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The Seductress and the Hag: The Demonization of Women as Witches in Arthur Miller's The Crucible and Beyond

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## The Seductress and the Hag:

### The Demonization of Women as Witches in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* and Beyond

#### **I. Introduction**

Don't be promiscuous, but don't be a prude—the expectation for women's expression of gender and sexuality is a precarious balance, primarily defined by what it is not. This hypothetical ideal of expression lies in the ambiguous center of a spectrum between the two evils, the over-sexed seductress and the under-sexed celibate, though in reality women tend to be sorted into one category or the other as though it were a binary made up of two equally threatening categories. Historically, women have been criticized, targeted, and persecuted for their association with one side or the other of that binary; by categorizing a woman in either one of the extremes, society can dismiss her, punish her, and get her rebellious, revolutionary, or atypical ideas out of the way (Patterson 5). Nowhere is this pattern more evident than in the circumstance of the hysterical and irrational witch hunt, or its contemporary reiteration as seen during the Red Scare of the 1950s. In his 1953 play *The Crucible*, Arthur Miller connects both sides of the feminine binary to the image of the witch, and through an exaggerated reflection of the demonization of both types of women, criticizes the persecution of women through extreme archetypes.

#### **II. Historical Context: The Salem Witch Trials**

In the frigidly cold winter of the year 1692, nineteen citizens of Salem, Massachusetts, were accused of witchcraft, tried, and ultimately hanged. For centuries, historians have contributed different explanations for the tragic events of that fateful January. Some hypothesize that it was an economically incited tragedy, a product of greedy people coveting their neighbor's lands or goods, especially since the unusually low temperatures at the end of the 17th century lowered crop productivity and forced people to fear for their family's survival (Reed 216). Others suggest a religious- or power-based explanation, theorizing that Puritan reverends who caught and punished witches gained respect and credibility in their community (Leeson & Russ). Others still point to the social function of a "standardized nightmare" against which a community can assemble (Gershman), or as Miller himself posits in the intro to *The Crucible*, an excuse to publicize guilt and shame (Miller 7).

Though all these factors likely had an impact on the hysteria that culminated in nineteen executions, the cultural anxiety surrounding gender and sexuality was also a vital factor in the Salem Witch Trials. In hyper-repressed and hyper-religious Puritan society, masculinity was associated with the godly and the good, while femininity was tied to the Devil's temptation (Reed 210). Of the nineteen people sentenced to death for witchcraft, thirteen were women, and seventy-eight percent of all accused witches were female (Reed 216). Whether a result of biblical ideology or pure patriarchy, witchcraft was viewed as a manifestation of depraved female desire, an indication of the perversion of proper Puritan gender roles and expressions of sexuality. A woman's fight against the Devil's temptation was the ultimate test of propriety and purity, and the accusation and hanging of women who had succumbed to the Devil served as a way to symbolically punish female sexuality and repress women (Reed 223). Furthermore, by linking femininity to witchcraft, the accused women could be written off as inhuman monsters and thus

their community could sentence them to death without committing any perceived sins. This structure of sham trials, inspired by the fear of female sexuality and built upon the goal of demonizing women so they could be punished without compunction, is not confined to one winter in a tiny Massachusetts town—the same scenario has played out in many different contexts, including that of 1950s America with the rise of McCarthyism.

### **III. Historical Context: McCarthyism in the 1950s**

Much like the social climate in late 17th century Salem, the 1950s in America was a decade characterized by fear. Thanks to the Cold War and the looming threat of nuclear destruction, anxieties and suspicions were at a high. People worried that their acquaintances, their co-workers, or their neighbors might secretly be insidious Communist spies, seeking information to report back to the Soviet Union. Between the anti-Communist fear-mongering of Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy and the investigations held by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), mistrust was constant and trials were plentiful. Like the events of Salem in 1692, the HUAC trials were convoluted and illogical, forcing the accused to either confess and accuse someone else, or be punished. And just as in the case of Salem, the most obvious threat—under McCarthyism, the threat of Communism and the Cold War—was not the sole threat at the time.

There was a set of underlying cultural anxieties and frustrations that greatly influenced who specifically was accused of Communist ties. The commonly accused groups included members of Hollywood, high-ranking government employees, queer Americans, and, significantly, women. Though only three percent of high-level government jobs at the time were held by women, over eighteen percent of investigations into government workers targeted female

employees (Storrs). In the same way that apprehension surrounding sexuality impacted the gender of those accused in Salem, this disproportionate persecution of government-employed women by the HUAC was likely tied to anxiety surrounding American gender roles in the aftermath of women joining the workforce during World War II. Men felt threatened by the possibility of being emasculated by competent feminine women, or worried about being replaced by more masculine female employees (Storrs). Out of these concerns emerged two archetypes, later named by historian Landon Storrs, which the HUAC used to vilify the majority of women sent to trial: the image of the “domineering asexual,” an overly masculine wife or worker who was thought to subtly collect political secrets for the Communists, and that of the “irresistible seductress,” a manipulative femme fatale capable of seducing high-ranking government employees and bringing the information gleaned via sexual wiles to the Communist party (Storrs). The intentional exaggeration of these archetypes, and the binary they played into, allowed 1950s America as a whole to mythologize and villainize the women who appeared to match these stereotypes, making it easier to target them in a way that was startlingly similar to the tactics used in 17th Century Salem.

#### **IV. Introduction to the Text**

Playwright Arthur Miller famously took advantage of the extensive parallel between McCarthyism and the events of the winter of 1692 in Salem, Massachusetts: in his explicitly allegorical work *The Crucible*, he uses a slightly fictionalized and subtly satirical version of the Salem Witch Trials to criticize the illogicality of the HUAC’s anti-Communist trials. Opening onto the chaos of the town the morning after several of the girls were caught dancing in the woods, naively attempting a spell to re-enthrall one of their paramours, the play follows the

accusations and eventual executions of a large portion of the town. The play is primarily centered around three characters: John Proctor, a “good and righteous man” struggling under the guilt of his adultery (Miller 104), Abigail the orphaned servant with whom Proctor had an affair, and Elizabeth, Proctor’s wife who remains unable to move on from the memory of her husband’s infidelity. Significantly, as the play progresses both Elizabeth and Abigail’s actions characterize them as witches and allow them to fit the dual archetypes of persecuted women that Storrs proposed. The manner in which both women are demonized as evil witches in response to the threats their sexualities pose to the rigid structure of Puritan society, ignoring the complexities of their situations, draws attention to the insidious strategy of presenting women as monsters so that they can be more easily punished.

## **V. Analysis of the Irresistible Seductress**

In the context of Puritan Salem, where adolescent sexuality is aggressively oppressed, any divergence from the structure of patriarchy and religious tyranny is dangerous to the social order, and Abigail—the catalyst, accuser, and seductress of the play—certainly diverges. As a girl who does not comply with the Puritan expectation that women are subservient, pious, and passive, Abigail is a threat to Salem. In Miller’s play, a representation and a reflection of cultural anxieties, Abigail’s divergence is made extreme in a way that permits the citizens of Salem—and the viewers of the play—to condemn her.

Abigail is portrayed as an evil character, a label given because of her cruel and unrepentant manipulations. When Abigail is asked whether she, through her dancing and charm-making, sold herself to Lucifer, she “instantly” points to the enslaved Barbadian woman Tituba and responds: “She made me do it! She made Betty do it!” (Miller 18). In an essay on

feminine power in various works by Arthur Miller, Iska Alter hypothesizes that Abigail's accusation is powerful and feminine, enacted to "maintain some measure of control over their [the girls'] societal identities" (Alter 148). Though Abigail's accusations certainly grant her power and impact beyond that which a young woman in Puritan society might normally have, her actions are not particularly empowering in a feminist sense (Bigsby). Instead, they lead to the imprisonment and hanging of other women in the play. For example, in response to a line of questioning during the main trial centered on Elizabeth Proctor, Abigail facetiously yet seemingly guilelessly insists that "Goody Proctor always kept poppets" (Miller 96). Despite understanding, and likely even intending, that this accusation might send Elizabeth to her execution, Abigail shows no signs of guilt or self-doubt whatsoever. As the scene continues, the other girls do show signs of doubt—the stage directions describe Mary as "weaker," "weakening," and "inaudible," for example—but Abigail leans further into the farce, hysterically conversing with Mary's spirit in the form of an invisible bird above her. Thanks to Miller's historical note at the start of the play, viewers are aware that there are "no witches" in Salem (Miller 7), and thus Abigail's possession must be an intentional act. Abigail's complete commitment and lack of doubt in the face of deadly allegations make her seem blatantly wicked.

On top of the evil of her unrepentant accusation, Abigail is also presented as a witch through her agency in the execution of pagan rituals. During the girls' dancing in the woods, she is the one to drink a potion of blood with the intent to kill Elizabeth Proctor (Miller 18). Later, it is Abigail who threatens the other girls with veiled occult violence: "Let either of you breathe a word about [anything other than dancing] and I will come to you in the black of some terrible night and I will bring a pointy reckoning that will shudder you" (Miller 19). The darkest part of the night is known as the witching hour, a time when dangerous and magical rituals take place.

Especially so near the start of the play, the use of this time of night to enact a “pointy reckoning”—evoking the image of the same pins Abigail later sticks into herself to convince the town of the other girls’ malfeasance—presents Abigail as capable of using obscure magic to cause harm to others. It presents her as a dark and punitive witch.

Abigail also embodies the model of the seductive and openly sexual witch (Patterson), a characterization nearly synonymous with Storrs’ archetype of the “irresistible seductress.” During Abigail’s first on-stage conversation with Proctor, she uses a string of devious tactics within a few acerbic lines in an attempt to win him back. She first takes advantage of Puritan propriety, referring crudely to her prior sexual relations with Proctor in an attempt to evoke an emotion in him: “I know how you clutched my back behind your house and sweated like a stallion whenever I come near!” (Miller 21). Then she tries to exploit Proctor’s morality. As a man moral enough to be “haunted by guilt” for his adultery (Schissel) Proctor must be moral enough to pity a saddened or confused, and thus vulnerable, girl; by using the rhetorical question “Or did I dream that?” to facetiously cast doubt on her recollection, Abigail appeals to his instinct to allay that confusion. However, to answer, Proctor would either have to lie, or have to acknowledge—and revisit—the memory of their sexual encounter. Thus Abigail cunningly forces him to confront the reality of his relationship with her. Next, she places the blame on Elizabeth, villainizing her while victimizing herself: “It’s she [Elizabeth] who put me out, you cannot pretend it were you” (Miller 21). Finally, she refers to the pair’s earlier affection in an appeal to Proctor’s emotions: “I saw your face when she put me out, and you loved me then and you do now!” (Miller 21). In such a wide variety of rhetorical techniques used so rapidly, it becomes clear that Abigail is cunning, manipulative, and sexually forward—that she, rather than



the male and significantly older Proctor, is the seductress (Schissel). In her sexuality and control, she becomes the alluring and threatening witch.

However, in the emphasis on Abigail's evil and her characterization as a witch, her youth and inexperience are ignored. Schissel points out that Miller's portrayal of the character, as well as that of most staged versions of and literary criticism surrounding the play, maintains and even draws attention to Abigail's greed and culpability, yet fails to take issue with the fact that she is a seventeen-year-old girl. Though critics tend to condemn Abigail for her promiscuity as well as her malicious actions, it is vital to note that while Proctor, a thirty-year-old man frustrated by his distant wife and tempted by the traumatized and vulnerable young girl living in his house (Balti), is the perfect candidate for extramarital relations, Abigail is a girl who likely had little to no sexual experience before that with Proctor (Schissel). Additionally, though neither Miller's portrayal nor critics' receptions draw attention to it, many of Abigail's actions could be rationalized as childish fancy. Casting a love spell with friends in the woods is a rebellious and quintessentially adolescent thing to do; it belongs as much to the realm of young girls exploring the world through games, as to that of real and malicious witchcraft. Similarly, committing to a lie out of fear of the consequences of confessing is a behavior typical of young adults whose prefrontal cortex—the part of the brain associated with lying—is at the peak of development (Scientific American 2020). However, it is Abigail's manipulation and evil, her sexuality and her characterization as a witch, that are highlighted in her character.

Across literary criticism and popular opinion, it is far more common to see Abigail referred to as a monster and a seductress rather than a complicated catalyst victimized by her times, and critics and casual viewers alike join Salem in their willingness to condemn a woman who is characterized as a seductive witch. A 2023 Reddit user on a thread about Abigail's fate as

a historical figure commented that “We dont know what happened to her but I genuinely hope all those girls suffered before their deaths”; another describes Abigail’s psychological state as a “god complex” (Reddit). Though these are certainly not academic sources, they do relay a general cultural opinion of Abigail’s character, repeating the same criticism that the citizens of Salem made—they forget Abigail’s age, dismiss the likelihood of her fear of being caught, discount the possibility that she might be a victim rather than a femme fatale. In doing so, they change the image of Abigail from a complex and partially innocent threat to nothing more than an “irresistible seductress” and a witch. As the vitriolic Reddit comments prove, this demonization frees people from feeling a need to remain kind or moral in their persecution or punishment of such a woman, and instead allows them to view the accused as purely a monster—mythologized, extreme, and deserving of punishment.

## **VI. Analysis of the Domineering Asexual**

As a foil to Abigail, a woman on the opposing side of the binary from her irresistible seduction, Elizabeth Proctor is a character portrayed as threatening and evil through her lack of sexuality. She is presented to the audience as the villain preventing Proctor from achieving happiness through her inhospitality, and a threat to Puritan gender roles through her masculinity, presentations that seem to justify her punishment at the end of the play. On a second level, within the plot itself, Abigail’s acting as though Elizabeth were a witch reflects the same social phenomenon.

Elizabeth is presented as evil in her frigidity and her refusal to forgive her husband for his adulterous transgression. In a domestic scene where Elizabeth remains cold and aloof despite Proctor’s attempt at warmth, he finally breaks down:

Spare me! You forget nothin' and forgive nothin'. Learn charity, woman. I have gone tiptoe in this house all seven months since she is gone. I have not moved from there to there without I think to please you, and still an everlasting funeral marches round your heart. I cannot speak but I am doubted, every moment judged for lies, as though I come into a court when I come into this house. (Miller 52)

Proctor's plea that Elizabeth "spare" him suggests that Elizabeth has been subjecting him to some punishment, an impression augmented by the idea of the torturous length of "all seven months." Proctor also characterizes his wife as frigid and prudish by evoking the metaphors of a funeral and a court, two cold and passionless places. This torturous passionlessness is further echoed by the idea of inhospitality, symbolically reinforced by Elizabeth's not adequately fulfilling Puritan household needs. Earlier in the same scene as Proctor's outburst, he adds salt to his wife's stew while she is in the other room, apologetically requests a drink, and then proceeds to ask her why there are no flowers in the home (Miller 47-51). As Wendy Schissel points out, in the combination of his particularity and his apologetic tone, Proctor evokes sympathy from the audience—surely, doesn't a man deserve to be adequately fed and comfortable in his own home? In the process of sympathy being forged for Proctor, Elizabeth is presented as the character blocking his way to contentedness, the frigid and unfeminine villain whose unforgiving nature causes Proctor to suffer (Schissel). Elizabeth is the unsatisfied wife who refuses to make her home and herself warm and welcoming to her husband, and thus an unnatural and inhospitable woman embodying Storrs' archetype of the "domineering asexual."

Furthermore, Elizabeth's frigidity forces a subtle shift in gender roles within the Proctor household, challenging Puritan expectations. Proctor's need to tiptoe around his wife, for example, as well as his willingness to cater to her suspicion, are two actions typically expected of

a wife in a traditional marriage. Similarly, in the case of the salt, the drink, and the flowers, Proctor takes the typically female responsibility in his request for warmth and femininity in his home. Thus Elizabeth, as the prudish and overly masculine “domineering asexual” wife, prompts a reversal of gender roles and challenges Proctor’s masculinity. In the context of Puritan society, where gender roles and expectations of sexuality were extremely rigid, even this subtle reversal is threatening to the social order, and one way in which Elizabeth embodies the image of the witch. This villainous frigidity and threatening masculinity, extreme to the point of casting her as a witch, is what rationalizes Elizabeth’s punishment at the end of the play. Imprisoned, pregnant, and scheduled to hang once her child is born, Elizabeth is the one to apologize to her husband, telling him that “it needs a cold wife to prompt lechery” (Miller 126). If Elizabeth had not previously been depicted as evil in her frigidity, apologizing to her husband for his adultery would seem absurd. Yet apologize she does, an arguably necessary action which redeems her character. The necessity of this logically absurd apology in order for her to receive redemption is evidence of the power of presenting a woman as a witch.

This same absurd phenomenon can be seen through Abigail and Elizabeth’s relationship within the play; Elizabeth’s connection to the image of the hag, the aged and sexless witch, is mostly prompted by Abigail herself. Near the start of the play, she calls Elizabeth “a cold, sniveling woman” (Miller 22) before literally accusing her of being a witch; as Elizabeth says: “There be a thousand names; why does she call mine? [...] She thinks to take my place, John” (Miller 58). The allegations are made because Abigail is jealous of Elizabeth, threatened by her proximity and claim to Proctor. Manvir Singh, in an essay on witches, explains this phenomenon: “Actors bent on eliminating rivals devise demonizing myths to justify their rivals’ mistreatment” (Singh 3). This is precisely what Abigail does, in a way that renders Elizabeth’s considerable

goodness irrelevant. Though Elizabeth does display some maternal love—her final request before imprisonment is to “tell the children I have gone to visit someone sick” (Miller 74)—and loyalty to her husband—she feels “agony” at the thought of publicizing his infidelity in the trial (Miller 105)—the court still condemns her. By presenting Elizabeth as a prude and a witch, Abigail is able to layer an accusation of malfeasance (Miller 72) atop the already present characterization as a sexless hag. Through this presentation, Abigail condemns Elizabeth to trial, negating the threat she poses.

## **VII. Parallel to 1950s McCarthyism**

“The monster prevents mobility,” posits scholar Jeremy Cohen in his 1996 book *Monster Theories* (Cohen 12). Labeling something as monstrous categorizes it as evil and other, and thus permits its punishment and eradication. This principle, so clear in *The Crucible* itself, can also be readily applied to the McCarthyist persecution of specific and real women in the 1950s. Just as the portrayal of Abigail as irresistibly seductive and unrepentantly monstrous allows her Puritan society to condemn her, so the characterization of real-world 1950s women into the archetype of the “irresistible seductress” allowed them to be dismissed and persecuted without compunction. This connection between seductive presentation and villainization is evident in the arrest and trials of actress Dorothy Comingore, who was best known for her role as Susan Alexander in the 1941 film *Citizen Kane*, an actress in the public eye who had a complicated and non-traditional relationship with her family (The Ada Weekly News). In October of 1952, Comingore was called before the HUAC and asked if she was a communist; she pleaded the First and Fifth Amendments and refused to answer their question (Film Culture, 65-67). That spring, she was arrested on the charges of prostitution (LA Times). During her trial she testified that she had

been framed after accepting a friendly ride home, yet the two undercover deputies who had allegedly posed as her customers maintained that she had offered to “find a dark place to go” in exchange for ten dollars (LA Times, Chester Times). After the trial, Comingore commented that “I wouldn’t have said a thing like that. This is all part of my being an ‘unfriendly witness’ [to the HUAC]” (Chester Times). However, it was too late. By casting her as a prostitute, the American Justice System was able to discredit and villainize Comingore, effectively devaluing her perspective and terminating any threat she might otherwise pose as a visible and non-conventional woman in popular culture.

A similar parallel exists for the other side of the binary of sexual female evil. Just as Abigail accuses Elizabeth of witchcraft by emphasizing traits that signified the archetypes of the hag, so other 1950s women were cast as the “domineering asexual,” rendering it easier for society to fear and condemn them. A *Vogue* article from 1949, telling the dramatized story of a man’s search for a new secretary—a search fraught with unappealing women—presents a clear example of this via a fictional woman (who is also, ironically, named Dorothy):

“And then came Dorothy Travis, tailor-made suit, neat brown hair, short, unpolished nails, cold gray eyes, and abrupt, ruthless drive of a matron at Dachau. From the instant she came into the room she tried to put Joe on the defensive—it was an old trick and Joe had caught on to it at once. They fenced for a few minutes, sizing each other up like a couple of wrestlers, then Joe turned and with a half smile looked out of the window. I’d better get rid of this one he thought. If I don’t she’s likely to end up sitting at my desk and I’ll be taking dictation from her.” (Vogue 117)

The description of this woman is laden with words that evoke masculinity or asexuality. The author mentions the male-dominated sport of fencing, and also compares Dorothy to a wrestler.

Furthermore, since polished fingernails and soft curls were symbols of pretty and curated femininity, “unpolished nails” and “neat brown hair” defeminize the character, while her “cold gray eyes” and “abrupt” demeanor present her as overpowering. Startlingly, the archetypal character is presented as monstrous via the rhetoric that compares her to a “matron of Dachau.” In the period following the Second World War, such a figure of domineering German control would have immediately seemed unequivocally evil to American readers; this combination of masculinity and demonization allows for the story’s protagonist to “get rid of” Dorothy without hesitation.

Even everyday women during the Red Scare were forced to exaggeratedly distance themselves from the domineering archetype. In an oral interview, writer and political organizer Susan Griffin reflected on a woman she remembered from her childhood, who agreed to testify before the HUAC: “Sylvia had two sons to support, so when they brought her in she gave information about him, not because she wanted to cooperate, but because she didn’t want to be blacklisted because she was the sole support for these two boys” (Griffin 7). Though Griffin was a child during Sylvia’s testimony, the connection between motherhood and salvation, and thus between domineering selfishness and demonization, was clear even to her. If Sylvia had not embraced her motherhood, it would have been far too easy for the HUAC to demonize her and condemn her to the social disgrace and employment blacklisting that many modern or progressive women in her era suffered (Kaklamanidou 33). Had she demonstrated competent directness or confident femininity—modern characteristics capable of revolutionizing American culture or gender roles—without tempering them with the more palatable role of the caring mother, she too would likely have been presented as monstrous. Whether cast as threateningly

domineering or threateningly sexual, her potential for engendering social change would have been negated.

## **VIII. Conclusion**

While a hysteria of condemnation and paranoia can be considered a “Dionysian surrender to the irrational,” as scholar Christopher Bigsby puts it, the social phenomenon of the witch hunt has too many logical roots to be explained away by mythological irrationality. Both in *The Crucible* and in real events that occurred during the 1950s in America, the characterization of women as witches allowed them to be freely persecuted, the threat they posed thus eradicated. Using the same subtle satire typical in his plays, Miller highlights the absurdity of this phenomenon. He exaggerates the villainization of “dominant” or “irresistible” women, drawing attention to the absurdity and danger of the demonization that was actively occurring in the 1950s. Characterizing women as “witches,” Miller demonstrates through his depictions of Abigail and Elizabeth, is just another way to halt the progress and justify the punishment of unconventional women.



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