Insanity as a Social Norm in Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*

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### 1. Introduction

In 1996, The New Yorker published an essay by Arthur Miller, titled “How I Wrote *The Crucible*”. The essay describes the historical conditions in which the playwright composed this particular work. Miller mentions the relative ease of writing about the Cold War today and points at the fear and paranoia during the McCarthy era for explaining his setbacks while writing the play. For Miller, it was almost impossible to approach the Red Scare crisis rationally; therefore he writes that, by that time, he “[…] lacked the tools to illuminate miasma” (160). Calling the McCarthy era “miasma”, Miller draws attention to the toxicity of paranoia, and undertakes the task of demystification. The role he assumes is represented by John Proctor, the major character in the play. The failure of Proctor’s reason becomes the impossibility to analyze the situation and act accordingly. However, the play also displays the actual failure of Miller’s task: throughout the play, the Puritan colony and the young women are demonized instead of analyzed, and many rational townsfolk, such as John Proctor himself, only reproduce the already existing discourse of power, that is paranoia. As a result, the emancipating role of madness diminishes, and paranoia becomes the social norm of the colony.

### 2. Background

The word ‘crucible’ has two meanings: the literal meaning is a vessel in which metals or other substances are heated and melted; the other meaning is ‘a severe trial’, and chiefly acquired this meaning during the seventeenth century, when the witch-hunt trials started. In the context of Salem witch trials, the crucible has become a metaphor which describes the Puritan colony as a community that is experiencing a series of hearings, trials, and a test of conscience. As a Puritan colony in New England, the community’s life was based on the principles of Puritan faith, and as John Winthrop announced in “A Model of Christian Charity”, the establishment of the colony would itself be a test for the materialization of the Puritan faith in social life. On the board of the ship Arbella in 1630, he called New England “a city upon a hill” where “the eyes of all people are upon us” (216). Here Winthrop makes a clear distinction between ‘the eyes’ and the colony: having left the British Isles as dissenters, the Puritan community required a close-knit order and full commitment to faith in order to survive and succeed as an experimental community.

The two meanings of the word imply the foundation of a colony in the making. The authenticity of the community is based on the merging of the experiences in the New World, while it is also fuelled with fears and anxieties of the unknown. That is, the utopian project of the Puritan colony identifies itself
with self-insulation and its resistance to time and change, which forms its sense of belonging. Michel Foucault defines this space as heterotopia rather than utopia. Whereas utopias have no real space, heterotopias are “counter-emplacements, a sort of effectively realized utopias in which the real emplacements, all the other real emplacements that can be found within culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted; a kind of places that are outside all places, even though they are actually localizable” (17). For Foucault, the colonial settlements in North America were unreal spaces, hence utopian. Foucault writes that the role of such spaces is “creating another space, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is disorderly, ill construed and sketchy. This would be the heterotopia not of illusion, but of compensation” (21). In this sense, the Puritan colonies were established on the subversion of the already existing space. As opposed to the religious intolerance, the colony integrated equally intolerant practices against the other. Similarly, the Church of England was replaced by the Meeting House, which served as the materialization of surveillance and power.

The colony also exemplifies the confinement of the other. As Foucault explains, the politics of the 17th century required the poor and the unemployed to disappear from social life and be confined in certain institutions. The high number of poor people was seen as a threat to the nation, and in Thomas Dekker’s words, they were thought to be “banished and conveyed to the New-found Land, the East and West Indies.” (Foucault 65) The Puritan colony was by no means poor, idle or mad; but they were dissenters in terms of the Church of England. It’s not that they were forced to immigrate, but their internalized dissent that made them come to America.

Foucault materializes his concept of heterotopia with the image of a ship. For Foucault, the ship is the perfect metaphor for utopian space, and in communities without them “dreams dry up, espionage replaces adventure, and the police the pirates.” (22) However, the ship denotes to another powerful image in Foucault’s writing: the ship of fools. The ship which metaphorically signifies the exclusion of madmen from society also functions as a heterotopia. In this context, the transatlantic journey of the Puritans had resulted with a heterotopia which took its cues from madness transformed into social life.

3. The text
Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* depicts the Massachusetts Bay Colony as a despised heterotopia, which also stands for an allegory to the United States during the McCarthy era. The play, written in 1953, tells the story of the actual witch-hunt trials that started in 1692 in Salem. The play opens with Reverend Samuel Parris worrying over his daughter, Betty, who is in an unconscious state. The reverend had discovered her, her cousin Abigail and some other village girls dancing in the woods. The reverend and townsfolk immediately relate these two events and suspect of witchcraft. When Abigail denies the accusation, the town decides to summon Reverend Hale who is known as an expert on demonology. With his arrival,
Abigail senses the severity of the accusation, and says that John Proctor, a fellow townsman, is the wizard who is in control of the town’s witches. Proctor’s family is under threat because John Proctor was having an affair with Abigail. As a result, Abigail is held as a witness, many people are accused of witchcraft, and the Proctor family faces a serious test of conscience: whether to deny the unbiased accusation and get hanged, or accept it and be excommunicated. In the end, Proctor refuses to confess, and he is executed. The epilogue shows that Parris is voted out of office soon afterwards, Abigail becomes a prostitute, and in 1712 the condemnations and excommunications are retraced.

For the literary and cultural canon of the 1950s, the Puritans were the Pilgrim Fathers, to be followed by the founding fathers of the United States. Therefore, the central role of the Puritan colony is not only about religious conservatism, but also about the roots of the American state. Writing on the historiography of Puritanism, Peter Lake argues that “entities like ‘the New England mind’ […] were habitually presented as distinctive, even formative, contributions to the emergence of various aspects of Americanness.” (352). In this sense, the Puritan colony was considered the core of nation-building, the heritage of the American mind and its social norms. Miller is clearly responding to the position of Puritanism in history writing, as well as literary criticism and the formation of American literary canon. The academia of the 1950s was predominated by the New Criticism, whose foremost tenet is the autonomy and integrity of the literary text. Accordingly, the literary work that brought together the missing or lost unity was the one most valued by the New Critics. The literary canon is established through a test of time, which proves the permanence of the text. In T. S. Eliot maintains that

No poet, no artist of any art has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. […] The necessity that he shall conform, that he shall cohere, is not onesided; what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which precede it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them (956).

Eliot’s idea of literature requires the literary work to be a new member of an established canon. For this, coherence, order and conformity are the key elements the literary work should have in common. Literature that had passed the test of time is monumental, thus resistant to time and change. As a result, Eliot sees literature as a closed system, which had shut itself against the chaos of history. This aspect of the New Criticism has been considered reactionary. In Literary Theory, Terry Eagleton writes,

When Eliot was in fact assaulting was the whole ideology of middle-class liberalism, the official ruling ideology of industrial capitalist society. Liberalism, Romanticism, Protestantism, economic individualism: all of these are the perverted dogmas of those expelled from the happy garden of the organic society, with nothing to fall back on but their own paltry individual resources. Eliot’s own solution is an extreme right-
wing authoritarianism; men and women must sacrifice their petty ‘personalities’ and opinions to an impersonal order. In the sphere of literature, this impersonal order is the Tradition. (39)

Eagleton criticizes Eliot’s standpoint by demystifying his idea of organic unity. In this sense, Eagleton emphasizes the ideological aspect of the formation of the literary canon and the function of literature in social life. Closely knit by Tradition and resembling the creation of another space, the literary canon can be considered a heterotopia in which imagination is eternalized and the incoherent is left out for the sake of the imagined social order. The Crucible is clearly in dialogue with the defense and critique of the literary academia of the 1950s in the United States. The play uses the Salem witch trials to demystify the Cold War politics in the United States. The play criticizes the oppressive social order in Salem, and integrates non-theatrical elements to the dramatic text. However, Miller also seems to mirror the anxieties of the disintegrating order in the Post-war period.

The play is openly critical of the oppressive social order through its use of characterization. All of the townsfolk who are accused of witchcraft are known to be respectable and pious members of society. Among them, John Proctor represents reason against the irrational accusations, and channels Miller’s own point of view. This is evident in two ways: Firstly, the play is based on John Proctor’s individual struggle to make sense of the crisis. As Christopher Bigsby argues, Miller’s concern was “Proctor’s free act, his ethical attitude. He does not die for the landless, for social justice, but for his sense of himself” (154). Actually, Proctor’s death is confirmed when he refuses to sign the false testimony that reveals the names of the witches. When he refuses to sign it, he says “Because it is my name! Because I cannot have another in my life! Because I lie and sign myself to lies!” (124). For him, his name and signature are more important than the testimony itself, because he is preoccupied with keeping his integrity more than anything else.

Secondly, John Proctor is not one of the characters that Miller says he fictionalized during the writing process. In the preliminary note titled “A Note on the Historical accuracy of the Play”, Miller writes that “this play is not history in the sense in which the word is used by the academic historian” (11), and explains how he manipulated certain aspects of history for dramatic purposes. His interpretation of history, therefore, defines his version of McCarthyism. Among the changes he underwent, he mentions the change of Abigail’s age, the number of girls and judges involved, and the fate of certain characters. These changes imply that Miller reduced certain characters to functions, and concentrated on the dramatic effect rather than historical accuracy. In The Crucible, character functions work in extremes, representing the dark and rational sides of human mind and action. All the characters Miller mentions in this article are the causes and agents of the crisis, except Proctor.

The social oppression during the Cold War is materialized in The Crucible through the use of allegory. The play can be read simply by exchanging the Puritan ministers with the House Un-American
Activities Committee, and John Proctor with Arthur Miller himself. As an allegory, the play reanimates history rather than producing a counter-heterotopia. Allegory, as a literary device, is a representation or symbol of an idea or concept. Rather than the idea itself, the author prefers to verbalize it in a context which is controlled by the author himself. As Josh Cohen maintains, “Allegory comes into being once the written sign fails to find meaning fulfilled in itself.”(17). In the case of The Crucible, one of the reasons of Miller’s use of allegory is the fact that the art of writing was being threatened. The crisis of Salem witch trials and McCarthy era are both represented as irrational, even insane. The irrationality of the crisis is also mirrored in the way the text was produced. The text is composed of the dramatic text, prose sections which present a commentary on certain characters and events, an epilogue, and a prologue titled “Echoes down the Corridor”. The variety of such complimentary texts proves the failure of representation: the play is supposed to be ‘not history’, but the dramatic text is not sufficient for making sense of the crisis. The dramatic text and stage directions, that is the visual and linguistic representation, clearly require a detailed and rational explanation. Therefore, the prose sections attempt to make the irrational intelligible. The norms of a dramatic text are thus violated, and the broken integrity of the text is recomposed through the use of commentaries.

The play also manifests a sexist attitude towards the female body and imagination. Witchcraft accusations are staged by Abigail Williams and her friends, hence a threat to the integrity of the town. Furthermore, the ones who are accused and hanged are women, too. Writing on the masculinity in Miller’s works, David Savran observes a common thread, that the male subject’s effort to repress the female body. He writes, that “throughout Miller’s work, the female body is constantly in danger of overflowing its limits. It is unstable and unfixed, its boundaries always in dispute, its interior – constituted indifferently of speech, sexual desire, or partially digested food – always threatening to erupt and engulf men in a sea of laughter, chaos, and stink.” (38-9). Faced with this problem, the male subject exerts power over the female subject, expecting her to assume traditional feminine qualities such as silence and chastity. Analyzing the character of Abigail Williams, Wendy Schissel argues that the text is preoccupied with “gynecophobia” (56) and Abigail is “a victim of an older man’s lust” (64). According to Schissel, she needs to summon witches not to save herself or take revenge, but as moral support for her fear and confusion. In this sense, the female body tests the anxieties of the individual and society at the same time. Therefore, what starts as a simple threat develops into madness for the individual, society and the state.

Bibliography


