ESSAY REVIEW

SALEM WITCHCRAFT IN RECENT FICTION
AND DRAMA

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A Mirror for Witches. By Esther Forbes. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1954. Reissue. $3.00.)


In the last six years American publishers have issued one history, an anthology of trial documents, two novels, and two plays about the Salem witchcraft trials. The subject is especially interesting today because of a few parallels to McCarthyism and because of our interest in abnormal psychology, which has drawn some writers to study the adolescent girls whose fits and accusations led twenty people to the gallows. Since the Salem episode has become a symbol of the bigot's tyranny—a symbol so completely accepted that a prominent Washington correspondent of the New York Times and a comic-strip writer for the San Francisco Chronicle can both refer, without being corrected, to the witches whom Cotton Mather burned in Salem—the four recent novels and plays raise some interesting questions about the aims and techniques of historical fiction and drama.

None of these books is merely a story set against the background of the period; three of them concentrate on real historical characters, and all four pretend to portray history, give or take a few facts. All try to explain the outbreak of accusations and the curious testimony against the defendants. All but one begin with the first accusations and end with the last executions. All have something to say of the connection between Puritan theology and the injustice done at Salem.
Arthur Miller makes the most ambitious historical claims, and for that reason among others his play The Crucible deserves a more thorough discussion than I have space for here. Although confessing, perhaps patronizingly, that his play is not history in the "academic historian's" sense, he declares that it reveals "the essential nature of one of the strangest and most awful episodes in human history." The Crucible, although it set few records on Broadway, has been steadily popular elsewhere. Produced simultaneously by amateur theater groups in San Francisco and San Mateo, California, it attracted such large audiences over a period of several months last year that the San Francisco company turned professional and continued for some time to produce the same play as its first professional offering. In France, too, the play has been popular. Besides Mr. Miller's dramatic skill, there are several reasons for this popularity.

The subject, of course, is adaptable to the stage, and Arthur Miller has taken advantage of its dramatic opportunities. One could transcribe verbatim the examination of any of a dozen defendants, and if played with moderate skill the scene would amuse, anger, and terrify an audience. The magistrates' persistent cross-examination, the afflicted girls' screams and fits (which Mr. Miller certainly underplays), the defendant's helplessness in the face of what seems to us a ludicrously closed logical system (Examiner: Why do you hurt these girls? Defendant: I don't. Judge: If you don't, who does?), the appearance of her "specter" on the beam or in the magistrate's lap at the very time when she is declaring her innocence, her evasive answers, her contradictions, and her collapse into confession—these are almost unbearable to watch.

The Crucible dramatizes brilliantly the dilemma of an innocent man who must confess falsely if he wants to live and who finally gains the courage to insist on his innocence—and hang. To increase the impact of this final choice, Mr. Miller has filled his play with ironies. John Proctor, the fated hero, has been guilty of adultery but is too proud to confess or entirely to repent. In order to save his wife from execution by showing that her leading accuser is "a whore," he has at last brought himself to confess his adultery before the Deputy-Governor of Massachusetts Bay; but his wife, who "has never told a lie" and who has punished him severely for his infidelity, now lies to protect his name. Denying that he had
been unfaithful, she convinces the court that he has lied to save her life. In the end, Proctor, reconciled with his wife and determined to live, can have his freedom if he will confess to witchcraft, a crime he has not committed.

This battery of ironies is directed against the basic objective of the play: absolute morality. In the twentieth century as well as the seventeenth, Mr. Miller insists in his preface, this construction of human pride makes devils of the opponents of orthodoxy and destroys individual freedom. Using the Salem episode to show that it also blinds people to truth, he has his characters turn the truth upside down. At the beginning of the play, the Reverend John Hale announces fatuously that he can distinguish precisely between diabolical and merely sinful actions; in the last act the remorseful Hale is trying desperately to persuade innocent convicts to confess falsely in order to avoid execution. The orthodox court, moreover, will not believe that Abigail Williams, who has falsely confessed to witchcraft, falsely denied adultery, and falsely cried out upon "witches," is "a whore"; but it is convinced that Proctor, who has told the truth about both his adultery and his innocence of witchcraft, is a witch.

What Mr. Miller considers the essential nature of the episode appears quite clearly in his play. The helplessness of an innocent defendant, the court’s insistence on leaping to dubious conclusions, the jeopardy of any ordinary person who presumes to question the court’s methods, the heroism of a defendant who cleaves to truth at the cost of his life, the ease with which vengeful motives can be served by a government’s attempt to fight the Devil, and the disastrous aid which a self-serving confession gives injustice by encouraging the court’s belief in the genuineness of the conspiracy—all this makes the play almost oppressively instructive, especially when one is watching rather than reading it. When one remembers the "invisible" nature of the crimes charged, the use of confessed conspirators against defendants who refuse to confess, the punishment of those only who insist on their innocence, then the analogy to McCarthyism seems quite valid.

But Mr. Miller’s pedagogical intention leads him into historical and, I believe, aesthetic error. Representative of the historical distortion is his decision to have the Deputy-Governor declare the court in session in a waiting room in order to force a petitioner to
implicate an innocent man or be held in contempt of court. Obviously suggested by the techniques of Senator McCarthy, this action is unfair to the Puritan Judge. And it is only the least of a number of such libels. In the Salem of 1692 there were indictments and juries; in *The Crucible* there are none. Mr. Miller's audience sees in detail the small mind and grandiose vanity of Samuel Parris, the selfish motives of the afflicted girls, the greed of Thomas Putnam; but it does not learn that a doubtful judge left the court after the first verdict, that there was a recess of nearly three weeks during which the government anxiously sought procedural advice from the colony's leading ministers, or that the ministers' "Return," though equivocal, hit squarely on the very logical fallacies in the court's procedure which *The Crucible* so clearly reveals. In 1692 there was a three-month delay between the first accusations and the first trial. Each defendant was examined first, later indicted, and then tried. In *The Crucible* the first "witch" is condemned to death just eight days after the first accusations, when only fourteen people are in jail. Whatever its eventual justice, a government which adheres to trial by jury and delays three months while 150 people are in jail is quite different from a government which allows four judges to condemn a woman to death within a week of her accusation.

Since Mr. Miller calls his play an attack on black-or-white thinking, it is unfortunate that the play itself aligns a group of heroes against a group of villains. In his "Note on Historical Accuracy," Mr. Miller remarks scrupulously that he has changed the age of Abigail Williams from eleven to seventeen in order to make her eligible for adulthood. But this apparently minor change alters the entire historical situation. For Mr. Miller's Abigail is a vicious wench who not only exploits her chance to supplant Elizabeth Proctor when the time comes, nor only maintains a tyrannical discipline among the afflicted girls, but also sets the entire cycle of accusations in motion for selfish reasons. Although Mr. Miller's preface to the book suggests other psychological and historical reasons for the "delusion" and even admits that there were some witches in Salem Village, his portrayal of Parris, Abigail, and the Putnams tells his theater audience that a vain minister, a vicious girl, and an arrogant landgrabber deliberately encouraged judicial murder and that a declining "theocracy" supported the scheme in
order to remain in power. One might fairly infer from the play itself that if Abigail had never lain with Proctor nobody would have been executed.

There can be no doubt that "vengeance" was, as Mr. Miller's Proctor says, "walking Salem," but it is equally certain that many honest people were confused and terrified. Underplaying this kind of evidence, Mr. Miller consistently develops historically documented selfish motives and logical errors to grotesque extremes. Every character who confesses in *The Crucible* does so only to save his skin. Every accuser is motivated by envy or vengeance, or is prompted by some other selfishly motivated person. And the sole example of ordinary trial procedure is an examination in which the judges condemn a woman because they regard her inability to recite her commandments as "hard proof" of her guilt.

The skeptical defendant's plight is naturally moving, but making the "witch-hunters" convincing is not so simple a task. Mr. Miller fails to do them justice, and this failure not only violates the "essential nature" of the episode but weakens the impact of his lesson on the audience. The witch-hunters of *The Crucible* are so foolish, their logic so extremely burlesqued, their motives so badly temporal, that one may easily underestimate the terrible implications of their mistakes. Stupid or vicious men's errors can be appalling; but the lesson would be even more appalling if one realized that intelligent men, who tried to be fair and saw the dangers in some of their methods, reached the same conclusions and enforced the same penalties.

The central fault is Mr. Miller's failure to present an intelligent minister who recognizes at once the obvious questions which troubled real Puritan ministers from the time the court was appointed. Cocksure in the first act and morally befuddled in the last, Mr. Miller's John Hale is in both these attitudes a sorry representative of the Puritan ministry. "Specter evidence," the major issue of 1692, is neither mentioned nor debated in *The Crucible*. Preferring to use Hale as a caricature of orthodoxy in his first act, Mr. Miller does not answer the question which a dramatist might devote his skills to answering: What made a minister who saw the dangers, who wanted to protect the innocent and convict the guilty, side with the court?

Even though the dramatist must oversimplify history, the fact
that dramatic exposition may be tedious does not excuse *The Crucible*'s inadequacies; Mr. Miller finds plenty of time for exposition in the first act and in the later speeches of Hale and the Deputy-Governor. The fault lies in Mr. Miller's understanding of the period; its consequences damage his play as "essential" history, as moral instruction, and as art.

Certainly the accurate portrayal of a non-villainous Puritan minister would be difficult. The easiest course is to concentrate on the innocent defendant—an intelligent character who deplores the court's folly and dies in defense of reason and truth. To oppose such a character, moreover, the author can exploit the villainous traits of Parris and the afflicted girls' flirtation with sorcery, if not with actual witchcraft. Three of the four recent novels and plays arrange this alignment.

Lyon Phelps's poetic drama *The Gospel Witch*, "written in the spirit rather than in the fact of history," concentrates on Martha Corey, a reasonable, pious woman, and her husband Giles, a garrulous old man. Both of them talk too much, the wife too intelligently and wittily and the husband too foolishly; the husband is too simply credulous, and the wife has too much faith in reason. Brought under suspicion partly because of Giles's unintentionally lethal gossip about her, Martha satirically anticipates her examiners' questions and the evidence against her; confident that she can show them the gaps in their reasoning, she thus incriminates herself. Given to cryptically wise statements, to saying

\[ \ldots \text{each thing a thousand times} \]
\[ \ldots \text{in a thousand different ways}, \]

she fails at first to take her danger seriously enough; and her answers to the authorities show that she characterized herself accurately when she told her husband that "wisdom's a limited virtue." Enraged by the injustice to his wife and grieving over his folly, Giles resolves to say nothing after he himself is arrested, and he dies without breaking his vow.

Mr. Phelps avoids Mr. Miller's fatal polarization. He refrains from telling his actors that John Hathorne is "a bitter, remorseless Salem judge"; his afflicted girls, though two of them practice witchcraft, are not so coolly vicious as Mr. Miller's Abigail; his Thomas Putnam is motivated not so much by greed as by anxiety for his
afflicted daughter's safety. But Mr. Phelps's most important improvement on *The Crucible* is his presentation of the orthodox point of view. Instead of having a minister test a defendant's innocence, as Mr. Miller's Hale does, by asking him to recite the Ten Commandments, Mr. Phelps writes two crucial scenes during which a cautious, fair officer of the court is slowly forced to suspect that Martha Corey is guilty. Here, too, the controversy over specter evidence is underemphasized, and Mr. Phelps relies on extreme coincidence when he has Martha dress in a romantic costume just before two elders come to interview her. But the persuasion of Ezekiel Cheever is entirely convincing to the reader.

Although he has rebuked Putnam for forgetting the Puritan's obligation to fight the Devil even when God's immediate purposes seem least clear, Cheever refuses to consider Martha Corey guilty when Putnam's tortured daughter accuses her. Asking for proof, he remains unconvinced even when Putnam, in anguish, holds out the "proof": his daughter's unconscious body. At the Coreys' house he restrains Putnam again in the name of decency and fairness. But as Martha seems to reveal uncanny prescience about several different subjects; as she promises, in fatal imagery, that unless the government stops turning "over souls for lice as you'd leaf a cabbage" it will get more "devils" than it bargained for and God "will forsake far more than the earth you walk"; then he can do nothing but pray that God will help her if she is innocent. By the end of the play, moreover, both he and Putnam have begun to suspect that they have abetted a terrible injustice, that they "have built a gallows where the heart cracks," that this "chaos" was not "a public test" but "a personal trial."

The difference between *The Crucible* and *The Gospel Witch*, then, is not only that the latter portrays the Puritans more accurately. Although Mr. Miller's introduction (without noting the coincidence) echoes Increase Mather's injunction to "pity rather than censure" the judges, his play presents too many orthodox characters whom one can only condemn; Lyon Phelps has portrayed some witch-hunters whom one must pity.

Both Shirley Barker and Esther Forbes bring the Devil into their novels. In Miss Barker's *Peace, My Daughters* the afflicted girls are again the real witches, but Miss Barker does not stop here. The Devil, in the form of a shoemaker named John Horne, persuades
the reverend Samuel Parris to sign his book! Arguing simply that the *ministers* need the Devil in order to maintain their authority and that of God's laws, he wins the allegiance of several of the colony's leading men. Here, as late in 1692 the Mathers actually began to suspect he had done, the Devil uses the witch-hunt to confuse God's people. He promises Parris that he will bring exactly twenty people to execution before leaving the area; he provides spectral evidence against innocent people; he encourages vigorous prosecution of the defendants.

Although this fantastic device is interesting, it is finally ineffective. The alignment of characters, of course, is even more extreme than in *The Crucible*, and the unfairness of representative trial evidence is accordingly exaggerated. Even more damaging, however, is the confusion of purpose caused by the Devil's relationship with Miss Barker's heroine. A passionate woman, frustrated by the death of her fiancé and by her marriage to an old man who is past love-making, Remember Winster is powerfully attracted to Horne, who falls in love with her. Out of fidelity to her husband and moral reluctance to go to bed with the Devil, she manages on several occasions (but only after the reader has been titillated by descriptions of her powerful desire to yield) to restrain herself in time. This courtship threatens to become the central plot of the novel. For her scruples and her knowledge of the conspirators' secret she must suffer imprisonment as a witch; she is rescued from the water during an extra-legal ducking only when the Devil himself uses his supernatural power to intervene. He gains her bed at last, but only at the cost of his pride; since she will not have him as himself, even after he has struck her husband with lightning, he is forced to appear as her lost fiancé, the miraculous survivor of a shipwreck.

Around this story of seduction Miss Barker places accounts of the real people who were tried and executed. But despite her efforts to put the two stories together, the connection between the problems of the real people and the struggle of Remember Winster seems tenuous. The Devil offers at first to abandon his assault on the village if Remember will yield to him, but the symbolic connection between this fantasy and an average citizen's responsibility for what happened is not clearly suggested. Finally, there is too little uncertainty among the characters; Remember knows positively
that the trials are a diabolical conspiracy, and the genuine issues are deprived of reality for want of genuinely bewildered people.

The greatest virtue in Miss Barker's approach to the subject is her willingness to look at the supernatural through seventeenth-century eyes. In an excellent scene during which the Devil conjures up specters to worship him at a Black Sabbath, and then disperses them in an instant, she approaches the effect of Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," and her heroine, like Goodman Brown, doubts momentarily that a human being can distinguish at all between the real and the unreal. For this kind of imaginative insight Miss Barker had the example not only of Hawthorne, but of Esther Forbes.

First published in 1928, and recently reissued, Miss Forbes's A Mirror for Witches is the best of these four works on witchcraft. It is a little masterpiece—as faithful as "Young Goodman Brown" to the seventeenth-century's view of demonology, yet more refined in technique than Hawthorne's story. Instead of choosing an innocent defendant for her protagonist, Miss Forbes portrays a guilty one. Written as though by an anonymous Puritan in the last years of the century, this is the story of Doll Bilby, a fictitious young witch who is executed in Cowan Corners (Salem Village) a few years before 1692. From the prose style, which suggests that of the Puritans without exact imitation, to psychology and the evidence, the point of view is consistently that of the late seventeenth century. Miss Forbes's technical achievement is prodigious. Her narrator never forgets his conviction that Doll Bilby was guilty, and yet the irony in this situation is consistently gentle. Miss Forbes does not burlesque him; her evidence, chosen with great care, is beautifully ambiguous: convincing evidence of witchcraft for any seventeenth-century observer, yet having quite another meaning for us. The author never has to intrude on the story, for the "true," scientific hypotheses or interpretations are made by a minister, Mr. Zelley, who later comes to deny that there are any witches and to die on the gallows at Salem. During Doll's life, however, even he must finally recognize that she is a witch, for she herself confesses the fact.

A Mirror for Witches is the story of how a witch is convicted in advance, for it reports carefully all the events which add to her notoriety long before she is officially accused. Doll is the orphan of
witches who have been burned in France. Adopted by an English sea captain named Bilby, she is eventually brought to New England. From the moment when Mrs. Bilby, apparently pregnant after years of marriage, believes her “child” blasted by Doll’s first look, a natural enmity exists between foster-mother and child, and Captain Bilby’s partiality for his Doll aggravates his wife’s hostility to her. More and more isolated by this hatred and her own perversity, the child is desolate when Captain Bilby dies, and she even comes to believe that she has caused his death. In her lonely, loveless despair she calls out to the Devil in the “wildness”; God’s grace has not come to her, and she is convinced that the Devil must be her god. She takes a lover whom she believes to be a devil but who is really the pirate son of a reputed witch, and she “marries” him according to the rites of hell. At the end she is accused of bewitching the sickly sisters of a rejected suitor, and she dies in childbirth in prison, deprived of all help because everybody, including herself, believes that she will bring forth a fiend.

But no outline of the plot can do justice to this beautiful novel. Miss Forbes’s fidelity to the lore of demonology, her fairness (despite a minor injustice to Increase Mather) to the trial judges and to Puritan beliefs, and her skillful presentation of Doll’s essential goodness make the book more moving than any of the others. The reader is forced to recognize not only this goodness in Doll, but also the overwhelming evidence of her guilt. The cruelty and injustice in this book are the more terrifying because the cruel and unjust people are not vicious or stupid; they are predestined to cruelty and injustice by all the circumstances of their intellectual environment. The novel does not lack vindictive people, nor does Miss Forbes fail to suggest that witchcraft trials served such people’s ends; but she has made Arthur Miller’s point more emphatically than he by presenting the Puritan’s attitude with the greatest sympathy and skill.