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Performance, Silence and the Role of Women in The Crucible

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Abigail Williams, the primary antagonist, is a clear example of someone who understands and uses performance to her advantage. In Act 1, Miller describes her as "a strikingly beautiful girl, an orphan, with an endless capacity for dissembling"(Miller 8). This shows us from the start that Abigail is someone who hides her true motives behind a false appearance. She cries out, "I want the light of God, I want the sweet love of Jesus!" (45) This sounds like a confession, but it can be a calculated act. She knows that society expects young girls to be pure and religious, so she pretends to be exactly that.

Her manipulation extends beyond the courtroom. Abigail uses fear to control the other girls. She threatens them, saying, "Let either of you breathe a word... and I will bring a pointy reckoning that will shudder you" (19). She understands that the court believes a united front, so she makes sure everyone sticks to the same script. Her power does not come from truth or reason but from knowing how to keep up a performance that looks believable to the men in charge. However, in the end, Abigail's power fades. She flees Salem and her name is ruined. Even though Abigail seemed to have all this power, it was only temporary. Her story shows how women only seem to hold power when they are manipulating the system.

On the other hand, Mary Warren wants to do the right thing and she is caught between staying loyal to the Proctors and the pressure from the other girls. Mary is naive, lonely and subservient—someone who genuinely believes in the court's authority and is easily swayed by others. When she tries to tell the truth, she is not stopped by reason or facts but by the emotional performances of Abigail and the rest of the girls. When Mary tries to resist, saying, "Abby, you mustn't!" (107) the other girls mock her, which makes the court believe that she is lying. Her breakdown shows how the truth gets lost when society is more interested in a good performance than in what is actually real.

Elizabeth Proctor represents another way women are treated. She stays calm and does not manipulate others for her own gain. But her silence does not protect her. When she lies to protect her husband, saying "My husband is a good and righteous man" (104), it is the one time she goes against her own honesty and it leads to her downfall. It is ironic that even though she is morally strong, it does not really matter in a world where emotional performances are what the court values most.

This play focuses on how women in Salem are either silenced or pushed to perform roles they might not want to. Those who do not conform, like Elizabeth, are ignored, while those like Abigail and Mary, who manipulate the system, are destroyed by it in the end. The Crucible shows how women's voices are valued only when they follow the script others set for them.

Works cited

Miller, Arthur. The Crucible. Penguin Books, 2003.