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Deconstructing Gender Identities in Nicholas Hytner's *The Crucible*¹

Nicholas Hytner's film *The Crucible* (1996), based on Arthur Miller's play of the same name was, to say the least, painful. Seeing this historical phenomenon reduced to a love triangle among John Proctor, Elizabeth Proctor, and Abigail Williams was infuriating. Beyond the historical inaccuracies that plague every film that attempts to depict a historical event, Hytner's production was difficult to watch because, despite the fact that it did not explicitly claim to be based on true events, the story of *The Crucible* continues to be the American public's most common interpretation of the Salem witchcraft crisis of 1692. By analyzing the gender dynamics created by Miller and reproduced by Hytner—using Miller's screenplay—I will demonstrate that the gender biases portrayed in *The Crucible* are not only a distorted representation of Salem, but also a product of late-twentieth century societal values. Furthermore, by deconstructing the historical characters as they were portrayed in Hytner's film, I will show that close scrutiny of *The Crucible* is necessary precisely because of how these works have managed to shape the public's understanding of Salem history throughout the decades.

Abigail Williams, John Proctor and Elizabeth Proctor: A Love Triangle

Both renditions of *The Crucible* agreed on one thing: Abigail was the evil child responsible for John's and several other people's hangings.² Even though in the film John is thirty five and Abigail seventeen (the real John Proctor was 60 when he was hanged, while

¹ From here on, I will be using *The Crucible* when my analysis applies to both, Hytner's and Miller's work. When referring only to the film, I will attribute it to Hytner, and when referring exclusively to the play, I will attribute it to Miller.

² From here on, I will refer to John Proctor as John, Elizabeth Proctor as Elizabeth, and Abigail Williams as Abigail when describing a scene from the film or the play. When referring to these characters by their full names, I will be discussing the historical events of 1692.

Abigail Williams was only 12), the eventual mayhem that ensued in Salem was *her* fault for using her body to tempt and seduce him, and not *his* fault for acceding to an affair with someone half his age.

Female sexuality was, indeed, a recurring theme during the witch trials of 1692, but it was not as explicit as Hytner's film portrayed it to be. Rather, as Elizabeth Reis argues in *Damned Women*, the threat of female sexuality stemmed from the idea that the soul was feminine, and it needed to be claimed by a masculine entity: God or Satan.³ In Puritan New England women were deemed to be the weaker gender and it was assumed that their souls were more vulnerable to Satan's temptations because their bodies were not as strong as those of men. Reis observed, "A woman's feminine soul, jeopardized in a woman's feminine body, was frail, submissive, and passive —qualities that most New Englanders thought would allow her to become either a wife to Christ or a drudge to Satan."⁴ This inherent weakness meant that women and womanhood were associated with evil. Reis further argued that once a woman became a witch, her body did not belong to her as "Satan could take them [women's souls] wherever he pleased and use them as he wished."⁵

Once a woman gave up her body to the devil, she also gave up whatever little autonomy she was allowed in Puritan New England. Surrendering the body implied an indirectly sexual relationship to the devil and his creatures. Accusatory testimonies often showed a fear of female sexuality, reflecting the association of womanhood with evil. The testimonies that mentioned the creatures that sucked a woman's blood were often focused on sexual organs, most commonly

³ Elizabeth Reis, *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 93.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 114.

breasts.⁶ Moreover, whereas the devil took several different shapes, when an accuser claimed that a specter had assaulted him or her sexually (sexual accusations mostly came from men), regardless of how subtle this sexual implication was, these assaults were always carried out by the devil in the shape of a woman.⁷

In *The Crucible*, particularly in Hytner's film, female sexuality was not a subtle threat; rather, it was the sole driving force behind the tragedy that befell Salem. Abigail's behavior was completely determined by John's actions. She lusted for John and was willing to do anything to *have* him.⁸ This was established during the first scene, where Abigail and other girls from Salem participated in a ritual intended to attract husbands. During the ritual, Abigail drank blood, believing that this would kill Elizabeth and allow her to be with John.⁹ Thus, in Hytner's film Abigail became the archetypical *femme fatale* that destroyed the Proctors' marriage and happiness. The image of Abigail as the evil child was further emphasized in two scenes that differ greatly from Miller's original work. In the movie, after John realized that Abigail had accused his wife of witchcraft, he confronted Abigail and told her that their affair was over. John's respect for Elizabeth made Abigail jealous, and she decided to stab herself with a pin, fabricating the evidence used to accuse Elizabeth of witchcraft.¹⁰ While in the play Abigail did stab herself a pin, she did not meet with John beforehand, but afterward.¹¹ In the play the pin was one of Abigail's many attempts to sustain the credibility of her own accusations, whereas in the film it was the direct result of John's rejection. Additionally, in one of the film's final scenes, Abigail approached John while he was in prison to explain to him that she never intended for her

⁶ Ibid., 115.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ It is important to note that in the film Abigail wanted to *have* John as if he were a possession. It was never really implied that she *loved* him, further contributing to her portrayal as evil and manipulative.

⁹ *The Crucible*, directed by Nicholas Hytner (1996; Beverly Hills, CA: Twentieth Century Fox Entertainment, 2004), DVD.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Arthur Miller, *The Crucible* (New York, NY: Penguin Group USA, 2003), 2.

accusations to hurt him.¹² Abigail then reiterated her feelings for John and asked him to run away to Barbados with her, but John rejected her once again. In Miller's play, Abigail ran away, but she never approached John before leaving. Instead, she leaves with one of the afflicted girls.¹³ Juxtaposing the play and the film shows that whereas in the film Abigail was completely consumed by her obsession with John, in the play she still had some agency and was able to act independently.

In both versions of *The Crucible*, but especially in Hytner's film, John was not meant to be seen as a man who cheated on his wife with a child. Instead, John was the victim; the tragic hero who experienced terrible agony between these women, and who was only liberated in death. Essentially, the film blamed the victims, in this case Abigail and Elizabeth, and it exempted John from any responsibility in the witchcraft crisis. Abigail, at seventeen, was one of the oldest afflicted girls, yet John, and the community at large, still considered her to be a child. Regardless, the blame fell on Abigail, the child, and not on John, the adult man that consented to a relationship with her.¹⁴ Likewise, Elizabeth was guilty because as a wife, she failed to keep her husband content, leading him to seek affection in someone else.

In particular, Hytner's portrayal of Abigail is problematic because of what it says about the society in which the film was produced. The film instigated anger towards Abigail and sympathy for John. The Proctors—and town of Salem as a whole—were victims of Abigail's ploy. The film did not leave room for the viewer to question how a seventeen year-old girl raised in a Puritan society was able to seduce a much older man. John's actions were portrayed as

¹² Hytner, *The Crucible* film.

¹³ Miller, *The Crucible*, 115.

¹⁴ Throughout the film, John referred to Abigail as "Abby" or "child." Shortening Abigail's name served to emphasize that Abigail was not an adult, even though she wanted to be considered one. This was further emphasized by Abigail's anger when John called her a "child."

natural: he was married to Elizabeth, a frigid, unforgiving woman, who left him no choice but to look for warmth in Abigail.¹⁵

Hytner's portrayal of Elizabeth was as problematic as that of Abigail. Elizabeth's behavior was essentially used as a justification for John's relationship with Abigail, liberating John from any guilt regarding his contribution to this affair. Throughout the film there were several indications that Elizabeth was not a good wife to John. John seasoned the food she made for him, implying that she could not cook well enough, and he told her to bring flowers into the house because "it is yet winter here," alluding to Elizabeth's frigid nature.¹⁶ Additionally, Elizabeth constantly reminded John of his affair with Abigail. That made John angry because, as he told Elizabeth, he had already apologized for and ended the affair, and that should have been enough for her to trust him once again. The film suggested that because Elizabeth constantly voiced her disapproval of John's and Abigail's affair, instead of helping him reconcile his feelings for both women, she contributed to the conflicting emotions that John experienced.

The Hysterical Women of Salem

Through Elizabeth and Abigail, the film made it clear that the women of Salem were responsible for the witchcraft crisis, and this blame was further emphasized through the afflicted girls. From the very beginning, it is implied that Abigail was responsible because she drank blood during the ritual, after which Betty Hubbard became immediately afflicted.¹⁷ Looking for an explanation to Betty Hubbard's condition, Abigail accused Tituba, the black slave that conducted the ritual, of witchcraft.¹⁸ The other girls, fearful of Abigail, immediately supported

¹⁵ Wendy Schissel, "Re(dis)covering the Witches in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*: A Feminist Reading" *Project Muse*, 37 No. 3 (Fall 1994), pp. 461-473.

¹⁶ Hytner, *The Crucible* film.

¹⁷ Refer to page 3 for explanation about the ritual.

¹⁸ Although Tituba is depicted as a black slave in both the film and the play, historical evidence shows that she was actually Indian. See Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2002).

her claims that the devil had possessed Salem by accusing several other people of the same crime.

The notorious afflicted girls had no historical agency whatsoever in either version of *The Crucible*. Instead, they were simply too afraid of Abigail to tell the male adults that dominated Salem society that she was lying. This was specifically seen in the film through Mary Warren's character. Initially, Mary Warren, a servant at the Proctor household, was part of the group of afflicted girls. Once Abigail accused Elizabeth of witchcraft, John begged Mary Warren to recant her testimonies, but Mary Warren was afraid to do so not because of the legal repercussions of lying to the court, but because she feared Abigail's retaliation.¹⁹ Indeed, her fears were justified when Abigail and the afflicted girls accused her of witchcraft.

It is important to note that in *The Crucible*, the only accusers were the afflicted girls, and the only explanation as to why they did it was hysterics, a quality that all men in this fictional Salem seemed to lack. Some notable examples from the film of how the girls instigated fear in the town are the accusations against Elizabeth, which were presented as Abigail's revenge upon John; in Mary Warren's actions; and in the group of hysterical girls that followed Abigail's command. The real Elizabeth Proctor, however, was accused of witchcraft by various people, including several men. As Mary Beth Norton explains, Nathaniel Ingersoll and Jonathan Walcott first complained against Elizabeth Proctor, charging that she had caused harm to several people. Particularly, John Indian claimed in his testimony that she tormented and choked him so that he

¹⁹ Hytner, *The Crucible* film.

would sign the devil's book.²⁰ In addition, Elizabeth Proctor's accusation was not really surprising, as her grandmother was thought to have been a witch.²¹

Furthermore, although Abigail Williams did accuse both Proctors and she was among the original afflicted girls, her influence waned by the later stages of the 1692 crisis. She was still a powerful accuser and her testimony helped indict about seventeen people, including the Proctors.²² However, she was not the leader she is shown to be in *The Crucible*: Mary Warren, and not Abigail Williams became a powerful accuser in the later stages of the trials.²³

The film turned the afflicted girls into a cult and made Abigail their leader. In doing so, it completely took away the historical agency that these girls had in 1692. There is no reference to the Indian Wars that plagued New England during the time period and how these influenced the behavior of New Englanders by instilling a constant sense of fear and distrust of others.²⁴ The film does reference the factional divisions between Salem Town and Salem Village that Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum examined in *Salem Possessed*, but in the film the girls were never concerned with politics; they only wanted to please Abigail.²⁵ Lastly, there is no mention of how for these girls, witchcraft—and not sexuality—was the only method through which they could have an impact in a male-dominated community. Through their accusations and their fits, the girls were able to gain the attention of a community that often relegated them to servitude

²⁰ Bernard Rosenthal, et al, eds, *Records of the Salem Witch Hunt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 173.

²¹ Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2002), 71.

²² Bernard Rosenthal, *Salem Story: Reading the Witch Trials of 1692* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 41.

²³ *Ibid.*, 45-48.

²⁴ Norton, *In the Devil's Snare*, 11-12. As John Hall pointed out, Norton's book was published in 2003, seven years after the film was produced. This could explain why Hytner did not make any reference to this specific historical event.

²⁵ Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), *passim*.

and obedience. By portraying women as the only accusers, Hytner's work helps perpetuate the stereotype of the hysterical girls that caused the Salem witch trials.

John Proctor, Objectivity, and the Men of Salem

In *The Crucible's* Salem, men had two main roles: they were either wrongly accused, or they were the judges that determined whether or not someone was guilty. The absence of accusing men, even though there were several of them in 1692, showed that men were the objective ones in this community, and that they did not give in to the whimsical subjectivity that characterized women. John was presented as a beacon of rationality who questioned the trials from their onset (he, of course, knew that Abigail was lying because she admitted this to him). In 1692 John Proctor did openly express criticism of the trials, and this was precisely what landed him in prison. When the Proctors' servant, Mary Warren, showed signs of affliction, John Proctor immediately resorted to violence to make sure that Mary Warren would not testify in court. Thus, Mary Warren's role as an accuser did not begin until after she was imprisoned, where she no longer feared John Proctor. *The Crucible* refused to acknowledge the involvement of men in the 1692 trials, where women's complaints were only legitimized once a man backed them up. An example of this is Mary Warren: although she was afflicted before she was accused of witchcraft, the court did not know about it because John Proctor refused to represent her in court.²⁶ Without a male figure to defend her, Mary Warren had no legal grounds to initiate accusations against anyone.

The judges, all condensed into the figure of Judge Danforth, were equally objective despite their religious zeal.²⁷ Danforth constantly attempted to make fair judgments, and was only prevented from doing so because he was blinded by Abigail's scheme. Danforth's

²⁶ Norton, *In the Devil's Snare*, 74. Thank you to Jael Goldfine for pointing this out.

²⁷ The only man shown in a negative light is Reverend Parris. However, his belief in witchcraft is presented as concern for his child, Betty, and not an attempt to gain influence within the community.

rationality is demonstrated when John told him that Abigail was lying, and that he knew this because he had an affair with the girl. Giving Elizabeth an opportunity to support her husband's claims, Danforth asked her why she did not want Abigail as a servant in her home.²⁸ Elizabeth, wanting to protect her husband, refused to admit he had an affair with the girl, leaving the judge no choice but to believe that the afflicted girls were telling the truth after all. Danforth technically allowed everyone to give their testimony in front of the court, but because of Abigail's lies and Elizabeth's refusal to taint John's name, he was proven to be a just man. When Danforth realized his mistake at the end of the film, he, too, became a victim of Abigail. If he admitted that he was fooled by the girl, the community would question his authority. However, he could not let an innocent man die. Danforth asked John to confess as a justification to save his life, but the latter man chooses to die to defend his honor. By showing that Abigail's scheme had affected everyone in the town, including the judge, Hytner's film showed that men were inculpable.

It was indeed up to the male judges to determine guilt, and the credibility of the trials *was* threatened when Mary Warren confessed: the afflicted girls wanted to silence her because she could easily expose their façade, while confessing witches needed to discredit her spectral evidence, fearing that it could be used against them.²⁹ Mary Warren did offer an opportunity for the judges to question the accusers' credibility, but they chose not to do this, and instead continued to believe the accusers' testimonies. In *The Crucible*, however, the only opportunity that the judges have to redeem themselves is lost when Elizabeth defends her husband's name, and thus it is *her* fault that the trials continued.

The Importance of Pop Culture in Understanding Salem

²⁸ Hytner, *The Crucible* film. At the beginning of the film, it is explained that Abigail was a servant at the Proctor household, but that Elizabeth sent her back to her family because she had an affair with her husband.

²⁹ Rosenthal, *Salem Story*, 46

Analyzing *The Crucible* is difficult: on one hand, both versions produced a biased, historically inaccurate representation of Salem. Yet without Miller's play and Hytner's film the history of Salem would not have become as prominent in American minds as it did. While many scholars have focused on analyzing Miller's work, few have focused on the film. Hytner's work, however, is just as important as the original play because it forces us to reconcile the advantages of film as a historical tool with the inaccuracies and myths that it inevitably reproduces and creates.³⁰

Arthur Miller clarified that his play was meant to be a criticism of McCarthyism and not a historical representation of Salem, but he also claimed that even though he had taken some liberties with the characters, the play maintained "the essential nature of one of the strangest and most awful chapters in human history. The fate of each character is exactly that of his historical model, and there is no one in the drama who did not play a similar—and in some cases exactly the same—role in history."³¹ This explanation essentially negated Miller's statement that the play was not "history in the sense that it is used by the academic historian."³² By claiming that the characters played the same role in his play as they did in history, Miller indirectly told the reader that his play was, after all, based on a true story. The play, disguised as freedom of speech against an oppressive government, served as a representation of Miller's biased gender views and as a revelation of the sexual politics of the fifties.

But what does this say about the film version of *The Crucible*? Film as a medium is perhaps more accessible and arguably more entertaining than academic texts, but it creates an ultimate retelling of the past. In representing these events, films tend to focus on arbitrary

³⁰ I was able to find a few articles that discuss gender dynamics in Miller's play, but I could not find any that discussed the film.

³¹ Miller, *The Crucible*, 2.

³² Ibid.

individuals, giving them importance. When the conflicts of these characters are resolved, the historical event is also resolved.³³ In Hytner's film, peace is restored in Salem after John is hanged and Abigail escaped to Barbados. Because a film reproduces both, images and words, there is not much room for an individual to fully interpret the historical events a film claims to depict. Miller wrote the script for Hytner's film, but by the late nineties the story of John and Abigail was devoid of the political meaning that accompanied the original play at its conception. Thus, the film further "articulate[d]... [Miller's] universalizing tendencies with his misogynistic impulses, his tacit assumption of logocentric authority with his dramatic expression of phallocratic bias."³⁴ The film was an opportunity for Miller to expand on his misogynistic views by making women guilty from all angles: Abigail, of course, was evil because she used her sexuality against John. Elizabeth, on the other hand, was guilty because her lack of sexuality drove her husband to another, much younger woman. Meanwhile, Hytner showed his own gender biases by adapting the film almost exactly as Miller intended it to be, even though by this time scholarly literature about Salem had proliferated, and would have allowed the director an opportunity to create a more realistic portrayal of the witchcraft crisis.

As Robert A. Rosenstone argues, all history, including visual history, was —and continues to be— a construction, and not a reflection, of the past.³⁵ Thus, Hytner's production was not only influenced by the 1692 witchcraft crisis, but by the modern contexts through which society defined it. The film was produced in a society that was preoccupied with sexuality and morality more than it was concerned with politics. After the play was written and the political threat of McCarthyism subsided, sex became increasingly more prominent in the American

³³ Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 56.

³⁴ Joseph Valente, "Rehearsing the Witch Trials: Gender Injustice in the *Crucible*," *New Formations*, no. 32, (1997), pp. 120-134

³⁵ Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, 11.

mentality as it began to leave the private sphere, and feminist and youth movements throughout the world began to defend and advocate for female sexuality.³⁶ Sex, specifically as it pertained to women, was more relevant by the time the film was produced. Thus, the focus on Abigail's sexuality as the cause of all problems in Salem is not surprising. Beyond explaining the events at Salem, Hytner's film, in a way, serves as a cautionary tale for the alleged perils of sensual women.

Conclusions

While Hytner's film presented Salem to a younger audience and contributed to the cultural relevance of this event, it must be criticized for continuing to produce the gender biases that Miller created on his play. As films become increasingly popular in American culture, they have more influence in how the public understands history. By focusing on a fictional love triangle, *The Crucible* turned Salem into the story of a tragic hero, and it did not present the powerful political and psychological conflict that influenced the witch trials. Unfortunately, even though neither man probably intended it, Miller's work and Hytner's subsequent film have become the most commonly recognized versions of Salem history.

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³⁶ Popular student and feminist movements in countries like Argentina, Brazil, Germany and the United States emerged in the late sixties and early seventies and, among other things, campaigned for gender equality in several aspects of everyday life, including sexuality. Additionally, the United States saw a rise of feminist literature during this time. Miller's play was printed in the early 50s, decades before these movements.

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