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Scapegoating Non-Conforming Identities: Witchcraft Hysteria in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* and Caryl Churchill's *Vinegar Tom*¹

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Abstract

When people are faced with different takes on their traditions that they firmly cling to so as to remain being who they purport to be, they are generally inclined to ostracise those who are different. In this sense, ostracising people by discarding them from their community is, metaphorically speaking, the same as leaving the goat in the wilderness as the verses from Leviticus explain the history of scapegoating. Just as the goat story from Leviticus, political and patriarchal power groups blame non-conforming individuals for all the problems in society, and ostracise them as witches only to take the upper hand, and enjoy absolute power. The pattern of punishment proves to be the same, that is, to leave the victim alone in a place away from home, be it the wilderness for a goat, or the loneliness and isolation for an individual. Besides, one of the most used and most efficient ways of scapegoating people, as the evidence shows, is to rekindle the tall-tale of witchcraft. This paper explores how and why witchcraft is deployed as a scapegoating strategy to silence and stigmatise non-conforming individuals on the pretext of maintaining order in society in Arthur Miler's *The Crucible* (1953) and Caryl Churchill's *Vinegar Tom* (1976) respectively.

Keywords: *The Crucible*, *Vinegar Tom*, Scapegoating, Witchcraft, McCarthyism, Feminism, Misogyny, Patriarchal Oppression

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And Aaron shall cast lots upon the two goats; one lot for the Lord, and the other lot for the scapegoat . . . But the goat, on which the lot fell to be the scapegoat, shall be presented alive before the Lord, to make an atonement with him, and to let him go for a scapegoat into the wilderness.

—*The Holy Bible*, (Lev. 8-10)

You loaded the sins of the city on to the goat's back and drove it out, and the city was cleansed. It worked because everyone knew how to read the ritual, including the gods. Then the gods died, and all of a sudden you had to cleanse the city without divine help. Real actions were demanded instead of symbolism.

— J. M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (2000, p. 91)

Scapegoating is an age-old practice that singles out an individual as responsible for the guilt and shame of a community, whereby members of that community project their guilty conscience on to that single individual. The history of the word 'scapegoat' plays an important role in the formation of its current meaning. It is argued that it was introduced into English by Tyndale's translation of the Bible (Douglas, 1995, p. 7), where the verses from Leviticus explain the history of scapegoating: "and Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel . . . and shall send him away by the hand of a fit man into the wilderness" (p. 21). Thus, through a projection of their sinful actions and guilt on to a goat, people were given a chance to purge themselves of the burden of their shame and become pure again by letting the goat loose in the wilderness.

Standing out as an ancient phenomenon, scapegoating is still extant in our modern times, and gains momentum with the rapidly changing ideologies and power relations. Hence, as Stafford (1977) maintains, scapegoating exists in our present condition, though "in a less dramatic, less open form", and "certain groups appear to be selected for scapegoating while others remain relatively free of persecution" (p. 406). The pattern for the selection of scapegoats remains rather elusive. Nonetheless, it could be argued that people are chosen to be scapegoats on the grounds that "they are different in some essentially notable way", and "their behavior portrays a large irritant quality which is ultimately provocative" (Douglas,

1995, p. 106). Accordingly, when people are faced with different takes on their traditions that they firmly cling to so as to remain being who they purport to be, they may be inclined to ostracise those who are different because “difference produces great anxiety” (Gallop, 1982, p. 93). In this sense, it could be maintained that ostracising people by discarding them from their community is, metaphorically speaking, not different from leaving the goat in the wilderness. The pattern of punishment proves to be the same, that is, to leave the victim alone in a place away from home, be it the wilderness for a goat, or the loneliness and isolation for an individual. Shunning the victim as the unwanted party is the part and parcel of scapegoating.

In order to scapegoat a person, people could come up with a variety of accusations. History has shown that human imagination is not to be underestimated. One of the most used and most efficient ways of scapegoating people, as the evidence shows, is to rekindle the tall-tale of witchcraft. This paper explores how and why witchcraft is deployed as a strategy to silence and stigmatise non-conforming individuals on the pretext of maintaining the order of society in Arthur Miler’s *The Crucible* (1953) and Caryl Churchill’s *Vinegar Tom* (1976) respectively.

The Crucible opened at a time when “the term ‘witch-hunt’ was nearly synonymous in the public mind with the Congressional investigations being conducted into allegedly subversive activities” (Martin, 1977, p. 279). *The Crucible* is based on the historical accounts of the Salem witch-trials in 1692, due to which “nineteen adults and two dogs were hanged for witchcraft” (Carson, 1990, p. 63) and other victims saved themselves “by confessing to witchcraft and accusing others” (Popkin, 1964, p. 140). Taking these trials as a point of departure, Miller attempts to draw an analogy between the witch-trials of the seventeenth century and the ‘witch-hunts’ of the 1950s’ America with the ‘Red Scare’, forged and manipulated by Senator McCarthy. He even became the chairman of the House of Un-American Committee (HUAC) and investigated into the possible conspiracies of the Communists. This committee rigorously tried to detect un-American activities and charge their agents with treason. However, the category of ‘un-American’ activities is ‘omnivorous’ enough to engulf any meaning, and the dividing line between what is admissible and what is not is rather blurred. The paranoia of communist agents’ penetrating into American society is taken to its extreme with Senator McCarthy. In the wake of the Second World War and during the Cold War period, there emerged countless conspiracy theories as to the fall of capitalism and the rise of communism in America because the USSR began to be a major political force

in the world. Senator McCarthy also believed that “205 Communists had infiltrated into the State Department: though he could name none, the investigations that ensued ruined the careers and the lives of so many” (Schlueter, 2000, p. 304). In this social and political atmosphere, “almost any criticism of the government or its instructions became, in the eyes of McCarthy, an admission of adherence to communism” (Blakesley, 1992, p. viii). Therefore, the HUAC interrogated many people from different walks of life, not least those who may use the power of art to affect people and criticise the government, namely writers and film directors. The committee pushed people to name names of the secret communists regardless of the fact that they were never involved in anything related to communism.

In this sense, I would like to argue that this delusionary endeavor to pigeonhole people as either patriot or traitor resonates with the scapegoating of residents of Salem as witches centuries before. The witchcraft hysteria begins with the minister Reverend Parris’ daughter Betty, who gets sick and whose sickness is mistaken for a deed of a witch. However, the truth is that Betty, her cousin Abigail, a group of girls, and the black slave from the Barbados, Tituba, were caught dancing in the forest, and one of them, Mercy Lewis, was naked. Parris sees them and frightens them to such an extent that Betty cannot recover from this extreme shock for a while. In the meantime, the rumour has it that there are witches in Salem. The ‘witch expert’ Reverend Hale comes to the town only to pull the trigger of witchcraft hysteria. A number of accusations of witchcraft ensue. Thus, characters begin to “deliberately and cynically give false evidence, or incite others to do so, for their own personal gain or gratification” (Welland, 1983, p. 60). For example, Thomas Putnam’s main objective is to seize the land of his neighbours, while Abigail wants to replace Elizabeth Proctor as the wife of John Proctor because they previously had an adulterous relationship. Accusations follow one another, and most of the residents of Salem are charged with witchcraft, and eventually hanged as in the case of John Proctor.

Characters’ recklessly falling for the witchcraft scenario is rooted in the “Puritan theocracy of New England” that “imposed numerous restraints on its citizens which contributed to an atmosphere of anxiety and repression” (Carson, 1990, p. 63). The anxiety and frustration of the Puritans in the New England is to some extent understandable because they had to leave England to practise their beliefs the way they wanted. Puritans were not content with the outcomes of the English Reformation and condemned the Church of England for taking no notice of the still continuing practices and vestiges that they associated with the Roman Catholic Church. Thus, they moved to New England because they were “deeply

motivated by a desire for a new order, the opportunity for which was seemingly provided for them in New England” (Robinson, 1994, p. 740). They wanted to establish an exemplary community fostered by rigid moral codes and strict rules — a ‘city on the hill’. The most important doctrine of the Puritans was the original sin. They believed that some of them would be saved, and those who seemingly lead virtuous lives might be sinners in disguise. As “Satan himself had appeared glorious before he fell, no evidence of virtuous life was a guarantee” (Carson, 1990, p. 65). This is the reason why the characters in the play are too quick to blame one another for irreligious practices because similar to a great number of Puritans they “assumed a priori that they were sinful and thus worthless”, hence, “they judged themselves guilty and were willing to accept the verdict of guilty by others” (Budick, 1985, p. 546).

In *The Crucible*, everything begins with Hale’s misdiagnosis of Betty’s illness. He believes that she suffers from hysteria due to witchcraft. At this point, what Foucault (1965) said of ignorant doctors can also be said of Hale because “the idea of hysteria is a catchall for fantasies, not of the person who is or believes himself ill, but of the ignorant doctor who pretends to know why” (p. 138). Even though witchcraft phenomenon can by no means be granted scientific grounds, Hale still professes to act in accordance with the knowledge of the books, thereby savouring the alleged superiority of an intellectual. As Hale maintains, his books “are weighted with authority” (I.41). Thus, by assigning authority to his books, he similarly assigns authority to himself. Through his adherence to truth, he conceals the fact that “discovery of truth is really a certain modality of the production of truth” (Foucault, 2006, p. 238). He, therefore, does not summon the truth from oblivion, but, on the contrary, he takes part in its production, and helps the creation of the witchcraft myth. This fact gives him power, which may be argued to be the essential reason of the struggles between characters.

Characters begin to spy on one another lest they are unable to retain their powerful status and control others. Much in the same vein with McCarthyism, characters who may threaten to unsettle the power relations and order in society are ostracised, and they are scapegoated for the things they have no connection with. In this respect, it could be maintained that witchcraft accusations and scapegoating practices are caused by those who want to keep their privileged status and access to more power. Accusations gain momentum because taking part in the accusation process means being, or remaining, a loyal member of that community. Besides, there is “a sense of participating in a ritual, of conformity to a ruling orthodox, and hence a shared hostility to those who threaten it” (Bigsby, 2004, p. 150). Thus,

there arises the anxiety to hold on to their religious and cultural identity, and not to lose that which makes them who they are, otherwise they would be lost. At the core of everything, there is the fear of not belonging, and ceasing to exist as you used to be. Therefore, they resort to absolute power at the hands of the judges in Salem. Nevertheless, giving people power to decide on the life and death of individuals is an absolute form of power, which brings about corruption, and eventually one day engulfs those in power, too. This corruption leads to the death of Proctor because he does not give up on his conscience, or yield into the fear of the tyranny.

At this precise moment, I would like to argue that *The Crucible* is as much a story of “individual conscience as the ultimate defence against a tyrannical authority” (Miller, 1996, p. 366), and retaining a sense of self cherished by personal integrity as a story of hatred and fear of women. In the final scene, Proctor is presented as an almost martyr figure who is cleansed of his guilt due to “the author’s lack of complete objectivity” (Carson, 1990, p. 74). In this regard, a different and equally valid reading of the play emerges as clearly as the first one, which will link it to *Vinegar Tom*. For the sake of brevity, the focus will be on the main female figures, Abigail and Elizabeth, who respectively embody the female stereotypes of seductress and frigid wife. As an example of cold wife, Elizabeth blames herself for Proctor’s adultery: “It needs a cold wife to prompt lechery” (IV. 133), thereby reinforcing “androcentric morality” (Schissel, 1994, p. 461). Moreover, Proctor rails at Abigail for calling onto heaven after she is supposedly harassed by the bad spirits Marry Warren sends on her: “How do you call Heaven! Whore! Whore!” (III. 108). In this sense, Proctor is inclined to “blame the victim of his lust for seducing him, quick to openly name Abigail as a ‘whore’ rather than himself as ‘adulterer’” (Adler, 1997, p. 96). His patriarchal way of rationalising does not let him confess his adultery. He uses the power of language only to stigmatise her, but he himself escapes it. Moreover, what troubles him is not the fact that he has committed adultery but that this may be known by the public. This is the reason why it takes so long for him to come to the court and confess his extramarital affair.

Furthermore, historical accounts show that “the real Abigail Williams was only 11 years old in 1692 (Miller has upped her age to 17) and the real John Proctor was 60 (Miller has lowered his age to 35)” (Koorey, 1997, p. 106), which makes it all the more disturbing to imagine their relationship. Besides, as Carson (1990) holds, “Proctor was not only twice the age of the girl he seduced, but as her employer he was breaking a double trust” (p. 75), which makes him far from being “the innocent victim of Abigail’s evil sexuality” (Tunç, 2013, p.

269). She is described as the ultimate femme fatale with tempting physical appearance, thereby securing “her entry into a dominant scopic economy” by being “the beautiful object of contemplation” (Irigaray, 1985, p. 26). What is more interesting is that despite ample references to her sexual appeal, Abigail did not have any sexual experience before Proctor, and she was a virgin: “I look for John Proctor that took me from my sleep and put knowledge in my heart!” (I. 30). Thus, rushing into the conclusion that Abigail seduced Proctor given her apparent lack of sexual awakening as the niece of a Puritan minister only reinforces the misogynistic assumption that “Abigail’s sexual knowledge must be inherent in her gender” (Schissel, 1994, p. 463). The final scene also serves to perpetuate “the tragic victory of [Proctor] . . . like the Puritan martyrs of old” (Carson, 1990, p. 75) at the expense of the defeat of Abigail. In his brief note to the play “Echoes down the Corridor”, after the events of the play, Abigail is said to end up as a prostitute in Boston, which underpins the argument that she is the seductive witch and guilty scapegoat to be banished into the wilderness who, unlike Proctor, is denied a chance to explain her real motives behind her actions by the author.

The other play of interest for this paper is Caryl Churchill’s *Vinegar Tom*, which was written for the socialist-feminist theatre company Monstrous Regiment in line with Churchill’s collaborative writing approach, reflecting her dedication to both socialism and feminism. As Churchill (1985) maintains in her introductory note to the play, “Vinegar Tom”, she wrote *Vinegar Tom* which is “about witches with no witches in it” because “‘witches’ were a scapegoat in times of stress like Jews and blacks”, and only “existed in the minds of its persecutors” (p. 129-30). The play is set in the seventeenth century England, and the action takes place in a small village. The main action springs from Jack and his wife Margery’s scapegoating their neighbors Joan and Alice for misfortunes happening on their farm basing their accusations on the grounds that Joan and Alice are witches. Then, the whole village succumb into frenzy, and most of the women are accused of witchcraft. These accused women are basically from lower social classes with little or no income. They are either poor, old or vulnerable women such as Alice’s mother Joan, or socially non-conforming single mothers who enjoy sex like Alice, or weak and easily frightened women who undergo abortion like Susan, or the healer women who stand on their feet by working without being part of the capitalist monetary system or institutionalised medical system like Ellen.

In this respect, as Reinelt (2000) maintains, “combining religious misogyny with emergent capitalism to construct poor women, unmarried women, and old women as scapegoats” (p. 175), patriarchal authorities exhaust all means to subject women to

dehumanising tortures and accusations of witchcraft. The underlying reason behind their anxiety and fear is that they cannot dominate the bodies and sexualities of these women. Thus, the play demonstrates “how women’s sexuality was feared and hated and blamed for all kinds of social ills” (Wandor, 1986, p. 41), and how they are persecuted by the male-dominated society, which renders women “scapegoats for social shortcomings and defects” (Thomsen, 1981, p. 166). Women who cannot fit into the sanctioned roles forged by patriarchy are stigmatised and their vulnerabilities are aggravated. As a single mother who has seen the world, as it were, Alice’s identity is attempted to be defined by her marital status. In the first scene, ‘Man’, presumably standing for all men in patriarchal society, attempts to humiliate her by calling her a whore. As a man in need of a ‘whore’, he is not willing to recognise that for any profession to emerge, especially for prostitution with the longest history among others, there needs to be a supply and demand balance. If men in society are desperate enough to pay women for sexual relationship, and do not see any problems in that, there will be women to supply this demand for reasons of their own.

He, furthermore, questions Alice’s identity: “What are you then? What name would you put yourself? You’re not a wife or a widow. You’re not a virgin. Tell me a name for *what* you are” (p. 137; emphasis added). Hence, he questions her using the pronoun ‘what’ rather than ‘who’, which lays bare the object position of women in this power matrix. Moreover, he accuses her of having no intelligible identity because he cannot name her. As Paglia (1991) asserts, “name and person are part of the west’s quest for form”, and “to name is to know; to know is to control” (p. 5). As he cannot find any room for her in the clear-cut definitions of womanhood, he becomes afraid that he may not maintain his authoritative power. Accordingly, as patriarchy sees a crack in its oppressive power system, it comes up with the myth of witchcraft. Hence, as Alice and many others are not compatible with patriarchal definitions of femininity, they must be witches then.

Another woman to go against patriarchal rules by meddling with the way nature works is Susan. She is accused of witchcraft for visiting the healer Ellen to have abortion. She is reprimanded by the priest for her fear of the labour pains because she “must think on Eve who brought the sin into the world and that got her pregnant”, and she must “think on how woman tempts man, and how she pays with God with her pain having the baby” (p. 146). This allegedly religious misogyny preaches nothing but pain and punishment for woman because she is stained by the sin of Eve. Moreover, even such a biological phenomenon as labour pains is explained or misconstrued through patriarchal paradigms. As Susan is gullible and

easy to manipulate, she comes to believe that she is a witch: “I was a witch and never knew it. [...] I’m loathsome and a sinner” (p. 174-5). Thus, I would like to argue that patriarchy spins an age-old yarn and, with a sleight of hand, makes women believe that they are witches for not conforming to the norms, and for not being what patriarchal society wants them to be, which is actually the witchery of patriarchy.

While these poor women are persecuted for being witch, Betty escapes it through her social class and by resigning herself to the patriarchal power matrix. She is about to be tortured and bled under the disguise of treatment by the doctor who reassures her that “after bleeding [she] must be purged”, and she “will soon be well enough to be married” (p. 149). Thus, after she gets vocal in her rebellion towards patriarchy by refusing to marry, she is “literally bled into submission by a male doctor” (Megson, 2012, p. 111). In this respect, I would like to argue that the doctor that examines Betty in *Vinegar Tom* for hysteria by pricking her arm is no different from Hale who professes to diagnose Betty with hysteria in *The Crucible*. Both the alleged professionals attempt to gain authority from their supposedly reliable and truth-telling books, no matter how inaccurate and unsound they may be. Hence, professed academic knowledge becomes just another tool of oppression of women to turn them into “subjected and practised bodies” (Foucault, 1995, p. 138).

Churchill, thus, demonstrates women’s oppression at the hands of patriarchy that victimises them through religious grand narratives, capitalist greediness, male fantasies of femininity and female sexuality, and also class-based vulnerability. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the play was originally commissioned by the members of Monstrous Regiment in line with the company’s attempts of “reclaiming the history play from women’s point of view” (Wandor, 1986, p. 41). In this respect, Churchill and Monstrous Regiment “retaliate for centuries of female humiliation” (Thomsen, 1981, p. 168) through the power of theatre. This endeavour to inscribe women back into the history that can no longer be perceived as a coherent and truth-telling account of what really happened in the past, but no better than yet another grand narrative forged by patriarchy echoes in Churchill’s later play *Cloud Nine* (1979). In this play Victoria invokes a goddess: “Give us the history we haven’t had, make us the women we can’t be” (p. 308). Thus, similarly Churchill attempts to present an alternate history, which does not succumb into patriarchal grand narratives, through “a reconstitution of hidden historical narratives, and a deconstruction of the past as a static body of knowledge bracketed from . . . the present” (Adiseshiah, 2009, p. 95).

Moreover, she mingles her socialist-feminist stance with certain Brechtian devices, thereby making room for “a critical attitude” instead of a “serene acceptance of an apparently inevitable fate” (Kritzer, 1991, p. 3). Therefore, she makes use of episodic plot structure, minimal scenery, contemporary songs, cross-casting technique, and historicisation. All this creates the Alienation effect (the A-effect), and encourages the reader/audience to attain a critical distance to the play, thereby helping to draw an analogy between the seventeenth century witch-hunt and contemporary oppression of women by patriarchy. Besides, in *Vinegar Tom* Churchill makes use of the past with a “revisionist approach to history” so as to “uncover materialist dimensions of received historical narratives and to problematize gender binaries”, which paves the way for Brecht’s historicisation technique with its “possibility of judging the past from the point of view of the present (as well as seeing the present open to historical change)” (Megson, 2012, p. 114). As Brecht (1964) explains, “we must drop our habit of taking the different social structures of past periods, then stripping them of everything that makes them different”, which results in the creation of “a certain air of having been there all along, in other words of permanence pure and simple” (p. 190). Thus, Churchill does not let the reader/audience get the conviction that the current social and political system is unchanging and has been mysteriously extant all along. In contrast, by making use of historicisation that is “the enemy of recuperation and appropriation” (Diamond, 1997, p. 50), she encourages the reader/audience to critically question the present system that seems to be change-proof, and eventually subvert it.

Hence, in contrast to Miller’s use of naturalism in *The Crucible*, *Vinegar Tom* as a “revisionist history play defines itself against [conventional devices] and presents an ‘alternative’ in terms of form and content” (Megson, 2012, p. 113). By the same token, the latter can also be said to challenge the former content-wise by, inter alia, not taking sides with any masculine redemption. Churchill, unlike Miller, does not choose to allow her male characters to go through a martyrdom process by granting them an opportunity to clear their conscience, but rather focuses on witchcraft hysteria as an example of scapegoating on the basis of gender and social bias. It also shows what patriarchy, having run out of arguments, could do to women.

In the light of what has been discussed so far, I would like to argue that both plays also explore the extent to which totalitarian ideologies, be they oppressive religion, radical politics, patriarchy, or capitalism, can persecute individuals, and scapegoat non-conforming identities that are simply different as witches. Thus, as Welland (1983) notes, Miller’s *The Crucible* can

be “best discussed as an historical play on a subject perennially topical and not exclusively American” (p. 56). Churchill’s *Vinegar Tom*, accordingly, lays bare the history of women in which “female witches were in large scapegoats” for “the social and political instability” (Kruger, 1990, p. 34). The witch-hunt of women is still prevailing in our zeitgeist, even though it may have changed in form and means. Strikingly, the majority of people who are accused of witchcraft in both plays are women. This must tell us something about the gynocide and oppression of women at the hands of patriarchy. Evidence also shows that women were the ones that got most accused of witchcraft and executed in the early modern European history (Levack, 1995, p. 1).

To conclude, scapegoating others by projecting one’s failures or mistakes on to them proves to be the driving motive behind the manufacturing of witchcraft myths in order to persecute those who are different, and thus pose a threat to the majority’s sense of identity. In *The Crucible*, characters who are accused of witchcraft are mainly outsiders. Thus, scapegoating these people as witches just because of their difference from the mainstream is supposed to secure the order of society and retain power at the hands of a few privileged people. Similarly, in *Vinegar Tom*, non-conforming women who live outside the patriarchal paradigm of propriety are rendered witches, and persecuted. Just as the goat story from Leviticus, political and patriarchal power groups blame non-conforming individuals for all the problems in society, and ostracise them as witches only to take the upper hand, and enjoy absolute power. However, the fate of the goat in the wilderness is not much of anybody’s concern.

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