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Theatre as Truth Practice: Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*

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Citation

Aziz, A. (2014, December 9). *Theatre as Truth Practice: Arthur Miller's The Crucible*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/29997>

Version: Corrected Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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Title: Theatre as truth practice: Arthur Miller's The Crucible - a play waiting for the occasion

Issue Date: 2014-12-09

Conclusion: Written for an Occasion

Since the 1970s art's subversive potential has been the hobbyhorse of many academics in the humanities and social sciences. This political potential of art, one that has proved to be relevant and important in many cases, especially in countries subjected to a totalitarian or dictatorial regime, has been propagated by numerous movements such as Communism, feminism, operaism, autonomism and through a variety of approaches such as deconstruction, gender theory, queer theory and postcolonial theory. Subversion has often been addressed in relation to post-structuralism, and the name that would pop up most often in that context is Michel Foucault. He is one of the major theorists on the relation between state, culture, art and power.⁴⁰⁰ And, although at some point in his work subversion seemed to be nigh impossible since any subversion would rapidly be taken up by a power system that transcended and organised society, it later became a dominant theme.⁴⁰¹ In this respect, it would be quite easy to argue that *The Crucible* 'subverted' McCarthyism. Still, the play has started to travel through time, and we will have to see whether it has passed the test of time.⁴⁰² Its subversive potential is no longer predominant. In my reading, its potential for the present and the future lies in the fact that it speaks the truth, a dominant theme in Foucault's later work.⁴⁰³ Instead of subverting powers that be, it confronts them, albeit not all powers. In fact, it is a play waiting for a specific situation.

In the history of drama and theatre, many pre-eighteenth-century plays were occasion plays. Most of Shakespeare's plays were occasion plays. Lope de Vega wrote hundreds of them (it is said that he wrote 1800 comedies). The irony is that they lost this 'occasional' quality and became masterpieces that have been considered as near universal. The occasion play as a genre was not deemed worthy of serious, sustained academic attention. Shakespeare has become an academic industry, but the genre of the occasion play is central to a single cause

⁴⁰⁰ Such as in Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, trans. and introduction by Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978), p. 133; Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p. 149; Michel Foucault, 'The Order of Discourse', in *Untying the Text: A Poststructuralist Reader*, ed. and introduction by Robert Young (Boston / London / Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 48-78.

⁴⁰¹ See Fabio Vighi and Heiko Feldner, 'Ideology Critique or Discourse Analysis? Žižek against Foucault', *European Journal of Political Theory* 6.2 (2007), pp. 142-45.

⁴⁰² On literature and the test of time, see Richard A. Posner, 'Law and Literature: A Relation Reargued', *Virginia Law Review* 72 (1986), pp. 1355-56.

⁴⁰³ See Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*

here and there. Yet in a sense *The Crucible* is an occasion play, be it in reverse. It was written for the occasion of McCarthyism. Since then the play has survived, as performances in the last decade show. As a result, we could consider it as ‘universal,’ much like *Hamlet*, which has been performed for centuries, in many different circumstances and in many different circles and countries. Yet, *The Crucible* is different. It is a specific play in that it needs an occasion and has been written for an occasion where its potential can be fully realised. The situation it is written for is one in which a hegemonic power produces an atmosphere of fear and paranoia and uses this atmosphere to hunt down real or imagined opponents, appearing to be almost invincible, while it can only exist on the basis of fanatic belief. It is this type of situation *The Crucible* was aimed at and is now waiting for, an ‘appropriate time’ when it will become an ‘opportunity’, the two etymological roots of the term ‘occasion’. This is not to say, of course, that the play cannot be performed at any given time. It can be performed at will and, in fact, has been performed in many places, and on many ‘occasions’. However, if it is just a performance like any other, it will probably be experienced as any other play. Yet in my reading, it is a play that waits for not just any occasion but for the occasion, in its potential to speak the truth or to facilitate a truth practice.

If we come back to the issue of subversion, the play is not really subversive. The kind of tyrannical or totalitarian power that I have just sketched is not really vulnerable in terms of subversion. It will remove subversion with the sweep of a hand, a knock on the door, an asylum that is able to keep all forms of mentally deranged within its walls. Again, the power of *The Crucible* does not lie in the fact that it is subversive. It resides in speaking the truth. Such truth-speaking was central in Foucault’s later work and it was highly theatrical in structure.

As if to emphasize the theatrical structure of truth-speaking, Foucault calls it at some point a *game*, on the ground that the participants in the conversation must be willing to take on their role. Those in power will have to adopt the role of those willing to listen. This is to say that the one speaking the truth does not speak in poetic addresses. He or she does not possess truth, he or she speaks it, even if it is an uncomfortable truth, in some form of public space, or in an enclosed space where people gather (like the ecclesia). In speaking, the one speaking the truth takes a risk. Speaking the truth may cost him his life. The game is therefore not just a game. Speaking the truth can be a matter of life and death. This fact is sign for the fact that truth speech isn’t being a matter of

subversion but of confrontation. In this sense it is also useful to consider the situation in terms of conversation, or even dialogue. Speaking the truth does not resemble the Socratic dialogue, nor is truth an issue of conversation for that matter. The listeners' reaction, whether they agree or not, does not concern the speaker of the truth. Her truth confronts. Those in power will act as they see fit. They may change their mind, their ways of acting, or they may kill the one speaking the truth.⁴⁰⁴

The Crucible acts, as a whole, in terms of speaking the truth, regardless of the consequences. As a theatre play it does need a theatrical situation, however, in which it can come forward to confront the powers that be with its truth. Obviously, one can imagine situations where any play that has not been sanctioned beforehand is forbidden. In such situations, however, and where it is allowed to come forward on its own terms, *The Crucible* can act as a confrontation. This would not hold, admittedly, when the political system is functioning properly. However, in the circumstances that I described earlier, *The Crucible* works as a confrontation. Those willing to speak in such a situation will know what they are doing, and will have to accept the rules of the game governing speaking the truth. They have to be willing to risk their lives.

However, as I just pointed out, it would seem that people have to decide to speak the truth first and then use *The Crucible* for that purpose. It also works the other way around, however. Practising the play may help individuals and collectives dare to speak the truth. In this respect, the play is not just a play that can be performed; it also has a performative quality in the sense of speech act theory. Its power resides not only in its ability to be performed but also in its theatrical potential when it is read.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, *The Crucible*'s truth does not lie in the fact that it takes a particular stand and shows it to be the right one. The play mimics, represents and criticises a recurrent cultural pattern in US society. By working through the different positions involved, the play's truth, in showing the complexity of the situation instead of simplifying it, essentially confronts people with the ugly truth. And it is through performativity that this confrontation can become much more than a simple confrontation of speaking the truth. On this subject, let me turn to Judith Butler's *Excitable Speech*.

In *Excitable Speech*, Judith Butler is both concerned with cultural persistency and renewal, both in relation to the subject's formation and to power. At some point, she wonders how it is possible that norms produced by

⁴⁰⁴ Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, pp. 13-14.

human beings and aimed at regulation start to react with the embodied lives of human 'selves' in such a way that a 'normative embodiment of norms' comes into being. In order to explain this, Butler first considers Pierre Bourdieu's option in his counter-reading of Austin's idea of performativity. For Austin, as is well-known, the performative speech act is either felicitous or not. Yet, what determines a felicitous or infelicitous outcome? According to Bourdieu, the determining factor is the person who is legally empowered to speak. This of course creates the problem of how something new can ever come into being. Butler explains this with the help of Bourdieu's example of the ritual. Rituals need to be performed on the basis of the correct rules and so-called prescriptions, otherwise they become invalid, or infelicitous. However, as Butler argues, the ritual that interrupts another, valid, ritual can also be the ritual of the future. Bourdieu's analysis is ultimately unsatisfactory since he cannot explain how the non-conventional repetition of a conventional formula can nevertheless have formative powers. The issue of repetition, or iterability, is critical in this respect. Butler is clearly not dealing with 'new' acts that can be new as such. In fact she is dealing with the logic of repetition, of iterability.⁴⁰⁵

It is this logic of iteration that is paradigmatically embodied by any theatrical text, since the text aims at its own repetition, in a double sense: by means of rehearsals and by means of a repeated performance. Moreover, on a level that is both more concrete and more abstract, the text is a matter of the performative as opposed to the theatrical performance. On a textual level, *The Crucible* demands to be carried out not merely as a theatrical performance but as a performative search for a context. This is where Derrida comes in with his reading of Austin. Derrida reckons that the power of the performative is not so much dependent on the context as on its breaking with previous contexts and abilities to work again in new contexts. Inasmuch as any performative is conventional and ritualistic, it is consistent repetition that keeps its power alive. In other words, the performative is not solely linked to one context but to contexts to come. Performative speech acts have the same power here as the written word, or any written sign. These carry a power of their own that is able to break a given context, not as a performative aside but as a structural element.⁴⁰⁶

⁴⁰⁵ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York / London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 146-47.

⁴⁰⁶ Butler, pp. 147-49.

Although Butler considers this to be an important improvement on Bourdieu's reading of Austin, the question of historicity nevertheless puzzles her. If breaking the context and the subsequent possibility of reversal is structural, why does it only work sometimes? Derrida, in his approach of this question, appears to lack a social analysis of felicitous or infelicitous performatives. For such an analysis, Butler turns to the principal embodiedness of speech acts. Even when things are written down, codified or made into law, there has to be a body, in the end, that expresses them. The body is the place of social history and the instrument of the production of an almost self-evident realisation of this social history.⁴⁰⁷ By analogy, performative speech acts are not just the expression of already existing conventions and societal bodies, they also produce them. As such they are never self-evidently 'covered'. On the contrary they may give rise to 'renewed appropriations'.⁴⁰⁸ This is why I would like to consider *The Crucible* as a form of a *scenario*. A scenario is finished but needs to be carried out and in being done will lead to something new. Its Latin etymology is, literally, 'of stage scenes' and it is on these scenes that the text, from its status as sketch, needs to be actualised.

This also the stage where speaking the truth, in this case through *The Crucible*, is confrontational. It is not saying something new, it is saying something that people, whether in power or not, already know. The power of *The Crucible* lies in its search for a context which it can open up, not because it is realising an alternative but because it repeats the language of the powers that defined this context in the first place. The text works paradigmatically here as a *theatrical* text. The performative, in Butler and Austin's sense, demands that we do what we say, or rather that expression and action coincide. A performance of *The Crucible* in any shape and on any scale can only become a performative when it is brought in the open and made public, in terms of speaking the truth. In this context, it extends beyond the realm of mere rehearsal of the text. It demands a sequence of performances.

Happy are the times that do not call for a play such as *The Crucible*. If the times are such that they engender a play by creating the occasion the play is waiting for, its performance would not merely be a matter of going through the motions, even if only as a ritual. The play's performative powers demand that it be enacted with the courage of truth defined by Foucault. The game at stake, as Foucault calls it, comes with its own risks. As long as the ruling powers accept

⁴⁰⁷ Butler, pp. 152-53.

⁴⁰⁸ Butler, pp. 158-60.

to be told the truth, the actors enacting the play will be relatively safe. But it is their acting that may also provoke violent, ruthless responses. Such is the game of truth, such is the risk of truth-practices. In this respect, truth-practices cannot be a simple matter of individual responsibility. According to Foucault, the factors involved in truth-practices can be defined as follows:

What is involved, rather, is the analysis of complex relations between three distinct elements none of which can be reduced to or absorbed by the others, but whose relations are constitutive of each other. These three elements are: forms of knowledge (*saviors*), studied in terms of their specific modes of veridiction; relations of power, not studied as an emanation of a substantial and invasive power, but in the procedures by which people's conduct is governed; and finally the modes of formation of the subject through practices of self. It seems to me that by carrying out this triple theoretical shift – from the theme of acquired knowledge to that of veridiction, from the theme of domination to that of governmentality, and from the theme of the individual to that of the practices of self – we can study the relations between truth, power, and subject without ever reducing each of them to the others.⁴⁰⁹

As may be clear from this quote, a play such as *The Crucible*, when not simply performed like any other play at any given time but on the occasion that it has been waiting for, will not merely involve individuals acting, although it will certainly always require individual courage. The actions they are engaged in, however, relate to the three elements mentioned above of subjectivity and power, of the individual and collective self. When acted out as such, performing the play becomes an action, in Arendt's sense: a public, political act, in what Hannah Arendt called a space of appearance, a theatrical space that is, in which the audience takes as much part as the actors – and with unpredictable outcomes.

⁴⁰⁹ Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, p. 9.