

SALEM WITCHCRAFT IN AMERICAN DRAMA

by

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SALEM WITCHCRAFT IN AMERICAN DRAMA  
Introduction

The word 'witch' is derived from the Anglo-Saxon 'wicca', the oldest reference for which (circa 890) is listed in the Oxford Dictionary as meaning "a man who practises witchcraft or magic; a magician, sorcerer, wizard."<sup>1</sup> Wicca can also be found more specifically defined as "a magician who weakens the power of evil."<sup>2</sup> At any rate, at its inception this was a male term, the female derivative (wicce) for which did not appear until over a century later (circa 1000). At that time the term was redefined to exclude any personal power and was based solely on supposition and conjecture: "a woman supposed to have dealings with the devil or evil spirits and to be able by their co-operation to perform supernatural acts."<sup>3</sup> In one short century the etymology came to include a denotation of evil and a connotation of women as instruments to be used.

As to its modern usage, the American Heritage Dictionary defines the word 'witch' as:

- "1. a woman who practices sorcery or is believed to have dealings with the devil.
2. an ugly, vicious old woman; a hag.
3. (Informal) a bewitching young woman or girl."<sup>4</sup>

This description establishes witchcraft as an exclusively feminine domain, although this was not the case in our history. Both male and female witches were

accused and condemned by the Inquisition and at the witchcraft trials in Salem, Massachusetts. It is also not the case in our American drama.

Our drama depicts three kinds of witches. The first is the folk witch, a creature of regional notoriety, native only to the most isolated, undereducated areas and preserved in local legend and lore. The one play of national fame to exemplify this is Dark of the Moon by Howard Richardson and William Berney. Its central character is very much male: the Witch Boy, John.

The second, an even rarer type, is the transcendent witch, a phenomenal character who exists as human but possesses occult powers that transcend our limits, e.g., clairvoyance, divination, etc. One such witch is the Witch of Endor, a necromancer approached for counsel by Saul in the Bible. A full-length drama about her was written in 1916 by Robert Norwood and titled, not surprisingly, The Witch of Endor. No other full-length drama of original American authorship exists which focuses on a transcendent witch. She is, however, to be found in plays translated or borrowed from foreign sources. We sorely lack these legends on our own.

But of the third sort there is no scarcity since the political witch is of great interest to us due to her documented existence in our history. This witch is the perennial victim of societies eager to maintain power by

branding and condemning certain people as scapegoats. The Crucible by Arthur Miller would be the most famous play of this type, set as it is in 17th century Salem, but several others have been written sharing that same theme.

There are a total of six full-length plays on the Salem witchcraft theme as listed in the Cumulated Dramatic Index (1909-1949) and the Play Index (1949-1982). These plays comprise a fascinating spectrum of dramatic treatments from conventional to melodramatic to Brechtian. None of the six adheres strictly to the recorded facts of the Salem trials, but the authors vary widely in their chosen deviations. It is the purpose of this paper to study those deviations as compared to the documented story of Salem in 1692. We shall examine each author's plot and purpose in relation to his/her alterations of fact and then evaluate the effectiveness of those choices.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, Oxford English Dictionary Vol. XII (Walton Street, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 205.

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Holmes, Witchcraft in History (Secaucus, NJ: The Citadel Press, 1977), p. 206.

<sup>3</sup> Oxford, p. 206.

<sup>4</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, American Heritage Dictionary College Edition (New York: American Heritage Publishing Co., Inc., 1975), p. 1470.

## CHAPTER 1 - THE SALEM STORY

When Christianity finally gained political power in the European Middle Ages, it demanded to be the only religion of state. So the practice of 'wicca', the ancient religion in praise of the Great Mother and her consort, the Horned God, was declared heretical. At first the practitioners were only fined or flogged, but as time passed the contention grew fiercer. By the beginning of the Inquisition in 1233 the penalties had escalated to torture and death. Females now comprised the majority of those accused, with "women being more licentious than men" being the official attitude.<sup>1</sup>

Recorded history being as patchy as it is, the first full documentation we have of an execution for the practice of witchcraft is of one which occurred in 1459 in Arras, France, when 5 women and 1 man were burned at the stake. In England the first important witchcraft trial was not recorded until 1566 in Chelmsford, following Queen Elizabeth's Witchcraft Act of 1563. Chelmsford became notorious for these trials, the largest of which occurred in 1645 when 32 people were accused based on evidence given by a group of small children. Nineteen were hung; the rest were imprisoned.<sup>2</sup>

The reign of James I broadened the application of the death penalty for crimes associated with witchcraft, so



after 1604 the situation worsened. The greatest number of mass executions were recorded in the 1620's, a great motivational factor for seekers of freedom to try settling in the New World.<sup>2</sup> It was not until 1736 that legislation was passed in England which ended the classification of witchcraft as a capital crime.<sup>3</sup> However, even that didn't prevent the execution of John and Ruth Osborne by their community in 1751, the last such execution recorded in England.<sup>4</sup>

From this background of religious persecution in England, more than one company of determined individuals fled, filled with strong ideals of personal freedom and fiercely opposed to what they had known as traditional authority. They were later to become the seedbed for our American democracy, but initially each company had to band together tightly for survival. While the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock had their Mayflower Compact, those of the Salem community had their Covenant "to walk together in moral communion" with their church as their hub.<sup>5</sup> Somehow the inherent irony of aspiring to unite such pioneer spirits into an idealized homogeneous community was not evident.

The Puritans were a hard-working, no-nonsense group with rigid ways and absolute values, but their marriage customs were surprisingly liberal for the times. Their marriages were of the romantic variety, that is, based on

individual preferences with the husband and wife relationship taking precedence over the procreation and childrearing aspects. Children were secondary in importance and expected to behave like miniature adults, with very little liveliness and even less indulgence.

It was, in fact, via the children that the unity of the Salem covenant was finally shattered, but the church's position as the society's hub had slipped steadily with the increasing influx and survival of the Society of Friends, the Quakers. Predictably, when the great delusion of witchcraft took hold of Salem, the great majority of the accused were Quakers. The trials served as a political ploy to procure power over those too independent of the church and an ironic repetition of the persecution the Puritans fled from in England.

The available data of Salem's history indicate that it was a troubled, diverse community even as far back as 1671. Their preacher, Rev. Bayley, it is recorded, resigned due to conflicts with prominent church members. His successor, Rev. Burroughs, was in turn so persecuted by the pro-Bayley partisans that he left in 1680 without ever receiving the financial settlement he was promised. It took the next preacher, Rev. Lawson, only until 1684 to decide that harmony here was impossible, and he returned to his favored Boston. Then entered one Rev. Samuel Parris. Coming from a background as a merchant trader in

the West Indies. Parris started haggling about his salary at the onset of his interviewing process in November, 1688. His pecuniary ways won him few friends but the church's majority did finally call him back in April, 1689. More time elapsed, but finally he was ordained as Salem's minister at the year's end in 1689.

Rev. Parris brought with him to Salem not only his young daughter, Elizabeth, and his niece/ward, Abigail Williams, but also his domestic slaves from the Spanish West Indies, Tituba and her husband, known as John Indian. In the winter of 1691-92 when Betty Parris was nine and Abigail only eleven, Tituba entertained regularly at Rev. Parris's home. Her faithful audience at these regular gatherings included ten adolescent girls and three women, before whom she displayed her skills at fortunetelling, legerdemain, ventriloquism, and sorcery. Abigail, for all her youth, showed a particular affinity for these tricks and was to become the leading personality in the offshoot group of accusers, later known as the afflicted ones.

That the afflicted ones were masterminded by some manipulative adult seems evident when one reviews the order and sagacity of their choices of victims to accuse. First was Sarah Good and her 5 year old daughter, Dorcas, who had subsisted on community charity and handouts since being deserted several years earlier. The whole town had tired of their begging. Dorcas died in jail; Sarah was one

of the 18 women and 4 men who were executed and the source of a most interesting anecdote. As Sarah was being led to the gibbet, Reverend Noyes was the minister at her side. To him she said, "As you take away my innocent life, may God give you blood to drink." Twenty-four years later Rev. Noyes died of a violent internal hemorrhage. The reverend is indeed recorded to have died choking on his own blood.<sup>7</sup>

Next to be accused of witchcraft was Sarah Osburn, a widow with two sons who later married her farmhand, only to have him cause endless contention with her boys and squander away the resources of her farm. By 1692 she was in poor health and bordering on dementia; she too died in jail within the year.

The third to be accused was Tituba herself, as "a disarming tactic to dispel suspicion" from the Parris household.<sup>8</sup> Tituba's confession helped accuse and incriminate others, but after a few months in jail she testified she'd been beaten by Rev. Parris and told what to say. All this was ignored, and shortly thereafter she was sold for her prison fees to another owner. No record was kept of her husband's fate.

By this time there was momentum built up to carry the masses into mania, so the next accusation was pivotal. Rebecca Nurse was a cheerful, respected elderly woman who, along with her husband, Francis, had raised eight healthy children to adulthood and accumulated a formidable estate

for them in Salem Village just outside Salem proper. Rebecca was a woman to be envied but was also too outspoken to appreciate the politics at play. She and Francis even refrained from church attendance in Salem as a protest against the credence given the afflicted ones, saying they preferred the convenience of celebrating their worship with their neighbors and friends in Salem Village so much closer to home. This no doubt smacked of secession to the Rev. Mr. Parris.

One woman in Parris' party, Ann Putnam, had long grumbled against Rebecca as a negligent midwife. Ann had had several stillbirths and miscarriages before the survival of her daughter, also named Ann, who was then twelve and also a part of Tituba's retinue. Mrs. Putnam reportedly went into hysterics at Rebecca's preliminary examination when Judge Corwin showed an unwillingness to prosecute, but pressure from Judge Hathorne to proceed won out: Rebecca, along with five others, was committed to jail for future trial. This was the beginning of the end. Even one of her original accusers, Jonathan Putnam (brother-in-law of Ann), tried to renege on his testimony; but, in order to save face, the Justices ignored him. Even the governor issued a reprieve, but due to a public outcry he recalled it. Rebecca was eventually condemned and hanged, but her death left an indelible impression on the trials.

Another elderly couple of comfortable means, Giles and Martha Corey, were also accused by the Putnams. Martha, variously recorded as the second or third wife to Giles, was a social deviant in that she greatly enjoyed reading, and more than just the Bible. Giles himself had been known as a "scandalous person in his former time" by the community; but just the year before, on April 26, 1691, at age 72 he had joined the First Church of Salem (Parris', of course) and been received into the brethren.<sup>9</sup> This was no small feat for a man notorious for his cocky, arrogant manner and quick temper. In fact, Giles had been repeatedly involved in lawsuits of all sorts for most of his adult life. He was not a man to be cheated, nor was he a man without enemies.

Martha was accused first, but Giles' accusation followed quickly due to his belligerent, rebellious behavior in the courtroom. (When asked by the judge if he had no fear of being charged, Giles answered quite simply, "I don't know that I've ever spoken that word in my life, sir.")<sup>10</sup> Martha's condemnation and execution proceeded without incident, but Giles Corey formed his own radical strategy. He refused to answer any of the charges. In this way he could not be convicted for he had entered no plea as required by law. This also meant his lands, monies and belongings could not be condemned but would instead pass to his heirs undefiled. Such obdurate behavior could not,

of course, be condoned by any court. The penalty for such was the French 'peine fort et dure', meaning to be pressed under heavy stones to force testimony. Giles endured to his death, uttering but 2 words at the last, "More rocks."<sup>11</sup>

By this time the accusations were spreading outside Salem and certain Boston journalists, most notably Thomas Brattle, were bravely taking up the cause of those persecuted. Within one short year hundreds had been accused and imprisoned, homes and farms were impoverished and neglected, and entire families had fled the area in terror. An entire summer was struck from history as sundry lives were held in suspension.

Then came the sudden and complete revolution when "they went too far ... struck too high."<sup>12</sup> The wife of Salem's most prominent merchant was accused and imprisoned but she, like several before her, managed to escape and flee. Next to be accused was the Rev. Samuel Williard of Boston's Old South Church and on his heels, the mother-in-law of Judge Corwin in Boston. Then in October the afflicted ones fingered Mrs. Hale, the minister's wife in Beverly. This time the community rallied around their 'Rebecca Nurse', convinced of the accusers' perjury. By January, 1693 a new tribunal was in session, reviewing all pending cases. That month 150 prisoners were released under the signature of Governor William Phipps, only to be

assessed all court, jailor and prison fees. Many were reduced to utter poverty.<sup>15</sup>

As for Giles Corey and Rebecca Nurse, both had been excommunicated as was customary for condemned witches, Giles being considered either that or a suicide. But less than twenty years later the descendants of both had this stigma removed. On March 6, 1712, both Nurse and Corey were absolved, although no mention is made of Martha being given the same consideration.<sup>16</sup> Rev. Parris himself remained devoid of natural sympathies saying, "it was a mere difference of opinion."<sup>17</sup> One of the young girls was even quoted as saying it was "only in sport - we must have some sport."<sup>18</sup> Needless to say, no legal action was taken lest undesirable repercussions should befall the court justices themselves. So it was in Salem in the year 1692.



NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ronald Holmes, Witchcraft in History (Secaucus, NJ: The Citadel Press, 1977), p. 75.

<sup>2</sup> Holmes, p. 102.

<sup>3</sup> Holmes, p. 36-37.

<sup>4</sup> Holmes, p. 44.

<sup>5</sup> Holmes, p. 117.

<sup>6</sup> Richard P. Gildrie, Salem, Massachusetts 1626-1693: A Covenant Community (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1975), p. 173.

<sup>7</sup> D.R. Castleton, Salem: A Tale of the Seventeenth Century (Franklin Square, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1874), p. 122.

<sup>8</sup> Castleton, p. 123.

<sup>9</sup> Richard D. Pierce, The Records of the First Church in Salem, Massachusetts 1629-1736 (Salem, MA: Essex Institute, 1974), p. 170.

<sup>10</sup> Castleton, p. 102.

<sup>11</sup> Castleton, p. 102.

<sup>12</sup> Castleton, p. 332.

<sup>13</sup> Castleton, p. 333.

<sup>14</sup> Pierce, p. 219.

<sup>15</sup> Castleton, p. 335.

<sup>16</sup> Castleton, p. 334.

## CHAPTER 2 - GILES COREY, YEOMAN

Of all those tried and executed at Salem in 1692 no doubt Giles Corey was the most colorful character by far. Therefore it's small wonder that he was the first selected for glorification via dramatic art.

Giles Corey, Yeoman by Mary E. Wilkins was written in 1893, 200 healing years after the Salem community's great delusion had passed. The play itself opens with three members of the Corey household knitting, spinning and teasing each other. Nancy Fox is an elderly domestic, over eighty years in age but as self-concerned and ornery as the child, Phoebe Morse, whom she so enjoys taunting with her witch stories and feigned witch screeches. Phoebe is an orphaned niece of Martha Corey's, approximately 5-7 years old judging from her actions, who now lives with the Coreys in comfort and security, exhibiting all the symptoms of being well-tended and willful. The third lady present is Olive, daughter of Giles and Martha Corey, whose rationality and self-discipline provide a strong contrast to Nancy and Phoebe's horseplay.

Ann Hutchins, Olive's neighboring friend, enters looking quite spooked after her short jaunt through the adjoining grove on this blustery evening. Cryptically, Ann implies that Olive knows what just frightened her so, much to Olive's consternation. Ann adds further confusion when

she violently throws off a beautifully embroidered cape Olive gives her as a gift. Ann offers little coherent explanation, only a bit of babble about her lack of sleep due to Olive's parlor light haunting her past 9 p.m. the night before. She also makes reference to the uncanny shine in Olive's eyes that wasn't there before. Nancy, in mischief, teases Olive about those late hours being spent with her beau, Paul Bayley, a former beau of Ann's. It is implied that Olive's responsiveness to Paul's attentions contrasts widely with Ann's chilly demeanor.

Giles Corey then abruptly enters as if chased by banshees, making dark reference to the evils about on such a night. He has attended that day's trial of Sarah Good and Sarah Osborn in town and is deeply troubled that his cat and ox have behaved strangely that same day. His own wife, he remarks flippily, cares not about the trials and hasn't even the sense to stay at home tonight. He is perturbed to learn that she is out on an errand and hasn't returned even after dark.

Then in breezes Martha, at peace and unconcerned, in striking contrast to those present. She listens a bit to the others, then proffers logical explanations for each incident mentioned. Martha is a rational woman whose lack of faith in the witch trials baffles her poor husband. Frustrated, Giles mumbles a feeble threat as he retreats to bed, adding that Martha never did like the cat anyway.

Next the handsome Paul Bayley arrives, prompting the troubled Ann to beg leave. With hesitant chivalry Paul offers to accompany her past the grove; but Martha quickly volunteers, saying she needs a pattern from Ann's mother. In obvious endorsement of Paul and amid audible protests, Martha shoos a petulant Nancy and a pouting Phoebe off to bed. Alone, Paul and Olive speak of their love and plans together for the future. Paul has that day purchased land for a home but must leave for a week in Boston on business. Olive then pragmatically curtails his wooing and shuffles him off, but not without a loving farewell.

The next act finds Ann's mother, the Widow Hutchins, turning the embroidered cape over to Reverend Parris and Judge Hathorne as evidence of witchcraft. Ann has been confined to her bed, tortured by fever, nightmares and intermittent fits of hysterical screaming. Aroused by the screams, others come to inquire or help, one of whom is Giles Corey. Agitated as always, Giles resolves to aid her however he can, to wipe out this menace that so tortures innocents like Ann. Guileless and gullible, Giles answers the others' questions carelessly without sensing the ominous direction they are leading. The trap is set; Martha and Olive are arrested.

In Act III we find Giles radically changed toward the 'afflicted' young girls. His agitation now is with the rampant stupidity in the meeting house, that anyone could

entertain the thought that Martha or Olive is a witch. Yet he hears his own words twisted and misconstrued, and those of Phoebe and Nancy as well. Martha quickly accepts the futility of disproving an invisible crime, but she flares again with passion when her daughter is brought in as the accused. With the potent eloquence of sincerity, Martha alternately pleads with and then threatens Olive's former friends. As her grand coup de grace she adopts the label 'witch' as her own and promises vengeance should Olive be harmed. This weakens Olive's accusers, so she is set free, while Martha is declared a self-confessed witch to be remanded for execution. This in turn infuriates Giles who then wages his own frontal attack on the plaintiffs and judges alike, only to be accused of witchcraft himself.

In Act IV Paul returns to find the Corey household wasting and Olive bordering on a breakdown, still repeating those nightmarish accusations. Paul gently chides her for tarnishing her mother's reputation as a goodly housewife and parent. He suggests that Olive can be living proof that her mother is no witch, thereby restoring Olive to a purpose. Lastly he tells her of her father's rumored strategy to stand mute at his trial to show his scorn and to save his property from attainder. Paul then leaves to plead with the governor for a pardon.

By Act V Martha has been dead one month, and Giles is just waking from a dream of her when Paul comes with the

disappointing news, once again, from the governor. Paul tries desperately to dissuade Giles from his chosen path but Giles holds to the image of Martha on the gallows and stands resolute. Even Olive's sudden appearance to plead with him to yet hope for acquittal cannot sway him. Giles stalwartly resists their pleas and even exacts their promise to marry in three weeks and carry on with their lives.

Act VI finds Judge Corwin and his fellow judges in controversy over the gruesome ordeal occurring in the field nearby. Corwin hadn't the stomach to watch Giles' punishment so the men have moved their debate to the neighboring field. Now Paul and Olive are approaching, just newly wed since this is three weeks, to the day, after their promise. It is Olive's determination that she should be near her father, but Paul is even now attempting to sway her resolve. In her anguish she states that she does not love Paul and cannot love any man but her father. Paul takes no offense but only answers quietly that he understands her loyalty. Olive then cries with pain and self-hatred for feeling such pleasure on this particular day of her wedding and her father's execution. Before she can go to her father's side, a message comes to the judges that Giles has died without pleading. Giles has won.

Giles Corey, Yeoman was written as a heroic saga to emblazon Giles Corey as representing the power of the one

against the many. Ms. Wilkins has kept the essence of the true story, adding her own ingredients for her tailored interpretation of Giles' motivation. In a format imitative of Shakespeare she has interspersed comic relief scenes among those of the most intense drama. Nancy Fox and Phoebe Morse are her invented tools for these intermittent respites when they practice their hoodoo rituals to wreak revenge for any trivial slights they might have suffered that day. Phoebe dwells most on these imagined persecutions, so Nancy must remind her that as witches they can retaliate without fear. This foolish attitude provides dark irony while their attempts at stealth are comically clumsy since Nancy's rheumatism handicaps their hiding quickly. Even in the family's darkest hour the senile, selfish Nancy manages to whine repeatedly about the scarcity of sweet cakes and hard cider allowed her. This contrast to the main dark plot is masterful, the best feature of the play.

Olive Corey is also an invention of Ms. Wilkins', requiring Martha Corey to be far younger than Giles' 80 years to have a daughter just approaching marriageability. But the author uses Olive to great advantage to illustrate rather than narrate Giles' personal reasons for preserving his estate. Creating a full household of dependents gives Giles an understandable motivation for his self-sacrifice, although in truth the Coreys' children

were all raised and married by 1692. Still, in this play the character Olive functions beautifully as the cherished one to be protected. She is also the damsel in distress and fuel for the undercurrent love story with its semi-happy, bittersweet ending.

Changing Martha's age was also a wise decision since it provides a more believable basis for her impassioned defense of Olive at the trial, although the fact that Martha goes unscathed in that scene could be viewed as a major flaw in this play. In reality Martha was Giles' age but that would not suit this play where it is Nancy who is the female of eighty years, played for all the standard humor to be derived from the aged's infirmities, eccentricities and senility. Though Giles is also eighty, the author avoids these stereotypical characteristics by endowing him with the irrepressible energy of an irascible old goat. chooses to counter these prejudices by endowing Giles with the energy of an irascible old goat. For Giles, Martha and Nancy to be the same age would have made the writer's job of character contrast tougher, so this choice was surely meant to provide variety among the personalities and their motivations. No mention is made of Martha being Giles' second/third wife either, since accuracy in this play is really quite secondary.

The Widow Hutchins is no doubt modelled after Ann Putnam in the actual story whose only daughter, Ann, was



part of the 'crying out'. Making Mrs. Hutchins a widow was a deft stroke of caricature, facilitating the preconception that Ann would be maladjusted and clumsy in male-female relationships and even that the widow would be envious of Martha's security.

But a caricature is not a character, so herein lies this play's limitations. Effective though it may be in its inspirational value, this play hasn't the depth of characterization to make it a classic. The greatest change in our protagonist happens between Acts II and III without the audience even witnessing it, and therefore Martha's transformation from quiet acceptance of her fate to sudden fury as a mama lion becomes problematically climactic. Shifting such dramatic focus to Martha, even temporarily, is far too weighty; the play is thrown off balance.

It is this unfortunate lack of balance that especially mars this play of absolutes. Ms. Wilkins has given absolutely no redeeming virtues to the Hutchins nor to any other of her backdrop characters, so only the Coreys have received any fleshing out. That makes it all the more crucial that Martha and Giles should be crafted to perfection, but such is not the case.

Still, Ms. Wilkins does do a decent job of depicting Giles Corey as mulish but lovable, courageous but unenlightened, and confused if not bumbling. The Corey household as a whole is portrayed as an easily likable

lot. The fabricated family ties provide all the necessary empathy for the audience to grieve deeply with Olive and her new husband at the play's end. This is a play of good moments without enough thorough character depth. Ms. Wilkins' choices would have been better warranted if they had resulted in establishing greater credibility in all her characters' development. This play compares favorably to those that follow, as we shall see, but its author did not carry through far enough for honors.

### CHAPTER 3 - MARGARET OF SALEM

In Margaret of Salem, written by Rita Benton in 1924, we find our first glorified her (Greek feminine for hero) Margaret Scott, in a role counterpart to Giles Corey in the previous play. Margaret is fabricated as a first cousin of Elizabeth Hubbard (one of the afflicted girls in history) and likewise the orphaned niece of Dr. Griggs, Elizabeth's guardian also. Still in her teens, Margaret has just been sent to live with the doctor and her cousin in the harsh and repressive covenant community of Salem. It is a joyless setting, as Margaret soon discovers.

To Ms. Benton's credit, Act I begins where it all began in history, in the Parris household, the Reverend Parris being in heated debate with Rebecca Nurse and her sister Mary Easty over the arrests of the Goodwives Good and Osburn. The debate ends at a standoff, on a more than sour note, which Rev. Parris takes no pains to conceal in front of his dependents and their several guests. When he has safely stomped from the room, the conversation resumes. Betty Parris pleads with Tituba, their West Indian domestic, to entertain them with her tricks and magic. Betty is but a wisp of a nine-year-old while her cousin, Abigail Williams, is in her teens, as are Abby's friends Anne Putnam and Mary Walcott, who are also present. Mary is the oldest of the girls and longs for the company of her bosom friend and confidante, Elizabeth

Hubbard, who's gone to meet her cousin, Margaret Scott of Rowley. As the girls continue to cajole Tituba into demonstrating her ventriloquism, it is revealed that Miss Hubbard has also perfected this skill and that Mary and Elizabeth deeply resent the ever-recurring adult reproof in this community.

At this point Elizabeth and Margaret are seen arriving and so the girls decide to play a witch-crying ruse to initiate Margaret. Disconcerted at first by their addressing her as a witch, Margaret then falls in with the pretense and even indulges in a bit of forbidden frolic by teaching them a song and dance. It all seems to be harmless fun until Dr. Griggs enters with the Reverend to examine Betty, whose fits of tantrum, temper and agitation lately have worried her rather into suspecting bewitchment. Elizabeth, aided by her cohorts, seizes the opportunity to accuse Rebecca Nurse, for whom she harbors nothing but venom since Rebecca spoke ill of her to the eligible and illustrious Robert Calef of Boston. Elizabeth is out to avenge this imagined loss of a most desirable suitor. Margaret then senses the intrinsic danger in an outsider speaking up. She holds back, but her self-disgust grows as a cancer.

Act II opens with a view of Cotton Mather in pompous practice of his Sunday sermon. He is interrupted by Dr. Griggs who entreats him to examine his two wards, Elizabeth and Margaret, for symptoms of bewitchment. His

limited affection for the feminine gender surfaces in his comment on their goodness: "in so far as a woman may be righteous."<sup>1</sup>

Left alone with Mather Elizabeth employs histrionics to the hilt, a most effective pander to Mather's disproportionate ego. Margaret, being far too reasonable for such coquettishness, pleads to be sent back to Rowley. Mather lectures her on the futility of flight from the devil, prompting Margaret's foreshadowing query, "And must one suffer then for doing good?"<sup>2</sup>

Robert Calef then appears, bearing a petition for the life of Rebecca Nurse and appealing to Mr. Mather to pledge his support for this godly woman. Calef sees straight through Elizabeth's wiles since he's experienced the same before. But no amount of reasoning can penetrate Cotton Mather's blinders. Margaret, however, boldly pens her name, relieved to have acted decisively if minimally. Mather is aghast at this and even more so at Margaret's assertion of her disbelief in any powers of darkness. "If there be no devil, there is no God," he states.<sup>3</sup> Herein lies the crux of the problem, the immanent dichotomy, the inherent theme.

Calef, on the other hand, is instantly enamoured with Margaret's courage and begs to see her again, whereupon she answers portentously, "the only free spot in Salem is the graveyard."<sup>4</sup> They agree to meet there at sunset in three days.

Act III presents a different Margaret, lying prone on the graveyard soil but immediately upright at the sound of someone approaching. It is Robert Calef come again as he has several times before, but Margaret is too obsessed with self-blame to bask in their mutual affections. Today Rebecca Nurse and four others were hanged; the bells are tolling still. Margaret is unable to shake a feeling of responsibility for never having strength enough to defy Elizabeth's group in open confrontation. She spoke in Rebecca's favor but once; now her spirit seems broken, burdened with despair. Calef seems nearly oblivious to her intensity but offers such flighty and impractical solutions as absconding to Boston or the frontiers. Margaret's fear now transmutes itself to a selfless need to protect Calef from association with her. It is obvious (to all but Calef) that she already knows she's an imminent victim and wishes only to protect her beloved from a similar fate. Upon hearing others approach, and at Margaret's insistence, Calef takes leave of her for a week to travel on business to Boston and beyond.

Elizabeth and her cronies now emerge to taunt Margaret with an ultimatum. She can rejoin their ranks by accusing Calef as her bewitcher or she can be accused herself. Margaret refuses to identify Calef as having been her companion in the dark and defies Elizabeth with vehemence. Then in comes a search party, with Dr. Griggs as head, to arrest Margaret for trial as a witch. Cold as

the grave, Griggs also offers Margaret a chance to swear against Calef. When she refuses to speak, he callously observes that she has "so fallen under Robert Calef's influence, it is meet that thy body suffer."<sup>2</sup>

In Act IV Ms. Benton employs a most interesting feature. She discards the predictable court scene, substituting a crowd of constables, cronies and gossips in an overflow outside the court doors. This very artfully presents a multitude of viewpoints and illustrates the facility with which words can be interpreted to suit any fancy. Sympathy, antipathy and apathy abound, but one thing is evident: there is no common law in these uncommon times. Justice has now become a nebulous matter.

Margaret, however, has become quite set in her resolve before the judges. She refuses to speak other than to state her innocence and will answer no questions pertinent to her clandestine companion's identity.

Calef returns at this point but is allowed no access; Margaret is already condemned, so no defense is admissible. Elizabeth can't resist this chance to gloat and even goes so far as to predict that Calef's trial will follow shortly. With a deliberate laugh Calef retorts, "Try it, mistress," and Elizabeth backs away.<sup>3</sup>

Margaret is then led from the courtroom just as Calef is trying to affirm that he was Margaret's associate in the graveyard, not the devil. Elizabeth is overjoyed at this; she'd already planted the seeds of suspicion before

his arrival and now he was confirming her story. But his confession is totally negated, if not upstaged, as Margaret goes wild in her own 'confession' and denial of his claim. In a manner ala Martha Corey in the previous play, Margaret accepts a witch's fate and threatens directly those 'afflicted' who accuse and those judges who condemn. With cryptic eloquence she states that they could see the devil in the moon or the flowers, in a crone or a maiden, but she alone knew the devil in that graveyard. Now a self-confessed witch, she is trundled off to the gibbet.

The last act opens with a crowd scene as all gather for the day's executions. Again the voices of the crowd paint contrasting attitudes, i.e., easy consciences amid questioning minds. The crowd grows increasingly divided as Cotton Mather and Robert Calef exchange words, and one faction even boldly shouts that enough have suffered already, with eleven previously hanged. Mather is then called away to tend a problem up ahead so Calef is left with Margaret and the crowd.

As the bells begin to toll for another victim's end, Margaret weeps in fear of dying with such hatred in her heart. She can find no peace with God now that they've "forced me into league with the devil." Hearing Margaret speak of God, an old crone opines aloud that a witch cannot pray so how can she? Calef grasps at this and urges the crowd to test Margaret with a prayer, the Lord's



Prayer. The vocal majority agrees: so amid a perfect hush, Margaret starts to pray. But her sincerity overpowers her at the line concerning the forgiveness of others. She alters the prayer to plead for nothing more than the power to forgive, but the sensationalist crowd hears only the disruption in the prayer and immediately roots for her hanging. Margaret then softens, begs Calef to finish the prayer, and goes on to her death as Calef sinks to his knees and recites the Lord's Prayer in its entirety, while the crowd acclaims 'Amen'.

This play sustains a dark and somber tone with no comic element to alleviate its heavy mood, just as Margaret's uncle, Dr. Griggs, displays no humor to freshen his dark nature. Therefore, Margaret of Salem is quite effective as a mood piece depicting that joyless environment the Puritans so diligently maintained.

Far more important to Ms. Benton is that her message be clear: the only forces of darkness are fear, hatred and ignorance, and this she stresses heavily. Margaret chooses to die rather than continue a life that has lost its spiritual light. To her such a life would be worse than hanging. Rita Benton gives us a hero who opts to preserve her sincerity, her soul.

As for historical value, Ms. Benton can only be applauded for starting at the beginning, albeit without the adults involved in Tituba's entourage, and with the afflicted girls so conveniently homogenized in age. This

latter point proves to be a functional choice providing as it does the preconceived notion that gossipy teens can be bratty, catty and competitive without limits. (The one deviant, little Betty Parris, is sent packing off to stay with relatives in the very first act.) With the girls so close to a marriageable age, Elizabeth's motivation, tactics and vengeful manipulations ring true and work well, although there's an undying curiosity to know the story of that 'simple folly' of which Rebecca Nurse supposedly spread such news. Benton's use of Rebecca Nurse in her story lends a nice touch: it sets up the perfect time frame for the disparity in the crowds.

But Benton has serious problems in building her characters, none of whom bear any historical authenticity. Margaret is a bit of fiction possibly derived from Giles Corey's strength and Martha Corey's passion in Giles Corey, Yeoman. She is refreshingly admirable for a feminine character but not well-defined enough that we might know her. This drama would be far more interesting if we could know what broke her between Acts II and III, reducing her to such a fearful, despairing creature. Margaret also is a bit sketchy, although a dynamic actress could feasibly make it work. Depending on the actress, the climax outside the courtroom could be this play's finest moment or its weakest link.

Then there is Calef, the worldly businessman who exhibits unbelievable naivete in his passionate remarks

and subsequent departure. Calef can be interpreted as a model of Thomas Brattle or Lynn Moody, two merchant-journalists who publicly opposed and defeated Cotton Mather's group. But his character is too incomplete to be flattering. When he openly dares Elizabeth in Act IV, it seems a showdown is inevitable. But Elizabeth simply backs off, when only moments before she had the audacity to declare the governor's permit in Calef's hand a devil's forgery! She'd even gone so far as to rip and shred it. Yet we are to believe Calef's personal power equals hers and keeps him safe, when we've been given no justifiable reason. If he were truly a formidable opponent, why would he not press for Margaret's release and call Elizabeth's bluff? Calef is a character with missing pieces.

The passionate Lord's Prayer to conclude the play may be a brilliant piece of irony or the piece de faux pas. The prayer itself is problematic; in Margaret's hands it begins as a potentially sensational dramatic device but when passed on to Calef it degenerates into a very trite tool for a saccharin ending without any purpose. We've no clue in the dialogue as to why Margaret softens to find forgiveness in her heart. Perhaps we're to assume she feels pity for the bleating herd surrounding her; the poor, dumb animals don't know sincerity from rote. Benton fails to provide any substantial explanation, choosing instead to just tie it all up with a trite Hollywood ending.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Rita Benton, "Margaret of Salem" in Franklin and Other Plays (New York: The Writers Publishing Co., Inc., 1924), p. 192.

<sup>2</sup> Benton, p. 195.

<sup>3</sup> Benton, p. 199.

<sup>4</sup> Benton, p. 201.

<sup>5</sup> Benton, p. 210.

<sup>6</sup> Benton, p. 218.

<sup>7</sup> Benton, p. 225.

#### CHAPTER 4 - THE WITCH

The Witch, written in 1943 by Flora Louise Hunn, is of such lighter content and construction than our two preceding plays. One might even liken it to the Perils of Pauline genre. In it we find the stereotypical rich villain, Robert Witherspoon, lusting after the helpless widow's daughter, Patience Whiting. Upon the scene comes the hero, Richard Richardson, naively seeking employment with the recently deceased Mr. Whiting, whom he describes as "no kin of mine, yet kinsman to my kinsmen."<sup>1</sup>

The play opens with Patience and her Mother, Mistress Whiting, reminiscing about England and hoping their permits arrive soon for their passages back. It is June, and they have struggled to eke out their living doing seamstress work and candlemaking for the governor since the death of Mr. Whiting the winter before. Their financial insecurity has not escaped the notice of Robert Witherspoon, a pompous old goat with a penchant for young wives. Witherspoon is powerfully rich, a widower with a house second only to the governor's mansion in their fair city of Boston; he gloats openly about the proper training of a woman to serve him as a wife. Though he is of Mrs. Whiting's generation, his deceased wife was only 22 and had borne him three sons in four years, another feat to his glory in his estimation. Judith, the deceased, is said

to have fallen deathly ill due to a lack of bedrest following her last delivery. She has been dead only three months, but already Witherspoon has set his sights on Patience as her replacement.

Then Richard Richardson arrives, and his mutual attraction with Patience is instantly evident. The widow explains she can offer him no gainful employment, only bed and board, so she refers him on to her late husband's friend, Governor Phipps, and off he goes.

Witherspoon returns, having noted this handsome young man's visit to the Whitings. He repeats his plans for Patience and forbids further contact with Richard. With audacious pleasure, however, the ladies welcome their new boarder upon his return. He has gotten a job and now promises all his spare energies to his newly found family.

In Act II Witherspoon presses more forcibly and demands Patience's hand in three weeks instead of the three months he'd mentioned earlier. He flatly states that the banns will be announced on the coming Sabbath whether Patience approves or not; her will can be broken just as Judith's was. While Mistress Whiting continues to pursue a graceful mode of refusing, Patience (a misnomer surely) becomes openly insulting. This prompts Witherspoon to threaten her with the prospect of Gallows Hill, "For I do truly think myself bewitched, that I should even think of wedding thee."=

Witherspoon then attempts to convince others of the community that he is a victim of Patience's black arts. His emotional outbursts and pained expressions inspire a town gossip to observe that the fair Miss Whiting has always been "much too pink and white...red-lipped...blue-eyed and slender-waisted to be a decent, plain God-fearing lass."<sup>5</sup> The wheels are set in motion.

Patience and her mother now visit the governor to appeal for his intercession: they are told these things must run their course. Gov. Phipps declares such a matter to be out of his hands but assures them that the truth will out. Still, Phipps does summon Witherspoon for an explanation. Much to his credit, the governor remarks that these symptoms of obsession and insomnia that Witherspoon describes could be viewed as thwarted passion in a younger man. With potent authority Phipps warns Witherspoon he'd best be able to prove this charge of witchcraft or suffer grim consequences.

Patience is then arrested and tried with neither her mother nor her beloved Richard at her side. The judges show a definite presumption of her guilt, finding the idea of Witherspoon's marriage proposal both ludicrous and preposterous. Patience is expected to counter with evidence proving her innocence, but for such an invisible crime there is, of course, none. As she is cautioned about the punishment for standing mute, Witherspoon bites his

arm viciously but covertly, then yowls with pain and proffers the marks as evidence. Patience continues to plead innocence, but she is sentenced to hang nonetheless.

The final act finds Patience being brought from her cell for her execution. After months of torture she has still refused to confess, and now she welcomes the release her death offers. Her speech is moving, as are the menacing whispers in the crowd of suspicions now turning toward her mother.

But just as the cart of prisoners starts rolling to the gallows, a messenger boy comes racing down the road demanding they stop by order of Gov. Phipps. He then tells of the incredible fight he has just witnessed and how Richard has beaten a confession out of Robert Witherspoon. At that moment Richard arrives with the infamous signed confession and a governor's pardon for all the prisoners to ensure that no other innocent life could be taken in error. This incites the crowd to action, and off they go to tar and feather the pummeled remains of Mr. Witherspoon. Overcome with relief and gratitude, Patience ends the play saying, "If Richard had not come I should have died."<sup>4</sup>

Overall this play suffers from the characteristic predictability of a melodrama, so it seems hardly fair to compare it in any way to its predecessors. It is a play with no perceptible purpose but to entertain, which it



does. It makes no attempt to represent any complexities in its characters; that would only be superfluous to its simplistic plot. Ms. Hunn chooses instead to be only an historical name-dropper, using Corwin as Sheriff, Stoughton as Chief Justice, and Parris as the minister at the trial. All are merely names, not characters. The Witch avoids really touching history at all except to utilize Governor Phipps' mass reprieve as its happy ending, when, in truth, even that had tragic side effects.

To Ms. Hunn's credit, however, is her choice of location as Boston versus Salem, thereby creating numerous direct links to Gov. Phipps. It was an interesting idea to have a friendship motivate the mass pardoning, but the friendship portrayed is as lacking in depth as the stereotyped characters. Gov. Phipps sounds as lame as Pontius Pilate exonerating himself from the crucifixion, when he speaks with the Whiting ladies. Then too, the trial seems farcically one-sided with Patience abused and defenseless at the author's convenience. It is unfathomable that the governor would not at least have cautioned the judges to assure Patience fair treatment. Yet, Mistress Whiting and Richard are barred from the court, leaving Patience's word against Witherspoon's.

Ms. Hunn is guilty of repeated contrivances in this play and should be scolded for this were it not the melodrama it is. It is decidedly contrived that when

Witherspoon makes his oppressive visits to the Whiting garden at the start of the play, there are no passersby. Yet when he decides to rant and rave over his bewitchment, two elderly women are conveniently there to witness.

Using the convention of a closed curtain to indicate the passage of time also becomes laughable with its too frequent use. Richard's returning from the governor with a job after less than two pages of dialogue and chancing to encounter Witherspoon leaving the Whitings becomes blatantly comical.

Another strained device is the dramatic reading to Patience of the detailed procedure for extracting her plea via 'peine forte et dure' should she choose to stand mute. It is a gory description straight from the Giles Corey story, but it serves no purpose here.

The ending to this play is another quick-fix contrivance. Although Ms. Hunn avoids the last-minute rescue (they're not even to the gibbet yet), the slapdash summation of the action and Patience's simpering last line are more befitting a Pearl Pureheart episode than such a dark, historical theme. In short, only the lighthearted can appreciate the value of this play; the rest of us are prone to criticize its content as shallow.

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NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Flora Louise Hunn, The Witch (New Haven, CT: privately printed, 1943), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Hunn, p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> Hunn, p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> Hunn, p. 40.

## CHAPTER 5 - TITUBA'S CHILDREN

The next play, Tituba's Children by William Carlos Williams, was commissioned to be written in 1948 in collaboration with Thomas Canning of the Eastman School of Music for the Gratwick touring opera company. The company declined to use it even before its completion in 1950 saying, "it had a savage bite ... not the gay kind of satire that we were after."<sup>1</sup> And savage it is, using the more sensational approach of progressive images of the Salem trials juxtaposed against the modern McCarthy investigations, with no attempt made at standardized plots/subplots. Mood music and interpretive dance are also incorporated for a thorough subliminal, theatrical experience.

A musical prelude of a childish theme played in a shrill and frightening manner sets the mood before the play begins. Williams then presents Abigail Williams and Betty Parris, at the historically accurate ages of 11 and 9 respectively, whining like pampered pets and overheard by the ragtag beggar, Sarah Good. The girls were longing for Tituba's entertaining stories of witches and bogeymen, forbidden though they be. Abigail has even coerced Tituba into baking a special cake meant to reveal whether there are witches locally. Recent bratty behavior in the children has given rise to speculative rumors about witchcraft, and the children find it all quite

titillating, even heady. So when Sarah Good now forgets her place and offends the girls with sarcastic comments, it follows easily that she is the first accused.

Tituba is here presented as a kindly unfortunate longing to return to her homeland of sun away from "this cold weather and these hard people ... and work, work, work."<sup>3</sup> It's a touching picture when Tituba cradles the little blond Betty and calls her a golden baby who's much too young to understand that Abigail is already one of the hardest of all. However, it's not Abigail but Mercy Lewis who so simply states their life's lament. "They torture us because they find us young."<sup>4</sup>

With an absurdist lack of transition we find ourselves transported to a modern cocktail lounge in Washington, D.C. on Halloween where Stella, a club hostess, is producing a skit for the club members. The skit is on the Salem witchcraft trials and a certain customer, Mac, finds that portentously ironic. He has been summoned for questioning on his reputed un-American activities, a matter on which he comments. "The very vagueness of the charges makes it suicide for me to answer them."<sup>4</sup> Mac is getting seriously inebriated and shows no sign of heading home although his pregnant wife has called the club five times. It's obvious he prefers Stella's company despite his domestic responsibilities, but the stalwart Stella affectionately shoves him homeward.

The next scene shows the club that evening with various senators, lobbyists, officials and newspapermen milling about the floorshow space and gossiping about young Mac in his absence. The floorshow then commences with the headwaiter, Tony Proposito, emceeing in his broken English. With a chorus of waitresses and Stella as narrator, there proceeds a succession of dramatized vignettes from the trials of Sarah Cloyce, Sarah Good, Elizabeth and John Proctor and Giles Cory. As Mac is seen entering the club, the chorus does a wild heckling number around Stella as Sarah Good, and the show is over. Stella rushes to warmly greet the refreshed and exuberant Mac, who proudly announces the premature arrival of twin sons that afternoon. Suddenly there's a buzz and scurry among the columnists about a State Department official found in a swanky club with a blond hostess while his wife's in the hospital having twins. Act I then closes.

Act II begins with a 'skit' approaching the surreal. The set pieces are those used in the club's floorshow, but no feature of the club is present. Passages are read in god-like voice-overs from Starkey's The Devil in Massachusetts and Upham's Salem Witchcraft. At the same time, a succession of those accused in 1692 approach the pulpit: some sarcastic, others deriant and even some gentle. All appear unafraid, self-assured in their innocence, all the more ironic to the audience.

The next scene brings the same accused before a more elaborate court with the justice's bench raised, looming formidably over the defendants with ominous clout. Amid the various testimonies and children's accusations, the court gradually transforms, peopled now with principals from the D.C. club comprising half the crowd. Puritans the rest. With Giles Cory's last words heard from offstage as a balladeer elucidates in song, Mac takes the spotlight. He stands mute as Senator Yokell and his committee badger him with leading questions. The musical chorus now adopts a Greek style of strophe/antistrophe to muse on the repetition of history and the morality of our progress.

Stella then takes the stand to face a barrage of foundless accusations borne of petty gossip concerning her relationship with Mac. When Stella professes to be a good Catholic, a Puritan jumps up to shout, "A papist! An idolator!"<sup>20</sup> but he is suppressed as inappropriate and removed from the stage. The times and the labels have changed; the system has not.

The situation quickly escalates until Stella is finally accused of wishing to death Mac's twin sons. This is news to Stella: she faints from the shock of the revelation. Mac then becomes instantly verbal, only now he's facing a Salem judge, Reverend Noyes, questioning his familiarity with Russian people. In livid rage Noyes falls into a seizure, choking grotesquely on his own blood in

dramatic enactment of Sarah Good's legendary curse. Senator Yokell then replaces Noyes again and the play within the play never stops but compounds. Mac's selective silence results in indictment for contempt, while being artistically likened to Giles Cory's belligerent triumph.

Using choral recitations of Salem history as background and fill, Williams underscores this painful comparison with the already sentenced Mac despairingly speaking of liberalism as a simple belief that "all children should be fed."<sup>6</sup> The play then closes musically, as it started, but this time it's the "Ballad of Giles Corey" sung simply and solo as the session disbands and the set darkens.

Williams makes no alteration of history for his play, but rather enfolds it as the leavening for his own tasty tidbits of caricature: a sexist columnist in lust for Stella, Senators Gasser and Pipeline of the oilmen's raction, the bigoted Senator Yokell whose major contribution is casting aspersions on other people's surnames and Senator Wise who embodies the concept of the misnomer.

The near-Brechtian musical format provides a perfect medium for double-edged commentary and exposition without verbosity. Also, using gleeful dancing demons in staged interaction with Abigail in Scene 1 and with power figures in Act II was a brilliant stroke of symbolism.



This play masterfully enhances the most positive and powerful connotations remaining to the word 'theatrical'. Its integration of historic detail with creative drama flexes the time continuum, applying the past to the present so that what was actual becomes allegorical. Salem becomes a modern metaphor. William Carlos Williams illustrates that "whatever it is, it's in themselves, and me, in all of us."<sup>7</sup>

Tituba's Children is not a conventional play but its use of conventions would certainly be worthy of further exploration. The character-revealing excerpts of conversations in the crowd scenes, the positing of the afflicted children as peers to sniping columnists and the use of the immigrant headwaiter for simplified, potent interjections are all insignia of a master. Less is more in Williams' hands. His use of the chorus runs from Las Vegas style to classic Greek drama while his use of voice-overs epitomizes 'deus ex machina', God manufactured. All these combine to make this an experience, not a mere play.

Although this play has never, to my knowledge, seen performance, I've chosen to include it in this paper. To ignore it would only compound that neglect.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> William Carlos Williams. "Tituba's Children" in Many Loves and Other Plays (Norfolk, CT: New Directions Publishing, 1961), p. 435.

<sup>2</sup> Williams, p. 235-6.

<sup>3</sup> Williams, p. 240.

<sup>4</sup> Williams, p. 243.

<sup>5</sup> Williams, p. 293.

<sup>6</sup> Williams, p. 297.

<sup>7</sup> Lyon Phelps. The Gospel Witch (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1955), p. 22.

## CHAPTER 6 - THE GOSPEL WITCH

This play was not published until 1955 (after the success of The Crucible), although it saw its first performance in 1952. The Gospel Witch by Lyon Phelps is a curious treatment of the Salem theme starting in a format akin to Thornton Wilder's Our Town. The play's narrator introduces himself as a "clerk that year for a merchant in Boston named Brattle."<sup>1</sup> His introduction sets an emotional tone combining awe, guilt and regret, then he takes his leave. He reappears again much later, popping in and out of the play, often as a voice of conscience in crowd scenes and courtrooms, only to be removed or squelched.

The play itself begins with Abigail Parris and Ann Putnam dressing cobs as dolls and gossiping like old hens about the recent arrests for witchcraft and the confession of the Parris' slave, Tituba. Ann also voices her conviction that Martha Corey is tormenting Mrs. Putnam, Ann's frail, bedridden mother. Abigail comments she has heard tales of Mr. Putnam having once been an ardent beau of Martha's, which makes Ann livid. Mr. Putnam then enters, along with a neighbor, Ezekiel Cheever. Both are aghast at the 'hoodoo' dolls Tituba had originally designed and the display of tempers as well.

Abby is promptly sent home to her uncle, the Reverend Parris, while Ann feigns a shuddering trance as if

possessed. Eager to incriminate Martha Corey, Ann describes her as her possessor but fails to identify Martha's apparel when asked by Mr. Cheever. Instead, Ann wails that she's blinded and swoons into a faint. Ironically, Cheever and Putnam were already en route to question Martha on behalf of the church, due to various suspicions already voiced against her. Now this has added fuel to Tom Putnam's flames.

Scene 2 presents Giles and Martha Corey bantering domestically with Giles ever easy to rile and Martha quite wise and accepting, but assertive nonetheless. Their extended interplay covers sundry topics: a two-faced, opportunistic son-in-law from Giles' first marriage; the three witches jailed in the village, and the dangers of hanging back from deeper involvement with the church at such a dramatic time. Giles warns Martha that even now there's talk of a most devout lady being under suspicion. Martha responds with a sad but knowing look and quietly says a prayer.

Giles then leaves, frustrated as always that he is unable to sway Martha's opinions or even understand them. Martha takes this opportunity to cheer herself a bit by singing and donning a few items of finery from an old chest. It is in this attire, with gaily colored ribbons in her hair, that Martha greets the unexpected Cheever and Putnam. In her straightforward way, Martha guesses their

purpose and predicts her major accusers but then asks if her current state of dress had been described, considering its oddness. Putnam and Cheever are shocked by her seemingly mystic knowledge, but then Tom accuses her of trickery, knowing as she must of Ann's temporary blindness. Martha then vents her exasperation. "Do you presume to turn over souls for lice as you'd leaf a cabbage?"<sup>2</sup> At this the men leave.

Scene 3 finds Giles desperately calling for Martha upon returning to their darkened home. Thinking she has already been taken for questioning, he is overjoyed to discover her sitting in the dark, musing on the power of fear. Giles notes the gay ribbons, inquiring whether the special attire is setting for a certain special announcement; but Martha smooths her skirt tightly across her flat tummy and laughingly says no. In a lovely moment of intimacy she tells Giles the tale of her relationship with Tom Putnam and his inability to love a woman of her strength and complexity. Giles then admits to having been questioned about Martha's beliefs on witchcraft; now he fears his answers were too ambiguous. Martha sighs with resignation but reassures Giles that her own innocence will clear her in the examination.

Scene 4 depicts Martha's hearing, with the 'Man from Boston' (narrator) as a rational voice amid the crowd of hysterics. Giles is also present but in a belligerent,

contrary and uncooperative mood. Everything he says or has said appears turned against poor Martha; she is soon cognizant of this fact, lamenting, "Ye are all against me and I cannot help it!"<sup>20</sup> Realizing her inevitable sentence, Martha begs to be given leave to go to prayer, but this is repeatedly denied.

Scene 5 returns to the Putnam home where Tom is at his daughter's bedside along with their flirtatious domestic, Mercy Lewis. Mercy appears to be almost routine in her suggestive offers of comfort to Tom and advocates cures Tituba once concocted. All this Putnam declines so the restless Mercy returns to the kitchen, leaving Tom to muse on another time with a younger Martha and the vitality they'd known. Ann then pretends to wake, asking if Martha Corey tortures him too. She then reigns another trance, this time adopting the persona of Joe Goodell, a man Giles Corey had been accused and acquitted of murdering. 'Goodell' affirms his death was murder and foretells Giles' uneasy death as a fitting retribution. Ann then resumes her whining for more candles and her father's constant presence to guard against the Corey witches.

In Scene 6 we find Giles Corey appraising his own father's masonry in the Ipswich jail, estimating what number of stones his body could bear. Due to the dangers of confining a witch and a wizard in close proximity,

Martha is held in Salem jail so the hinted possibility of news about Martha persuades Giles to speak with his jailor, Peter Bunt. Judge Hathorne then arrives to try privately to pump a confession from Giles, offering him merciful consideration in exchange for his cooperation in solidifying the case against Martha. After all, he points out, the frequency of their quarrels and set-tos was well known throughout the community. At this Giles breaks his stony silence to roar, ".don't let me add murder to the wrong I've done her!" Hathorne misinterprets this as a death threat and in pompous cover for his hasty retreat, declares his intent to enforce the dreaded 'peine forte et dure', to press Giles to testify under the weight of great stones. At Hathorne's departure Giles immediately enlists the cooperation of Bunt to produce and deliver his will, wishes, and final correspondence to various intimates. Giles is intent that his predatory son-in-law should show no profit for having colored his testimony against the hapless Martha.

It is in Scene 7 that the Man from Boston is identified when he hands a letter of introduction to Martha's jailor to gain access to her cell. The man is Lynn Moody, a representative of Thomas Brattle, both men of historical significance for their courageous public battle against Cotton Mather and his kind. Impressed, the jailor grants Moody's request; but the sudden arrival of

Rev. Parris and Mr. Cheever necessitates a temporary delay under cover. To Cheever, Martha still gives warm greetings, but her pointed aversion to Parris incites his egotistical pride. Intent on extracting Martha's confession, Parris is taken aback by her sudden admission of guilt, but not for the crimes mentioned. Even more amazing is her claim to equal innocence, but not an innocence that he could understand. Definitively she states, "I'm one you cannot keep in your set kind of community."<sup>5</sup>

Cheever tires of this cat and mouse game, knowing he and Parris have come to inform Martha of the Coreys' excommunications, the end of any hope or communal ties. With sympathy and painful acuity, Cheever takes his leave saying, "God keep you, Martha, pray for us all if you find we're wrong."<sup>6</sup> Martha then dismisses Parris with her summation, ".loving God you lose a love of life, loving life I lose a lack of God."<sup>7</sup> It is then that Moody is admitted, bearing a greatly appreciated last letter from Giles, ending this scene on a bittersweet, endearing note.

In Scene 8 Moody finds an inebriated Bunt guarding the corridor for the duration of Giles' ordeal. The rare but regular moans from within haunt and torture poor Bunt; he curses everything in this living nightmare, saying, "Yes, and damn virtue too, damn everything but courage."<sup>8</sup> Giles soon expires, saying only, "Pile on more rocks!"<sup>9</sup>



Scene 9 finds Putnam again at Ann's bedside, solitary in his misery and musing aloud on how Martha could ever have married such a rustic bungler. This apparently prompts Ann to her nightmare ravings again but this time Putnam questions. "She does this to herself - can that be it?"<sup>10</sup> Cheever then arrives, breathlessly telling of Giles' demise. Bitterly tired, Putnam calls Mercy to guard and quiet Ann, observing that it is, "too late for heavenly peace, but we can have some human silence."<sup>11</sup> As the scene closes Putnam falls to weeping, asking in his anguish, "Who are we hanging? Things unhinge."<sup>12</sup>

The final scene presents Martha's execution with a chorus beginning a hymn sotto voce and building to crescendo as the crowd gathers beneath the gibbet. At Martha's request Judge Hathorne gives her leave to pray, explaining carefully that this can constitute no pardon since sentence has already been passed. Martha then prays expansively, finally praising God for his gift of the birds so that she could hear singing on this occasion. There follows the ominous drumroll of the gallows, and the curtain is closed.

In review there are several petty points of distraction so we'll begin with those. First to appear is the changing of Abigail's surname from Williams to Parris, a matter of convenience perhaps but irritating to an educated reader. The reference to her 'Aunty' Parris seems

even more useless; it seems a careless, versus calculated, move to alter Rev. Parris from being the widower he was. No reason presents itself. Neither is it discernible why the author should insist on Abigail and Ann calling their rustic dolls 'puppets' when the obvious reference is to the archaic term 'poppet' and not to a marionette.

The character of Ann Putnam is a major flaw in this drama. Without even the wisdom or experience of a teenager (the girls being but eleven or twelve), we are to believe Ann knows of her father's old flames and current longings to the point of interpreting Martha Corey as her mother's torment. Ann's strategy seems too sophisticated to be credible without an adult's assistance, especially in the researching and devising of the Goodell murder ruse, but no such mentor is shown. In fact, the whole point of resurrecting the Goodell story is lost since it has no bearing whatever on Giles' trial and appears particularly wasted on Putnam in its second occurrence.

It is also that change of heart in Putnam in Scene 9 that destroys the continuity of his characterization. The author provides no reasonable clue for Putnam's sudden loss of faith in his actions; we've no idea why this fit of Ann's differs from all the others.

On the other hand, the author's fabrication of Tom Putnam as Martha's ex-beau serves him well. Certainly Tom's continual struggles with his fond memories of Martha

in their youth hold far more interest than Martha's flowery, introspective soliloquies on the foibles of society. Tom's longing for Martha's vitality while nursing his bedridden wife, tending his hysterical daughter and fending off his lusty housemaid set his motivation well. It is easily understood why he should be more than willing to believe bewitchment to be his private malady. In reality Tom Putnam and Martha were of two different generations, so this affair has no basis in history but it is one of the few features in this play that is dramatically effective.

As for the Coreys, Mr. Phelps chose to portray them far younger than their seventy-plus years, with Martha still fertile and comely enough to haunt her former beau. The real truth about Martha Corey is that her history is sadly neglected. The published records of the First Church of Salem don't even bother to mention any absolution of her excommunication, perhaps due to the practical aspect that only Giles' name affected the properties. Other works also variously mention her as Giles' second or third wife, while her death is most often treated as having occurred first. Still, ballads and legend have it that she was hanged six days later. On this last point The Gospel Witch may be the only play with accuracy.

Martha as the play's protagonist is depicted as sagacious beyond the norm and morally superior in her

attitude toward the witch trials, saying, "The course is obvious in these matters ... They who hoof it to watch, catch the disease."<sup>17</sup> So Martha remains aloof, to her own sociopolitical destruction. Her summary of Tituba's situation also shows deep comprehension but suffers in its later reflection: "She must have had carriage in her own clime, but here, a heathen, they cry out against her, the godly children she was bought to nurse! Tituba did badly to fear, not God, but foreign girls."<sup>18</sup> Ironically Martha's own faith and fear of her Lord serves her a fate no better than Tituba's: her failure to fear those same girls harms her as well. This appears to negate Mr. Phelps' attempted message. His advocacy of religion ignores a potent reality he has just dramatized: Martha lays claim to more safety in her faith than Tituba has in hers, yet both are equal victims. There's an irony in that which is in no way supportive of Mr. Phelps' position.

It is the triumph of Giles Corey's individual will, this one man's heroics, that truly brings this play to its climax. His death in Scene 8 leaves an unshakable impression enhanced by the dank, dismal set; Giles' controlled, dying moans; and the jailor's uninhibited commentary. This is a scene that renders those following as anti-climactic. Even Phelp's attempts to delineate Giles from Martha fall short. Martha is given a special flair for words, but Giles's colorful epithets and curses

seem equally eloquent. This seriously weakens the potential foreshadowing in his warning to Martha, "You're always a shade too easy and quickly up with the words ... they'll have you for it, too."<sup>11</sup> However, it does add an irony to the later situation in the courtroom. There it's Giles's quick temper, heated eloquence, and lack of discretion that prove to be Martha's undoing as well as his own.

It would seem, in the overview, that The Gospel Witch is a play sorely in need of an editor. From beginning to end it fails to use its most interesting device, the narrator, as the unifying element he potentially represented. For those educated enough to know of his historical role and impact, Moody initially offered a ray of curious hope for the play's theme. Unfortunately that aspect was merely hinted at, then left to assumption.

It is Lyon Phelps' preoccupation with his lovely, lyrical dialogue that most needs editing. Though he produces several picturesque metaphors and epigrammatic observations, he also overshadows these with an excess of verbosity, especially in contrived soliloquies. Martha becomes a character with no personal power, only a penchant for prayer and sermon. It carries no weight when Martha speaks so sagaciously, saying, "What hurts the girls could be far more than winter, but whatever it is, it's in themselves. and me, in all of us."<sup>12</sup> It's a

superlative observation, but it bears no strength without being given further illustration. Theatre functions best in the showing, not the telling.

Martha herself may even be apologizing for the author's attitude when she says: "I can only do what I can do - wisdom's a limited virtue."<sup>17</sup> Such resignation in Martha strengthens by contrast the conviction, passion, and action to be found in Giles. His phenomenal determination totally upstages Martha's impact, despite her closing prayer when she says, "Now I would be reminded Giles failed me that he might to the great community prove his final worth."<sup>18</sup> Try as one might, it is impossible to perceive of Giles as a failure with such a show of colossal willpower on his part. In truth, his chosen ordeal helped fuel the Brattle-Moody campaign to its all-consuming heights, ultimately ending the witch trials and freeing the hundreds still incarcerated. His role in this drama is equally impressive.

Therefore, it can only be concluded that this play has functionally missed its mark. Its religious slant on the Salem theme serves no better than a balm on a severe and gaping wound, a wound Mr. Phelps should never have tried to treat. His heroine is far from heroic, his purpose becomes his undoing, and his plot falls in upon itself. Things truly do unhinge.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Lyon Phelps, The Gospel Witch (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1955), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Phelps, p. 28.

<sup>3</sup> Phelps, p. 52.

<sup>4</sup> Phelps, p. 69.

<sup>5</sup> Phelps, p. 74.

<sup>6</sup> Phelps, p. 74.

<sup>7</sup> Phelps, p. 76.

<sup>8</sup> Phelps, p. 79.

<sup>9</sup> Phelps, p. 83.

<sup>10</sup> Phelps, p. 86.

<sup>11</sup> Phelps, p. 87.

<sup>12</sup> Phelps, p. 88.

<sup>13</sup> Phelps, p. 15.

<sup>14</sup> Phelps, p. 21.

<sup>15</sup> Phelps, p. 15.

<sup>16</sup> Phelps, p. 22.

<sup>17</sup> Phelps, p. 23.

<sup>18</sup> Phelps, p. 92.

## CHAPTER 7 - THE CRUCIBLE

The last play on the Salem theme is The Crucible by Arthur Miller, published in 1953. This play opens with Rev. Parris having recently discovered his daughter, Betty, and his niece/ward, Abigail Williams, as part of a group in the woods (some in the nude) dancing to Tituba's West Indian rhythms and chants. Abigail is shown here as a calculating, vengeful seventeen year-old who drank blood at this ritual as a charm to wound Elizabeth Proctor. Abigail once worked in the Proctor household and was then lover to John Proctor. She cannot, and will not, accept that affair as ended and quite rightly says to John Proctor, "I have a sense for heat, John ... You are no wintry man."<sup>2</sup>

When questioned about the forbidden rites in the woods, Abigail audaciously accuses Tituba of leading in this corruption, and Tituba in turn decries other unsavory misfits as being the Devil's own. There follows a contagion of hysteria with Abigail and all her 'klatch' ecstatically accusing a litany of individuals in a prime offense-as-defense maneuver.

Act II introduces Elizabeth Proctor in domestic conversation with her husband. It is obvious there is strain here but also a mutual longing for accord. Unfortunately, each appears judgmental to the other and



both react defensively. There is a distance both regret but neither can bridge. Tragedy strikes shortly in the form of Abigail's accusing (and framing) Elizabeth as a witch, whereupon Mrs. Proctor is arrested and joins the ranks with Martha Corey and Rebecca Nurse. John then realizes he must expose Abigail as a vindictive fraud, but his chosen method is to coerce their domestic, Mary Warren, to repudiate Abigail and the others. Mary lacks the mettle necessary and turns on John when the girls threaten her. John is then also arrested, now to battle his conscience in solitude. He is all too keenly aware of his own character flaws to feel he can be identified with the saintly, guileless ones already charged.

By the final act months have passed, hundreds have been accused, farm crops are rotting, children and livestock alike wander without caretakers. The afflicted girls are now losing some of their fervor and credibility. In fact, Abigail and Mercy Lewis have run away after robbing Rev. Parris, leaving him on the narrow edge of a nervous breakdown. Rev. Hale, a peer to Parris in the trials, has also undergone radical change, having now no faith of any description but striving nonetheless to retain some semblance of security, most notably in the preservation of the church as well as human lives. He tries desperately to elicit confessions from those condemned, hoping to thereby save them from the gibbet and

save face for his church. He himself says to Danforth, the presiding judge, "I come to do the Devil's work ... to counsel Christians they should belie themselves. There is blood on my head!"<sup>2</sup>

Thus far no confession has been forthcoming; Giles Corey has even undergone his historical 'peine forte et dure' ordeal as a consequence of remaining mute to withstand trial. Elizabeth Proctor has proven to be pregnant with her third child so her execution has been stayed. She is now asked to persuade John to confess to save his life as well. Though she refrains from agreeing, she does grasp this chance to see her husband after months of imprisonment.

In their touchy, misguided way Elizabeth and John try again to reach each other but fall ever short. Elizabeth tries in vain to share her heart with John, but he rebukes any thought of her being as fallible as he. There is no confession that can provide the absolution John needs for his own self-esteem. "I am no saint," he says repeatedly. "Let Rebecca go like a saint; for me it is fraud!"<sup>3</sup> He would prefer to confess and save his skin, but the judges' insistence that it be in writing alerts him to their motive. Rather than be a tool to discredit the others, John finds he can accept death readily, a death with honor. As Elizabeth tearfully observes, "He have his goodness now."<sup>4</sup>

In The Crucible Arthur Miller has preserved more of the recorded story than any author to date. In his prologue he proudly states, "there is no one in the drama who did not play a similar - and in some cases exactly the same - role in history."<sup>28</sup> Miller's research and struggle to understand and model his characters "in conformity with their known behavior"<sup>29</sup> results in a powerful, complex theatrical experience all the more potent for its comprehensive representation of all aspects of our human nature. Mr. Miller has crafted a whole world, our world, in this play, a world without innocence and overrun with facades. Lightly-veiled resentments escalate to murderous accusations with but a little fanning of the flames. It's a fragile environment with each vulnerable character in precarious balance with the others.

But to credit Mr. Miller with having reconstructed the Salem community of 1692 would be a falsehood. The Crucible is too economical to waste its time in that endeavor. Instead this play combines elements of some figures into one; Judge Hathorne functions instrumentally as a composite of such as Rev. Noyes, Justice Stoughton and the infamous Cotton Mather. Miller also opts to brush over Martha Corey, as history appears to have done, to preserve the streamline of his vehicle.

Miller has essentially rationed himself with regard to characters, with each representing a facet of our

existence. Great drama demands great characters so Miller has devoted his all to bevelling the edges to better catch the light. His presentation in print reinforces this devotion, written as it is in near-novella form with frequent inserts of narrative and character explication based on original records and journals. He has peopled his play with distinct personalities, having first extracted their essence, and embellished them with but the barest of accessory characters for a clean, well-crafted play.

Abigail Williams is Miller's one major deviation since the 11 year-old Abigail as the leader of the afflicted ones still remains the unconscionable crux of the whole delusion. The fact that she eventually ran away and was later rumored to be a prostitute in Boston no doubt inspired this characterization of her and herein lies Miller's improvised plot. Miller's Abigail is the embodiment of unadulterated selfishness, trying as she does to couch her will in divine proclamation. She is the willful, egocentric hedonist in us all, set on having her pleasure no matter at whose expense.

As for Rev. Parris, he represents the egotist, at least until he's broken. At the onset Parris shows sickly symptoms of paranoia, power mania, and a penchant for transferring blame as when he whines, "I am your third preacher in 7 years...I left a thrifty business in the Barbados to serve the Lord...why am I persecuted here?..."

have often wondered if the Devil be in it somewhere: I cannot understand you people otherwise."<sup>7</sup> Such arrogance precludes any sensitivity in the man, yet when confronted with the distraught and desperate Parris in the last act, any compassionate being finds it difficult to keep a stony heart in the wake of such pathos. For such is the art of Arthur Miller.

Giles Corey, on the other hand, provides an almost humorous complement as the ultimate pragmatist. He thrives on any bone of contention, especially the property line squabbles of others. For Giles all truth is measured in terms of practical consequence; he is therefore a man of no small action. His tenacity, stubbornness and iron will are presented without any edge of cruelty but neither is his death given any real dramatic emphasis in this play, only a poignant, pointed reference. Miller himself termed Giles to be "the most comical hero in the history"<sup>8</sup> but depicts him with a strength far beyond foolhardy, and at an age in close keeping with his factual seventy-odd years, a hero of the old school.

And again we meet the Putnams. Thomas and Ann, this time presented as the elitists that records would suggest. Their animosity toward Rebecca Nurse, extracted from history, is instrumental in derining their characters, as when Tom asserts. "The Putnam seed have peopled this province. And yet I have but one child left of eight and

now she shrivels!" Likewise Ann cries, "You think it God's work you should never lose a child, nor grandchild either, and I bury all but one?"<sup>10</sup> In this play, as in the records, the Putnams are an envious, power-hungry pair, continually frustrated in their attempts to influence local affairs.

Meanwhile the gentle Rebecca Nurse and her husband, Francis, enjoy the respect and admiration of all their neighbors. Rebecca, elderly and wise, represents the moral superiority of the humanist, best illustrated in her observation, "There is prodigious danger in the seeking of loose spirits...Let us rather blame ourselves."<sup>11</sup> Rebecca is already conscious of the kinship in all human nature and vividly aware that no one is so pure in heart that he/she can afford to throw the first stone.

But poor John Proctor hasn't the comfort of Rebecca's inner awareness and still labels himself thoroughly a sinner. John reacts as a separatist, always outside the group or sphere, but as the play progresses he personifies the idealist in a triumph all his own. His culture has no ritual for the washing away of sin and he can not overcome his conviction that man is worthless until redeemed. Yet neither can he see redemption lying in the hands of fools or hypocrites.

John's dire need to confess once led him to Elizabeth, but with regret he comments later that he "must

have mistaken you for God that day. But you're not ... and let you remember it!"<sup>12</sup> It's a point John tends to forget himself, which prompts the more rational Elizabeth to respond. "The magistrate sits in your heart that judges you."<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth is a realist.

Elizabeth's character also progresses in the course of the play, due in part to her confinement with Rebecca. Her cool veneer warms to translucence for when we see the Proctors' encounter in the final act, where it is Elizabeth who now shows a deeper self-awareness when she shares with John that "Suspicion kissed you when I did...It were a cold house I kept."<sup>14</sup> With the deepest certainty she now knows that none other under heaven can be one's judge, for no one is your better or your lesser. We are all alone in this together.

Yet still John Proctor cannot relate. He is all too sure that he has been especially damned, not just for lust but more for his hesitance in exposing Abigail. He will not and cannot die with those he deems superior. Conversely, he agrees to confess to save his life, saying, "I think it is honest...I am no saint...it is evil and I do it!"<sup>15</sup>

But John reneges when he realizes the public impact, the credibility he'd be giving the executions. It is a triumph of mind and soul over body when his idealism conquers his instinct for survival. He defies the judges'

efforts to use him and chooses to die honorably as an example to his three children, a man who did not blacken the names of his friends. Suddenly enlightened, he now can see outside his personal concerns with a view of the fragile network interlocking us all. It is a John Proctor in fellowship who says to his wife, "You have made your magic now, for now I do think I see some shred of goodness in John Proctor."<sup>14</sup>

Within the conservative structure of a conventional play Arthur Miller has created an allegorical figure in John Proctor. Proctor's inner conflict represents everyone's limited perspective when preoccupied with the microcosm of his/her life alone. Upon opening ourselves to others we become aware of our personal impact and of an inevitable unity and camaraderie as uplifting as it is sudden. Miller has dramatized a truth and he owes the richness of his drama to his comprehension of its source.

Special kudos belong to Miller for his artful dramatic images that leave such an indelible impression from any good production of this play. The stark contrast in the appearances of Reverends Hale and Parris from Act I to II serve to illustrate this but the prime example is the potent wave of hysteria reenacted just as historians recorded it, the 'crying-out' at the close of Act I. With a minimum of words Miller chills our spines while we witness the snowballing accusations.



Still, the real mastery is in his delineation of character in but a few bold strokes. We find the sensualist in Tituba's simple view. "Oh, it be no Hell in Barbados. Devil, him be pleasureman in Barbados, him be singin' and dancin' in Barbados."<sup>17</sup> Contrast that with the equally simple view of the moralist, Judge Danforth. "We live no longer in the dusky afternoon when evil mixed itself with good and befuddled the world."<sup>18</sup> or with John Proctor's separatist conscience, as revealed to his admired friend, Francis Nurse, "I wish you had some evil in you that you might know me."<sup>19</sup>

But the most remarkable feature of this play is that it is never without empathy for its characters, even for such antagonists as Abigail, Parris, and the Putnams. This is what makes The Crucible the epitome of Salem plays and a classic great work overall.

## NOTES

1 Arthur Miller, "The Crucible", in Arthur Miller: Eight Plays (Garden City, NY: Nelson Doubleday Inc., 1981), p. 229.

- 2 Miller, p. 321.
- 3 Miller, p. 327.
- 4 Miller, p. 333.
- 5 Miller, p. 212.
- 6 Miller, p. 212.
- 7 Miller, p. 235.
- 8 Miller, p. 244.
- 9 Miller, p. 233.
- 10 Miller, p. 234.
- 11 Miller, p. 233.
- 12 Miller, p. 258.
- 13 Miller, p. 258.
- 14 Miller, p. 326.
- 15 Miller, p. 327.
- 16 Miller, p. 332.
- 17 Miller, p. 314.
- 18 Miller, p. 289.
- 19 Miller, p. 304.

## SALEM WITCHCRAFT IN AMERICAN DRAMA

### Conclusion

Just as there are magnifying mirrors, carnival mirrors, makeup mirrors and Mylar mirrors so do we find a number of ways theatre can reflect our world. The potential for control of perspective is limitless; with some arrangements we may even see infinity. But in the depiction of witchcraft American playwrights have limited themselves. Nowhere in our literature written for the stage can we find witchcraft represented as the alternative religion it is. Only one full-length American play depicts a witch as priestess, a celebrant of feminine sexuality as she was in ancient culture. Our playwrights prefer to focus instead on the political witch and even then their dramas comprise no feminine domain. The female is poorly represented, often ill-defined, and never depicted as a plausible protagonist.

In the study of these six plays, all interpreting the same slice of our past, we've found a remarkable variety of styles, plots and perspectives but each bearing the same basic message: there are no witches, only dark human nature. All six plays hinge on someone's vengeance, a standard byproduct of human relationships; we appear ignorant of any other way to live.

This is the schematic for the basic Salem theme, the aspect each play attempts to dramatize. With the same

Biblical, tilting language, these plays deal always with a sexual theme as undertone. In review we have Ann Hutchins' loss of Paul Bayley, Elizabeth Hubbard's thwarted plan for Robert Calef, Robert Witherspoon's lust for Patience Whiting, Mac's extramarital attraction to Stella, Tom Putnam's longing for Martha Corey and Abigail Williams' obsession with John Proctor. These are the seeds needed for the dark plots to grow.

Though all these plays contain good seed, not all these plays are good. Only one, The Crucible by Arthur Miller, has attained classic status; it has stood as an epitome for over thirty years without serious challenge. Is it because of Mr. Miller's self-proclaimed fidelity to all the recorded facts save one?

To give Mr. Miller his due, he does seem to have chosen the plot of least resistance, creating a storyline requiring the least deviation for its flow. Miller's strategy of distilling from history with minimal distortion was indeed a praiseworthy effort and it has served him well.

But what of the other plays we've studied? Is it their lack of adherence to fact that diminishes their value? Are deviations from history to be patently discouraged without exception? Or can we discern a consistent set of criteria for altering details to better depict historical essence?

Giles Corey, Yeoman is an awe-inspiring heroic saga of an individual's strength against the ignorance and fear of an entire community. This theme is strengthened by the addition of the several fictitious characters to the Corey household to establish filial ties. Using Phoebe and Olive as innocent dependents serves to illustrate rather than narrate Giles' reasons for his stoic endurance. This is an impressive play, well-focused on its purpose but weak in its complementary characterizations. No depth is given the antagonists: only the Coreys are effectively depicted, thereby neglecting the deeper dimension Miller added.

Margaret of Salem bears little resemblance to any recorded data, and is a dichotomous drama that slips nearly into melodrama. Even in its one historical link, Elizabeth Hubbard and her clique, the author conveniently homogenizes their ages but for no thematic purpose. It's merely a character detail to evoke preconceived notions about catty, competitive pubescent girls. Then too, its conflict pits the light of love against the dark force of hate, but with too much vivid contrast in its caricatures to blend well, so the play loses plausibility. It even cheats on explanations, leaving significant characters and climactic moments flatly underdeveloped. This play not only gives incomplete depictions but omits major pieces of motivation. It simply does not hang together.

The Witch is the ultimate melodrama, suffering all the afflictions that entails. Its characters are stereotypes, its plot progressions are contrived, and its ending is predictable. Here again there is little relation to historical data but for the use of Governor Phipps' signature as the happy ending. This play is a prime example of powerful material synthesized into a cheap, discount product.

Tituba's Children, on the other hand, deserves special commendation for the potent message it wields, its unique juxtapositions, its disarming use of music as a caustic medium, and its original approach to reprocessed material make it a classic in its own right. Every feature, from format to finale, was selected to underscore and accent the play's dramatic theme, to challenge the attitude that we must condemn what we can't understand. Without any conventional plot or character development, Williams effects his purpose with remarkable impact.

The Gospel Witch primarily survives in anthologies of religious dramas, as well it should with its leanings toward moral lecture. It is not a good play but more a pastiche of sermon selections supposedly bound by a plot that lacks a feasible premise. With its storyline pivoting on the Putnam child as such an incredible strategist, this play's multiple alterations of history were simply to suit its story. Its message never stood a chance.

In The Crucible this same problem was averted by the play's only major alteration: Abigail's age. Lacking hard evidence that adults controlled the children who in turn manipulated the community, Miller simply made the group leader older and more aware of the pull she had on men. Miller takes precious care to display all varieties of human frailty, and the situational complexities come forth in a flow. The Crucible is truly a heavyweight drama, clean and uncluttered, with no details added or subtracted merely for the author's convenience. Miller has selected and processed only those elements needed to achieve an enlightened perception of a man, a church, and a community struggling against their worst natures.

It would seem, then, that the major difference among these plays is not adherence to fact per se; it is cohesion in each play itself. Those plays showing a unified purpose overall also evidence the wiser and more effective deviations from history, intended to strengthen their respective central ideas. This follows the most basic tenet of playwrighting: any good play must be governed by its theme; all details must adhere to that directive. Hence, we find a hierarchy of theme/purpose over character motivation, motivation over character detail, and all these over plot. Theatre can never depict accuracy, only essence, so plays excel when they stay true to history's meaning (its theme) with one unified purpose.

Therefore, it may be concluded that historical deviations, just like details, must be tailored to an author's purpose. Choices made to enhance a character's motivation must support that same theme. Changes in character details are of questionable value unless they too become assets to strengthen the unifying idea.

In this study we have found three plays built for story alone: Margaret of Salem, The Witch, and The Gospel Witch. The other three were more intent on purpose and that has made all the difference. Giles Corey, Yeoman approaches this ideal with its well-crafted characters and clear motivation in the Corey family; Tituba's Children and The Crucible both attain it. In unity there is strength.



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SALEM WITCHCRAFT IN AMERICAN DRAMA

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## SALEM WITCHCRAFT IN AMERICAN DRAMA

This paper presents a study of the Salem witchcraft trials as reflected in the six American full-length dramas listed in the Cumulated Dramatic Index (1909-1949) and Play Index (1949-1982). Listed chronologically, these plays are: Giles Corey, Yeoman by Mary Wilkins; Margaret of Salem by Rita Benton; The Witch by Flora Louise Hunn; Tituba's Children by William Carlos Williams; The Gospel Witch by Lyon Phelps; and The Crucible by Arthur Miller.

With Miller's play accepted as the classic on this theme, all the others were compared to identify what element(s) made The Crucible the better play. Although no author adhered strictly to the facts as recorded, it was proposed that greater historical accuracy could be the strengthening factor since Miller's play was designed more in keeping with Salem history. This did not prove to be the case.

Instead, it was concluded that the weaknesses common in the lesser plays were due to nothing other than poor craftsmanship. Alterations of facts with no distinct relation to the play's purpose were most detrimental, while those details added or amended directly to strengthen the play's unifying theme were landmark assets. The best in historical drama was found to be the best in any drama, a distillation of an essence presented with a thorough, well-fashioned focus.