. Their acts during 1692 imply a state of utter delinquency, causing death without rhyme or reason, for sport' (Robbins, 1959: 435; Detweiler, 1975: 599). There is ample evidence in Miller's *The Crucible* where first Samuel Parris' Caribbean slave Tituba confesses in front of Reverend Hale in the 1<sup>st</sup> Act. She states: '(in a fury) He say Mr. Parris must be kill! Mr. Parris not goodly man, Mr. Parris mean man and no gentle man, and he bid me rise out of my bed and cut your throat' (Miller, 2010: 45). Upon further emotional coercion, Parris' niece Abigail assumes the central role and confesses:

I want to open myself (They turn to her, startled. She is enraptured, as though in a pearly light.) I want the light of God, I want the sweet love of Jesus! I danced for the devil; I saw him; I wrote in his book; I go back to Jesus; I kiss his hand. I saw Sarah Good with the Devil! I saw Goody Osburn with the Devil! I saw Briget Bishop with the Devil! (Miller, 2010: 46)

One can clearly see that the discourse of witchcraft naturally fermented in the theological structures of that Salem society. The Puritans genuinely believed in a cosmic configuration where God and Devil existed together.

Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum's ground-breaking work *Salem Possessed* offers a sociological explanation of the Salem episode, emphasizing the merchant-farmer conflict between Salem Town and Salem village amongst the Putnam and the Porter families of New England (1997: 110). Their analysis is based on local tax records for 1691, the preceding year, which reveal an important difference between the payments by the pro-Parris factions and the anti-Parris factions. On the basis of these findings, they assert that the Salem witch-hunts were caused by the advancement of early capitalism. Boyer and Nissenbaum observed that the east side of Salem village was inhabited by wealthy and affluent Porter families who

possessed various holdings and had access to Salem Town and its port. On the west side of the village, on the other hand, the Putnam family, whose main vocation for decades had been agriculture, saw a gradual dwindling away of their agricultural farmlands because of the Puritan inheritance system. The inheritance system was patriarchal, and land was divided equally among sons. Taking the tax records as evidence, Boyer and Nissenbaum observe that the Putnam and the Porter families found themselves on opposing sides at town meetings regarding petitions and other institutional and liturgical matters. They view the trials as a pathological effect of the trends in the pre-capitalist economic reconfiguration of the locality and the success or failure of the respective families (ibid, 1997: 110). Miller provides a detailed account of the economic strife between the Nurse and Putnam clans in one of the narrative vignettes in the first Act of the play when he refers to the battle in the woods between these clans and also Thomas Putnam's efforts to appoint his man Bayley as a potential minister in Salem (2010: 25–26). This strife led the Nurse clan to absent themselves from Salem congregations and establish a separate and independent Topsfield entity away from Salem.

The economic competition explanation was rivalled by the theory that witch-hunting was the brainchild of the ecclesiastical and the legal elite who sought to strengthen their hold on church power. Richard Weisman's work (1984) on Salem is of particular relevance in this context. Weisman argues that relatively few cases of witchcraft convictions and executions in Salem prior to 1692 were the result of local accusations from the village. In Salem, they were firmly dealt with by the suspicious legal elite as they were perceived as movements for social justice. Hence there was resistance from a legal system opposed to radical demands and focused more on maintaining the status quo and the traditional community unity sanctioned by Puritan theodicy. Since the early days when the pilgrims landed in New England, their form of government had been established as a strict legalistic theology which was aimed at controlling the community through a contractual relationship between the individual and God via covenants (Weisman, 1984: 121; King and Mixon, 2010: 679–80). Weisman opines, then, that Salem was a case in which the judiciary went on an official offensive for the purpose of communal regeneration. This official offensive also signified the conservative power elite's attempt to contain diminishing ministerial prosperity and regain ministerial religious and social control (King and Mixon, 2010: 682). Act IV in the play provides tangible evidence in support of this argument when judge Danforth is made to revisit his stance and legal position. He states:

[...] Postponement now speaks a floundering on my part; reprieve or pardon must cast doubt upon the guilt of them that died till now. While I speak God's law, I will not crack its voice with whimpering. If retaliation is your fear, know this—I should hand ten thousand that dared to rise against the law, and an ocean of salt tears could not melt the resolution of the statutes. Now draw yourself up like men and help me, as you are bound by Heaven to do a full stop. (Miller, 2010: 117)

Also taking a view from a legal angle, David C. Brown argues that the 1692 trials in Essex County were a consequence of the clash between two legal cultures, i.e., the English common law and the indigenous laws of Massachusetts (1993: 85). Miller refers to this aspect in his narrative commentary in Act I when he states that: 'But the people of Salem in 1692 were not quite the dedicated folk that arrived on the *Mayflower*. A vast differentiation had taken place, and in their own time a revolution had unseated the royal government and substituted a junta which was at this moment in power' (2010: 7–8). The reference is to the Glorious Revolution in England in 1688. English common law partially replaced colonial criminal procedure law in Massachusetts during the early months of 1692. This was done in accordance with the 1691 charter, enacted in May 1692, which ensured that provincial laws were not in breach of English common law. According to Brown, this drove a wedge in the colony and led to a legal crisis which lasted until October 1692, when the Massachusetts General court reasserted the supremacy of the provincial laws (*ibid*, 1993: 86). Prior to the 1692 trials, the first hints of a clash between the two legal systems were evident under the Dominion of New England between 1686 and 1689, when the Andros regime anglicised the colonial legal system in criminal and legal cases. The colonial legal system was restored to its pre-1686 set up after the overthrow of the Dominion government, and it operated as such until the province charter was introduced in May 1692. Brown observes that the judges in the Oyer and Terminer court employed English legal techniques to establish the guilt of the accused, which included spectral evidence and the search for witch marks on suspects. The court overlooked the colonial legal convention of the two-witness rule that was applied in previous cases (*ibid*, 1993: 86). This may have been necessitated by the legitimacy deficit faced by the colonial government because shortly after 1684, and shortly before his death, King Charles II revoked its original charter of 1629 which legitimated the colonial right of self-government for more than fifty years. A new Anglican governor was installed, who was later overthrown, and a new charter was eventually enacted (Weisman, 1984: 123). As a result of the inclusion of Quakers and Anglicans, an inclusion that formed an unprecedented step towards inclusive and participatory politics, the custodians of the newly introduced secular order seriously questioned its theological legitimacy. Weisman observes that this presented the background for breaking the clerical precedence and permitting spectral evidence in the court hearings (*ibid*, 1984: 123). It also accounts, according to Richard Latner, for the carrying over of the accusations and the trials beyond the town of Salem to Andover and for the role played by the new governor in finally bringing the trials to a halt (Weisman, 1984: 123–25; Latner, 2006: 116).

The psychological or psychoanalytical explanations of the Salem trials suggest that the afflicted girls suffered from hysteria caused by the Puritan culture of social repression. Marion L Starkey explains the nature of the hold this hysteria had on the girls and the ministers: 'The magistrates could not be blamed for their credulity; belief in witchcraft was almost an article of faith. They were not to be blamed for their failure to understand the nature of hysteria; in their day no one did' (Starkey,

1966: 111). In a similar vein, Chadwick Hansen (1969) argued that the general population of Massachusetts had reached a state of excitement that he claimed was inaccurately called 'mass hysteria'. However, he believed that it was the popular fear of witchcraft rather than the preaching of the clergy that was at the root of this spell of collective psychic excitement. According to Hansen, the clergy were opposed to the way in which the events at Salem were being dealt with, especially the proceedings of the special court. For this same reason, Hansen says that it is impossible to understand and estimate the nature of all aspects of the Salem events without recognizing the power and hold of witchcraft on a society that genuinely believed in it (1969: x). Rebecca Nurse, who was seventy-two years old and a well-respected lady of Salem, gave her considered opinion on Betty Parris' illness in the play along with similar psychological roots of her problem: 'I think she will wake in time. Pray calm yourselves. I have eleven children, and I am twenty-six times a grandma, and I have seen them all through their silly seasons, and when it comes on them, they will run the Devil bowlegged keeping up with their mischief' (Miller, 2010: 26).

Anthropological explanations of the Salem episode are based upon cross-cultural studies of witchcraft beliefs and practices amongst people from other continents such as Asia and Africa. They tend to argue that the effects of witchcraft are caused by the belief in witchcraft itself. As Robert Detweiler shows, these anthropological theories can be divided into three general models that argue that: '(a) witchcraft serves as a way to explain life's misfortunes hence it is socially functional (b) witchcraft operates as a form of social control; and (c) witchcraft functions as a release of social tension' (Detweiler, 1975: 601). In an anthropological study of witchcraft, it is fundamental to admit that witchcraft beliefs are to be rationalized as an integral part of any 'possessed' society and that they assume the worth of a palpable reality for its people, just as much as empirically tested notions have in our contemporary world. Simply put, it becomes almost 'natural' for the afflicted people to resort to these beliefs to explain the misfortunes of life. Witchcraft may thus be a very convenient agency to blame when the conventional ways of dealing with misfortune fail, for example, when one is hit by lightning, hurricanes, epidemics, sterility, sickly livestock, miscarriages, famine, or drought. Hence, in providing partial relief and emotional solace to the sufferer by putting the blame upon the supernatural, societies maintain relative stability. The flurry of accusations at the end of Act 1 confirms that the most vulnerable individuals were the first ones to be accused of witchcraft in Salem. Samuel Parris' Caribbean slave Tituba was triply marginalized because of her black ancestry, womanhood, and slave status. She was the first to be blamed by Abigail, and then Betty and Abigail name George Jacobs, Goody Howe, Goody Sibber, Alice Barrow, Goody Hawkins, Goody Bibber and Goody Booth as companions of the Devil (Miller, 2010: 46).

The medical explanations of the trials relate the incidents to the spread of ergotism or encephalitis in the area (Caporael, 1976: 23; Woolf, 2000: 459–60). However, these explanations have largely been discredited lately in the social science analyses of the events on the grounds that a singular thrust on the clinical

nature of the problem is tantamount to a too reductive estimate of a broad problem in a community that was hostage to social, political, religious, and economic forces.

Given the extraordinary number of women being accused and prosecuted in the European witch-hunts but also in Salem, the feminist explanations remain of vital importance, elaborating why women were the prime suspects. Carol Karlsen explains that women's executions were triggered by the prevalence of traditional misogyny in the Western world. As Karlsen argues, the New England society was no exception and deemed women's trespasses as challenges to God, as attempts to subvert the order of Creation and also as challenges to prescribed gender arrangements. Based upon the normative distinctions for different social groups on the basis of their class, gender and race, women in New England were granted and prescribed certain forms of behaviour (Karlsen, 1987: 118–19). As Clarke Garrett observes, the Puritan home was a precarious territory for the exercise of feminine power and a venue for the constitution of interpersonal relations with men from outside the hierarchies of village authority. In such a social space, single, poor, marginalized, older, post-menopause and widowed women had an especially tenuous existence, and they became rather easy suspects as possessed witches (Garrett, 1977: 465–66). Elizabeth Reis observes that in Puritan New England, which was a patriarchal society, women's bodies were represented as vulnerable, unsatisfied, yearning, physically fragile and sexually tempting, and their feminine souls were believed to be a convenient target for the Devil's advances. In contrast, men, being audacious and physically strong, were likely to repel Devil's temptations (Reis, 1995: 15–16). In Salem society, a certain deferential paternalism prevailed, which immediately sanctioned any transgression by women from the community's accepted norms. The religious jargon clearly contained a sexist prejudice against women as a social group. Men were generally among those who wielded power, whereas most of the men who were accused were either husbands, family members of the suspected witches or had poor social standing. Many women were implicated by other women too, on account of their personal rivalries and jealousies arising out of day-to-day interactions in their close-knit Puritan culture. Hence there was clearly a strong gender pattern in the Salem prosecutions. Miller dramatized the gender politics of Salem along the classical binary image of women in Puritan imagination, where they could either live like the Virgin Mary as chaste, nurturing and pious women, or they could be mistrusted as archetypical witches when they trespassed prescribed gender-specific Christian moral values. That's why Abigail and other girls' pranks in the woods and during court proceedings can also be close read as pioneer voices of early feminists in an oppressive theocracy (Miller, 2010: 8).

The gender politics in Salem makes more sense, however, when analysed in combination with the broader politics of the real political interests which underpinned the Salem Trials. Mary Beth Norton famously put this explanation forward. She evaluated correspondences and journals during the late 1680s and early 1690s and found that the dominant concern of the Essex County residents during this time was the Second Indian War or the so-called King William's War

(1688–97) (Norton, 2003: 297–98). She studied the events in 1692 Salem as an attempt by the ruling elite to further control things politically at home in order to protect the colonial government and the society at large against the heathen Indians and the Catholic French at the north-eastern frontier. They would blame the devil and its deputies (that is to say, the witches) at home for working as accomplices of the French and the Indians to weaken their government (ibid.: 93–155). As Philip Gould also observes, when disenfranchised young girls like Elizabeth Parris, Abigail Williams, Samuel Parris's Caribbean slave Tituba and John Proctor's maid Mary Warren temporarily wielded power to accuse men, fellow women and influential families in control of the village, the political elite shuddered at their ability to shape the broader political course of the events. The trials' formal end upon the accusation against Governor Phips' wife testifies to the political nature of the whole witch-hunting episode in Salem (Gould, 1995: 66–67).

None of the above analyses can claim to give access to the truth *per se*, although they all deal with aspects of the historical truth, some of which may seem more plausible than others or may have more explanatory power. Miller, in writing his play, might have been interested in all kinds of arguments that could explain the Salem witch trials or that could shed some light on what happened, historically speaking. The question, however, is whether he was mainly interested in a historical explanation. He was certainly not interested in doing justice to all the aspects mentioned above. Perhaps what captured his attention the most was the element of political *fabrication*.

## WITCHCRAFT AND FABRICATION

A recurring question in the historical studies of the Salem case is how it relates to the history of witchcraft in Europe. In Europe, the spell of witchcraft occurred in the early modern period between 1480–1750, and it spanned a period of three centuries which also witnessed such epic political events as the Reformation and the Thirty Years' War from 1618 to 1648. In Europe, much of the prosecution of witches took place in a sixty-year period between 1570 and 1630 (Hoak, 1983: 1270). The North American episodes, which obviously include the Salem trials of 1692, are historically close to this period yet slightly later. Nevertheless, David D. Hall asserts that 'belated though it was, witchcraft and witch-hunting in New England had the same structure as witchcraft in England and, taking due account of certain differences, as witchcraft on the Continent' (Hall, 1985: 253). Hall argues that despite being geographically apart, there was a cultural affinity between the witchcraft phenomenon in New England with continental European and English witch-hunts in the early modern era.

When the interpretation of an earlier generation of historians, such as Joseph Hansen, H. Trevor-Roper and Henry C. Lea, who understood the fear of witchcraft as a violent expression of an inquisitorial fanaticism of the Christian Church, was proven to be insufficient to explain the true nature of the incidents this was a turning

point in the historiography of European witchcraft. The historians just mentioned saw the witchcraft phenomenon as an anomaly and an irrational, psychopathological episode in human history (Hall, 1985: 253; Fudge, 2006: 488–92). In contrast, the so-called functionalist interpretation of witchcraft took witchcraft seriously as a historical phenomenon which, as such, had a *function*. The historians Alan Macfarlane and Keith Thomas carried out two paradigmatic studies and made an anthropological study of European witchcraft in their respective works, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (1970) and *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971). In their view, witchcraft was endemic and arose from the very roots of the respective societies as a form of social interaction in the close-knit communities to meet certain social needs. The vengefulness of villagers or cunning traders looking for a profit led to accusations and a manipulation of the guilt of those who had angered their counterparts in deals and bargains. Hence social strain provided an excuse for resorting to accusations of diabolism and sorcery. It made people deal with both beneficent and maleficent magic in society (Horsley, 1979: 697–98). According to Keith Thomas (1971), it was one of the means of making sense out of misfortune, for which there was no other obvious cause readily available. Thomas linked the increase in witchcraft cases to the Protestant Reformation, which, he contends, had discredited most of the counter-magic that the villagers had previously employed to protect themselves against *maleficium*, which related to the occult means of doing evil or harm (1971: 51–77). Alan Macfarlane (1970) concurs with Thomas when he mentions that the Catholic Church in England prior to the Reformation provided the religious template that, through its rituals and a dramatization of the expulsion of evil and communal propitiation, in a sense comforted people with a sort of a social solace and solution to their misfortunes. Macfarlane argues that, as a result of the Reformation, the communal misfortunes that continued to infect society had been dealt with through a religious and ritual framework which was now destroyed. This would account for the witchcraft crisis erupting from within that society (Macfarlane, 1970: 195).

More important in Thomas' reading, however, was the social strain resulting from the onset of a market economy. The traditional village economy, which had sustained an ethic of charity to one's neighbours and protection of the poor through the old manorial system of poor people's relief, was now being eroded by trends such as land hunger, commercialization, price hikes, agricultural specialization and growing towns. According to Thomas, in this era of change and rapid flux in Tudor and Stuart England, the old conflict resolution mechanisms of the manorial courts and the village guilds had disappeared, leaving society to disintegrate and confront itself, especially when it reached breaking point. The Reformation, the economic liberalization, the disappearance of old norms of charity, friendship and sharing were the triggers for the increase in litigation and trials in that period (Thomas, 1971: 563).

When compared to what we know from the continental witch prosecutions, the English witches were relatively poor, belonging to the lower social classes, and during the trials the authorities weighed convincing and unconvincing evidence to establish their conviction. Thomas and Macfarlane deduced that

the machinery of enforcement in the executive ceased to function long before accusations disappeared. The European witch-hunts were markedly different in different countries, as Nachman Ben-Yahuda observes, just as Scottish trials differed from the British and resembled more the continental European trials. He observes that the most severe European witch-hunts occurred in Germany, France and Switzerland (Ben-Yehuda, 1981: 327). In all these different cases, however, the functionalist approach would hold that witchcraft itself had a certain function that did not depend so much on whether people truly believed in witches. Instead, accusations of witchcraft were, in a sense, fabrications with a social function.

One of the critics of *Religion and the Decline of Magic* is Norman Cohn, who feels that Thomas has not really explained the historical appearance of witchcraft as an issue of societal concern (1975: 153). Cohn points out that *maleficium*, the use of magic to cause damage, antedates the witch-hunts of the early modern period. He says: 'It is clear that many of the forms of *maleficium* that figure in the witch-trials of the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had been familiar for many centuries before' (ibid.). Because of the prevalence of this concept of *maleficium* in Europe since the Middle Ages, Cohn finds it an unconvincing excuse for the mass witch-hunts at that time in European history. He asserts that the concept of *maleficium* was transformed into an ideology and was deemed by the Church to be a rival heretical and pagan practice to uproot the religious foundations of society. The religious elites, therefore, genuinely believed that the witches were engaged in an organized conspiracy against the Church. Cohn explains: 'Like almost all of their contemporaries, the Fathers accepted without question that magic worked, that it really could produce miracles – but these were pernicious miracles, evil devices by which the demons tricked human beings into opposing God' (Cohn, 1975: 156). Cohn consequently claims that the peasant community had always succumbed to supernatural explanations and practices in the past without any official church sanction. Yet from the fifteenth century onwards, the church elite readily offered official sanction and patronage to accusations based on the concept of *maleficium*. This is why Cohn states: 'peasant fears could now find expression in formal accusations. As the authorities became more concerned with new concepts of witchcraft, so they became more willing to lend an ear to popular complaints about *maleficium*' (ibid.: 239). Therefore, the popular peasant beliefs were given an official importance, and in most cases the judges prosecuted the witches with the intention to rescue Christendom from an assault by Wicca and other pre-Christian pagan creeds.

We do not feel that we are in a position to decide whether Cohn's critique of Thomas and, by implication, Macfarlane, is *correct*. In relation to Miller's *The Crucible*, there is a more interesting point that can be derived from the tension between the functionalist approach and Cohn's criticism. Either people were clearly fabricating accusations of witchcraft, or they strongly believed that there was a genuine attack going on. The latter did not mean there was no fabrication involved; the former did not mean that fabrications could not produce, or affect, forms of belief that were distinctly *real*. In fact, the tension between the two options

is evidence of the pernicious nature of fabrication, which is either that one tends to forget that it is fabricated or that one may underestimate the reality of feelings that can be produced by fabrication. In both cases, criticism becomes extremely difficult. This, we think, is what Miller faced in his own time and one of the reasons why the Salem witchcraft case was such a tempting analogy.

## A TRUTHFUL ACCOUNT

How then does Miller's text position itself about these various interpretations of the historical events that took place at Salem? Does his text offer another interpretation that could be placed next to earlier interpretations? Or does *The Crucible* aim at an altogether different type of 'truth'? These questions are implicitly or explicitly dealt with in a short 'Note on the Historical Accuracy of this Play' that precedes the play, in which Miller explicitly states that 'This play is not history in the sense in which the word is used by the academic historian' (Miller, 2010: 3). Miller continues to spell out the differences by pointing out that dramatic purposes and poetic licence granted him the opportunity to fuse historical counterparts of the dramatic personae into one or more figures and alter their age and roles in history to suit the artistic flair of the piece. Yet, he also highlights what he calls the 'accuracy' of the play. This suggests that the truth-value of this representation depends partly on historical accuracy but is not confined to the question of what really happened in Salem. The first element is made explicit when Miller says that 'The fate of each character is exactly that of his historical model'. The term 'exactly' is repeated a little later when Miller states that some of the characters played a role in history that was 'exactly the same' (ibid, 2010: 3). This raises the question of what 'exact' similarity Miller hints at. That there may be more to it than just historical accuracy is indicated elsewhere, at a much later date, in an interview in 1980 in which Miller explained: 'There are lines of force – economic, political, mythic memories, genetic imprints – many more, and where they intersect in a human situation in which man must make choice – is drama' (Rajakrishnan and Miller, 1980: 196). Here it may be clear that the drama that interests Miller is both historical and singular but also more general, as a meeting point of transhistorical 'lines of force'. His account has to answer to a set of requirements that is both historical, concerns a specific and charged situation, and does justice to these more general lines of force.

Some of its critics thought *The Crucible* too specific, though, and considered it to be a propagandist play aimed at hitting an isolated political phenomenon too hard, or too simplistically, through allegory (Samuelson, 1998–99: 619). Miller defended himself against these objections with a similar mixture of historical specificity or accuracy and generality by saying that he was writing a play based upon immutable historical facts. After seeing the role of the prosecutors in the trial records, he was convinced that 'there are people dedicated to evil in the world; that without their perverse example we should not know the good. Evil is not a mistake but a fact

in life' (Miller, 1978: 158). He further emphasizes that there are certain types of situations that are typically human, which are intermittently repeated in different societies and social arrangements. In 1980 this was defined even more concisely when Miller stated there are some types of people who seem to reproduce their own kind through millennia. Miller proceeded to argue that the continuity of certain types of character and social situations in history must retain our interest in a book, a play or a poem that is based upon a subject from an entirely different age. This would define their historical relevance (Rajakrishnan and Miller, 1980: 196).

Historical specificity and more general lines of force that transcend historical situations might seem to hint at historical continuity. Yet the play is *aimed* at its contemporary present while ostensibly dealing with a historical episode and thus alludes to anachronism as a mismatch between two times. The play deals with history, but it also unhinges a period in history to address its own times and is produced in the present with its own cultural and political ground realities. In general, the chronological distance between the production of the play and its subject matter is revealing with respect to the way in which history affects a culture in any present. According to Frans-Willem Korsten, anachronism opens up another interesting potential as that which can never be contained in one domain alone. He writes that:

Things, ideas, and texts travel through time and are taken up differently in different times. In a fundamental sense, any historical artefact that functions in some kind of present can be seen as an example of anachronism. The complexity here is not so much a matter of language or representation but is primarily an issue of how we can connect to, or experience history, or deal with history in terms of actuality. (Korsten, 2012: 26)

When brought to life, a historical artefact like *The Crucible* is therefore anachronistic *per se*, but in this case the anachronism shifts to a meta-level in the sense that its subject is a three-hundred-year-old incident that is represented in a theatrical mode by a playwright in the middle of the twentieth century to address the present. The play presents history as a matter of *actuality*. For Miller and his contemporaries, the issue was how this disconnection in history operated to forge a link within history as something that actually had occurred and was true and was now occurring again. Here this play intervened politics of Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s through the historical allegory of an incident that was culturally and temporally American.

With respect to the truth of historical accounts, historical narratives may suffer from what Ankersmit called *historism*, with emplotted texts full of facts and records, and historians presenting them as if they had actually experienced them. In this context, they at times disregard the anachronism that separates history from the present in which it is being written. What, indeed, distinguishes Miller's play from the historical works about Salem is its regard for *past, present and future*. It would have been just another play dealing with history, describing history in order to understand history if its subject were merely the past. As it is, the play is a work

of art that is anachronistic by virtue of its dealing with history in its present and future present. Perhaps paradoxically, historical accuracy is nevertheless key for this anachronistic operation.

After examining the trial records and the historical data of the Salem episode, Arthur Miller constructed the plot of his play. His aim to work on a truthful account clearly emerges from the narrative texts that Miller inserted between the sketch of the stage-setting – ‘a small upper bedroom’ – and the actual dialogues in Act 1, and then at the moment that the different characters, for instance, the Reverend John Hale, appear for the first time (Miller, 2010: 32–35). The first account sketches the historical background of the Act to come:

But the people of Salem in 1692 were not quite the dedicated folk that arrived on the *Mayflower*. A vast differentiation had taken place, and in their own time a revolution had unseated the royal government and substituted a junta, which was at this moment in power. The times, to their eyes must have been out of joint, and to the common folk must have seemed as insoluble and complicated as do ours today. It is not hard to see how many could easily have been led to believe that the time of confusion had been brought upon them by deep and darkling forces. No hint of such speculation appears on the court record, but social disorder in any age breeds such mystical suspicions, and when, as in Salem, wonders are brought forth from below the social surface, it is too much to expect people to hold back very long from laying on the victims with all the force of their frustration. (Miller, 2010: 7–8)

Clearly, the accuracy of Miller's account was concerned with not just facts and figures from the surface. Miller refers to the Glorious Revolution of 1688 in England, which marked the formal end of absolute monarchy there. As a build-up to the moments of tension in Salem society, Miller observes that the Salemites of 1692 were significantly more secure than the first Puritans who had known hard times in Massachusetts and Virginia. They were less dedicated religiously compared to the previous generation who had sailed to American shores aboard the *Mayflower* and landed in New England to preserve their Puritanical faith. They established an ‘autocracy by consent’, designed to perpetuate and preserve the ideology and safeguard community unity as a source of their power against human and demonic rival elements such as the French colonialists and the Indians in the wild north-eastern parts of the county. In the case of Salem, however, autocracy turned into theocracy, and the desire to keep the community together turned into repression by, in Miller's words, a ‘junta’ (Miller, 2010: 8).

As may be clear from this, Miller set his play against a socio-historical background. When listing the many factors which possibly and logically led to the rift in the seemingly placid Salem society, Miller opines that 1692 was the watershed year for the conflict to take place. The situation was in no way unusual, however, nor was it simple. Arthur Miller ponders on the truthfulness or historical accuracy of his account in the introduction to his *Collected Plays*.

He concludes that it was the truthfulness of his account that had also troubled the audience:

I believe that the very moral awareness of the play and its characters – which are historically correct – was repulsive to the audience. For a variety of reasons, I think that the Anglo-Saxon audience cannot believe the reality of characters who live by principles and know very much about their own characters and situations, and who say what they know. Our drama, for this among other reasons, is condemned, so to speak, to the emotions of subjectivism, which as they approach knowledge and self-awareness, become less and less actual and real to us. In retrospect I think that my course in *The Crucible* should have been toward greater self-awareness and not, as my critics have implied, toward an enlarged and more pervasive subjectivism. The realistic form and style of the play would then have had to give way. What new form might have evolved I cannot now say, but certainly the passion of knowing is as powerful as the passion of feeling alone, and the writing of the play broached the question of that new form for me. (Miller, 1978: 159)

Arthur Miller reflects on the critical response of a contemporary audience, which found a morally self-conscious society too unrealistic a subject to be framed within a dramatically attractive fold, and which would have preferred a presentation that would have facilitated identification. Miller objects to this and emphasizes once more the importance of ‘the realistic form and style of the play’ (ibid, 1978: 159). He adds: ‘But we do do *Hamlet*, we do do *Macbeth*, we do a number of more mediocre plays as well; but the ones that last are the ones that we recognize most immediately in terms of the details of real human behavior in a specific situation’ (Miller and Gelb, 1958: 193). The paramount goal of the literary artist, in Miller’s opinion, is to draw a portrait of the characters and the situations, which leads to greater self-awareness of the individual characters who, in the end, emerge as more real and true to life. Miller seems dedicated to a theatre of ‘heightened consciousness’ which encourages a passion for *knowing* instead of merely a passion for feeling, however appealing this may be to the emotive side of the viewers and the readers.

The public and social ability of drama to make people *know* led Miller to write *The Crucible* as a response to political forces that were only too willing to rewrite history. As Tom Driver puts it, the element of knowledge is key here: ‘Drama is akin to the other inventions of man in that it ought to help us to know more, and not merely to spend our feelings’ (Driver, 1960: 47). The desire to know and explore the truth of the historical episode in Salem with a passion that was as important as the passion to work out the individual characters led Miller to invest his skills in producing this new form of dramatic writing with an enigmatic historical episode as its subject, addressed at his own times – and that implied an address to the future, as we will see. As for this future, the play is distinctly not, in our reading, ‘a prescient warning against tyranny’ that can reverberate ‘with fresh power in each culture and generation’, as the back flap of the most recent edition has it. Instead, we would

argue that there is a historical specificity and accuracy involved, a truthfulness in Miller's account underpinning *The Crucible*, that makes the play difficult to translate. It is not universally applicable or mouldable. In terms of truth practice, the play kindles a desire to know what happened and seeks to give an account that is as truthful as possible. This is posited as both a precondition of the play and as its aim. Without this historiographical desire, the play could not have had such a powerful impact. Or it would have lost its historical and political relevance.

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