JOHN PROCTOR

PROCTOR: “How may I live without my name? I have given you my soul; leave me my name!” (Act Four)

Proctor is a farmer in his mid-30s who might best be defined by his sense of pride and perhaps his shame.

When he first enters the Parris household in Act One, Arthur Miller suggests that he possesses: “a quiet confidence and an unexpressed hidden force”.

By the end of the play, that force is far from unexpressed: his concern for the reputation of his name, his desire to go on living, his contempt for the court, and his shame at having committed a deadly sin in having betrayed Elizabeth with Abigail, swirl together and make him a man less “quietly confident” than confused and furious.

This eventual explosion is seeded as early as the first act. The Proctor we know at first is quick-witted and adept at cutting through the hypocrisy which pervades the social structures of Salem, and yet quickly we learn that to some extent he is a hypocrite himself – playing the role of the upstanding virtuous farmer who is secretly guilty of lechery.

He is respected and perhaps feared by Salem society – he has a particularly public dislike for Reverend Parris – but privately, his marriage has been difficult since the affair with Abigail. He feels judged by Elizabeth, telling her in Act Two that he feels as though he: “cannot speak but [he is] doubted, every moment judged for lies”.

On the whole, Proctor is presented to us as a man who acknowledges and battles with his own shortcomings, but our sympathy for him might be shaken when we consider the moment in Act One when – though he claims never to have given Abigail hope to wait for him after the end of their affair – he admits that he “may have looked up” at her window in the night, further fuelling her desire for him.

In the final moments of the play, Proctor decides that he would rather die than give a false confession that may taint his and his family’s name.

Hale suggests that “it is pride, it is vanity”, but Elizabeth believes that “he have his goodness now”; there is as much disagreement among characters as among audiences as to whether his actions are selfish and proud or righteous and religious.

ELIZABETH PROCTOR

PROCTOR: "There are them that cannot sing, and them that cannot weep – my wife cannot lie. I have paid much to learn it, sir." (Act Three)

Elizabeth is clearly a woman of good renown in Salem. When her name is first raised in court in connection with witchcraft, the accusation is not pursued, and later she is one of the wives in support of whom Giles Corey is able to gather 91 signatures. Like her husband, her problems – at least at the beginning of the play – are not public but personal.

Though she still loves her husband, her virtuosity and honesty make it difficult for her to move on from the revelation of Proctor's affair with Abigail Williams.

In the immediate aftermath, we learn she dismissed Abigail from the house and tainted her name in town, but other than this we see few signs of anger from Elizabeth.

In Act Two we see her – as Miller puts it – "suddenly [lose] all confidence in [Proctor]" when he accidentally let slip that he had not seen her that day in a crowd, but had spoken with her alone. One might forgive her anger at this, but her mild nature wins out and she tells her husband that she: "never thought [him] but a good man – only somewhat bewildered".

The only sin we actually see her commit in the play is the lie she tells in court to protect her husband's name when she will not admit to his affair with Abigail. The cruel irony, of course, is that this lie – supposedly the only one she has told in her life and intended to preserve Proctor's dignity – in fact condemns him.

In the final scene of the play, after three months of lonely contemplating, she comes to the conclusion that "it needs a cold wife to prompt lechery" and apologises to Proctor for having pushed him away from her.

With this realisation she tells John that she can no longer judge him and encourages him to forgive himself and to make his own decision regarding whether or not to hang. The final line of the play goes to her when she rejects Reverend Hale's pleas to change her husband's mind, telling him that "he have his goodness now. God forbid I take it from him!"

ABIGAIL WILLIAMS

ABIGAIL: "And now you bid me tear the light out of my eyes? I will not, I cannot!" (Act Two)

Miller introduces Abigail as: "a strikingly beautiful girl, an orphan, with an endless capacity for dissembling".

She is the Reverend Parris' niece, and all we hear of her parents is that apparently Abigail: "saw Indians smash [their] heads on the pillow next to mine" – though whether this is true, or a tall tale being used to scare the girls into obeying her, we cannot know.

She is in love, or is at least obsessed with, Proctor, whom she says: "took [her] from [her] sleep and put knowledge in [her] heart". Though on the face of it she appears to be referring to Proctor having taken her virginity, she goes on to say that she "never knew what pretence Salem was... never knew the lying lessons I was taught" – there is a sense also in which Proctor has opened her eyes to the hypocrisy and corruption that lies beneath the surface of Salem society.

We might see these awakenings, both sexual and social, as governing and guiding Abigail's actions throughout the play; she is driven by her obsession with Proctor and resentment of his hasty dismissal of her and is able to manipulate those around her and whip up such mass hysteria as a result of the social frameworks Proctor has made apparent to her.

In contrast to the position of powerlessness Abigail finds herself in after her dismissal from the Proctors – dependent on her uncle to keep a roof over her head and slandered in town by Elizabeth – the courtroom provides a context in which Abigail is in absolute control. A mere accusation from her is enough to send innocent men and women to their deaths; her sin of adultery is nothing in comparison to the charges of witchcraft she and her friends are able to inflict on the townspeople.

By the final act, unseen by us, Abigail has run away from Parris' home with Mercy Lewis, having stolen all 31 pounds from her uncle's strongbox. He believes her to be aboard a ship, and Miller comments in his postscript to the text that the real–life Abigail was rumoured to have "turned up later as a prostitute in Boston".

REVEREND JOHN HALE

HALE: "I may shut my conscience to it no more – private vengeance is working through this testimony!" (Act Three)

When Reverend Hale arrives at the Parris household from the neighbouring parish of Beverly, one could hardly imagine him saying the line above. At first, he is a self-assured intellectual who is proud to conduct God's work in the hunting out of witches; having "discovered" one in Beverly he is summoned to Salem as an expert and clearly relishes his reputation. At this point in the play he is authoritative and speaks with great confidence – but he is not destined to stay that way for very long. His transformation over the course of the play is perhaps more significant than that of any other character.

In Act Two, when he visits the Proctor household and questions Proctor and Elizabeth about their Christian values, he assures them that townspeople such as Rebecca Nurse will be safe from arrest, and even advises the Proctors how best to avoid further suspicion: "God keep you both; let the third child be quickly baptized and go you without fail each Sunday into Sabbath prayer; and keep a solemn, quiet way among you."

Steadily – particularly in the wake of the arrests of Elizabeth, Rebecca Nurse and Martha Corey – he begins to doubt the very proceedings that his arrival in Salem initiated. By the end of Act Three, having observed the ridiculous nature of the court – and believing Proctor and Mary Warren's claims that the girls' testimony had been fraudulent – he denounces the court and storms out.

Finally, in the closing act, Hale is a broken man, desperately trying to convince those awaiting the gallows to confess, not because they are guilty but because he takes the blame for every townsperson who hangs; despairing, he tells Danforth that "there is blood on [his] head!"

DEPUTY-GOVERNOR DANFORTH

DANFORTH: “This is the highest court of the supreme government of this province, do you know it?” (Act Three)

Danforth is the most senior official in the play, the Deputy-Governor of Massachusetts; meaning he presides over witchcraft trials not only in Salem but throughout the state. His conviction in the law and unswerving belief that God will protect the innocent mean that he has no qualms in sentencing those who will not confess to witchcraft to be hanged, as his logic dictates that they must be guilty. The single-mindedness of his convictions blinds him from seeing through the mass hysteria and finger-pointing around him and allows the proceedings to continue unchallenged.

JUDGE HATHORNE

HATHORNE: “Excellency, will you permit me?” (Act Three)

Hathorne ranks below Danforth and assists him in the court proceedings. He is quick to jump to accusations of contempt of court, and will not stand for the protestations of Proctor, Francis Nurse and Giles Corey. If anything, he is even less open to challenges than Danforth – even when Salem society is disintegrating in the final act, he refuses to recognise that the hangings may have created any bad feeling in the town.

REVEREND PARRIS

PARRIS: “There is a faction that is sworn to drive me from my pulpit.” (Act One)

Parris is the Puritan minister of Salem. Throughout the play he is shown to be less concerned about people – even his own daughter – than he is about reputation and material wealth. He worries that rumours of witchcraft having infiltrated his house could lead to a rebellion against him.

Proctor calls him out on his avaricious behaviour throughout the play; we learn that he barters over his salary, went against tradition in demanding the deeds for his house when he became reverend, and replaced the pewter candlesticks in church with gaudy golden ones.

In the last act we discover that Abigail has fled from his house with all of his money, as good as proving that she was lying all along. But Parris’ pleas that Proctor and Rebecca Nurse’s executions are postponed turn out once more to be self-motivated: he worries that the hanging of such respected figures may prompt a violent revolt that could threaten his life.

TITUBA

TITUBA: “Mister Reverend, I do believe somebody else be witchin’ these children.” (Act One)

Interestingly, though we cannot be sure, Tituba is the only character in the play who may genuinely have undertaken magical activities: possibly attempting to communicate with Ann Putnam’s dead babies and creating a charm for Abigail to kill Elizabeth. Racism seems to play a part in her fate, as her ‘Barbados songs’ are mistaken for witching incantations; indeed, when we meet Tituba again briefly in the final act of the play she explains that in her home country, the Devil is not as feared as he is in Massachusetts.

BETTY PARRIS

BETTY: “I saw George Jacobs with the Devil! I saw Goody Howe with the Devil!” (Act One)

Betty is the daughter of Reverend Parris, and in some ways the whole plot of The Crucible begins with her fainting after her father discovers her and the girls dancing in the woods. The fact that Abigail’s threats rouse her from her “unconscious state” shows us that her sickness is play-acting rather than any genuine illness. At the end of the first act, she joins in Abigail’s accusatory chant of the names of accused witches, setting into motion the tragic events of the play.

MARY WARREN

MARY: “It were only sport in the beginning, sir, but then the whole world cried spirits, spirits, and I – I promise you, Mr Danforth, I only thought I saw them, but I did not.” (Act Three)

When we first meet Mary – servant of the Proctors and friend of Abigail’s – she is intent on confessing to the girls’ activities in the forest, but Abigail and Mercy quickly intimidate her into keeping quiet. At first, she plays along as the girls become integral to Danforth’s court for the condemning of witches. In court, she makes a poppet for Elizabeth, and later that night, when Elizabeth is arrested, she understands – as Proctor does – that Abigail has used the poppet as a means to frame Elizabeth for witchcraft, and reluctantly agrees to testify to the girls’ fraudulent claims in court.

Once the tables are turned on her and her former friends begin to accuse her of witchcraft, she quickly loses her nerve and falls back in with them, accusing Proctor. Mary is not as single-minded as Abigail, but is clearly susceptible to the hysteria of proceedings, and fearful enough to follow the crowd.

SUSANNA WALCOTT

SUSANNA: “I freeze, I freeze!” (Act Three)

Susanna is another of Abigail’s friends, and appears in the court scene playing along as the girls accuse Mary Warren of bewitching them and threatening to attack in the form of a bird.

MERCY LEWIS

MERCY: “She means to tell, I know it!” (Act One)

Mercy is the servant of Thomas and Ann Putnam, and Abigail’s closest friend. Together they intimidate Mary Warren into keeping quiet about their activities in the forest, and at the end of the play, we learn that Mercy has accompanied Abigail in her escape from Salem.

GILES COREY

ELIZABETH: “It were a fearsome man, Giles Corey.” (Act Four)

Corey is a likeable, argumentative, and slightly bumbling old man, whose gravest error is to talk publicly about how confused he is that his wife reads books; these harmless comments lead to her charge of witchcraft. He is well attuned to the social problems in Salem, and takes particular issue with Thomas Putnam, who he essentially accuses of murder in court. For his actions, and for supporting Proctor, he too is arrested and accused – but it is what he does next that makes his fate so unique and remarkable. Corey refuses to plead either innocent or guilty to the charge of witchcraft, and as such cannot be either hanged or released. This way, he remains a Christian, but is subjected to the torture of “pressing”, whereby heavy stones are placed on his chest until he will plead one way or the other.

THOMAS PUTNAM

COREY: “If Jacobs hangs for a witch he forfeit up his property– that’s law! And there is none but Putnam with the coin to buy so great a piece. This man is killing his neighbours for their land!” (Act Three)

When Putnam enters the Parris household at the beginning of the play, it is because his daughter Ruth has also been taken strangely ill and is sleepwalking with her eyes open. He is at the forefront of the townspeople keen to explain the children’s behaviour with witchcraft and as the play progresses it becomes apparent why – he used the mechanism of accusation to further his own greedy agenda. It is a result of his dispute with Corey that the old man is sent to prison and pressed.

ANN PUTNAM

ANN: “It is a marvel. It is surely a stroke of hell upon you.” (Act One)

Like her husband, Ann Putnam is also keen to blame witchcraft for the strange occurrences in town and can boast a particularly tragic one of her own – she has buried seven babies who quickly died despite seeming perfectly healthy at birth. She not only believes that witchcraft is to blame, but asks her daughter Ruth to enlist the help of Tituba to communicate with the spirits of her dead children. Her hysteria is as unhelpful and dangerous as anybody else’s, but given her harrowing circumstances we can perhaps understand why she leapt desperately to such a far-flung conclusion.

REBECCA NURSE

REBECCA: “I have eleven children, and I am twenty-six times a grandma, and I have seen them all through their silly seasons, and when it comes on them they will run the Devil bowlegged keeping up with their mischief.” (Act One)

Rebecca is an elderly woman, hugely respected in Salem and known for her devoutly religious nature; in the first act she acts as an arbiter between the arguing men, and even the hot-headed Proctor defers to her calm demeanour. Her arrest on charges of witchcraft is one of the factors in Hale’s increasing scepticism of the court, and when she is due to be hanged, Parris and other court officials worry that her death might be more than Salem could put up with. Even at this stage in the play she is a model of dignity and religious conviction, refusing to confess to witchcraft even though she knows she will be hanged.

FRANCIS NURSE

FRANCIS: “My wife is the very brick and mortar of the church, Mr Hale.” (Act Two)

We meet Francis when he arrives in shock at the Proctor home, to tell John that his wife Rebecca has been arrested on charges of witchcraft; he is an elderly man and loving husband who cannot understand how anyone could think his wife a witch. Together with Corey and Proctor, he delivers depositions to the court in defence of their wives but comes to believe that he has betrayed his friends in the town when Danforth suggests that the 91 people who signed his deposition will be brought in for questioning.

EZEKIEL CHEEVER

CHEEVER: “You know yourself I must do as I’m told.” (Act Two)

Cheever is made the clerk of the court when Danforth begins the witch trials, and is entirely taken in by proceedings, showing no regard for the protests of those he has lived alongside his whole life.

MARSHAL HERRICK

HERRICK: “The law binds me, John, I cannot budge.” (Act Two)

Herrick, like Cheever, is a man simply doing his job, though he exhibits more kindness than the clerk. In Act Four he allows Sarah Good a swig of cider and risks the anger of the Deputy-Governor when in Act Three he pointedly tells Danforth that he: “know [Proctor] all [his] life. It is a good man, sir.”

SARAH GOOD

SARAH: “Oh, is it you Marshal! I thought sure you be the Devil comin’ for us.” (Act Four)

Sarah Good is one of the first to be accused of witchcraft, and when we meet her in Act Four – a mentally ill homeless woman – it becomes apparent why she was such an easy target. Unlike pillars of society such as Rebecca Nurse or John Proctor, she is in no position to defend against accusations, and will – even before the trials began, perhaps – have been a victim of persecution and social rejection.