

Piedade fairies and salem witches

Abstract

How can two religious phenomena, motivated and sustained by supernatural visions of children and adolescents result in totally diametrically different personal and social transformations? One of the phenomena studied is part of Brazilian Catholicism and refers to an apparition of the Virgin Mary (from the 1980s until today). The other phenomenon, the puritan inquisition, reveals an American religious dynamic very common in the 17th Century. The inquisition caused many people to die and promoted significant changes in the lives of the people involved and in their communities. Besides comparing these two phenomena, the author's purpose was also to show the richness of these episodes, without surrendering to interpretations which are excessively psychological and sociological, and which are not sensitive to the transcendent's experience of life.

Keywords: supernatural, visions, marianism, Puritanism, social, transformations

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Introduction

If, on the one hand, the general rule states that art imitates life, on the other there are curious exceptions where the opposite is true. This is the case of the apparition of Our Lady of Piedade,¹ the similarity of which to one of the epics of North American theatre is surprising. I refer to Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible* (1953), which in Portuguese is entitled: *As Bruxas de Salém* (*The Witches of Salem*).² For this reason and in homage to the renowned playwright, who died in February of this year, I use this play and some of its interpretations as an analytical strategy to bring to the forefront, through approximation and contrast, what lies behind the Brazilian drama. I must emphasize that this comparison aims only to meet the specific objectives of this article, since the nature of the phenomena and related data are very distinct.

The scenario in which Our Lady appears is the vicinity of the small farming town of Piedade dos Gerais (MG- Brazil), namely in the former Fazenda and Sítio Barro Vermelho district, currently known as the "Valley of the Immaculate Conception-Vale da Imaculada Conceição". The Virgin appeared there for the first time to three girls, aged twelve, ten and seven, in the afternoon of September 19th 1987. The first Marian messages can be resumed as the good news announcing a better world for the rural workers in that region and a call to prepare in full for this happening by living in a community within the sanctuary. The tone of these messages was quite revolutionary, welcoming those who suffer and the oppressed, telling them that they would become equal and live in complete happiness.

As time passed and thousands of pilgrims came there from nearby towns, the messages began to change, becoming more generic and subjective. They continued to speak of salvation and the building of a better world, but no longer for those in a lower position in the local hierarchy, and rather for those whose heart was suffering. Maria promised them that as long as they continued sharing in the

"Valley" there would be plenty, supplies would not be lacking and no one would go hungry. However, money was not to circulate between them, and nothing could be charged for or paid for. In the third phase of the phenomenon, the pilgrimages took place in an opposite direction, since Our Lady began to peregrinate further afield. To this day her travels aim to take the word to those who are unable to travel to Piedade, and also to reach a larger public that is still unaware of the happening. Wherever she peregrinates Maria appears to visionaries if they are gathered in prayer or praising God. She manifests herself anywhere: in houses, squares, streets, clubs, and schools and even in churches, since she affirms that she has never abandoned the Church even though it has been rejected in Piedade.

In sum, over the course of the last seventeen years several aspects of the apparition have undergone modifications. However, the following characteristics of the Virgin of Piedade remain unaltered and characterize her profile and her devotion:

- (i) Her oracular messages are uttered in an altered state of consciousness and in the first person
- (ii) The messages are revealed in public during rites and through visionaries (especially the messenger Marilda)
- (iii) the messages circulate in various social contexts, beyond the small town where they began
- (iv) The constant presence of a non-clerical group open to new followers in the sanctuary, nowadays comprised of people who have different values, concepts, interests, social projects and types of Catholicism
- (v) The affectionate and gentle welcome Maria gives
- (vi) The announcement of the good news: the Kingdom of God for everyone

Before beginning the intended task of comparing this phenomenon with *The Crucible*, it is important to mention that other authors before me have sought inspiration in this play for the production of their artistic works. One of them was the Brazilian dramatist Jorge de Andrade in this play *Vereda da Salvação* (1965). Like Miller and on his advice,¹ Andrade used a real case of religious fanaticism as the subject of his play. He focussed on a tragedy that was recent at

¹This phenomenon was ethnographed by me, and was the central theme of my PhD thesis, later published in 2003 with the title *Vozes da mãe do silêncio: a aparição da Virgem Maria em Piedade dos Gerais (MG)*. In addition it was presented and discussed by me in the book organized by Steil, Mariz and Reesink in 2003, entitled *Maria entre os vivos: reflexões teóricas e etnográficas sobre aparições marianas no Brasil*.

²*As Bruxas de Salém*, Editorial Presença, Lisboa (1961).

the time and had taken place at the Fazenda São João da Mata, in the municipality of Malacacheta (MG-Brazil) in 1955. Some sharecroppers, members of the Adventist Church of the Promise and exalted by the religious passion of Holy Week, killed four children they deemed to be possessed by the Devil. The landowner called the police who in turn killed the perpetrators of the crime.

Miller's drama does not however belong to his time. It takes place in 1692 in Salem, Massachusetts. It is a small village founded by Puritans who had been persecuted in England and where, consequently, a strong religious fervour predominates. In the village temporal activities and interests are always subordinated to spiritual ones and even power is exercised in the name of a divine authority through men who declare themselves to be its representatives on Earth. In addition to theocracy, the desire to acquire possessions and a strong sense of guilt stirs in the bosom of these people.

Based on letters and documents about factual witch trials, the writer portrays this Puritan society in the midst of a problem of collective hysteria which in the end results in deaths. This research is very similar to the ethnographic efforts of an anthropologist, since although the play begins with the words "No one can really know what their lives were like", throughout the text Miller attempts to convince us that 17th century Salem was indeed like he portrays it. He sought to get to know this community in depth and to reveal it in a crystal-clear manner, believing profoundly that the reader would discover the essence of one of the most terrible chapters of the history of mankind ("A Note on the Historical Accuracy of this Play" in *The Crucible*, op. cit.).

The plot begins to unfold when two pubescent girls fall into a "hypnotic trance".¹ after having danced naked and evoked spirits in the forest along with other girls. When they are found out, they indicate, through supernatural visions, some women as being in league with the Devil so as to protect themselves precisely from this same accusation. Fear of the infiltration of Evil in the community immediately arises and an inquisitorial process is therefore begun, leading to innocent people being burnt at the stake. At first sight, the most noticeable coincidence between the *Crucible* and the manifestation of the Virgin Mary is the synthesizing operation of a collective truth ignited by the girls. Although the ideological register of the two cases is different, since as I will demonstrate further on the values consecrated in each of them are inverse and opposite, it is this same crystallizing gesture of social truth operated by the visionaries that makes them similar. Firstly, in general this gesture takes the children out of the marginal position they held in the two societies before the extraordinary events took place. They were not heard, nor were they valued or even respected, their lives being totally determined by their elders. Miller states that: He [Reverend Parris] was a widower with no interest in children, or talent with them. He regarded them as young adults, and until this strange crisis he, like the rest of Salem, never conceived that the children were anything but thankful for being permitted to walk straight, eyes slightly lowered, arms at the sides, and mouths shut until bidden to speak.²

However, once they began to have unusual visions their status became completely altered. The young ones, both in Salem and in Piedade, became deified and elevated to the condition of God's messengers on Earth. As a consequence, they became powerful and held the entire population's fate in their hands. Danforth: (...) Do you know, Mr. Proctor, that the entire contention of the state in these trials is that the voice of Heaven is speaking through the children? Proctor:

I know that, sir.² Together with the reversal of the role of the children in those communities another important change in the order of things also occurred. Following the manifestation of the supernatural, there was a profound revolution in the way reality was perceived and defined. In the end, as in fairy stories, the visionaries placed a spell on these universes.

The world which until then had been considered real and immediate, took second place in the lives of both communities. Everyday activities, social roles and duties stopped being the organizing factors of daily life. In their place, Our Lady, the Devil and other beings - less concrete objects of knowledge-became extremely solid, creating objective facts and giving new meanings to former facts. In truth, like *The Crucible*, the apparition of the Virgin shows us that there is a very close relationship between the objective world and the world of ideas. Or rather, these terms find themselves in permanent proximity, one being a basic reference for the existence of the other. In both stories, however, it is made explicit that facts and representations form part of everything we call reality. Furthermore, they clearly speak of integrated universes, cosmologies, where the modern world distinction between real and fantastic does not exist.

It is curious that the source that inspired the playwright and lead him to these considerations regarding the Salem witch trials was an episode that took place in his own time: the political persecution of communism, headed by Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s. As Miller saw it, the investigations carried out in the name of national security breached the rights of the people who were questioned, and who frequently abandoned their values and beliefs to escape from punishment, concealing their guilt - in the same way as those suspected of witchcraft. Moreover, these investigations encouraged the appearance of informants motivated by personal interests or by revenge.³

As a result, at this period in time, an atmosphere of mistrust and fear hovered over the United States, rekindling the "witch-hunt". Yet again, it was generated by terror, metamorphosed in a sacred and legitimate aura as an objective truth. [...] It was not the rise of 'McCarthyism' that moved me, but something which seemed much more weird and mysterious. It was the fact that a political, objective, knowledgeable campaign from the far Right was capable of creating not only a terror, but a new subjective reality, a veritable mystique which was gradually assuming even a holy resonance... That so interior and subjective an emotion could have been so manifestly created from without was a marvel to me. It underlies every word in *The Crucible*.^{2,3}

However, whilst the supernatural visions raised a new order, both in Salem and in Piedade dos Gerais, they also spoke of the contexts in which they arose. That is to say, at one and the same time they built new realities and also referred to the means that produced them, allowing us to know them. In both cases, it appears to me that this arose through the ease with which the girls captured discursive crystallizations-values, needs, collective concerns, among other aspects present in their societies and translated them in the form of sacred symbols. Nor should we forget that due to their multi-voiced

³Jorge de Andrade also wrote *Vereda da Salvação* (1965) at a politically turbulent time in Brazil. For the first time, according to Sobrinho in his PhD thesis entitled *O Teatro Consciente de Arthur Miller e Jorge Andrade* (1982), Andrade dramatized the living conditions of the poorer classes of Brazilian society, which, as also happened to Miller as a result of denouncing the persecution of communists, provoked discontented reactions both by the totalitarian government that ran the country and also by left wing political groups.

nature, the symbols absorb and condense discrepant meanings in the same representation. Thus they are able not only to reflect the political and social structure in which they are situated, legitimizing social positions, but also contribute towards subverting it.

In truth, by learning tradition at low levels of consciousness, children, shamans and artists, as a general rule, have greater access to unconscious structures than do adults taken to be “normal”. In these phenomena this fact clearly occurs. The visionaries, in a manner not mediated by consciousness, appear to be “possessed” by the discursive principles of their own cultures. Everything indicates that Arthur Miller sensitively perceived or intuited this ability of the children, since even having modified some aspects of the actual trial, such as the age of one of the girls, he kept them in the centre of the play, reflecting the entire village. As such it is through the children’s imaginary that the feelings and the thoughts of the 17th century Puritans are revealed to us. The author himself recognizes, in part of his “Introduction”,³ that the girls did not create anything. They merely ignited a process that was already there and on the point of developing at that place - which also explains why the village people immediately adhered to it.

After all, phenomena of collective effervescence, similar to the witch-hunts and the apparition of Our Lady do not happen by chance. They do not occur unexpectedly or inexplicably. There are countless other vital and decisively important interrelated factors involved in them. Therefore, as the writer well understood, there is not just one single motivation for such phenomena. In *The Crucible*, the various circumstances that gave rise to the collective hysteria are gradually presented and connected to each other, taking away the sacred nature of the phenomenon for us, the readers. There is a gradual evolution from the mere allusion, or suggestion, to the definition of the fact of witchery itself. The origin of these reasons is found in small motivations, such as envy, resentment and individual ambition. It is, however, the ingrained sense of guilt, inherent to the Puritan society, and the desire to conceal it that is at the root of the situation.

Differently, it is not guilt that emerges from behind the messages of the Virgin of Piedade, nor are the motivations I reveal of an individual nature. Socio-economic factors are more emphasized than personal issues, despite not having the intention of taking away the sacred character of the event. To a large extent, this is due to the nature of the anthropological efforts made, as I see it, which seeks to understand the Virgin’s apparition as the result of the interaction between the various groups involved in it without, however, reducing it to a mere representation of these social relations. I therefore seek to find in the crisis of the local Church, in the conflicts between the peasants, in the possible construction of a hydroelectric power station and in the cultural tradition nothing more than underlying elements for the development of a phenomenon that transcends this specific context.

On the other hand and in order to meet the demands of drama, Miller needed to invent a lovers triangle, comprised of one man and two women, which makes the supernatural “natural”. This is the core of the play: the adolescent Abigail Williams, the driving force of the happenings in Salem, was the Proctor household’s servant until Goody Proctor discovers a romance between her and her husband. In revenge the girl accuses Elizabeth Proctor of witchcraft and, although she leaves John Proctor out of this accusation, he is indirectly involved. The outcome of the drama is tragic. John Proctor, the hero, can neither face the present nor himself, unless he frees himself of the guilt (especially the guilt of adultery) that has accumulated over the years. So he turns to death to soothe his inner conflict and maintain his good name before society.

All the scenes of the play take place in closed environments, clearly demonstrating the oppressive atmosphere of a Puritan village. The story can also be seen to be moving towards the catastrophe, in a movement that goes from the bursting of new life in the spring to the death and decay of autumn. There is here a further divergence from the apparition in Piedade, since there the supernatural manifestations take place in open places and during the day, which may be representative of the Catholic mysticism that lead the country folk of Minas Gerais to encounter salvation rather than hell. However, even though *The Crucible* is structured around the three characters mentioned above, bringing deep psychological issues to the surface, at no time is the theocratic community lost from sight. The individual is always treated as the evidence and product of his/her collective environment. After all, the author starts from the assumption that individual acts are linked to a collective pattern and that the microcosm of the family reflects society as a whole.

According to Robert Hogan,⁴ Miller’s most efficient way of placing man in his social context is through the technique of the narrator, as used in the introductory act. The purpose of this act, referred to as “an overture”, is to describe the background in order to understand why there was en masse adherence to the fanaticism that took hold of Salem. Thus the scenario and the atmosphere of the period are established before Proctor’s case is broached—as I too attempted to do before relating the first Marian apparitions at Fazenda Barro Vermelho. In the light of this focus given by the author, who is very close to an anthropological approach, several interpretations of the drama relate it to extensive humanistic thematics. For some commentators,^{1,5} the witch trials do not only speak of the Puritan way of seeing the world, but also of the American way of seeing it, since the history of Puritan theocracy is the history of the United States itself. That is to say, “the dilemma of John Proctor, then, was the dilemma of America itself”.⁵

Furthermore, the study by Miguel João Sobrinho entitled, *O teatro consciente de Arthur Miller & Jorge Andrade*^{6,7} (op. cit.), shows that the guilt complex of the Americans is considerably explored in the play as a cause of repressive phenomena. This feeling would be the result of religious fervour accompanied by the strong materialist desire to acquire possessions. Present since the occupation of the North American lands, the belief that God rewards upstanding people with money turns money into a symbol of moral integrity. However, the ownership of material goods was exalted without concern as to how they were acquired, as wealth passed an image esteemed and respected in society. As such, the Christian virtues became to be yearned for alongside worldly goods, creating, in this duality, both guilt and the desire to conceal it.

In parallel, Sobrinho (idem) highlights the playwright’s social concern, manifesting himself against the abuse of power that arises through the deep-rooted feeling of guilt. In essence, according to Sobrinho, Miller defends the right of all mankind to be free from any kind of oppression, be it political, economic or ideological. As a consequence, the real events involving religious fanaticism in 17th century New England served only as a vehicle for Miller’s much more generic ideas. Despite some critics having reduced *The Crucible*, at the time it was written, to an allegory of the official investigations unleashed by McCarthy, it can be seen that it is not a mere pamphlet nor are its motivations contingent or immediatist. It is true that there is, by association, criticism of the attitudes and methods of the 20th century inquisitors and of those who sold their own conscience in order to escape condemnation. However it is more universal questions that give the play vitality, proven by its continued and successful restaging to this day and by the fact of it having become a source of inspiration

for other writers. For this reason it can be stated that the thematics of this drama from the past are trans-historic. It defines itself as a social process that includes and enlightens whilst also transcending the Salem witch trials and the anti-communist persecutions of the 1950s. There is here another important point in common between the apparition of Our Lady and The Crucible. Although the Marian phenomenon is a present drama, produced and staged in Piedade dos Gerais, as I stated earlier, it is not restricted to the specific context of that region. Today the faithful from different social classes, different regions of Brazil and even from abroad actively take part in this happening. However, even though the apparition directly mobilizes Catholics, it involves more than just Marian devotees. It is much more far-reaching. After all, over the last two thousand years Maria has managed to surpass the singularity of the particularly religious field, synthesizing the feelings and the thinking - the “ethos” and the vision of the world⁸ of Christianity itself. Thus, by making direct contact with and activating this powerful symbol, which has defined much more than the ways of local society and has traversed different eras, the supernatural visions of Piedade dos Gerais reveal a far-reaching message. It refers both to the country folk of the State of Minas Gerais and also to the entire Western world, and that is how it should be read and understood.

Finally, I have left until last, following the above comparison, the parallel that I deem to be crucial between what happened in Salem and what happened in Piedade. Although both cases deal with the same theme- children’s ability to control and define the world of adults, evoking contact with the supernatural, what is more important is that we are faced with two different core meanings. That is to say, there are two socially opposite worlds. In Salem there is guilt; in Piedade there is innocence. In the former there is condemnation, punishment; in the latter there is unlimited joy and redemption for all. In one there is adultery, adult guilt, represented by the Devil; in the other there is the maternity of the mother to whom all human beings are children, the Virgin’s sinless motherhood. In both stories a group of girls find themselves at the centre of the phenomena, establishing the denouement of the events and sustaining their dramatic action. However, if, in the work of fiction, the protagonists cause commotion in the village through fear, in the real-life case they promote peace, happiness and social harmony, ensuring, through the promise of Our Lady, salvation for those who follow her. Whereas the girls in The Crucible found it easy to establish terror in Salem and gain control over those who believed them as well as the naive and those benefited by the situation, the manifestation of the Virgin Mary, on the other hand, caused neither fear nor suffering among the country folk of Minas Gerais. Either way, the symbols present in the children’s imaginary that are capable of causing these profound revolutions are not random ones. As with any symbol, they are the result of the context and the religious concepts in which they emerged. Consequently it is through them that the children speak to all of society, playing the role of mediators of the collective wish. In Salem we can therefore see that the deep-rooted sense of guilt, the desire to conceal it and the suffocating austerity of a society created an infernal phenomenon. The Puritans met with hell, whereas in Piedade dos Gerais Our Lady appeared promising the creation of heaven on earth. The peasants were indeed reborn, to her glory. All the prominent problems and conflicts existing in September 1987, the threat of a hydroelectric power station being built, the socio-economic problems and the reproachable attitudes of the parish priest were overcome following the apparition, as if by miracle.

In sum, new worlds were built in both societies through the children. In the play, however, the characters experienced an “anti-utopia”, whereas in Piedade the girls proposed and achieved a utopian world among the peasants.⁹ Faced with so many parallels between

The Crucible and the manifestation of the Virgin Mary,¹⁰⁻¹² apart from the beauty of the play, it inspired me to a singular interpretation of the phenomenon that happened in Minas Gerais. I should also say that I am aware of countless works,⁴ in both Brazilian literature and cinema, that focus on real-life cases of Messianism and religious fanaticism in Brazil, but of them all The Crucible appeared to me to be the most perfect reference for achieving my objectives in paying homage to its author and presenting in this article the richness of the experience of popular Catholicism in Piedade,^{13,14} without yielding to interpretations which are excessively psychological and sociological, and which are not sensitive to the transcendent’s experience of life.

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Conflicts of interest

Author declares there is conflicts of interest.

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⁴As an example I quote Euclides da Cunha’s classic work *Os Sertões*, which shows the figure of Antônio Conselheiro in the turbulent events of the Canudos War. This war is also the scenario of *João Abade*, a romance by João Felício dos Santos, and also of the more recent *The War of the End of the World*, by Mário Vargas Llosa. Antônio Callado, in turn, creates an imaginary situation certainly inspired by various episodes of Messianist-millenary outbreaks-in which to unfold his novel *Assunção de Salviano*, while the case of Malacacheta is found in the pages written by Jorge Andrade. A film worthy of note is *Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol*, by Glauber Rocha. And, to demonstrate that such religious movements are not exclusive to North-East Brazil or the country’s poorer regions, at the end of the 1970s the cinema focussed on a fact that took place in São Leopoldo (RS) known as the “Mucker’s’ Revolt”, when the members of a German colony adhered to the religious fanaticism lead by Jacobina, a controversial mystical figure (Sobrinho, 1982). Apart from these, undoubtedly there are various other works that could be named here.

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