

Religion

Five years after *The Crucible* was first produced, historian Edmund S. Morgan offered this trenchant summary of Puritanism's inherent religious tensions:

Puritanism required that a man devote his life to seeking salvation but told him he was helpless to do anything but evil. Puritanism required that he rest his whole hope in Christ but taught him that Christ would utterly reject him unless before he was born God had foreordained his salvation. Puritanism required that man refrain from sin but told him that he would sin anyhow. Puritanism required that he reform the world in the image of God's holy kingdom but taught him that the evil of the world was incurable and inevitable. Puritanism required that he work to the best of his ability at whatever task was set before him and partake of the good things that God had filled the world with but told him he must enjoy his work and his pleasures only, as it were, absent-mindedly, with his attention fixed on God. (7-8)

Miller's play reflects this constellation of paradoxes in its characters' earnest seeking after truth despite their blindness to their own ignorance, their determination to root out evil wherever they might find it except in their own assumptions and beliefs, and in their longing for a perfectly moral life that would dominate their irrepressible human passions. For them, the devil was a spiritual reality that encompassed these and other barriers to a pious and godly life. As Miller himself commented, religious faith is central to the play's intent:

The form, the shape, the meaning of *The Crucible* were all compounded out of the faith of those who were hanged. They were asked to be lonely and they refused. They were asked to deny their belief in a God of all men, not merely a god each individual could manipulate to his interests. They were asked to call a phantom real and to deny their touch with reality. (*Theatre Essays* 173)

To modern audiences, the Puritan belief in witchcraft may seem immediate and incontrovertible evidence of a skewed mindset. But for a culture rooted in the moral and theological authority of the

***The Crucible* after Six Decades**

Christopher Baker

In 2010, the *Denver Post* invited a panel of judges to vote on the “Ten Most Important American Plays” (Moore). Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* came in at number nine; his *Death of a Salesman* was first. Such rankings are the stuff of endless debate among scholars and theatergoers, but there is no debating the permanent rank that Miller holds in the history of American theater or of the place that *The Crucible* holds after over sixty years on stages all over the world. It is Miller’s most-often-performed play and has appealed to a variety of audiences and cultures who respond to its electric issues that extend far beyond a miscarriage of justice in a seventeenth-century North American colony. Miller assessed the play’s meaning in 2000:

More than a political metaphor, more than a moral tale, *The Crucible*, as it developed for me over the period of more than a year, became the awesome evidence of the power of the inflamed human imagination, the poetry of suggestion, and finally the tragedy of heroic resistance to a society possessed to the point of ruin. (*Echoes* 287)

“I had great joy writing [*The Crucible*],” Miller recalled in 1985, “more than with almost any other play I’ve written” (*Theatre Essays* 278). The play blends the social and religious conflicts of angst-ridden Christians with the tensions experienced in any age when powerful, authoritarian institutions seek to bend individuals to their will. It dramatizes the struggles of clearly flawed people to arrive at a sense of justice that will somehow not become tainted with their own shortcomings. And it movingly portrays the agony of a couple that seeks to defend their relationship against tensions that would wreck their loving marriage. The play continues to appeal to audiences through its exploration of the themes of religion, power, psychology, and love.

All in all, the present volume offers an unusually wide variety of responses to Miller's play, not only from the essayists themselves but from the many other persons whose opinions they report and describe.

Scapegoats, Satanism and the Sacred: Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*

Nicolas Tredell

Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible* (1953), considered in light of René Girard's anthropological study *La violence and le sacré* [*Violence and the Sacred*] (1972), powerfully dramatizes the way in which a society finds scapegoats to try to allay the potential for internecine violence that threatens to tear it apart—but thus, ironically, creates a situation in which the scapegoating process itself starts to release internecine violence and tear it apart anyway. For Girard, the scapegoating process has its roots in ritual sacrifice, which provides a controlled way, endowed with the aura of the sacred, of releasing violent energies in societies that have not yet developed a legal and judicial system. “Le sacrifice a pour fonction d'apaiser les violences intestines, d'empêcher les conflits d'éclater” [“The function of the sacrifice is to allay internal violence, to prevent conflicts from bursting out”] (Girard 27).

The society *The Crucible* depicts no longer practices ritual sacrifice because the crucifixion of Christ provides a symbolic image of a redemptive killing that need not be enacted upon a human or animal victim, and because a legal system has taken on the tasks of arrest, trial and punishment and aims to identify, not an innocent victim, but a culprit who supposedly deserves capital punishment. In this respect, law is a continuation of sacrifice by other means. But Salem in 1692, as Miller portrays it in the play, is also a society in which the strains are so great that these religious and judicial alternatives to ritual sacrifice have started to break down; they are no longer adequate to defuse the potential for internecine violence: a sacrificial victim, or victims, must be found but cannot be named as such: the sacrificial act is justified by religion and still retains a sacred aura but it has to be mediated by a judicial system that selects and identifies those who have supposedly broken the law and thus deserve to have controlled violence visited on them in the

shape of punishment. It is this quest for legally identifiable figures who can be sacrificed that has become a witch hunt where the need for a sacrifice at least partly overrides due process and protocols of evidence. Put this way, it may sound abstract; but it is, of course, always individual human beings who are involved in specific examples of witch-hunting, as accused, accusers, investigators, law officers, judges, jailors, and hangmen. *The Crucible* presents its audience with such human beings—based on real, historically documented figures transmuted by Miller’s dramatic imagination—in a situation of crisis.

Primal Panic

The Salem that *The Crucible* presents is plagued by a primal panic centred on the death and possibly mortal illness of children, a source of grief to the parents and of demographic threat to a community conscious of an imperative to increase and multiply that is both biological and biblical. As the first extended prose passage in the play points out, Salem is a beleaguered community near the “edge of the wilderness” and of an “American continent” that is “full of mystery” and “dark and threatening,” and out of which “Indian tribes marauded from time to time,” the “heathen[s]” that claimed Christian lives (Miller 14). It must maintain its discipline and its numbers in order to survive, and child deaths deplete the population. act one opens on stage with the Reverend Samuel Parris’s ten-year-old daughter, Betty, lying “inert” in bed (13), perhaps seriously stricken; later in the act, Ann, the wife of Thomas Putnam, laments that she has already lost seven infants and that her daughter Ruth now lies sick.

Seeking a cause for this, at a time when scientific medicine was only starting to develop, Ann Putnam finds it in Satan, and her language has a poetic force that gives her diagnosis greater authority. She says of Betty and Ruth: “It’s death, y’know, it’s death drivin’ into them, forked and hoofed” (Miller 21). Here, the repetition of “it’s death,” the alliterative reinforcement provided by the plosive initial “d” of the present participle “drivin’,” and the vivid phrase yoking two familiar synecdoches for the diabolic (“forked and hoofed”)

intensify the idea of diabolic destruction; the commonplace phrase “y’know” takes on a quality of cognitive authority, as if appealing to a widely shared and well-established knowledge. A little later, she describes how her seven babies died: “each would wither in my arms the very night of their birth” (23), where the verb “wither” suggests a plant becoming dry and shrivelled, or a person getting old (as in the expression “withering with age”), a process that would normally extend over weeks or years but is telescoped here into what does indeed seem an unnaturally short space of time, “the very night of their birth,” an echo of Samuel Beckett’s image in a play almost contemporary with *The Crucible*, *Waiting for Godot* (written in French 1952; English version first performed 1955, published 1956), when Pozzo says of women: “They give birth astride of a grave” (Beckett 83). This seems to be literally Ann Putnam’s lot.

Ruth Putnam still survives, but, according to Ann, she has become a “secret child” who “shrivels like a sucking mouth were pullin’ on her life too” (Miller 23); the image of secrecy implies a child mysteriously estranged from her parents, while the simile of the “sucking mouth,” which might more usually evoke a baby at its mother’s breast, is here transformed into a sinister force that seems to be draining a child’s life away—and is all the more alarming because of its associations with a suckling process that would normally be life-sustaining. Against this poetically charged discourse, a more rational discourse, even if it were available, would make little headway. When Mrs Putnam goes on to say that Tituba, the Parris’s servant, who is of Barbadian provenance, should speak to the dead in order to “surely tell us what person murdered my babies [. . .]” (23), she both authorizes a religious transgression—as Parris says, “it is a formidable sin to conjure up the dead!” (23)—but also enters into the judicial zone with the use of the verb “murdered.” Once it becomes a matter of “murder,” the legal mechanism goes into action—and the last lethal lever in that mechanism, in late seventeenth-century Salem, is the noose.

The alarm caused by child mortality links with the anger aroused by internecine conflicts within Salem over property and position, and the formation of factions to pursue those conflicts.

Reverend Parris is aware that his position as pastor in the town is precarious—hence his alarm at the possibility that word may spread that witchcraft contaminates his household. Thomas Putnam—we first learn this through the second long prose description in act one, rather than through action and dialogue—is “a man with many grievances, at least one of which appears justified” (Miller 22)—the rejection of his wife’s brother-in-law, James Bayley, as minister of Salem, despite being fully qualified for the post and having majority support. Putnam felt this to be a slur on his name and family honor. He also failed to break his father’s will, which left more than seemed fair to a stepbrother. In fact, he seems to have failed in every public cause he took up. There is a lot of anger and frustration in most of the Salem characters the play portrays, and this feeds into the potential for violence that the sacrifice, taking the partly legalized form of a witch hunt, works to defuse. Such anger and frustration, and several other qualities, are embodied in the figure of Abigail Williams, the primary driver of the witch hunt, the most energetic accuser of the alleged diabolists, who may also be seen as abused.

Accuser and Abused

Abigail is precocious, defiant, dangerous, and inventive. She is quick-thinking and has a free way with words, which, in act one, she attributes to her nature, as one who is at least partly outside civilization: “A wild thing may say wild things” (Miller 29)—although this links up with other uses of the adjective “wild” in the play that suggest loss of control rather than freedom from repression. One significant usage is by Proctor’s wife Elizabeth in act two, to denote the turmoil in the town that Abigail has helped to provoke: “The Deputy Governor promise hangin’ if they’ll not confess, John. The town’s gone wild, I think” (53). Another is by Hale in act three, when he falls into inadvertent rhyme in saying of Mary Warren, after she has accused John Proctor of being “the Devil’s man”: “this child’s gone wild!” (104).

Abigail’s way with words is evident when she warns Mercy Lewis, Mary Warren, and Betty not to speak of what, beyond dancing, they did in the woods:

Chronology of Arthur Miller's Life_____

1915	Born on October 17 in New York City to Isadore and Gittel (Barnett) Miller.
1916	Begins attending public schools in New York.
1929	Stock market crashes, undermining the financial security of Miller's family and precipitating the "Great Depression" of the 1930s.
1930-32	Works as a salesman and delivery driver.
1933-34	Graduates from high school in 1933; works as a clerk in an auto warehouse. Applies for admission (at first unsuccessfully) to the University of Michigan. Begins studying there in the fall of 1934.
1935	Writes for the university newspaper; does well academically; takes creative writing courses; covers local labor developments.
1936	Meets his future wife, Mary Grace Slattery; wins an award for his first play (<i>No Villain</i>); writes a short story about a salesman; is impressed by a performance of Ibsen's play <i>A Doll's House</i> .
1937	Takes playwrighting classes; receives a scholarship when <i>They Too Arise</i> wins an award; writes <i>Honors at Dawn</i> ; meets Norman Rosten, a friend and later collaborator.
1938	Finishes his play <i>The Great Disobedience</i> ; graduates from college; returns to New York; revises <i>They Too Arise</i> , now calling it <i>The Grass Still Grows</i> and submitting it for possible Broadway production;

Works by Arthur Miller_____

Stage Plays

No Villain (1936)

They Too Arise (1937, based on *No Villain*)

Honors at Dawn (1938, based on *They Too Arise*)

The Grass Still Grows (1938, based on *They Too Arise*)

The Great Disobedience (1938)

Listen My Children (1939, with Norman Rosten)

You're Next (1939, with Norman Rosten)

The Golden Years (1940)

The Man Who Had All the Luck (1940)

The Half-Bridge (1943)

All My Sons (1947)

Death of a Salesman (1949)

An Enemy of the People (1950, based on Henrik Ibsen's play *An Enemy of the People*)

The Crucible (1953)

A View from the Bridge (1955)

A Memory of Two Mondays (1955)

After the Fall (1964)

Incident at Vichy (1964)

The Price (1968)

The Reason Why (1970)

Fame (one-act, 1970; revised for television 1978)

The Creation of the World and Other Business (1972)

Up from Paradise (1974)

The Archbishop's Ceiling (1977)

The American Clock (1980)

Playing for Time (television play, 1980)

Elegy for a Lady (short play, 1982; first part of *Two Way Mirror*)

About the Editor

Robert C. Evans is I. B. Young Professor of English at Auburn University at Montgomery, where he has taught since 1982. In 1984, he received his PhD from Princeton University, where he held Weaver and Whiting fellowships as well as a University fellowship. In later years, his research was supported by fellowships from the Newberry Library (twice), the American Council of Learned Societies, the Folger Shakespeare Library (twice), the Mellon Foundation, the Huntington Library, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Philosophical Society, and the UCLA Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies.

In 1982, he was awarded the G. E. Bentley Prize and in 1989 was selected Professor of the Year for Alabama by the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education. At AUM, he has received the Faculty Excellence Award and has been named Distinguished Research Professor, Distinguished Teacher Professor, and University Alumni Professor. Most recently, he was named Professor of the Year by the South Atlantic Association of Departments of English. In 2017, he was appointed a Research Scholar at the University of Nevada in Las Vegas, home of the *Ben Jonson Journal*, which he coedits with Richard Harp.

He is a contributing editor to the John Donne *Variorum Edition* and is the author or editor of over forty books (on such topics as Ben Jonson, Martha Moulsworth, Kate Chopin, John Donne, Frank O'Connor, Brian Friel, Ambrose Bierce, Amy Tan, early modern women writers, pluralist literary theory, literary criticism, twentieth-century American writers, American novelists, Shakespeare, and seventeenth-century English literature). He is also the author of roughly three hundred published or forthcoming essays or notes (in print and online) on a variety of topics, especially dealing with Renaissance literature, critical theory, women writers, short fiction, and literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.