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WEAPONIZING FAITH:
“SPECTRAL EVIDENCE” IN LONGFELLOW, MILLER AND TRUMP

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
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May 2021

Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores a particular type of irrational pattern-seeking — specifically, “spectral evidence” — in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s *Giles Corey of the Salem Farms* (1872) and Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* (1953). It concludes with observations of this concept’s continued and concerning presence by other names in Trump-era politics. The two works by Longfellow and Miller make a natural pairing because both are plays inspired by the Salem witchcraft trials (1692-93), a notorious historical miscarriage of justice. Robert Warshaw calls the Salem witchcraft trials, aside from slavery, “the most disconcerting single episode in our history: the occurrence of the unthinkable on American soil, and in what our schools have rather successfully taught us to think of as the very ‘cradle of Americanism’” (211). Spectral evidence plays a central role in *Giles Corey* and *The Crucible*; it is directly responsible for the conviction and execution of the main protagonists and several other characters in both plays. This thesis is particularly concerned with how religious and judicial authoritarians in Longfellow and Miller weaponize “spectral evidence” to establish cultural and legal hegemony through fear and by scapegoating a marginalized, demonized other. It is my contention that spectral evidence is very much with us today, operating under other similarly oxymoronic names such as “alternative facts” and “fake news.”

This thesis also takes issue with a common reading of *The Crucible*, and perhaps *Giles Corey*, as a play about the Salem witchcraft trials as a product of “mass hysteria”: “a collective phenomenon in which a group experiences delusions, fear and perceived threat.” That reading also seems to be a popular interpretation of the actual

Salem witchcraft trials (Blakemore). Certainly, I vividly recall the phrase “mass hysteria” (and, sadly, not much else) from my own junior high encounter with Miller’s play.

Perhaps this reading was considered more appropriate for impressionable schoolchildren than one that sharply critiqued religious and state authorities. The latter reading — the reading explored here — would have turned this play into provocative fare indeed. No longer would it have been a play merely about Puritan or even McCarthyite craziness; it would have gained a dangerous contemporary relevance. My contention, consistent with an elite theory of the state, is that Longfellow and Miller focus their concerns not so much on the populace but on the political and religious authorities who lead us. Certainly, mass hysteria is an important part of these plays and the historical witchcraft trials, but it is more symptom than cause. The verdict of “mass hysteria” should not be allowed to overshadow the state-driven authoritarian violence detailed and deplored by these plays.

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“When men yield up the exclusive privilege of thinking, the last shadow of liberty quits the horizon.” – Thomas Paine, Common Sense

“Attention must be paid.” – Arthur Miller, Death of a Salesman

WEAPONIZING FAITH:

“SPECTRAL EVIDENCE” IN LONGFELLOW, MILLER AND TRUMP

A young child sees life as a “great blooming, buzzing confusion,” William James said, but the process of becoming an adult involves making some sense of the world. We want to grow out of confusion toward understanding: “All men by nature desire to know,” Aristotle said in his *Metaphysics*. Human beings are pattern-seeking creatures, uncomfortable with uncertainty. Indeed, understanding our world – perhaps the ultimate goal of education – appears to be an evolutionary necessity. Evolutionary epistemologists argue that the idea of natural selection has always encompassed not only physical but also cognitive adaptation to one’s environment; early humans adapted by seeking to understand the physical world empirically in terms of cause and effect — that is, in terms of patterns. “As the American philosopher Willard Van Orman Quine observed, those proto-humans who mastered inductive inference, enabling them to generalize appropriately from experience, survived and reproduced, and those who did not, did not” (“Evolutionary Epistemology”). The human desire to discover patterns of understanding, however, is not always a rational process. “When we feel like we don’t have command of our own fate, our brains often *invent* patterns that offer a sense of self-control,” Adam Hinterthuer writes in *Scientific American*, citing a 2008 study by University of Texas researchers. “The brain will find patterns or images where none really exist.” Americans, it might be argued, are particularly susceptible to irrational pattern-seeking, given both the influence of religion in the country and America’s traditional reputation as a hard-nosed pragmatic people. They want answers – just the facts, ma’am – not bewilderment or ambiguity. Anecdotally, Americans seem

to favor movies that offer a solid resolution: no loose strings untied. As the director Paul Schrader has said, “American movies are based on the assumption that life presents you with problems. Most American films seek to solve the problems posed by their narratives, to resolve them in a way that all questions are answered and the spectator can leave the cinema with a clear sense of closure” (Schrader 127). More seriously, the American system of justice is based on, or at least supposed to be based on, a foundation of pattern-seeking through direct evidence or persuasive circumstantial evidence.

This thesis explores a particular type of irrational pattern-seeking — specifically, “spectral evidence” — in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s *Giles Corey of the Salem Farms* (1872) and Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* (1953). It concludes with observations of this concept’s continued and concerning presence by other names in Trump-era politics. The two works by Longfellow and Miller make a natural pairing because both are plays inspired by the Salem witchcraft trials (1692-93), a notorious historical miscarriage of justice. Robert Warshaw calls the Salem witchcraft trials, aside from slavery, “the most disconcerting single episode in our history: the occurrence of the unthinkable on American soil, and in what our schools have rather successfully taught us to think of as the very ‘cradle of Americanism’” (211). Spectral evidence plays a central role in *Giles Corey* and *The Crucible*; it is directly responsible for the conviction and execution of the main protagonists and several other characters in both plays. This thesis is particularly concerned with how religious and judicial authoritarians in Longfellow and Miller weaponize “spectral evidence” to establish cultural and legal hegemony through fear and by scapegoating a marginalized, demonized other. It is my contention that spectral evidence is very much with us today, operating under other similarly oxymoronic names such as “alternative facts” and “fake news.”

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Dreams and Visions

“Spectral evidence” is evidence based on dreams and visions, “evidence most often observable only by those afflicted” (Adams 16). As such, it does not seem in any way compatible with contemporary ideas of admissible courtroom evidence; indeed, the term is most associated with the Salem witchcraft trials. Considered rationally, “spectral evidence” seems a self-contradictory term, an oxymoron: “Evidence” suggests something tangible — open and available for independent inspection or review — or at the very least conceptually persuasive. The “spectral,” however, belongs to the realm of the ghostly, the imaginary and invisible. The

spectral, the supernatural, does not deserve the name of evidence; it is only a profession of faith: “Thanks to this arrangement, hallucinations, dreams, and mere fancies would be accepted in court as factual proof not of the psychological condition of the accuser but of the behavior of the accused” (Robbins 477). (Scholars trace the concept of spectral evidence to an infamous origin, the Spanish Inquisition, which was responsible for 3,000 to 5,000 executions over three centuries.) Because spectral evidence is make-believe, it cannot be refuted. It is the sort of proof for which there is no disproof. As a state Supreme Court justice in New Hampshire noted — in a 1982 case in which the justice detected a suggestion of spectral evidence — the admission of victims’ conjectures would be limited “only by the limits of their (victims’) fears and imaginations, whether or not objectively proven facts are forthcoming to justify them” (Douglas in *State v. Dustin*). It should be noted, however, that spectral evidence is not merely a lie. It is a faith-driven lie and seems to have the quality often of being strongly believed by the person making the claim of spectral evidence. With its connections to authority figures and religious or quasi-religious faith, spectral evidence often wields a particularly strong power over those who are duped. Longfellow and Miller, moreover, focus especially on the potential repressive power of “spectral evidence” when exploited by political and religious authorities.

Despite the obvious flaws of spectral evidence, it remains a historical fact that William Stoughton, the chief justice of the Salem witchcraft trials, accepted it into the courtroom proceedings. Significantly, spectral evidence “had not previously been allowed in New England witchcraft trials and was generally condemned by all authorities on the subject” (Bremer 31). Even for many who devoutly believed in the existence of witches, in other words, “spectral evidence” was a bridge too far – though not for Stoughton. Spectral evidence is at the very heart of the Salem darkness. The notorious trials were sparked by a few young girls in Salem who

accused several adults of being witches and casting spells on them – that is, the girls. In a more rational society, these spectral accusations would not be given a second thought. In the case of Salem, in the grip of religious fanaticism, these accusations were readily believed, and people were tried and executed as a result: “The one-year ordeal of the Salem witchcraft cases resulted in the imprisonment of 200, the execution by hanging of 19, and the death (by pressing) of one man, Giles Corey, for refusing to speak” (Adams 12). Significantly, the Salem witchcraft trials were an outrage chiefly against women, with 14 women executed and six men. It is a measure of the fanaticism of the times that two dogs also were executed, one as a witch, the other as a supposed victim of the accused witches (Blakemore). A long history of public repentance began shortly after the trials.

The witchcraft trials remain a unique and nightmarish episode in American colonial history. The term “spectral evidence” would seem, then, to belong safely to the past. Longfellow and Miller, however, resuscitated the notion of “spectral evidence” in *Giles Corey* and *The Crucible*. The two obviously saw “spectral evidence” as a core and sinister influence in the Salem witchcraft trials, perhaps a metonym or embodiment of the faith-based fanaticism decried by both Longfellow and Miller in their witch-trial plays. But why did Longfellow and Miller, writing 81 years apart, choose to take on the Salem witchcraft trials for their subject? Certainly, the plays can be read merely as melodramas about a shocking chapter in America’s past. It is almost impossible, however, not to read both plays as allegories for enduring, contemporary concerns, especially because Miller frequently encouraged audiences to see *The Crucible* as an allegory.

Longfellow Agonistes

It may be difficult for any contemporary reader, having been schooled in one of literature's most famous allegories (that is, *The Crucible*), not to apply the same allegorical understanding to Longfellow's *Giles Corey*. Both plays are bleak, sometimes nightmarish, dystopian even, with nothing resembling a comic interlude. Both end in tragedy, with the disturbing executions of two morally upright (if flawed) characters – and several others. It seems unlikely that either Longfellow or Miller wanted audiences to leave the theater comforted by the idea that the plays are mere period pieces, relics of the past. Their concerns about a repressive and persecuting society speak not only of the Puritan era but of the atmosphere of their own times. Miller especially takes great pains to explain himself, beginning the play with a long introductory narrative designed to set the scene, not only in a physical sense but in a psychological and philosophical one as well. He wants the reader to understand the mindset — the obsessions and complexities — of Puritan Salem. It is interesting that Miller offers more off-stage commentary in this play than in any of his other major works. Miller's comments are not merely a matter of stage directions or brief outward descriptions of character, as one might find in many plays. On the contrary, Miller talks at length about the characters' inner lives and the era of the Puritans:

They (Puritans) believed, in short, that they held in their steady hands the candle that would light the world. We have inherited this belief, and it has helped and hurt us. It helped them with the discipline it gave them. They were a dedicated folk, by and large, and they had to be to survive the life they had chosen or been born into in this country.” (Miller, *Crucible* 349)

Passages such as this one from the play's introduction may remind a reader of George Bernard Shaw's interventions — long introductions and philosophical discussions — in the latter's own

plays. These reflections in Miller's *Crucible* could be part of a narrative history or an essay about the Puritans. It's clear that Miller wants to get his point across; he does not want to be misinterpreted. At the same time, it's interesting, too, that Miller frequently mentions modern America's inheritance from the Puritans, as he does above. He is inviting us to remember that the Puritans are always with us. He is encouraging a contemporary interpretation of his Puritan play.

If *The Crucible* were merely a play about Puritan excess, if it were merely a period piece, it would not likely enjoy the enduring status of "classic" that it currently holds. Indeed, Miller warns the reader at the outset that his play is not a work of history; he takes considerable liberties for "dramatic purposes." A reader may surmise that among those "dramatic purposes" is a desire to create a durable work of art aimed at universal concerns rather than merely a lurid exploration of "one of the strangest and most awful chapters in human history" (Miller, *Crucible* 245). *The Crucible's* richness as a work of art, in fact, has resulted in a variety of interpretations that have changed through time, based on the local and contemporary context – a phenomenon Miller applauded. Early reviewers of the play took it for granted that Miller was thinking about Sen. Joseph McCarthy's campaign against people suspected of being communists. Miller certainly did not discourage this interpretation, and in his subsequent discussions of *The Crucible*, Miller made it plain that McCarthy was very much on his mind.

The allegorical intent of Longfellow's *Giles Corey* is less certain, though one plausible contemporary reading would see the play as a cry for reason and rationality in the midst of American Civil War and fierce national divisions over slavery. Expanding on the scholarship of Jill Lepore, it's possible also to see the central character of Giles Corey as a John Brown-like martyr, a victim of injustice and irrationality. Indeed, the very last word of the play, delivered by

Mather, refers to the just-executed Corey as a “martyr” — a realization that comes only moments too late.

Despite some similarities in the two plays, there’s little or no evidence that Miller knew Longfellow’s play; Miller speaks at length of *The Crucible* in his autobiography, *Timebends*, but doesn’t say a word about Longfellow’s lesser-known *Giles Corey* as a possible inspiration.

According to Longfellow scholar Christopher Irmischer, “It’s more than likely that Miller encountered Longfellow’s poetry in school, but Longfellow’s verse plays were never as successful as the poetry, so it seems doubtful that he would have come across *Giles Corey*.” Yet both plays (it should be mentioned that Longfellow’s *Giles Corey* is really a closet drama) share at least one overarching theme: They’re both highly critical of religious fanaticism — “this tornado of fanaticism,” as Longfellow put it in the play (610). In both Longfellow and Miller, religious fanaticism serves a particular political purpose – the brutal control of a society:

“(W)hen we see the steady and methodical inculcation into humanity of the idea of man’s worthlessness – until redeemed – the necessity of the Devil may become evident as a weapon, a weapon designed and used time and time again in every age to whip men into a surrender to a particular church or church-state” (Miller, *Crucible* 371). That Miller, an atheist, would launch an attack against religious zealotry is far less surprising than the similarly sharp critique by Longfellow, a Unitarian who often and gently extolled religious faith in his poetry.

Indeed, *Giles Corey* is a fascinating subject for scholarly examination not only because there has not been much research on this almost obscure work by a writer who “used to be both the best-known poet in the English-speaking world and the most beloved, adored by the learned and the lowly alike” (Lepore). The play, bitterly critical of Puritan fanaticism, is also of keen interest because it seems completely out of character for Longfellow, often thought of as a

“cloying” and “maddeningly genteel” poet of the masses (Lepore). In a postmodern and cynical age, Longfellow’s most popular poems — “A Psalm of Life” (1839), “Excelsior” (1841) and “The Village Blacksmith (1839), among others — can seem sentimental and preachy. And “Paul Revere’s Ride” (1861), with its numerous historical inaccuracies, seems an example of jingoistic poetic propaganda. But worse than that, Longfellow was and is known as “a schoolroom poet” whose elegant (unkind critics would say banal) rhymes made him accessible and easy for rote learning by schoolchildren, as in “Paul Revere’s Ride”:

Listen, my children, and you shall hear
Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere (Longfellow 362).

Or “The Village Blacksmith”:

Under a spreading chestnut-tree
The village smithy stands;
The smith, a mighty man is he,
With large and sinewy hands (15).

But what makes a poet easily accessible to children also diminishes his or her reputation among reading adults, Lepore argues: “For a poet’s literary reputation, to be read by children — and especially to be loved by children — is the sweet, sloppy kiss of death.” For Longfellow, a cliché seems unavoidable: He’s a victim of his own popularity. Perhaps it’s past time for Longfellow to be rescued from such a fate. A reappraisal might focus on Longfellow’s later years when he delivered such bleak tales as “Torquemada,” a story in *Tales of a Wayside Inn* (1863) set during the Spanish Inquisition, and another verse drama about fanaticism: “Judas Maccabeus,” included in the collection *Three Books of Song* (1872). Among Longfellow’s optimistic shorter works are poems that deal with darker topics: sorrow, death and doubts about the future of humanity,

including “My Lost Youth” (1855), “Mezzo Cammin” (1842), “The Ropewalk” (1854), “The Jewish Cemetery at Newport” (1852) and “The Cross of Snow,” the latter a sonnet of all-consuming grief for his dead wife, published only after Longfellow’s death.

And then there’s *Giles Corey*, burning with righteous indignation. That play and its companion piece, *John Endicott* — grouped together under the name *The New England Tragedies* — are “as bleak as anything Hawthorne ever wrote, and far more brutal,” according to Charles C. Calhoun, one of Longfellow’s more recent biographers. Both Longfellow plays concern religious violence: While *Giles Corey* looks at one man victimized by the Salem witchcraft trials, *John Endicott* centers on the persecution of the peaceful Quakers by the Puritans. In *Giles Corey*, Longfellow seems to question “the origins of the New England polity, even of Christianity itself” (Calhoun 235). The two Longfellow plays are “full of punishments that are either threatened or carried out,” according to Irmischer. “This is as dark as it gets.” Indeed, *Giles Corey*, with its religious skepticism, seems altogether more brave, profound and modern than Longfellow’s popular shorter poems. Certainly, Longfellow considered the play to be among his finest works and was deeply disappointed by its failure to attract the attention that many of his other works enjoyed. Perhaps the lesser-known *Giles Corey* could be compared to Mark Twain’s “The Mysterious Stranger,” an exploration of religious fanaticism that is overshadowed by Twain’s breezy, folksy and popular works as *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Both *Giles Corey* and “Mysterious Stranger” are works of maturity, written by men who had suffered significant loss in their lives. Their life-experiences may have left them with a deep skepticism and little tolerance for such products of religious zealotry as spectral evidence.

Given that Longfellow will launch a fierce critique of the Puritans in *Giles Corey*, it’s interesting to note that Longfellow and the Puritans *agreed* on a central mission of the Christian:

converting Native Americans. At the conclusion of Longfellow's enormously popular *The Song of Hiawatha*, the title character encourages his people to welcome the European missionaries and their Christian faith. *Hiawatha* is, or at least was, a much-loved narrative poem that romanticizes and sympathizes with Native Americans and their way of life, but the portrait is a complicated one: Longfellow seems to assume the eventual obliteration of indigenous ways of life. The Puritans, for their part, aggressively sought to convert some Native Americans while brutally waging war against others. Between 1646 to 1675, Puritans established Praying Towns with the specific purpose of converting Native American tribes to Christianity. The Natives who moved into these towns were known as Praying Indians. They were expected to give up not only their religion but also their hunter-gatherer lifestyle, clothing and rituals, and embrace a Puritan culture ("Praying Towns").

Religious fanaticism is Longfellow's *bête noire*, but he clearly is not simply anti-Puritan. His views on religion and the Puritans were complex. Indeed, 10 years before *Giles Corey* was published, Longfellow wrote *The Courtship of Miles Standish*, a Puritan romance of Longfellow's own ancestors, John Alden and Priscilla Mullens. It should be pointed out also that the victims of Puritan excess were, like Giles Corey, Puritans themselves. Nor, as has been noted, was Longfellow anti-Christian — even if, as Calhoun claims, he seems to attack Christianity in *Giles Corey*. *The New England Tragedies* were published along with two other verse plays in the book *Christus: A Mystery* (1872). Significantly, the two other plays are works of faith. *The Divine Tragedy* is a retelling of the Jesus story. *The Golden Legend*, meanwhile, is a dramatization of a medieval legend about Henry II and a devout young woman who is willing to sacrifice herself for him.

Yet, a strikingly different playwright presents himself in *Giles Corey*. The play opens with the word “delusions,” of which “spectral evidence” could be considered a constituent part, and ends, as noted above, with the word “martyr” — the end result of the delusions to which Longfellow refers. This is Longfellow agonistes, taking up arms against religious fanaticism.

Just as the play begins with the word “delusions,” so Longfellow repeats the word more than a dozen times in the play. In another author, this repetition might seem an example of sloppy writing; in Longfellow it seems intentional. He wants to emphasize the epidemic of delusion that afflicted Puritan Salem. Another often-repeated word is a kind of delusion — “spectre” (Longfellow’s spelling) or its adjectival form, “spectral.” This self-conscious repetition hammers home Longfellow’s obvious concern about religious fanaticism — an outlook, he implies, based on delusions. Longfellow’s view of Puritan fanaticism, like Miller’s, is certainly vivid and decisive. He writes bluntly of an authoritarian society, an unholy collusion of church and state:

Prologue: (T)he Minister and the Magistrate,
Who ruled their little realm with iron rod,
Less in the love than in the fear of God,
And who believed devoutly in the Powers
Of Darkness, working in this world of ours,
In spells of Witchcraft, incantations dread,
And shrouded apparitions of the dead. (561-562)

In a few words, then, Longfellow paints the major characteristic of Puritan Salem in broad strokes: an undemocratic society dominated by the authorities of church and state whose brutal rule is driven by fear and superstition. Longfellow makes it plain that the spectral-evidence-

supported “delusions” of which he speaks, and speaks frequently, are not mere harmless religious eccentricities but ideologies of public violence that “crushed the weak” (561) by establishing a rigid us-versus-them dichotomy — a phenomenon, I argue, that continues today. Megan Eatman has written about the powerful brutalizing the vulnerable (“crushing the weak”) by dividing and then conquering – “Violence clarifies the vision of ‘us’ and ‘them’: We are just and strong, they are dangerous and deviant” (2). Such rhetoric might have been spoken by the authoritarians in both Longfellow and Miller.

The extent to which superstition permeates Puritan society is illustrated in an early scene in *Giles Corey* that would be comical if Longfellow had any obvious comic intent. Cotton Mather, who represents the ministerial side of church-state authoritarianism, is journeying to Salem “to circumvent the Witches” when he gets lost in the woods. Instead of thinking this merely a case of bad luck, Mather immediately reaches for a spectral explanation:

Mather: Surely by Witches have (I) been led astray.
I am persuaded there are few affairs
In which the Devil doth not interfere.
We cannot undertake a journey even,
But Satan will be there to meddle with it
By hindering or by furthering. He hath led me
Into this thicket, struck me in the face
With branches of the trees, and so entangled
The fetlocks of my horse with vines and brambles,
That I must needs dismount, and search on foot. (563)

This is a society, Longfellow suggests, that cannot abide Occam's razor. The easy and most obvious explanation can never suffice; a misfortune must be chalked up to satanic influence in most every case. Mather "reasons" based on spectral evidence. His confrontation with the vines must be the Devil's work because, after all, he's on his way to Salem to thwart witches in their course of evil. Common sense might suggest that Mather has foolishly strayed from the path and walked into the branches of the trees; Mather, however, takes it for granted that Satan is fully in control, leading him astray and striking him with the branches. Significantly, Longfellow reveals the extent of Mather's superstition by having him muse that "there are few affairs / In which the Devil doth not interfere." Thus, the supernatural becomes not the last resort but the *first* explanation — superseding common sense — for any odd occurrence. This incident foreshadows the nightmarish leap of faith that will be used to convict and execute Salem's supposed witches.

It should be noted that Longfellow conspicuously commits a historical error by putting Cotton Mather in his play. Mather never attended the Salem witchcraft trials, though he wrote about them in *Wonders of the Invisible World* and is often blamed for not speaking out against them (Franklin 143). Longfellow himself researched the Salem witchcraft trials, so Mather's appearance in the play can only be deemed purposeful. Perhaps Longfellow, who it might be said believed like many nineteenth century writers in Truth with a capital "T," felt that the real-life Mather was guilty of literary malfeasance for acting as an apologist for the trials and the executions — rather than recognizing them, as perhaps a conscientious writer should, as acts of grave injustice. In addition, it seems that Longfellow wanted to emphasize the active and central involvement of the church in the Salem atrocities; Mather, a well-known Puritan clergyman, would serve as an ideal and recognizable symbol of autocratic religiosity.

Mather's counterpart, Judge John Hathorne, a magistrate representing the state side of the authoritarian church-state collusion, is even more convinced of Satan's control of unexplained occurrences: "The Devil hath come down in wrath upon us, / And ravages the land with all his hosts" (Longfellow 566). Mather, in fact, warns Hathorne of the dangers of an "excess of zeal." Hathorne, for his part, sees doubt and caution as weakness:

Hathorne: For one, I do not fear excess of zeal.

What do we gain by parleying with the Devil!

You reason, but you hesitate to act!

Ah, reverend sir! Believe me, in such cases

The only safety is in acting promptly.

'Tis not the part of wisdom to delay

In things where not to do is still to do

A deed more fatal than the deed we shrink from,

You are a man of books and meditation,

But I am one who acts. (508)

Judge Hathorne, in short, is hardly "sober as a judge." He makes a virtue of rashness and zealotry rather than extolling the sort of dispassionate approach and deliberate weighing of evidence that would seem appropriate for a judge. In the passage above, in fact, he expresses several alarming ideas that would seem anathema to the ideal impartial magistrate. For one, he's clearly superstitious, disdainful of slow, calm deliberation. He specifically downplays the role of "reason" — which presumably should be at the very heart of a judicial proceeding — as well as reason's accoutrements: books and meditation, two aids to calm deliberation.

Hathorne is true to his word, displaying an “excess of zeal.” He is given to extravagant leaps of faith. When brought before a young, ailing Mary Walcot, Hathorne immediately infers the work of Satan, proclaiming to Mather: “You now see/ With your own eyes, and touch with your own hands,/ The mysteries of this Witchcraft” (570). Hathorne is particularly gullible when it comes to spectral evidence. When Mary claims that Goodwife Bishop is torturing her — even though Bishop is not present in the room — Hathorne immediately believes this spectral evidence rather than questioning the girl’s veracity or whether she is suffering a delusion or disease-provoked hallucination: “The spectre is invisible / Unto our grosser senses, but she (Mary) sees it” (571). Jonathan Walcot, Mary’s brother, then strikes into the air with his sword, attempting to defend his sister from this “spectre”: “There’s nothing there!” he exclaims, again in a scene that could very well be played as high farce if Longfellow were not so deadly serious. Hathorne has a quick explanation, again evoking spectral evidence: “The laws that govern / The spiritual world prevent our seeing / Things palpable and visible to her (Mary). / These spectres are to us as if they were not” (572). Hathorne clearly does not want reality to interfere with what today we would refer to as his confirmation bias. Hathorne, even more than Mather, wishes to see witchcraft at work, and so every detail must be distorted to draw that conclusion.

Jumping to Spectral Conclusions

When we first meet Giles Corey, we see that he, too, believes strongly in witchcraft — ironically so, because he eventually will be the tragic victim of witchcraft hysteria. Corey’s cattle are behaving oddly, and Corey immediately jumps to a supernatural conclusion: “The cattle are bewitched. / They are broken loose and making for the woods.” Corey’s wife Martha, also destined to become a victim of the witch hunts, responds as the voice of reason: “Why will you harbor such delusions, Giles?” — employing the play’s oft-repeated word “delusions” (574).

Longfellow, speaking through Corey, offers a brief explanation for Puritan zealotry and superstition: all-consuming devotion to a literalist interpretation of the Bible:

Corey: Surely what's in the Bible must be true.
Did not an Evil Spirit come on Saul?
Did not the Witch of Endor bring the ghost
Of Samuel from his grave? The Bible says so. (575)

Martha, again the voice of reason, responds:

That happened very long ago...
If in His providence He once permitted
Such things to be among the Israelites,
It does not follow He permits them now... (575)

Martha signals, early on, that a bit of doubt, critical thinking and just common sense might have averted the tragedy to come. She hopes that the seafaring man Richard Gardner will “bring with him / A gale of good sound common sense, to blow / The fog of these delusions” away (576).

When on trial for witchcraft, Martha will boldly exclaim, “I do not believe / In any witchcraft. It is a delusion” (589). Martha will pay dearly for daring to think for herself amid witchcraft hysteria.

Mather and Hathorne, despite their obvious zeal, have a moment of doubt concerning spectral evidence themselves:

Mather: May not the Devil take the outward shape
Of innocent persons? Are we not in danger,
Perhaps, of punishing some who are not guilty?
Hathorne: As I have said, we do not trust alone

To spectral evidence. (586)

This would be a comforting exchange — the idea that Mather and Hathorne are not completely irrational — if only it were true. Longfellow suggests that this is an utterly hypocritical exchange; the play itself argues that Mather and Hathorne were only too willing to accept spectral evidence as conclusive. (The real Mather's relationship to spectral evidence seems complicated: He expressed doubts about spectral evidence while also seeming to act as an apologist for the witchcraft trials in *The Wonders of the Invisible World*.)

Why did Longfellow choose Corey as the symbols of the 20 executed victims of the witchcraft trials? The historical Giles Corey may have seemed a particularly sympathetic character: for one, he was 81 years old, and Longfellow, though he does not mention Corey's age, does make it plain that Corey is quite old. Also, Corey was unique: of all the victims of the Salem witchcraft trials, he was the only one who was not hanged. Instead, for refusing to enter a plea of either guilty or not guilty, he was pressed to death under the weight of heavy stones — but not before being tortured for days by the weights (Blakemore). Corey, who also appears as a minor character in *The Crucible*, chose this brutal though perhaps also heroic death so that his heirs might inherit his property; had he been convicted of witchcraft, his possessions would have become the property of the state.

Corey recognizes the true harm of spectral evidence, noting that no one is safe when evidence perceived only by the allegedly afflicted can be taken as gospel truth. Corey sums up the atmosphere of Salem under witchcraft hysteria: “When every word is made an accusation, / When every whisper kills, and every man / Walks with a halter round his neck!” (579). That seems to foreshadow Corey's fate. The spectral evidence that will be used to accuse Corey of witchcraft, and which will lead to his death, takes a peculiar form: His hired worker, John Gloyd,

suggests the elderly Corey has inhuman strength that must come from a “supernatural” source: “No man so old as he is has such strength. / The Devil helps him!” (592). His observation is yet another example of confirmation bias: He sees Corey working hard in the field and later watches in awe as Corey lifts a keg of cider by himself. Corey, despite being elderly, also bests Gloyd in a short wrestling match. Longfellow emphasizes the irrational nature of Gloyd’s accusation by turning a familiar literary trope on its head. Great physical strength in literature of the nineteenth century is often seen as a symbol of great moral strength. The character of Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables* comes to mind. But Gloyd ironically sees great physical strength as a sign that a character is in league with the Devil. Longfellow seems to have wanted his nineteenth-century readers to be outraged that a moral exemplar like Corey could be seen as a witch based on such flimsy and odd evidence. Likewise, when Martha Corey is seen praying, Gloyd, without hearing her words, immediately jumps to the conclusion that this heretofore pious woman — “I am a gospel woman,” she exclaims at one point (598) — is praying to the Devil. Martha’s fate is sealed when Mary Wolcot writhes in agony in a courtroom scene and accuses Martha of sending her “spectre” out to torture Mary. The latter also claims that the spectre of a man has walked into the courtroom, accusing Corey of murdering him. Martha, for her part, unsuccessfully pleads to the court for reason: “Will you take / My life away from me, because this girl (Mary), / Who is distraught, and not in her right mind, / Accuses me of things I blush to name?” (603). Rather than questioning Mary’s histrionics, Hawthorne privileges the young girl’s spectral evidence over Martha’s pleas of innocence. Corey denounces a court “where ghosts appear as witnesses, / And swear men’s lives away” (610). Hawthorne belies his earlier statement that “we do not trust alone to spectral evidence.” In fact, the only evidence offered in court is spectral. In Puritan Salem, it seems that the most illusory “evidence” can be manipulated to serve the confirmation bias needs

of accusers and rush innocent victims to their graves. Longfellow makes a plea in *Giles Corey* for rationalism, for real empirical evidence, a sort of logical positivism, 40 years before that philosophical idea was widely discussed. The chief takeaway from *Giles Corey* could be summed up as Longfellow's deep concern for the enduring and malevolent power of fanaticism when wielded with spectral evidence by those in authority.

The representatives of church and state in *Giles Corey* and *The Crucible* may cloak their actions in a desire for justice — actually, justice is rarely mentioned — but the use of “spectral evidence” can really be seen as a desperate tool for the state and church to reassert order and control in the face of uncertainty and instability. Certainly, the state violence — that is, public hangings — that follows convictions based on spectral evidence would alert the Salem community that crime or biblical nonconformity will be severely punished: “U.S. communities have historically practiced violence as rhetoric,” Eatman writes. “Proponents of lynching, state-run executions and torture all claim that these practices ‘send a message’ to recalcitrant others” (13). Violent action such as state-run executions, are persuasive, making “power brutally ‘real’ by inscribing it on the victim’s body” (7). Michel Foucault has described public torture (such as Giles Corey suffered) and execution (as other alleged Salem witches suffered) as constitutive of sovereign power. If the church or state has been challenged or questioned, then public punishment becomes a “ceremonial by which a momentarily injured sovereign is reconstituted” (48). Foucault’s use of the word “sovereign” seems particularly apropos for the Salem witchcraft trials in that God presumably is the injured party. Looked at another way, the church and state arguably had sovereign power over those living under Salem’s theocratic government. Church and state use violence to reassert hegemony: “Public violence in the United States almost

uniformly maintains dominant identities perceived to be at risk” (Eatman 9). Spectral evidence may be a kind of irrational pattern-seeking but underneath it all is the state’s will to control.

The Puritans

A desire for order and control certainly is at the heart of the actual historical Puritan enterprise: “Because they (Puritans) viewed the civil and religious spheres as mutually supporting, they saw religious beliefs that threatened the church as disruptive of public order and acted against the offenders” (Bremer 82). The Puritans were inerrantists – Christians who accepted every word of the Bible and would allow little or no debate on the matter: “Religious toleration was out of the question” (Cullen 22). The Puritan governmental structure was theocratic and hierarchical, with little or no checks and balances to question the authority of the church. To Puritans, there was no question that witches, with supernatural malevolent intent, existed: “Unexplained phenomena such as the death of livestock, human disease, and hideous fits suffered by young and old suggested the agency of the devil or someone in league with the devil – witches” (Bremer 31). This is spectral evidence run amok: a leap of faith toward a supernatural cause rather than something far more mundane. Yet the Salem Puritans seemed to believe, without doubt, in the rightness of their cruel, barbaric actions. As Miller wrote 40 years after the premiere of *The Crucible*, many or most Puritans, as inerrantists, read the Bible verse “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live” as a commandment: “There had to be witches in the world or the Bible lied” (Miller, “Why I Wrote ‘The Crucible’”). It must be said that the witchcraft trials in Salem don’t tell the whole story of the Puritans. In popular culture, however, the Puritans are indelibly associated with the Salem witchcraft trials and their worst attributes:

Few people in American history have been as consistently disliked as the Puritans. ... The word “puritanical” is still in wide usage in the early twenty-first

century, usually as a synonym for intolerance ... The American philosopher Richard Rorty has memorably summed up the prevailing contemporary view of the Puritans as “self-flagellating sickies.” (Cullen 11-12)

Historians have often tried to offer some balance to the popular negative conception of the Puritans. No less a critic of American paranoia and anti-intellectualism than Richard Hofstadter actually sought to defend the Puritans, particularly their commitment to education, calling them “the first class of American intellectuals”:

It is doubtful that any community ever had more faith in the value of learning and intellect than Massachusetts Bay. Among the first generation of American Puritans, men of learning were both numerous and honored. There was about one university-trained scholar, usually from Cambridge or Oxford, to every forty or fifty families. These Puritan emigrants, with their reliance upon the Book and their wealth of scholarly leadership, founded that intellectual and scholarly tradition which for three centuries enabled New England to lead the country in education and scholarly achievement. (Hofstadter 67-68)

Bremer also credits the Puritans with the promotion of education and for advocating participatory forms of government that are very much with us today (3). Miller himself in his introduction to the play expresses some admiration for the Puritans’ work ethic and stern, unbending religious ideology. The colonial Puritans, after all, were newcomers and had to figure out how to survive in a cold, inhospitable, dangerous environment, surrounded by Native Americans: “In unity still lay the best promise of safety,” Miller writes. “For good purposes, even high purposes, the people of Salem developed a theocracy, a combine of state and religious power whose function was to keep the community together, and to prevent any kind of disunity

that might open it to destruction by material or ideological enemies” (*Crucible* 350). Miller’s thoughts conveyed through his introduction for the reader — though not for an audience member at a performance — are interesting because they offer some sympathy for the Puritans that arguably is not to be found in the text of the play itself. A fair question, though one that is outside of the scope of this paper, is: How much is Miller’s *Crucible* to be credited, or blamed, for our nation’s popular conception of the Puritans as a dismal and perhaps evil people? Is this an example of life imitating art? Miller does credit himself at least for reviving interest in the Salem witchcraft trials and for turning contemporary Salem into a tourist trap (Miller, *Timebends* 42).

An early manifestation of the Puritan obsession with unity can be seen in the Antinomian crisis of the mid-1630s and the fate that befell Anne Hutchinson. One might even think of this incident as the first Salem witchcraft trial, 60 years before the trials that actually bear that name. The Antinomians insisted that “since no one knew who was saved (a tenet of Calvinism), no one — not even ministers — could have authority over the individual conscience” (Cullen 26). Such an idea filled some Puritan leaders with alarm.

Taken to its logical conclusions, Antinomianism had deeply subversive implications for Massachusetts. It would only be a matter of time before an individual’s beliefs would lead to the rejection of all outside authority, since just about any law, sacred or secular, could be perceived as trampling on a personal conscience. Any form of collective governance would be impossible. (27)

Hutchinson was not accused of being a witch, but she was the most vocal proponent of the Antinomian creed and therefore charged with “traducing the ministers and their ministry” (27). Hutchinson and her followers were banished from the colony, fleeing to Rhode Island and later New York. It is interesting to note that a woman, Hutchinson, was made a scapegoat for the

supposed sins of many others — just as women mostly paid the price for being alleged witches in the Salem trials. The patriarchal Puritans would seem to have been doubly alarmed by a nonconformist who also happened to be a woman.

Leaping to Witchcraft

If the colonial Puritans' legacy is a mixed one, with at least some positive qualities, as historians argue, Longfellow and Miller, in writing plays about the Salem witchcraft trials, capture the Puritans at their nadir. Miller's portrait is one of dangerous and lethal fanaticism. The play opens on the scene of a desperate Reverend Parris attempting to wake his daughter, Betty, who is unconscious. Ann Putnam assumes that Betty has been bewitched, asking: "How high did she fly, how high?" (Miller, *Crucible* 355). She is echoed a short while later by Miller's Giles Corey: "Is she going to fly again? I heard she flies" (354). Thus, Miller, like Longfellow, establishes the context of widespread superstition in Salem at the very beginning: Ann Putnam assumes that malevolent supernatural forces are at work on Betty — giving the latter the power of flight — in the same way that Mather assumed that the devil had led his horse astray in the first scene of *Giles Corey*. (Both scenes might be comical if the Puritans weren't deadly serious.) Reverend Parris begs the Putnams, "Leap not to witchcraft" (356) — in other words, don't assume witchcraft is behind Betty's apparent incapacitation — but leaping to witchcraft is exactly what most everyone will do in the play.

However, not everyone. Miller sets up a stark dichotomy in the *Crucible's* portrait of dangerous state-sponsored fanaticism, with characters who represent reason, such as John Proctor, and those under the grip of zealotry, such as Reverend Hale and Deputy Governor Danforth. Among the reasonable voices — those who take a brave stand against the powerful zealots — in Longfellow and Miller are Martha Corey and Rebecca Nurse, respectively. This is

particularly interesting because a fair criticism of both Longfellow and Miller is that their main protagonists are men, when in fact the primary victims of the actual Salem witchcraft trials were women. A reader can be grateful that Longfellow and Miller cast a spotlight on a historical act of grave injustice while also being dismayed that the two left the majority of the real — that is, female — victims largely in the shadows. At its worst, this act of partial literary erasure repeats the act of actual erasure of female bodies committed by Puritan leaders. Ironically, both Longfellow and Miller remain true to the historical record in suggesting that young women wield the accusations of witchcraft. Thus, Longfellow and Miller depict women as the primary *antagonists*, but they do not allow women to be seen as the main *protagonists*. Longfellow and Miller, as independent artists, are under no obligation to be faithful to the historical record, but their choices in their adaptations of history speak volumes. On the other hand, if men are the *primary* heroes in the plays, Longfellow and Miller do treat some women sympathetically and even heroically. If the plays are read as portraits of the dangers of public fanaticism, women, particularly older women, are the voice of calm reason and common sense in both dramas. Martha Corey's common-sense exhortations in *Giles Corey* are noted above. Her counterpart in Miller's drama, Rebecca Nurse, not only discounts the presence of witchcraft in Salem but foresees the danger of a community succumbing to fanaticism: "There is prodigious danger in the seeking of loose spirits. I fear it, I fear it. Let us rather blame ourselves" (Miller, *Crucible* 367). If strange things are happening in Salem, Rebecca suggests, the community should take personal or communal responsibility for whatever may be amiss and not deflect accountability from themselves while reaching for spectral evidence and supernatural explanations that may lead to ruin. With folksy sagacity, Rebecca pooh-poohs the idea that the supposedly possessed girls are the victims of witchcraft:

Pray calm yourselves. I have eleven children, and I am twenty-six times a grandma, and I have seen them all through their silly seasons, and when it come on them they will run the Devil bowlegged keeping up with their mischief. A child's spirit is like a child, you can never catch it by running after it; you must stand still, and, for love, it will soon itself come back. (366)

These reasonable characters boast a healthy skepticism; the fanatics, by contrast, start not from a position of skepticism but from the rigid mindset of religious certainty: i.e., that witchcraft is behind the strange happenings in Salem. A nuanced character like Reverend John Hale is willing to believe that witchcraft is running amok in Salem, but he must be persuaded through a process of inductive reasoning: "Now let me instruct you," he tells Putman, the latter of whom assumes his daughter is possessed. "We cannot look to superstition in this." One can easily hear the voice of Miller through Hale: Miller wishes to "instruct" us: "We cannot look to superstition in" what is happening in Salem. As we see in Rebecca Nurse, some of Miller's most interesting characters are minor ones: Hale is a character with a compelling arch; despite his misgivings, he does conclude early in the play that witchcraft is present in Salem; but by the end of the play, he recognizes, with desperation, his own foolishness and the town's grave injustice. *The Crucible*, however, is not merely didactic or polemical — it excels aesthetically as a work of the theater — but there is a good reason the play is thought to be one that schoolchildren are capable of easily understanding.

This is a play about the dangers of fanatical faith; the chief tool of the fanatics is spectral evidence. They are driven by faith: "It's God's work we do," says Mary Warren (Miller, *Crucible* 391), one of the girls accusing adults of witchcraft, expressing a sentiment that surely would be familiar to the holy warriors in the Crusades and Spanish Inquisition. Hale, like a holy

warrior early in the play, even favors military metaphors in expressing his absolutism:

“Theology, sir, is a fortress; no crack may be accounted small” (397). When the Proctors appear to doubt the existence of witches, Hale exclaims like a good biblical literalist, “You surely do not fly against the Gospel” (399).

The true danger afoot in Salem is that Hale, Danforth and Parris operate on faith alone, not on empirical evidence. Their authority likewise stems from faith. As Hale says of Rev. Parris: “The man’s ordained, therefore the light of God is in him” (396). A flimsy standard is established by the fanatic: faith, not evidence, makes right. Rhetorically, the appeal to authority (*argumentum ad verecundiam*) is widely recognized as a logical fallacy; Miller’s and Longfellow’s concern is that this fallacy is sometimes widely accepted, in court or in the court of public opinion, as legitimate. In the case of the Salem witchcraft trials, the appeal to authority led to the execution of 20 people. Spectral evidence requires an appeal to authority because it lacks the support of tangible evidence.

Danforth, as deputy governor, certainly possesses authority. He is a strong believer in spectral evidence, saying that “the voice of heaven is speaking through the children” who have accused adults of being witches (412). His explanation of the legitimacy of spectral evidence is preposterous, yet it is accepted because he is the voice of authority:

In an ordinary crime, how does one defend the accused? One calls up witnesses to prove his innocence. But witchcraft is *ipso facto*, on its face and by its nature, an invisible crime, is it not? Therefore, who may possibly be witness to it? The witch and the victim. None other. Now we cannot hope the witch will accuse herself; granted? Therefore, we must rely upon her victims — and they do testify, the children certainly do testify (420).

Danforth in the short speech above makes two extraordinary claims: one, that the purpose of a trial is to prove the innocence of the accused when actually the burden traditionally is on the state to prove the guilt of the accused; and second, that someone may be found guilty of an “invisible crime.” The basis of such guilty verdicts is, as mentioned above, the faith that “the voice of heaven is speaking” through the accusers. Faith-driven evidence is absurd on its face, but Miller’s point is that when such evidence is given the imprimatur of authority, it sometimes is misguidedly but widely accepted as fact. In our own time, some of former President Trump’s more outlandish statements continue to be embraced by millions of his supporters despite being thoroughly debunked as spectral, as will be discussed below.

Danforth is Miller’s ultimate villain. At least Hale, when he begins to see the grave errors into which faith has led him, says to Elizabeth Proctor, “Cleave to no faith when faith brings blood” (444); it’s a remarkable sentiment from someone who earlier spoke of faith as an impenetrable fortress and admonished the Proctors not to challenge the Gospel. Danforth, however, is unrelenting throughout the play. More than any other character, he weaponizes faith, as Miller put it in one of his lengthy asides, “a weapon designed and used time and time again in every age to whip men into a surrender to a particular church or church-state” (371). Danforth is concerned with power, and he will do anything to maintain his own authority and that of the church and court: “But you must understand, sir,” Danforth says to Francis Church, “that a person is either with this court or he must be counted against it, there be no road between” (416). Danforth, significantly, demands that executions continue even after considerable doubt arises as to the guilt of the accused witches: “I cannot pardon these when twelve are already hanged for the same crime. It is not just. . . . Postponement now speaks a foundering on my part; reprieve or pardon must cast doubt upon the guilt of them that died till now. While I speak God’s law, I will

not crack its voice with whimpering” (441-42). Like Hugo’s Javert, Danforth is utterly inflexible, perhaps monomaniacal, on faith and the law. Unlike Hale and even Javert, Danforth has no reckoning with the truth. Danforth may even have doubts about the guilt of the accused, yet he proceeds with their executions to maintain the power of the church and state. As Miller wrote in a 1966 letter to literary critic Sheila Huftel, Danforth represents “the rule-bearer, the man who always guards the boundaries of which, if you insist on breaking through them, have the power to destroy you. His evil is more than personal, it is nearly mythical” (Huftel 146-47).

Proctor’s response to the injustice and madness in Salem is a simple plea, which he cries out twice in the play: “But the proof, the proof!” (391, 402). He is the embodiment of Rational Man, demanding real concrete evidence of witchcraft that can justify executing a human being. None is forthcoming. For fanatics, spectral evidence is more than sufficient and “anyone who tries to introduce into court the voice of reason is likely to be held in contempt” (Warshow 219). At one point, Proctor superbly ridicules the idea of invisible spectral evidence: “There might be a dragon with five legs in my house, but no one has ever seen it” (Miller, *Crucible* 423). The court, however, seems to completely miss the point. When Mary Warren recants her testimony against the accused witches, Danforth responds, “I cannot hear you” (412). The assumption is that Mary Warren is speaking too low, and Proctor repeats her comment. Another reading might suggest that Danforth is unable to accept that he, the court and his faith might be in error. He cannot hear because he *will* not hear. In his 1996 *New Yorker* essay on the writing of *The Crucible*, Miller said the idea of “spectral evidence” was a particular concern to him as he wrote the play. It created a “poisoned cloud of paranoid fantasy” in which the most outlandish accusations “made a kind of lunatic sense to them” (Miller, “Why I Wrote ‘The Crucible’”).

Despite little evidence that Miller had ever read Longfellow's play, *Giles Corey and The Crucible* share the same philosophical outlook: specifically, a similar outrage at the fanaticism that has gripped Salem's religious and judicial officials and the larger public. Both Longfellow and Miller emphasize that the outlandish accusations against the alleged witches are not only based on spectral evidence; that's bad enough, but the claims are put forth specifically by children against adults. As Giles Corey exclaims, "The magistrates are blind, the people mad! / If they would only seize the Afflicted Children, / And put them in the Workhouse, where they should be, / There'd be an end of all this wickedness" (Longfellow 586). Miller's Proctor expresses a similar shock that children accusers, armed only with spectral evidence, are allowed to make claims that can lead to the state execution of the accused: "Is the accuser always holy now? ... We are what we always were in Salem, but now the little crazy children are jangling the keys of the kingdom" (404). The latter sentence is a particularly resonant phrase, with the "kingdom" suggesting both the realms of the sacred and the secular, the minister and the judge. Likewise, the "crazy children" seems to refer at once to the actual children accusers and the state and religious leaders who have themselves become children in their gullibility, recklessness and blind faith. Miller's harsh view of children in the play — "the tyranny of teenagers," he called it in his autobiography — may seem decidedly unprogressive for a liberal — and it is — but the playwright noted that young people often can be found at the forefront of theocratic revolution or bloody popular uprisings, whether of the left or right (Miller, *Timebends* 348).

Who, then, is to blame for what happened in Salem? Penelope Curtis indicts the entire community of Salem: "*The Crucible* is the only one (of Miller's plays) in which a whole community is directly, and tragically, implicated" (46) — the "mass hysteria" thesis, with which this thesis takes issue. Certainly the role of the community should not be overlooked; Curtis is

persuasive in describing its craven acquiescence: “Evil with a capital ‘E’ comes into power only when the community gives it institutional status ... when the community surrenders the sacred power over life and death to a corrupt judge and group of hysterical or malicious girls” (46). It’s enticing to blame the community as gullible and reckless, as Shakespeare does in *Julius Caesar*, but that assumes the Salem community had a choice in the matter. In a true representative republic, true choice exists, but in the theocracy of Salem, the community has little power or agency. The public, at least in Salem, cannot surrender, to use Curtis’ term, what it does not have: freedom of choice. A larger concern is that the verdict of mass hysteria — expressed by the cliché “There’s plenty of blame to go around” — is too easy and diffuses accountability. If everyone is to blame, how does a society guard against official misconduct or mass hysteria? Accountability should focus on the prime motivators of the Salem tragedy. The most alarming takeaway from *The Crucible* and *Giles Corey* is not the acquiescence of the public but the failure or perhaps corruption of institutions — specifically the state and the church — and their leaders. The tragedy is set into motion when church and state leaders accept the validity of spectral evidence. The die is cast when power abdicates responsibility and rationality.

A Fluid Meaning

The Crucible, like many works deemed to be “classic,” is a multivalent narrative, open to a variety of interpretations, as Miller noted with some pride in his autobiography: “In time, *The Crucible* became my most frequently produced play, both abroad and at home. Its meaning is somewhat different in different places and moments” (Miller, *Timebends* 348). Many have seen the play as the story of an individual fighting on behalf of Truth against the powerful — the central theme, in other words, of Miller’s previous play, a translation of Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People*. In 1996, Miller noted that “for some, the play seems to be about the dilemma of relying

on the testimony of small children accusing adults of sexual abuse, something I'd not have dreamed of forty years ago" (Miller). Others focus on the love-triangle at the heart of the play between Abigail, John Proctor and Elizabeth Proctor. In a 1957 French-language film of play, philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre was given the task of writing the screenplay, turning *Les Sorcières de Salem* into a Marxist tale of the rich oppressing the poor. Miller found much to admire in this "touching" film adaptation — "the film had a noble grandeur" — but noted that the basic premise was historically inaccurate: "In reality victims like Rebecca Nurse were of the class of relatively large landowners, and the Proctors and their like were by no means poor" (349). The playwright Kimberly Belflower, meanwhile, brought *The Crucible* into the #MeToo era in her 2019 play, *John Proctor is the Villain*, produced at Clemson University. For Belflower, *The Crucible* is about sexual abuse, but the victims have no voice in the patriarchal Puritan society; that's why they rebel in outlandish ways, with claims of witchcraft. The title of Belflower's play says it all: John Proctor is the villain, not Judge Danforth. Belflower offers a provocative challenge to traditional interpretations of *The Crucible*: How can John Proctor be considered a hero when he upholds patriarchal norms in a society where women, including his wife, have no power and he then seduces a (presumably) 16-year-old orphan, Abigail, in his employ? Belflower, moreover, sees Proctor's sacrifice at the end of the play not as heroic but as selfish, an example of false machismo or toxic masculinity that leaves his wife and daughter facing a life of poverty.

These are compelling interpretations, two of them literary critiques in the form of drama. I would argue, however, that these interpretations, like Curtis' emphasis on the mass hysteria thesis, distract attention from Miller's primary purpose: offering a cautionary tale about the dangers of arbitrary, autocratic rule. Jeffery Hotz, a Longfellow scholar, finds in both *Giles*

Corey and *Crucible* what he terms “a reluctance to judge the historical actors in the tragedy.” Hotz cites two examples of the authors expressing sympathy in the plays for their misguided characters. In the final stanza of his Prologue, Longfellow writes: “And ye who listen to the Tale of Woe, / Be not too swift in casting the first stone, / Nor think New England bears the guilt alone” (Longfellow 562). Miller also makes a plea for sympathy in the introduction to his play: “When one rises above the individual villainy displayed, one can only pity them all, just as we shall be pitied someday” (Miller, *Crucible* 350). These statements do somewhat complicate the primary thrust of the plays, as Hotz suggests. What Hotz overlooks is that these are passing sentiments that are not developed by the authors. These statements should not be accorded inordinate weight, given that the authors spend considerable time doing the exact opposite of what Hotz says: strongly judging the historical actors in the tragedy. Miller, as stated above in his letter to Hufel, clearly thought Danforth to be an evil character of almost “mythical” proportions. It is my contention, in short, that both Longfellow’s and Miller’s plays can be read as dystopian literature, such is the harrowing picture of state authoritarianism that they present. At the core of these dystopian visions is the phenomenon of spectral evidence, the exact opposite of real evidence that can be perceived by the senses. To borrow an apropos line from Orwell’s *1984*, Longfellow’s Hathorne and Miller’s Danforth “told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears. It was their final, most essential command.”

Miller, for his part, notes that his play, wherever and whenever it has been performed, most often is interpreted as a condemnation of state tyranny:

I can almost tell what the political situation in a country is when the play is suddenly a hit there — it is either a warning of tyranny on the way or a reminder of tyranny just past. As recently as the winter of 1986 the Royal Shakespeare

Company ... played it in English for a week in two Polish cities. Some important government figures were in the audience, by their presence urging on its message of resistance to a tyranny they were forced to serve. In Shanghai in 1980, it served as a metaphor for life under Mao and the Cultural Revolution, decades when accusation and enforced guilts ruled China and all but destroyed the last signs of intelligent life. The writer Nien Cheng, who spent six and a half years in solitary confinement and whose daughter was murdered by the Red Guards, told me that after her release she saw the Shanghai production and could not believe that a non-Chinese had written the play. "Some of the interrogations," she said, "were precisely the same ones used on us in the Cultural Revolution. (Miller, *Timebends* 348).

In Miller's own time, of course, the play was seen as an allegorical indictment of McCarthyism. It was an interpretation that was not at all hidden but encouraged by Miller and the play's early critics: "Neither Mr. Miller nor his audiences are unaware of certain similarities between the perversions of justice then and today," critic Brooks Atkinson wrote in *The New York Times* following the play's premiere.

Critic Walter Kerr, writing in *The New York Herald Tribune* about *The Crucible's* premiere, said Miller is "profoundly, angrily concerned with the immediate issues of our society — with the irresponsible pressures which are being brought to bear on free men, with the self-seeking which blinds whole segments of our civilization to justice." Kerr even saw the play as too polemical, but hammered home its relevance to contemporary issues, calling the tragedy "an accurate reading of our own turbulent age." From the beginning, then, this interesting Puritan play was seen as an overt condemnation of contemporary political tyranny fostered particularly

by one man, Sen. Joseph McCarthy, whose stock-in-trade was spectral evidence. Like the girls on a witch hunt in *The Crucible*, Joseph McCarthy had a tendency to make outlandish statements, saying, without evidence, that the State Department “was full of treasonous pro-Soviet intellectuals” (Miller, “Why I Wrote ‘The Crucible’”). The McCarthyite attacks resulted in years of investigations, blacklists, and bullying by the House Un-American Activities Committee and the Army-McCarthy hearings in the Senate. Critics such as Robert Warshow who link *The Crucible* to McCarthyism draw clear parallels between the forced confessions in Puritan Salem and the similar coerced confessions during the McCarthy era (Warshow 219). In the play, those who confess to witchcraft and identify others as witches can save themselves; John Proctor considers a false confession to save himself but ultimately decides not to tarnish his own good name while falsely implicating others. Likewise, during the McCarthy era those who confessed to having been a member of the communist party and/or named names could perhaps avoid blacklisting. I argue, however, that the play’s more timeless and universal meaning is to be found in its delineation of fanaticism and its specific concern for spectral evidence.

Certainly, McCarthy made use of spectral evidence. By stoking the fear of the populace, McCarthy, much like the accusers of Salem, was able to persuade people of the danger of supposed communists – again, without evidence. In an infamous speech on February 9, 1950, McCarthy told a crowd of 275 at the Ohio County Republican Women’s Club that the U.S. State Department was “thoroughly infested with communists” and brandished papers that he claimed listed 57 such subversives; that supposed number later ballooned to more than 200. Eventually, it was discovered that no list existed. Thus, just as the witch-accusing girls of Salem used “spectral evidence,” so McCarthy used make-believe as well in attacking supposed communists and destroying lives. The Puritan pattern of religious zeal and absolutism also played a prominent

role in McCarthyism. McCarthy depicted the fight against “Godless communism” as an apocalyptic one, and freely used Manichaean biblical rhetoric. One can easily hear the hyperventilating voice of Danforth in McCarthy’s 1950 speech about communism to the Catholic Press Association: “You have been engaged in what may well be that final Armageddon foretold in the Bible — that struggle between light and darkness, between good and evil, between life and death” (McCarthy A4159). The choice for McCarthy, as for Hathorne and Danforth, was between good and evil – and there was no room for compromise.

The McCarthyite interpretation of *The Crucible*, while certainly valid and transparently promoted by Miller, is also another reductive way of looking at the play. I can recall in my own junior high experience that the play was explored as an allegory, a way of interrogating McCarthyism through the lens of the Puritans’ witchcraft trials. No doubt the play is often taught in school that way: as an exploration of two tumultuous episodes in history. But such a way of teaching the play relegates it to history. The play gains tremendous relevance and power, however, when it regains its timeless status as an exploration of the autocratic impulse in today’s politics.

Spectral Evidence in Trump-era Politics

Brian McGrath in *The Poetics of Unremembered Acts*, his 2013 study of poetry’s role in education, writes that he composed his conclusion on the tenth anniversary of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. It is a tragedy that he is “having trouble not remembering.” Contemporary public events have a tendency to intrude upon literary analysis. Perhaps that is entirely appropriate, attesting to the timelessness of literary works. Similarly, an American reader of *Giles Corey* and *The Crucible* is also likely to have trouble not remembering the domestic public tumult of the past four years, 2016-20.

A reading of *Giles Corey* and *The Crucible* offers fascinating context and insight into these years. Former President Trump has shown himself to be conversant with the rhetoric of *The Crucible* (whether he recognizes it or not), having on numerous occasions claimed to be the victim of a “witch hunt.” As Jonathan Beecher Field points out, “in 2018 alone, Trump has tweeted the term 112 times.” As Field also underscores, Trump’s repeated use of the word is illegitimate because a true witch hunt is associated not with solid empirical evidence but with spectral evidence:

As with other witch hunts, this bitter injustice (the Salem witchcraft trials) happened because the court of law elected to credit ‘spectral evidence.’ That is, the court accepted as evidence claims that the defendant harmed the victim in visions and dreams. Cotton Mather played a significant role in the Salem witch trials in no small part because he has previously written about the ability of witches to project a spectral vision of themselves and afflict their victims remotely. ... In a sense, Mather was more right than he knew when he insisted that to hunt a witch one must embrace the spectral. Indeed, this is one of the defining characteristics of a witch hunt, its dependence on confabulated “evidence.” (Field)

Trump’s frequent reference to COVID-19, meanwhile, as the “invisible enemy” is reminiscent of Mather’s *Wonders of the Invisible World* in which Mather discusses witches and advocates the legitimacy of spectral evidence. Longfellow and Miller both speak frequently of the “invisible” and the “unseen,” with obvious demonic connotations, as when Longfellow’s Mather says, “These wonders of the world invisible / These spectral shapes that haunt our habitations” (566). The coronavirus, of course, is not truly invisible under a microscope but Trump’s rhetoric turns

the virus into spectral evidence. The “invisible enemy,” with its satanic connotations, would be the sort of rhetoric that might fly over the heads of the media while sending a clear message to Trump’s evangelical supporters that the president is engaged in an almost mythic battle against the forces of evil. Branding the coronavirus as an “invisible enemy” would also tend to absolve the president of accountability for the deaths that resulted from the virus during his tenure. Satan would be to blame, not the Trump administration’s public health policy. It’s interesting to note that the president’s scientific advisers and his successor, President Joseph Biden, do not use the term “invisible enemy.” Like Longfellow’s Hathorne and Miller’s Danforth, Trump also has been adept at weaponizing faith, saying in 2020 that his then-opponent Biden was “against God.” He is known for attacking the faith of many others in the public sphere, including Sen. Bernie Sanders, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Sen. Ted Cruz and Sen. Mitt Romney (Cathey).

The Trump era might be called a heyday of spectral evidence, given that the former president has been credited with more than 30,500 false or misleading statements, according to a *Washington Post* database. Like the staunch advocates of spectral evidence in *Giles Corey* and *The Crucible*, Trump appears devoutly to believe his own lies:

Dr. Bandy X. Lee, a forensic psychiatrist and author of *Profile of a Nation: Trump’s Mind, America’s Soul* told ABC News that Trump’s “pattern of lying seems to consist of beginning with a conscious lie intended to deceive others — or to cover up who he really is — but as more people believe him and the adulations of crowds gratify him in irresistible ways, he comes to believe in his own lies” (Cathey).

Like Hathorne and Danforth, Trump cannot conceive that he may be in error and, when challenged, often doubles down on his lies: “His grandiose sense of himself does not allow for the possibility that he is wrong” (Lee, quoted in Cathey).

The Trump presidency, in fact, began and ended with two notable examples of spectral evidence. On his first full day in office in 2017, Trump claimed he saw 1 million people attending his inauguration on the National Mall. Trump falsely claimed that this was the largest inaugural gathering in the history of the nation (Cathey). This is reminiscent of Danforth saying that spectral evidence can only be perceived by those making the claim. When confronted with actual photographic evidence that only 250,000 to 600,000 attended the inauguration, Trump insisted that the photos had been taken early or altered to give a false impression. Other Trump administration officials suggested that Trump was referring to the largest audience ever to see an inauguration live or over the airwaves. This, however, was debunked, too, leading then-senior Trump counselor Kellyanne Conway to invent the term “alternative facts.” The term seemed to suggest opinions that Conway wanted the public to accept as facts, even though there was no evidence to support alternative facts as actual facts. “Alternative facts” surely is the modern equivalent of spectral evidence, a claim perceived only by the person making the claim and worthy of belief only because someone in authority, like Trump or Danforth, backs the claim. Whether the authority is Trump or Danforth, one may detect the presence of “confirmation bias” (yet another term associated with Trump-era politics) lurking beneath some of their most outrageous claims.

Throughout his presidency, Trump often used the rhetoric of spectral evidence. In making claims, he would often eschew concrete empirical evidence in favor of hearsay that he expected listeners to accept as facts. He would pepper his speech with such phrases as “A lot of people are

saying,” “People think it’s going to happen,” “Everybody’s talking about it,” “They are saying,” “Everyone is now saying,” “That’s just what I heard,” “A lot of people tell me,” and similar vague expressions (Andersen). Such phrases rely heavily on the appeal to authority. They should be no more persuasive than Danforth’s outrageous ideas about justice, but because they’re uttered by an authority figure, the claims are widely accepted. And like Danforth, Trump never (or almost never) backs down.

There is a clear line running through Longfellow’s Hathorne, Miller’s Danforth and McCarthy and Trump: It’s the authoritarian’s almost absolute reluctance to admit doubt or error, which is seen as a grave weakness. The act of doubling down on lies — rather than admitting doubt or error — during the Trump years may account for the public prevalence of the term “gaslighting”: Lies repeated often enough begin to be believed, as least by some or even many. Hathorne, Danforth, McCarthy and Trump certainly all engaged in gaslighting, though the people will not be fooled forever. The four also frequently demonized their opponents, often the vulnerable, as the other. The strategy of the authoritarian is to divide people into us-versus-them in order to conquer. In the case of Hathorne and Danforth, those accused of witches were often women and the elderly, not often the elite. Trump, of course, is famous for demonizing the vulnerable or marginalized, such as immigrants, refugees, women and minorities.

Trump’s quality of never backing down, never relenting, may account for the almost cult-like following he enjoys among his supporters, especially those motivated by faith. Trump famously claimed in 2016 that he could shoot someone on Fifth Avenue in New York City and not lose votes. True enough, Trump’s support among evangelicals barely wavered between 76 percent and 80 percent from 2016 to late 2020 (Gjelten). Like Hathorne in *Giles Corey* and Danforth in *The Crucible*, Trump finds his greatest support from people of devout faith.

The Trump presidency, characterized by lies, ended with what has been termed the Big Lie: Trump's repeated claim, which to date he has not withdrawn, that the 2020 election was stolen from the former president. As evidence, Trump and his supporters offered a vast array of conspiracy theories that surely qualify as spectral evidence: among them, that ballots were altered across the country, changing the outcome of the presidential election but not the other elections on the same ballot. Other conspiracy theories include that the voting machine company Dominion changed or deleted votes for Trump; that sharpie markers invalidated Trump votes in Arizona; that mail-in voting is rife with fraud; that people threw out bags of ballots or "found" suitcases of ballots; that poll watchers were blocked from observing elections; and that there were thousands of votes by dead people or people voting multiple times. All of these claims, spectral in nature, have been thoroughly and repeatedly debunked (Cohen). These conspiracy theories are no more real than the invisible five-legged dragon that John Proctor claims *could* be living in house.

The crucial point about spectral evidence — whether in Longfellow, Miller or Trump — is that spectral evidence, when claimed by a figure in authority, can obliterate actual facts. Despite the debunked claims about the election of 2020, 36 percent of Americans believe the election was stolen. In addition, 76 percent of Republicans believe there was widespread voter fraud in the 2020 election despite at least 60 state and federal lawsuits that failed to prove fraud (Cillizza). On Jan. 6, 2021, the day Congress officially counted electoral votes making Joe Biden the next president, chants of "Stop the Steal" echoed through the U.S. Capitol. That was followed by a deadly assault on the Capitol by Trump supporters who believed the spectral claims Trump had repeated incessantly for the previous three months (Cohen, Cillizza). As with Longfellow's Hathorne and Miller's Danforth, Trump uses spectral evidence as a means of

control. Spectral evidence, though preposterous, is dangerous because it often works. It proclaims that might, not evidence, makes right.

The fact that millions of Americans today devoutly believe something that has been repeatedly shown to be false — the idea that Trump, not Biden, won the 2020 election — suggests that “spectral evidence” may be one of the most important concerns of our time, and that *Giles Corey* and *The Crucible*, as pointed critiques of spectral evidence and fanaticism, may be among our most relevant and useful works of American literature. By exploring the lethal potential of spectral evidence, particularly when wielded by an authority figure to assert control, *Giles Corey* and *The Crucible* remain powerful and always contemporary. The two plays also point to a remedy in an era of widespread belief in spectral evidence. It lies in a healthy skepticism: asking questions, questioning received wisdom, engaging in critical thinking, using common sense, and valorizing the authority of concrete evidence. Or, as the doomed John Proctor exclaims in his passionate plea, “The proof, the proof.”

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