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Of Histories and Hiveminds:
The Weaponization of Community in *Fuente Ovejuna* and *The Crucible*

Like Lope de Vega's *Fuente Ovejuna*, Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* depicts a fictionalized account of a true historical incident. *Fuente Ovejuna*, published in the early seventeenth century, depicts the events leading up to a village's collective uprising and overthrow of a corrupt military leader that took place in 1476, nearly one hundred and fifty years prior to the play's initial printing. At the time of *Fuente Ovejuna*'s 1619 publication, Spain had been undergoing rapid cultural growth and innovation during what would come to be known as the Spanish Golden Age. Concurrent to this literary and artistic renaissance was colonial expansion under the Spanish Hapsburg Empire; Kathleen Deagan characterizes this expansion as "simultaneously an invasion, a colonization effort, a social experiment, a religious crusade, and a highly structured economic enterprise...the largest ever known in the Western hemisphere" (3). In *The Crucible*, Arthur Miller uses the Salem witch trials of the late seventeenth century in order to draw a comparison to the contemporary anxieties about communism during the McCarthy era of the mid-nineteenth century United States, a "mass media campaign that required famous public figures first to confess their past or current affiliation with communism, and then to recant their former political idealism, shunning it as a product of their youthful naivety" (Aziz 169). Both *Fuente Ovejuna* and *The Crucible* were pertinent and applicable to the national crises out of which they were born: in seventeenth century Spain, there was an anxiety with the legitimacy of inherited power such as that of the Hapsburg crown or the Catholic church; in twentieth century America, national identity was made vulnerable by the threat of Cold War communism, and figures such as Miller highlighted the McCarthyist mob mentality that rose as a kind of collective self defense. In both plays, de Vega and Miller respectively explore the power of solidarity, of community,

as a response to crisis; However, while de Vega celebrates its virtues, Miller warns of its intoxicating dangers, reframing this sense of solidarity instead as a collective social hysteria. *Fuente Ovejuna* and *The Crucible* then work to historicize the present, to interpret contemporary concerns as symptomatic of a historical impulse to repeat the past, for better or for worse.

After Laurencia, the heroine of de Vega's *Fuente Ovejuna*, is disgraced by military commander Fernán Gómez and resolves to seek revenge, she struggles with coming to terms with her rank and the lack of power that it affords her. To her father, she laments,

“Do you believe that you are men
Of honor? Do you believe that you are
True fathers? How can you see me here
And not feel all the pain I feel pierce
Your very souls? You are like sheep...
I'll take up arms, pursue my cause myself” (Act III. 94-101).

Here, de Vega exhibits the tragic powerlessness of the individual. Laurencia, despite her strength, her cunning, her purity of character, cannot take control over her desire for revenge because of her rank and the social structures that designate men as the saviors and women as the damsels in waiting. With this monologue, Laurencia effectively inspires the men of her village to work collectively in the name of restoring honor to the disgraced women of Fuente Ovejuna. When they successfully execute their plan to overthrow Fernán Gómez, a gesture formally legitimized by the Catholic king and queen, we see how important a role solidarity and communication play in catalyzing change; despite the initial dissent, the wild variation in the village's values and conceptions of honor illustrated by dialogue early in the play, they unite for the common cause of avenging the town's disgraced women.

Legitimacy and rightful inheritance play a significant thematic role in both *Fuente Ovejuna*'s plot and Lope de Vega's own contemporary cultural moment. At the heart of the Hapsburg-era Spanish imperial project was the pursuit and maintenance of a self-designated

(or divinely designated) entitlement to power and empire (Cañeque 29). De Vega, producing plays like *Fuente Ovejuna* during this period of rapid cultural, political, and economic growth and inundation, articulates the anxiety of illegitimacy, of power gained through dishonest or unjust means. While it remains ambiguous whose power de Vega satirizes via the Commander in *Fuente Ovejuna*, his despicable behavior and eventual fall from grace nonetheless reflects a distaste for corrupt leaders and the sycophants who enable them. In “Recruiting the Literary Tradition,” Jason Parker cites Esteban Calle Iturrino in claiming that “the uprising of townspeople with the Catholic Monarchs against the feudal order was symbolic of an era of change in the political history of the nation” (124). While Iturrino hesitates to restrict de Vega to any particular political stance, he still indicates *Fuente Ovejuna*’s figurative gestures towards the contemporary political concerns of seventeenth century Spain. Drawing parallels between *Fuente Ovejuna* and the Hapsburg conquest, we can see how the perceived entitlement to power, reward, and retribution produces dissent and anxiety in both narratives. de Vega, through Laurencia’s voice, and through his interpretation of the fifteenth century uprising, optimistically suggests that the solution to illegitimate power is solidarity and consensus. While Esteban, Juan Rojo, the Alderman, Barildo, and Mengo all disagree upon the nature of love, ethics, and honor, Laurencia’s moving speech inspires the morally diverse group of men to unite against the indisputable evil represented by Fernán Gómez.

In his 1953 play *The Crucible*, Arthur Miller showcases the insidious shadow to the power of the community. In reimagining a dramatized account of the Salem witch trials from late seventeenth century Massachusetts, Miller illustrates the village hysteria that spreads when Abigail Williams, a young girl, becomes intoxicated by the power that comes with accusing her town-folk of practicing witchcraft. Act one culminates with Abigail and Betty exclaiming wild accusations that target their peers, Abigail hysterically (but calculatedly) exclaiming, “I want to open myself!...I want the light of God, I want the sweet love of Jesus! I danced for the Devil; I saw him; I wrote in his book; I go back to Jesus; I kiss His

hand. I saw Sarah Good with the Devil! I saw Goody Osburn with the Devil! I saw Bridget Bishop with the Devil!" (65). After seeing Tituba, the first to be accused by Hale and Putnam, gain authority and privilege by naming Sarah Good and Sarah Osburn as practitioners, Abigail becomes likewise seduced by the prospect of gaining this kind of power in a community wherein she is regarded as a hysterical young girl. At this point, the play dissolves into paranoia, the entire community now fervent in their pursuit of cleansing the village of its satanic presence. Like Laurencia in *Fuente Ovejuna*, Abigail makes a powerful gesture that inspires her community to band together in the face of evil and wrongdoing, and as the narrative unfolds in acts two through four, it becomes apparent that this speech act would be the catalyst for the escalating hysteria that claims the lives of more than a dozen members of the small village. However, Abigail's dishonesty and manipulation shows that communal solidarity, while certainly effective, does not necessarily serve as a solution to illegitimate power; in fact, it can instead be merely yet another form of it.

Regarding his motivation to write *The Crucible*, Miller wrote in the play's introduction, "Above all horrors, I saw accepted the notion that conscience was no longer a private matter but one of state administration. I saw men handing conscience to other men and thanking other men for the opportunity of doing so" (50). Like *Fuente Ovejuna*, Miller's play concerns itself with the mysterious, inspiring power of the community, which in the case of *The Crucible*, manifests in the form of the witch-hunting mob. Judith Cerjak evaluates Miller's aims as a warning, claiming, "He wants us to fear the power of the group. He wants us to fear coercion. He wants us to question the 'bandwagon effect' in society" (56). Recalling the Salem witch trials as he witnessed the strange, fear-mongering power of McCarthyist rhetoric, Miller saw that with the rise of this nationalistic pursuit of righteousness and transparency came the deterioration of individuality and the freedom of thought, a prospect tragically antithetical to the "flowering of culture unmatched by any other decade of the twentieth century" that took place in 1950s America, a golden age in its own right (Horowitz 103). At the crux of Miller's anxieties is the fear of his society's willingness to compro-

mise their own conscience, their souls and their philosophies, in order to construct a defense against some imagined evil or impurity. In 1950s America, it was communist sympathy; in Miller's play, illicit witchcraft.

While it may be tempting to diagnose *The Crucible* simply as a historicized dramatization of McCarthy scare tactics, an omen of the potential escalation, the larger-scale thematic fundamentals of the play gesture towards a general skepticism of the community and of the nation. Abigail Williams, in banding Salem Village together as one univocal body, breeds a kind of power too potent for any individual (John Proctor) to overcome. The denouement of *The Crucible*, with Proctor executed for his refusal to testify, challenges the triumph of *Fuente Ovejuna's* celebration of community spirit. Proctor, representing the iconoclastic individual archetype, suffers fatally for his refusal to cooperate with the community in a conclusion at odds with de Vega's supposition that communal solidarity resolves illegitimate power. Social unity in *The Crucible* signals an illicit kind of homogeneity that can cloud the judgement of an otherwise free-thinking agent, a representation contrasting the triumphant assembly of the village in *Fuente Ovejuna*. While *Fuente Ovejuna* envisions the congregation of unlike minds as a beacon of hope, *The Crucible* darkly envisions the development of a dangerous hivemind, "a notional entity consisting of a large number of people who share their knowledge or opinions with one another, regarded as producing either uncritical conformity or collective intelligence" (OED). Despite this opposition, both texts put forth the notion of community as a profoundly powerful force in their respective moments of political tumult and cultural flourish.

In the aforementioned "Recruiting the Literary Tradition," Parker observes of *Fuente Ovejuna*, "the 'classic' or 'Golden Age' Spanish theater is so important to modern Spain not simply because it provides a historical tradition of culture, but also because it has engendered the cultural and social frameworks through which contemporary notions of national—and perhaps non-national—identity are constructed and interrogated" (139). Such a proposition echoes Hayden White's influential theory that "the historical narrative does not *repro-*

duce the events it describes; it tells us in what direction to think about the events and charges our thought about the events with different emotional values” (402). In *Fuente Ovejuna* and in *The Crucible*, we see this kind of ideological production at work. Bearing witness to changes both positive and negative, de Vega and Miller call upon history to, as Parker articulates, “construct and interrogate” notions of identity both subjective and collective. In composing narratives focused on ideas, dissent, power, community, and individuality, both playwrights explore in these texts the impulse to fashion a collective identity in times of crisis. For Spain in the early seventeenth century, and for America in the 1950s, significant expansion and evolution necessitated a reevaluation of self-vision and priorities. *Fuente Ovejuna* and *The Crucible* target, in particular, the crucial potential of the collective. Using history in order to generate critical thought about the contemporary, de Vega and Miller weaponize the community in their plays as a signal for what may come, as a historicization of the past, present, and future.

Works Cited

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