

*John Proctor Is the Villain: Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, an anti-McCarthyite play, hijacked by the new McCarthyism, #MeToo*

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Please note that this article includes important plot details.

Theatergoers taking their seats before Kimberly Belflower's play *John Proctor Is the Villain* see a stage set with a high school classroom, the title of the play projected on the long chalkboard. Finding approving references to the #MeToo campaign in the program, one could be forgiven for anticipating a propagandistic play in which a male high school teacher will turn out to be a predatory and unambiguous villain. Unfortunately, this is exactly the play one gets.

Written in the wake of the eruption in October 2017 of the #MeToo furor, Belflower's play leaves no buzzword unspoken in its fabrication and then joyous demolition of a world of "textbook toxic masculinity." Of three male characters in the play, one is evil, one is occasionally evil but stupid and the last is merely stupid.

Mr. Smith is a young, handsome and charismatic English teacher at a small town high school in Georgia. When the play opens, he is leading his honors literature class through a group recitation of definitions from a required sex education curriculum. The students are bored with this elementary and Christian-inflected material, which culminates in a celebratory definition of abstinence, and want to get back to talking about literature. Mr. Smith then provides a brief introduction to the class's next reading, Arthur Miller's 1953 play *The Crucible*, writing on the chalkboard the word "McCarthyism."

The plot of the play, briefly, follows the partially shared personal lives of a group of friends. Raelynn's longtime boyfriend Lee has had sex with Raelynn's best friend, Shelby. When the play opens, Shelby has been mysteriously missing since her tryst with Lee. Raelynn, the Baptist preacher's daughter, hangs out with her friends and is given to suddenly staring into the distance and fantasizing murders. When Shelby reappears, she and Raelynn reconcile, rekindling their friendship over a shared contempt for the revolting Lee and his lack of sexual prowess. This is a particularly repugnant scene. Shelby lets it out gradually that Mr. Smith had seduced her into a sexual relationship. From this point

on, the play is dedicated to revenge.

The dialogue in *John Proctor Is the Villain* is effective, Belflower capturing convincingly the rhythms and argot of contemporary teenage speech. In the University of Michigan production, the student cast is talented and committed to their roles. In particular, Brynn Aaronson as Shelby conveys a psychic fragility and emotional power that approach the harrowing, and Sarah Hartmus as Raelynn is deft at delivering her comic lines.

Scenes end abruptly, actors bursting into dance as particularly trite sentences, attributed in the program to American artist Jenny Holzer, are projected onto the chalkboard, telling us, for example, that "abuse of power comes as no surprise" and urging us to resist authority, cherish anger and be generally oppositional. Belflower's drama, however, contains as much genuine social opposition as a bowl of oatmeal.

John Proctor Is the Villain is presented as a reinterpretation of Miller's *The Crucible*, set at the time of the notorious Salem witch trials of 1692-93. In that work, farmer John Proctor, husband to Elizabeth, has had an affair with the family's 17-year-old servant Abigail Williams. Proctor ends the affair and asks forgiveness of Elizabeth, but Abigail refuses to accept the end of the relationship, and we are given to understand that Abigail is, as we would say, unstable. The most powerful moment in *John Proctor* comes when Shelby, reading the part of Abigail in class, directs this speech from *The Crucible* to Mr. Smith:

And mark this. Let either of you breathe a word, or the edge of a word, about the other things, and I will come to you in the black of some terrible night and I will bring a pointy reckoning that will shudder you. And you know I can do it; I saw Indians smash my dear parents' heads on the pillow next to mine, and I have seen some reddish work done at night, and I can make you wish you had never seen the sun go down!

In *The Crucible*, Abigail seeks to harm Elizabeth with the aid of

claims about witchcraft and intelligently realizes the power available to her by accusing Elizabeth and others of consorting with the devil. Thus begins the witch hunt.

Miller's play casts the Salem witch trials as an allegory for the atmosphere of false accusation and fear created by the Red Scare of the 1940s and 50s. The tactics of using false accusation, denying the accused the right to confront their accuser, assuming guilt by association and generating mass fear of Communism came to be called McCarthyism, after the Republican senator from Wisconsin Joseph McCarthy who in 1950 began making accusations that the State Department had been infiltrated by Communists.

The Red Scare had begun earlier with the formation in 1938 of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), which truly got to work, however, in the immediately postwar period. Miller himself would be brought before HUAC in 1956 and found in contempt of Congress for courageously refusing to surrender the names of Communist writers of his acquaintance.

The point of *John Proctor Is the Villain* is that there really are "witches"—they are men who assault women, including presumably Proctor—and that "we always have to believe women." Lying, spreading fear, fomenting hysteria, these elements of *The Crucible* and of McCarthyism are removed from the world of Belflower's play. Rather, in *John Proctor*, hysteria is the test of truth itself. In this play, if a character is experiencing strong emotion, she (males in the play do not register much in the way of emotion) usually explodes in rage, another test of truth and an essential quality of all Belflower's females. As one of Holzer's pseudo-ponderous projections has it (in paraphrase), "Emotional response is as valuable as intellectual response." In the vernacular of the play, Yeah no.

John Proctor features no end of screaming. Belflower chose her setting carefully, as adolescents in their genuine angst can be forgiven frequent fits of rage that in adult characters would be more off-putting. At one point, presumably echoing the naked dancing in the forest by a group of girls in *The Crucible*, the four main characters in *John Proctor* stand screaming wordlessly together, the chorus ignited by Beth's howling the word "penis." Again, inarticulate rage in this play is self-justifying and the stamp of truth.

Shelby is a thoroughly sympathetic character, as are all the female characters in the play who have been, or hint that that they may have been, molested by men. The play makes amply clear that the teacher is guilty. He is an accused man, after all. It does feel like an imposition, though, that we are asked to believe that the school district would allow him back in the classroom after an accusation, especially in 2018. His class is to be monitored, however, by the school counselor, a female whom he has also attempted to seduce.

Moreover, on Mr. Smith's first day back in the classroom, his life destroyed, we are asked to believe that he would take advantage of a spare five minutes to try to seduce the student Beth! This time, Belflower is willing to broach the ludicrous in her determination not to make Mr. Smith human and allow ambiguity to step out of the wings.

Mr. Smith must be the devil himself. And in the play's ending,

as the students dance in triumph while their defeated teacher writhes in his deserved agony amid loud music and strobe lights, one viscerally feels one of the fundamental differences between *John Proctor Is the Villain* and Miller's *The Crucible*: The concept of the devil is held up to ridicule in *The Crucible*. It is shown to be a concept used to exercise power over and to manipulate others. In *John Proctor*, the devil is real, and it is used to exercise power over and manipulate the audience.

We noted in a 2005 obituary of Miller that "Articulate and intelligent as it is, *The Crucible* does not offer much insight into the source of McCarthyism or the state of American society as a whole." Nevertheless, *John Proctor Is the Villain* offers much lighter, but insidious, fare. It is a revisiting of *The Crucible* from the right, as it were, in defense of the new McCarthyism, the #MeToo witch hunt.

Typically, Belflower told an interviewer:

Lots has been written about Arthur Miller and his life and the way that he treated women and, like, even that aside, taking a real look at John Proctor's role in *The Crucible*...I felt crazy. I thought, "God, what else did I miss? Geez." I was talking to my dad and said out loud: "And that's crazy, because John Proctor is the villain." I heard myself say that and I was like: "Oh."

No hint that the "villain" might be the entire system of social relations. No interest whatsoever in the present state of political and social crisis in America. None. This is what's on these people's minds.

The emotional power of many scenes is real. Again, Belflower can write. But the power is used in the service of a regressive idea.

That *John Proctor Is the Villain* should be staged at the University of Michigan comes as no surprise. UM has long been a major factory in the identity politics industry. It is a fecund and lucrative garden for the billion-dollar diversity-equity-inclusion (DEI) hucksterism. Not coincidentally, its ties to US imperialism are many and strong, from heavy military investment in the university to the Democratic Party-controlled Board of Regents and its staunch support for the genocide of the Palestinians.

Belflower's play is to open on Broadway next spring, where no doubt it will score points with well-heeled audiences and critics. It will also dovetail effectively, despite its upper-middle class feminism, with the new, anti-democratic Trump administration. Guilt by accusation. Guilt by association. Devils and angels. Such will be the stuff of the 2025 season. Away from Broadway, however, life will be very different.



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