



## **The Manichean Ploy: Psychoanalysis, Political Repression, and *The Crucible***

By Kurt Jacobsen

“I always assumed that underlying any story is the question of who should wield power,” Arthur Miller told *Paris Review* in 1966.<sup>1</sup> “I still believe that when a play questions, even threatens, our social arrangement, that is when it really shakes us profoundly and dangerously, and that is when you've got to be great; good isn't enough.” So Miller in *The Crucible*, set in Seventeenth century New England and first staged in 1953 at the emetic apex of McCarthyism, journeyed both inward and backward in time in order to grapple with the civil obscenities perpetrated in the post-war wave of persecutions of suspected communists, fellow travelers and any seditious 'bleeding heart' who dared to disturb the reactionaries' universe.<sup>2</sup> Miller thereby squarely confronted Manichean tendencies both in (1) an American culture, whenever under crisis, that is bloodily keen to eradicate shades of grey, and (2) an intellectual fashion, far from extinguished, to split explanations of human action irreconcilably into those privileging inner turmoil over outer forces, and vice versa. Neither tendency sat well with this untamable yet soul-searching playwright.

So deeply inured were those contemporary theater critics to pervasive McCarthyism, and compliant with its crude coercive will, that few, if any, spotted or, if they did, acknowledged the conspicuous link between this costume stage drama and the aspiring Yankee Doodle Dandy jackbooters combing a cowed nation for easy prey.<sup>3</sup> Other savvier spectators knew very well what was afoot. A cast member of the first production recalls old friends crossing the street to avoid being contaminated with her leprous presence.<sup>4</sup> After a relatively short six-month Broadway run (compared to *All My Sons* and *Death of a Salesman*), several *Crucible* players, including E. G. Marshall, found themselves peremptorily penciled onto black lists. The FBI, true to spiteful form, never forgave Miller's soon-to-be wife Marilyn Monroe for supporting him, opening a vast and burgeoning dossier on the supposedly subversive platinum blonde bombshell.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Olga Carlisle and Rose Styron, “Arthur Miller, Interview.” *Paris Review* 38 (1966), p. 68.

<sup>2</sup> McCarthyism wasn't the sole handiwork of Senator Joseph McCarthy, but “the result of a concerted campaign by a loosely structured but surprisingly self-conscious network of political activists” and was “primarily a top-down phenomenon.” Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are The Crimes: McCarthyism in America*. (New York: Little, Brown, 1998), p. xiii.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Gottfried, *Arthur Miller: A Life*. (London: Faber & Faber 2003), p. 218.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Bigsby, *Arthur Miller, 1915-1962*. (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2008), p. 455.

<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey Meyers, *The Genius and The Goddess*. (London: Hutchinson, 2003), p. 149.

Some House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) targets, such as Hollywood screenwriter John Howard Lawson, were indeed rip-snorting, card-carrying communists (exponents of “twentieth century Americanism,” as CP leader Earl Browder overoptimistically pitched American communism during the Popular Front period).<sup>6</sup> Actor Lee J. Cobb testified that he and Lawson hilariously (though not at the time) took a futile crack at reformulating the Stanislavsky method to harmonize with communist principles. Yet most of these sudden pariahs either were never party members, signed wartime petitions or attended rallies in support of a then highly valued Soviet ally (who, after all, bore the brunt of the bloodbath war against the Nazis), or disenchantedly had dropped all contact with the Party long before the 'scoundrel time' during which they were charged and hounded.<sup>7</sup>

The impertinent fact that harassing a legal political party was itself an unconstitutional and presumably un-American activity was brushed aside by coarse power players in Congress (such as Nixon) and red queen heads of the secret police surveillance agencies (such as Hoover). No one dared mention this trifling detail without inviting intimidating accusations of harboring heinous Stalinist sympathies themselves. Almost as soon as the irradiated dust settled in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the 'commies', as the American Right defined them, were hoisted up to the status of the public enemy number one within, and were to be made spectacularly harsh disciplinary examples of for any potential pinko tempted to stray a millimeter away from John Birch Society straitjacket notions of patriotism. The vile Congressional ceremonies of degradation proceeded indiscriminately and at full-bore.<sup>8</sup> The fact that several Soviet spies were uncovered elsewhere, and a Korean War (1950-53) was going on, drained any hope of fair hearings for leftists or liberals.

Miller was acutely aware that the new red scare of McCarthyism was not a random hysterical outbreak or an aberrant moment of paranoiac conformity, it was at root a cynical power grab, or a consolidation of power, by the Right against feared progressive forces intent on resuming the expansion of the New Deal in the early aftermath of the War. That rather timid reform project was the primary target, and accordingly deemed satanically communist by implacable and well-placed foes. In November 1945 Harry Truman did press for universal health insurance - a single payer scheme - that Republicans resisted and red-baited to oblivion in an extremely expensive lobbying campaign.<sup>9</sup> Anyone glancing through newspapers of the era might detect a proliferation of red scare investigations arising as if to counter

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<sup>6</sup> Kurt Jacobsen, “In Cahoots: Cinema, Cynicism and Citizenship,” in Lloyd Rudolph and Kurt Jacobsen, eds. *Experiencing the State*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Whatever Lillian Hellman's egocentric drawbacks, and bristling contemptuousness toward Miller, (see comments by arch-enemy Mary McCarthy) she surely had the title of this memoir of the period right.

<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, the term first saw print at the cresting point of McCarthyism, see Harold Garfinkel, “Conditions of Successful Degradation Ceremonies,” *American Sociological Review* 61 5, (March 1956).

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.trumanlibrary.org/publicpapers/index.php?pid=483&st=&st1=>

Democratic Party moves toward social program expansion. The Right was and stayed riled. It would be fruitless to search the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (launched in 1952) - daintily devoid of recognition of the reality of class warfare - for an apt diagnosis.

Essential to the ensuing degradation ceremonies was the ritualistic naming of names, which Miller at 1956 HUAC hearings refused to do at the price of a conviction for contempt of court and confiscation of his passport (later reversed by a Court of Appeals in a less heated atmosphere), not to mention, 40 thousand dollars in legal fees. Any frontal attack on, or demurral from, McCarthyism at its peak was perilous, at least until McCarthy took on the Army and tangled with the formidable Joseph ("Sir, at long last, have you no sense of decency?") Welch. Blacklist historian Victor Navasky writes that Miller, no martyr, thereby took on the mantle of a "risk-taking conscience of his time."<sup>10</sup>

How did it happen? The inherently ambiguous traffic between personal experience and historical event is what psychoanalysis, at its best, ought to be geared to illuminate.<sup>11</sup> At a dinner party in 1951 Miller was appalled to witness otherwise sane and urbane friends take seriously McCarthy's accusations of treason against the likes of former Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman and Secretary of State George Marshall. Miller, aghast, recalled reading about the bizarre Salem witch trials in the mid-1930s at College when it seemed "like reading about creatures on the moon," which he forgot until "the whole attitude of the 1950s started to develop."<sup>12</sup> The Salem trials became the mythic but by no means imaginary stimulus against which an outraged artist could etch out a response to McCarthyism according to his predilections and needs, conscious and unconscious. "It was simply impossibly any longer to discuss what was happening to us in contemporary terms," Miller reflected much later, which hardly would have been true of adultery.<sup>13</sup>

How not to scribble a screed though, however worthy? Miller's guilt over his unraveling marriage handily offered an intensely personal device for pinning down all this writhing metaphysical and ideological material. Fellow playwright Clifford Odets, who named names, later rather self-servingly deemed *The Crucible* "just a story about a bad marriage," which it undeniably also was.<sup>14</sup> But what Miller strived to examine in *The Crucible*, apart from marital ructions and authorities run amok, is the difference - for writers of talent - between the daemonic urge to create honest art and the more anodyne exercise of mere craft in service of making a buck. Miller would not be gulled by Manichean explanations either of the witch hunts in the 17th or 20th century or of varied human reactions to them.

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<sup>10</sup> Victor Navasky, *Naming Names*. (New York: Viking Press, 1980), p. 355.

<sup>11</sup> See Kurt Jacobsen, "Paradigmatic Saboteurs: Eriksonian Psychohistory and Its Vicissitudes," *Journal of Psycho-Social Studies*, forthcoming.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Evans, *Arthur Miller and Psychology*. (New York: Dutton, 1969), p. 71.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2013/01/22/arthur-miller-on-the-crucible/>

<sup>14</sup> Gottfried, *Arthur Miller: A Life*, p. 211.

Miller was appalled at the instant ideological turnaround, producing a “paralysis” of spirit in a formerly lively civic culture. “A similar paralysis descended on Salem,” he wrote.<sup>15</sup> “In both places, to keep social unity intact, authority had to be hardened and words of skepticism toward it proscribed.” But just whose authority? Peculiarly, both demented crusades were led by Lilliputian figures such as the petulant teenaged Abigail or the sour inebriate McCarthy against some towering community figures (not excluding Eisenhower, in some accounts), which in the modern instance clearly signaled that no limits or niceties existed in the war of the far Right on any authority above themselves. What was at stake in McCarthyism was usurpation by self-styled rightful heirs of authority, not a rejection of it.<sup>16</sup> Clancy Sigal, a Hollywood blacklistee, writes of attending swanky parties as the war ended where tycoons and their minions openly bragged of plans to launch a full-scale assault especially on trade unions and any malingering sympathizers in government.<sup>17</sup> Were these gleeful well-heeled 'plotters' delusional? Not insofar as the material means they wielded enabled them to impose their definitions on the real world.

The onslaught was so stunningly successful that soon a “new cautionary diction, an uncustomary prudence inflected our way of talking to one another,” Miller attests. Miller elsewhere recalled the bluff cynicism with which Columbia Pictures boss Harry Cohn pestered him to change gangster villains in the Brooklyn Longshoremen’s Union in the *On The Waterfront* script into Communists, knowing full well from his (Cohn's) own hardscrabble background that it would be a travesty to do so, however much 'in tune with the times.' Miller indelicately declined. Miller was a stickler for empirical truth, but he writes revealingly of fatalists of all kinds that he was repelled by any view “that smelled of hierarchy and the philosophicalness that leaves evil undisturbed.”<sup>18</sup> Miller who viewed art and life in robust dialectical terms was unapologetically snared in his own apparent contradiction between aiming to portray human activity as tragic in cases where it was indeed the only outcome, and a withering hatred of those in the stalls (or on the couches) who refrain from acting to remove the social sources of tragedy.<sup>19</sup>

The artistic enterprise for him was one of testing oneself, putting on trial received wisdoms, biases, blinkered views and self-soothing moral stances in order to pry out truths hidden from oneself as much as, at the outset, from the audience.<sup>20</sup> This is self-analysis and arguably no less searching than Freud's. For Miller writing that strives to make a potent point at no personal expense is no better than socialist realist

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<sup>15</sup> Arthur Miller, “Are You Now or Were You Ever?” *The Guardian* 17 June 2000.

<sup>16</sup> On this theme see, for example, Michael Paul Rogin, *The Intellectuals and McCarthy: The Radical Specter*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1967).

<sup>17</sup> Clancy Sigal, *Going Away: A Report, A Memoir*. (New York: Dell, 1961), p. 306.

<sup>18</sup> Evans, *Arthur Miller and Psychology*, p. 57.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* p. 78.

<sup>20</sup> “The writer must be in it; he can't be to one side of it, ever.” *Ibid.* p. 73.

pap or the formulaic corn of TV drama (capitalist surrealism). If artists themselves learn nothing from the ordeal of creation, why should audiences bother?

Any play of depth requires a personal ingredient. Art may well be anything an insouciant Art school graduate declares is art, but art for Miller, wasn't cool in the sense of being detached nor arbitrary in the teasing sense of pop or conceptual art. The artist, in Miller's reckoning, flares into action when ignited by a grave crime, a smug deceit, or a cheapened depiction of life. So Miller, who watched in horror as friends were demolished by, or succumbed to, orchestrated bullying, needed a way to navigate the epidemic of betrayals around him - non of them more wounding than that of his close colleague Elia Kazan, a disloyalty which might well have been at least as traumatic as his own crumbling marriage. Miller, no hero, simply could not bring himself to rat out friends to appease the oily Babbitts striking their evil pious poses on the HUAC side.<sup>21</sup>

For Miller, as for Freud, inner conflict is never exclusively an inner phenomenon - immaculately isolated from the external world around it, saturating it. In the play, and in his dissection of McCarthyite antics outside it, Miller repudiates the ploy of Manichaeism, the easy explanation - itself black and white - for civil degeneracy. Everything interpenetrates, in Miller's reckoning, which does not mean no causes precede others or that some are more important than others. The erotic temptation of Abigail for John Proctor, one infers from Miller's commentaries, parallels not Miller's attraction to Marilyn but rather his doubtless shameful temptation, however brief, at HUAC to recant, if not join the posse too, as others did. Miller tapped this personal anguish - and, in a creative sense, exploited it - to add emotional electricity to Proctor's plight, who otherwise had nothing much to regret. Psychoanalysts, thus, may make overmuch of the personal marital parallel. Miller did not, I repeat, did not pounce on the red scare as a colorful backdrop to a tale of marital woes; rather, he mined his own comparatively trivial marital woes to deepen a tale about the red scare. For we tread a very tricky territory morally as well as theatrically. Erikson notes that in this precarious period Puritanism, a "system on the defensive," went <sup>22</sup>

beyond defining sexual sin for full blooded and strong-willed people, gradually extended itself to the total sphere of bodily living, compromising all sensuality—including marital relationships—and spreading its frigidity over the tasks of pregnancy, childbirth, nursing and training. The result was that men were born who failed to learn from their mothers to love the goodness of sensuality before they learned to hate its sinful uses. Instead of hating sin, they learned to mistrust life.

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<sup>21</sup> It in no way diminishes Miller that McCarthy's censure in the Senate occurred in November 1954 and there was reason for bold spirits, who still took grave risks, to believe that this latest American red scare was on the wane.

<sup>22</sup> Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society*. (New York: Norton, 1950), p. 293.

Proctor's wife is the conveniently if credibly curdled product. The likewise convenient sin of marital disloyalty plunges Proctor, still a man marked by a rigid culture, into a private Gethsemane that the persecutions alone could not have inflicted upon someone who, above all, displays a dogged decency. "Any hero whom we even begin to think of as tragic," Miller rightly remarks, "is obsessed, whether it's Lear or Hamlet or the women in the Greek plays." So Miller put himself to the ecclesiastical test (a crucible, as it were), injected his doubtless much milder obsessive guilt into Proctor, and mentally mounted the scaffold *in order to make the play work*.

Miller undeniably was Proctor in adulterous yearning (who was immune to Monroe?)<sup>23</sup> and in his stance against a fear-stricken community goaded by slimy power seekers, though in radically different contexts. Proctor's guilt on stage becomes riveting and redemptive. Would Nixon, or HUAC Chair J. Parnell Thomas, who wound up in prison for financial shenanigans right beside Hollywood writers he railroaded, ever feel a twinge of guilt for their deeds?<sup>24</sup> Evidence is scant on that score. Proctor thereby possesses, or is possessed by, an overweening conscience, for who else would have felt such torment, except perhaps Hester Prynne's hypocritical lover, though to no good end either.<sup>25</sup> The adultery spiced the civic tale but there is no striking drama without a genuine witch-hunt within which the distressed principals strive to wriggle free. If Miller, and indeed Proctor, enjoyed a blissful marriage, then the story would be a commendable bore, one of a stalwart if occasionally ill-tempered *mensch* lined up against the gathering forces of unreason.

The model, interestingly, for the finger-pointing Abigail was Mercy Short, a former Indian captive who emerged deeply tainted and shamed from a wilderness embodying primitive evil (and the untethered unconscious), attributed solely to demonic savages.<sup>26</sup> Here again it is unforgiving and arbitrary community standards that misshape the course of a human destiny. Would she have behaved as she later did if the community had received her with compassion and kindness? Then comes Cotton Mather, a model for the glowering judge in Miller's play, who for his own reasons colluded with Mary's contrived fantasies to brand, and rid himself, of certain unwanted locals.

This mutually advantageous collusion capped the travesty where Mercy and her high-spirited companions played on folk superstitiousness to divert punitive

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<sup>23</sup> Arthur Miller, *Timebends*. (New York: Grove Press, 1987), p. 307. See the "no contest" choice that swing band leader Artie Shaw made between analytical advice and trying to hang on to the sultry Ava Gardner in Anthony Heilbut's *Exiles in Paradise*. (New York: Viking Press, 1983).

<sup>24</sup> The so-called 'pumpkin tapes' (three rolls of microfilm) that Richard Nixon carefully had himself filmed examining with a magnifier during the Alger Hiss Trial turned out to contain nothing of relevance. Navasky, *Naming Names*, p.7.

<sup>25</sup> Frederick C. Crews, *The Sins of the Fathers: Hawthorne's Psychological Themes*. (Berkeley: University of California, 1989, rev. ed.), pp. 143-144.

<sup>26</sup> Richard S. Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier*. (Tulsa: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973), pp. 138-139

attention from themselves. Without a pliable judge she might have been contained and thwarted, but Mather was busy making a hell and brimstone reputation and taunting the residents that, without him, salvation slipped ever further out of their desperate grip.<sup>27</sup> These fierce yet feeble Puritans required stern guidance against backsliding, to resist the seductiveness of the polymorphously perverse wilderness beckoning nearby. There was no middle ground, just Manichean fantasies at malevolent play. Mather himself was a trove of disagreeable complexes worth probing, but the contest for power and property always was the highest, if disguised, priority in Salem.

Miller did not emerge unmarked from the harrowing HUAC experience. In the late 1960s Miller, if anything, would appear more glum and dispirited when he again beheld the intrusion of Americans blundering boldly among disdained “natives,” this time in Vietnam.<sup>28</sup>

We really don't believe any good will come out of this war but most of us go right on paying for it and will as likely as not vote back into power the men who escalated it to its present size . . . But there is no secret about any of this, and no lack of communication either . . . It is we who are burning down their homes . . . But we do not affirm or deny what is given us. We simply abdicate. Ours is the Age of Abdication.

The abdication he decried was that of what tenderly came to be called by conservatives the “silent majority,” which was a hand-me-down of the McCarthy era. Still, Miller was a bit too quick to judge what erupted into a decade (1965-1975) of strife and dissent and hope too, before the long, slow but steady counterrevolution of the next 40 years cranked into gear. The more it did so, the further Miller was elbowed out of the theatrical orbit, at least in the USA. The subtle yet swift resurrection of Dickensian-style capitalism, disarmingly adorned with computer chips, Walmart goods, housing bubbles, and credit default swaps, shoved him aside in a brusque manner that McCarthyism couldn't accomplish.

Miller, respectful yet wary toward psychology, firmly states that when “you eliminate the vital element of the actor in the community and simply make a psychiatric figure on the stage who is thinking profound thoughts which he doesn't let anyone know about, then it's a perversion.” To wonder whether the play “worked for him as a truly restitutive work of art” (for cloying marital guilt) is more a reductive hobgoblin that the unwitting consistency of the analyst imports into the fray than it is an operative aspect of the flesh and blood person who is choosing how to act within his stressful times.<sup>29</sup> Miller acknowledges that he has benefited from reading Freud,

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p.156.

<sup>28</sup> Arthur Miller, 'The Age of Abdication,' in Richard Falk, Gabriel Kolko, and Robert Jay Lifton, eds. *Crimes of War*. (New York: Random House, 1971), p. 478.

<sup>29</sup> Alan C. Elms, 'The Psychological Functions of Artistic Creativity,' *Clio's Psyche* 18, 3 (December 2011), p. 264. Worryingly, the only contributor in the foregoing forum of

Jung and others, and undergone analysis, so he is not indulging in a Manichean way of his own, but rather ruing it where it occurs in the work of certain paint-by-the-numbers shrinks. Dialectical work, in his rough and ready terms, certainly aligns well enough with at least some practitioners of the dark psychoanalytic arts, but not all or enough of them.<sup>30</sup>

One cannot help but gather from critiques of Miller's stellar Salem play that too many psychoanalysts cannot release a subject from the coils of social conformity without a permission slip, based on a deviant element in the subject's psyche, which can be traced in orthodox diagnostic terms. The mainspring of art "is the conflicts, preoccupations, and obsessions deep within the artist's psyche," a critical psychoanalyst retorts.<sup>31</sup> "But *The Crucible*, which focuses on the Salem witch trials of 1692, seems to be a drama about politics." Seems? The world is out there but our images and ideas about it are not. Why favor one side or the other, internal and personal, or external and political? That is the abiding dialectical question Miller insistently asks of all impulsive Manicheans in politics, psychotherapy and the arts, and it remains a powerful one.

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psychohistorians on Miller's Salem play who raises the concern of reductionism is a sociologist.

<sup>30</sup> "It's the relationships between and within the people, and these relationships are dialectical, that is, one thing sets off another thing, which in turn sets off a third thing, and ad infinitum to a point of catharsis, where there is a synthesis of these contradictions, and the work challenges chaos with form." Evans, *Arthur Miller and Psychology*, p. 55.

<sup>31</sup> James William Andersen, "The Psychology of Artistic Creativity: With Reference to Arthur Miller and *The Crucible*," *Clio's Psyche*, p. 253.