

## Holism vs. Individualism in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*

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### Abstract

*In his introduction to The Crucible, Arthur Miller admits that the village of Salem was designed as “a combine of state and religion whose function was to keep the community together” (Crucible, 16). This holistic approach to government endemic in the minds of the founders of Salem is premised on their resoluteness to protect their community against the risk of intrusion or impurity: “all organization is and must be grounded on the idea of exclusion and prohibition” (Crucible, 16). However, the apparent concern for social homogeneity among the Salemites was nothing but an overlay hiding its deeper purpose as the ideology of always keeping the mass under control. The Salem witch-hunt is the offshoot of this holistic system characterized by its demand to preserve its puritan community while it betrays its deeper truth as the obsessive perpetuation of endless violence: moral and physical.*

**Keywords:** Holism, individualism, crisis, manipulation, homogeneity, heterogeneity.

## Literature Review

Holism is born as a model to control social life while it often pauses to console its subjects with its concern of social unity. The distinction which it subtly enforces is not an interaction between self and other but rather a one-way process it metes out on its will-less subjects. This subordination, however, is not without its socio-political cost. And the consequence of it eventually subverts the homogeneity claimed by the holists.

Eric Cheyfitz postulates that a capitalist pursuit is what always displaces the religious lesson of European settlers about the taming of the heathen natives. I began from this assumption within my purview of analyzing *The Crucible* where the overlap between the religious and the ideological cannot go unnoticed. The decision-makers in Salem have inscribed on their subjects a socio-political rule cloaked with a holistic intention. This rule ignited the passion among individuals to enter into conflict with the representatives of their holistic system in the Church as in the State.

Iska Alter saw in the hysteric fits of the girls in *The Crucible* a furious expression of this individualistic desire to break free from their theological system. Branko Mitrovic; however, admits to the presence of a social consciousness always tormenting the minds of people with individualistic tendencies: a consciousness which (ironically) disturbs the possibility of a total cleavage from their holistic system.

Jean-Pierre Dupuy and Louis Dumont affirm the ontological superiority of the “whole”: a superiority which finds meaning in the denial of individual identities; while William H. Dray acknowledges individual potential as the real locomotive in any holistic community. The testimony of Tituba in the witch-trial I will prove a case in point about this very last claim. I also align with Ann Scarboro on the same ground.

In his article, “Intersubjectivity as Co-phenomenology: From the Holism of Meaning to the Being-in-the-world-with-others,” Carlos Cornejo formalizes the “holistic totality of sense” into the trilogy of self, other and object of discourse. Yet he does not mention the possible impediments to meaning-making in a holistic context. I suggest that *The Crucible* purveys an antithesis to Cornejo’s claim, especially when it comes to the insoluble crisis between the individual self and the holistic society of Salem.

Wittgenstein gives a different interpretation of the holistic connection between language and context than Cornejo. Wittgenstein’s sense of holism is interactional. Holism – according to Wittgenstein—is born from the fact that private language always ends up fusing in public language and vice versa. I will apply this reading to the Salem witch-hunt precisely to the shift in the role of the hysteric girls from that of rebels to that of victims.

My article caters for an explanation of holism as a parochial diktat which has been given the form of a rational law: also for the position of the individual in a holistic society as a tantalizing state of crisis.

## Research Objectives

Unfolding the internal dilemma in Salem is a function of the reader's endeavor to look beyond the holistic impression about this society. A great length of the issue is explored in *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller which stages multiple reactions (verbal, physical, and intellectual) to a socio-political order which finds legitimacy in the religious pretext more than anything logical. Consequently, a more authentic profile will be brought into view about Salem as a composite of heterogeneous individualities suffering repression by their self-interested system. The critical aspect of the witch-hunt will be revealed in the impossibility to bring this repression to an end: also in the impossibility to find meaning to the life in Salem outside its scope. My task is to tease out what the debate between individualism and holism in Miller's *The Crucible* entails.

## Research questions

The study is an attempt to answer the following questions:

- 1- What does *The Crucible* reveal about the inner structure of the Salem society behind its holistic appearance?
- 2- Does *The Crucible* stage a conflict between the holistic rule and the individualistic tendency of its subjects?
- 3- What is the outcome of this conflict?
- 4- How can holism come out from the interaction between language and context in *The Crucible*?
- 5- What accounts for the frailties –if any—of the holistic system depicted in *The Crucible*?

## Secular and religious underlays to the holistic fabric of Salem

In his essay “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism” (1905), Max Weber interprets the rush for the colonization of the New World as a cover to the Calvinist belief in predestination. He acquaints us with the truth that religion is employed by European settlers as an alibi to their self-interested colonization. The Calvinists conceive of their God as:

a transcendent being remote from any human understanding, a being who had allotted to each individual his destiny according to his entirely unfathomable decrees, and who controlled the tiniest detail of the cosmos. Since his decrees were immutably fixed, those on whom he bestowed his grace could never lose it, just as those to whom he denied it could never attain it. (Weber, 73)

*Unfathomable* is the epithet given by Weber to the decree of the Christian God upon his Calvinist disciples. The impermeability of this decree to logic drags it to the category of metaphysics as a pretext to the violence exerted against the native territory and culture: a violence whose principle form is, according to Marx Weber, capitalism.

Similarly, Eric Cheyfitz commented on the secular rationalization of colonization which serves as a foil to an otherwise illegitimate cause: “This religious rationalization

survives in the form of a secular fatalism linked to a belief in the efficacy of markets to solve global issues of poverty” (Cheyfitz, 142). Cheyfitz interprets the alibi behind European immigration to the New World in economic terms as nothing beyond the ethics of Calvinism. Economic opulence (for the Calvinists) is an offshoot of man’s religious uprightness and consequently, of God’s grace upon them. This is one subtext to *The Crucible* where land lust goes hand in hand with the prevailing witch-hunt hysteria. An instance of this is the exchange between Proctor and his wife in the very opening of Act Two where she counsels him to claim himself innocent from the charge of adultery in front of the Magistrates in Salem. The discussion between the couple (which unfolds their common expectation that their “farm” should yield good “crop”, together with the prospect of buying a “heifer” ) is a telltale clue about the financial risks in store for Proctor in case he should be found guilty.

These details about the Salem socio-political outlook give us an idea about the extant intimacy between material privileges and the religious cover to the witch-hunt. We thus make sense of holism as the effacement of the intellectual and material distinctions of the individual for the sake of a communal concern whose end is –ironically—one of mutual extermination and demonization.

### **The individualistic or micro-law level of holism in Salem**

The teenage girls sanctioned themselves to unleash the process of their own individuation by issuing their micro-laws against the repressive holism of Salem. Abigail, for example, unpacks to Proctor her indignation about the hypocrisy of their Puritan society in a very dismayed tone: “I never knew what pretence Salem was, I never knew the lying lessons I was taught by all these Christian women and their covenanted men!” (*Crucible*, 30) The girls’ exasperation with the imperatives of their holistic society traces in bold lines their impassioned escape in the woods and their indulgence in such eccentric practices as conjuration and the drinking of charms made of chicken blood. The ecstatic physical convolutions of the girls during their private experience in the woods –the place judged by the Salem folk as “the devil’s last preserve” (*Crucible*, 15) –is a mirror image to their recalcitrant desire to inscribe their idiosyncratic code of behavior in defiance of the patriarchal holism of Salem. However, one truth about the teenage girls is that they share the common fate of exclusion within Salem on the ground of their financial, marital or racial disadvantages. This truth, alone, betrays the depth of their anxiety from this system which hardly allows escape to its subjects, especially women:

It is important to warn against the common misunderstanding of the individualist position, which ascribes to individualism the denial of social entities. The proper understanding is, however, that the individualist position assumes complete reducibility of such entities to the individuals that comprise them. (Mitrović, 32)

In the above quote, Branko Mitrovic explains individualism not as the total denial of social-consciousness but as the transplantation of the ethics and customs of the domineering group into its distinct individuals. I may adduce that individualism actually finds meaning to itself as a reactionary response to an extant social order. An instance of individualism perspires from the sight of the girls of Salem, dancing naked around the crucible in the forest.

In his article “Holism versus Individualism in History and Sociology” Ernest Gellner (491) describes individualism as the kind of tendency which “does not wish to allow that the Whole could ever be a cause, and [insists] that explanations which make [it] appear that it is can be translated into other.” Similarly, J. W. N. Watkins, in his article “Historical Explanation in the Social Sciences” (505) makes the distinction that individualism is a “statement about the dispositions, resources and inter-relations of individuals.” To a holist, however, “social systems constitute wholes at least in the sense that some of their large-scale behaviour is governed by macro-laws which are essentially *sociological* in the sense that they are *sui generis* and not to be explained as mere regularities or tendencies resulting from the behaviour of interacting individuals” (ibid, 505). One way holism is brought into vision in *The Crucible* is in the predilection among the Salemites to take providence as (what J. W. N. Watkins considers) a “*sui generis*” –therefore inscrutable—formalization of their political and spiritual pursuits since their early settlement until suspected witches are brought to trial.

Watkins’ awareness of “inter-relations” among the members of a holistic society calls to mind the strategic power of Salem in how it ensures its oppressive politics through its implementation of a “strict and somber way of life” (*Crucible*, 14). Miller’s axiomatic terms in his overture to Act One sum up the gist of the holistic authority in Salem simply as a prophylactic measure against the surfacing of individual potential: “in unity still lay the best promise of safety” (ibid).

### **Holism as the imbrication of language upon context**

The dissenting teenage girls (accompanied by Tituba) have emerged conspicuous in their quest for autonomy as a holistic mini-system which found in their naked dance in the woods a reaction to the Salem mainstream society. Their language of disobedience and sexual liberation is double-edged. It starts from their grievance about the Salem holistic oppression against their desires and ambitions and evolves into a response thereto. In her article “Betrayal and Blessedness: Explorations of Feminine Power in *The Crucible*, A View From the Bridge, and After the Fall,” Iska Alter has seen into the girls’ writhing in the woods “an explicit violation of publicly affirmed communal norms as well as private standards of right conduct insisted upon by male-authorized social order sustained by a patriarchal, woman-fearing theology” (127). In this light, we also witness the maturation process of the girls from the status of victim to that of rebel. However, the common feature between the two experiences is that the holistic oppression practiced in Salem is a context for both. It follows that the language system (whether it belongs to the entirety of the Salemites or to the seceding female subgroup) is spurred by the very contingency that both groups coexist in Salem. Here is Carlos Cornejo clarifying the kinship between context and language as a holistic composite:

Context and language are imbricated in a unique holistic totality of sense [...] Meaning is better understood as a dynamic construal, an evolving process highly sensitive to the context of language use. (Cornejo, 172)

Holistic meaning, according to Carlos Cornejo, is to be found in the intersubjective space where a triangular relationship between subject, interlocutor and object is constructed, extended and (possibly) fortified. However, Carlos Cornejo insists that this triangular relationship is always a matter of synchrony:

The observed synchronized co-feeling among subjects, upon which language comprehension takes place, I call 'co-phenomenology'. (171)

I may reply by making the precision that intersubjectivity is not a matter of synchrony because "language comprehension" does not always go unhampered. Communication can be subject to crises and in this sense it takes different forms than the phenomenological assumptions of Carlos Cornejo. The problem with the study conducted by Cornejo is that it did not anticipate potential obstacles to the process of meaning-making. The heterogeneity endemic to the Salem community is a case in point.

Sarah Good is a sample of a sub-category in the Salem mainstream society. She is ousted as an economic burden to the Puritanical Salem society which praises hard work and material independence. Similar reserves are held against Sarah Osburn who (as a midwife) is accused of being the cause of death of Ann Putnam's seven babies. Here is Elizabeth Proctor defending herself as the very antithesis of Sarah Good and of Sarah Osburn: "I am no Goody Good that sleeps in ditches, nor Osburn, drunk and half-witted" (*Crucible*, 60). We notice in the portraits drawn respectively of the two unprivileged women that they represent a subgroup which metaphorically speaks a language different from that of the Salemites. Rather than being acknowledged as part of Salem, these women are held with suspicion and even disgust. In these terms, we approach a breach in the system of communication typical of the two speech communities: namely the conformist Puritan Salemites (on the one hand) and the marginalized women on the other. It is therefore possible to admit that the tragedy of Salem lies in the failure of its hypothetically holistic outlook as could be drawn from this address by John Winthrop in 1629 to a group of European immigrants to the New World:

We must be knit together in this work as one man. We must entertain each other in brotherly affection. We must be willing to abridge our selves of our superfluities for the supply of others' necessities. (qtd. in Larry Gragg, 27)

*The Crucible* stages how the holistic conception of meaning (as the cooperation between sign and context) in the village of Salem is ultimately destabilized because of the inherent cleavage between its social categories.

Another threat to the holistic worldview in Salem is conditioned by the metaphysical nature of witchcraft which forever resists our ken. This epistemic crisis inherent to witchcraft per se makes it that language cannot hold a true mirror to its essentially ungraspable condition. And yet, a substitute for the absence of visible signs of witchcraft is still to be sought in language because only in language do humans exist, says Derrida (*Speech and Phenomena*, 10). Consequently, the language spoken in Salem will bear the same incongruence (also the same immateriality) as that of witchcraft. In an ordinary crime, [...] one calls up witnesses to prove his innocence. But witchcraft is *ipso facto* [...] an invisible crime, is it not? Therefore who may possibly be witness to it?" inquires Danforth (*Crucible*, 90). This disfiguration of the language system in Salem has been discerned by Jean-Marie Bonnet in his article: "Society vs. The Individual in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*":

There is never any palpable evidence of anything throughout the play, and each individual is required to tell a lie if he wants to save his life. In that sense, language is

the demonic force of the play; everything rests on it, and this is true for all characters, on whichever side they stand. (35)

To counter the disintegration threatening its holist rule, the decision-makers in Salem resorted to deploy language to their own purpose of persecution and exclusion. The absence of phenomenological evidence to the existence of the Devil in Salem had to be counterpoised through the medium of language in order for the witch-hunt not to lose its alleged legitimacy.

According to Wittgenstein, the impact of social life infiltrates our language system so much so that the demarcation between public and private language becomes (to a large part) hazy:

The social language becomes so integrated to our inner life, that we cannot trace a division line between the public and the private language: “How could I intend to walk between the pain and the expression of pain”? (Wittgenstein, 245)

I think Wittgenstein’s conception of the holistic rapport between language and context is more substantial than that of Cornejo. In fact, there is no demarcation between private and public speech in Salem. Both spheres converge at one point: which is the expedient of having to push away the Other as a imminent threat. This overlap permeates a holistic interpretation of the witch-hunt hysteria within a new sign-system created (then mutually intelligible) among the Salemites. An instance of this interfusion between the private and the communal is the power now wielded by the teenage girls at the court of law. In the opening scene of Act Two, Elizabeth Proctor accounts for Mary Warren now as an “official of the court”: “I thought she were a saint, to hear her.” Elizabeth speaks of Abigail Williams in stronger terms: “Abigail brings the other girls into the court and where she walks the crowd will part like the sea for Israel” (*Crucible*, 53). Holism finds shape in *The Crucible* when the girls –initially ousted for witch hunt suspicions—are reincorporated within the same system now as an influence group in the seething Salem society.

### **Beyond the illusion of homogeneity: holism as a crisis**

Le holisme affirme l’antériorité logique et ontologique de la totalité sociale sur ses parties constitutives. La relation hiérarchique qui en est la formule logique est celle qui relie un tout, vu comme ensemble, et un élément de cet ensemble. (Dumont, 255)

Salem is a village striving by all means to preserve its homogeneity as an aggregation of people who came to Massachusetts initially as settlers fleeing religious persecution: “They were united from top to bottom by a commonly held ideology whose perpetuation was the reason and justification for all their sufferings” (*Crucible*, 15). However, Salem is also the kind of community known for “the panic which set in among all classes when the balance began to turn toward greater individual freedom” (*Crucible*, 16). It follows that “fear” is an ongoing feature of the Salemites who ended up perpetrating oppression upon their fellows thus creating a sentiment of mutual hatred, together with a percolating potential for dissent. Miller spurs us to feel the palpable crisis beneath the holistic surface of Salem between the individual (on the one hand) and his monochromatic social reality (on the other).

In an article entitled « L'Autonomie du Social : De la contribution de la pensée systémique à la théorie de la société », Jean-Pierre Dupuy takes account of the critical connotations of holism in such moments as when “ Le tout apparaît comme supérieur à la somme des parties, mais c'est parce qu'on a ôté des parties tout ce qu'elles doivent au tout» (Dupuy, 255). Salem is ruled by a system of thought and of conduct which denies individual identity to its subjects unless as a nameless, featureless part of the entire community.

The points of view made respectively by Dumont and Dupuy reveal holism in its anthropological –together with its moralistic import—as the opposite of individualism. The effect of custom created by the holistic rationalization of religious hegemony in Salem is that it has reduced the subject to an invisible thing. It follows that, beyond its outer shell as a Puritan, homogeneous society huddling together in peace and concord, *The Crucible* renders Salem perceptible essentially as the concentration of communal conflict:

Les holistes [s'appuient] sur une version du principe suivant lequel un tout est plus que la somme de ses parties [...] [I]l ne s'agit que de la façon nouvelle dont les individus agissent quand ils sont en groupe plutôt qu'isolés [...] Seuls les individus peuvent réellement agir ; les entités sociales ne peuvent agir que par l'intermédiaire des actions de leurs composants humains. (Dray, 324)

In light of Dray's apology of individualism, we come to grips with the moral justification always given to holism as the fusion of multiple energies for the sake of one and the same purpose. Holism seeks to penetrate the world of perception as a moralistic mission which cannot be fulfilled without the engagement of all its individuals. This also reminds us of the above quote by John Winthrop wherein he depicts the Salemites essentially as a cast which has no identity unless as a united group. Miller has surveyed the tendency in Salem to peep into one's neighbor's matters to the extent that no sense of privacy is ever allowed to anyone. Dramatically speaking, this historical fact will contribute to the development of the plot into an endless chain of mutual incrimination which strictly involves every single person in the witch-hunt: either as witch or as accuser. A case in point is when Reverend Hale induces Tituba into admitting to take upon herself the charge of *witch* in the court : “You are selected Tituba, you are chosen to help us cleanse our village [...] We will protect you [...] We will bless you Tituba” (*Crucible*, 48). A shift in role is meted out to one and the same person (Tituba) with a view to ward off the danger of disunity from the village of Salem. In this sense, the individuality of Tituba (as the racial, heathen and unmarried Other) is first taken as a matter of fear then quickly re-appropriated by the Salem eliminatory machine.

In an article entitled “Conscience and Community in *An Enemy of the People* and *The Crucible*”, Thomas P. Adler analyzes the unauthentic bond between the individuals in Salem. The local theocracy exerted upon them carries them beyond their own individual potential into a distasteful sentiment of self-denial:

[W]hen Miller comes to set up the conflict between the Puritan theocracy and the authority of individual conscience in *The Crucible*, he might be distorting aspects of the former in order unswervingly to espouse the latter. (Adler, 75)

Tituba is the kind of character who overtly subverts the rigorous encodement of the Puritan hunt for the Devil. Her skepticism against Salem is verbalized in a poetic interpretation of the Devil as part of her native voodoo tradition. In so doing, she portrays him as a Dionysian figure full of the energies of art and good living: “Devil, him be pleasureman in Barbados, him be singin’ and dancin’ in Barbados . . . you riles him up ’round here . . . but in Barbados he be just as sweet.” Ann Scarboro remarks that Miller has given “her a subtle power by making her a critic of the Puritans’ devil” (Scarboro, 222). Miller allows us to approach the profile of Tituba—the racial outcast—in light of her resistance to be incorporated within a system which condemns individual freedom in the name of persecuting the Devil’s advocates: “The Devil is alive in Salem, and we dare not quail to follow wherever the accusing finger points” (*Crucible*, 68). This remark made by Hale to Proctor reveals the degree to which religious ideology in Salem is flawed and unsustainable unless enforced by violent means. The holistic project of keeping the mass always under control often comes to grief in such moments as when the hearings at court reveal the individual’s tendency to rebel against Salem’s enraged Calvinistic obsession.

### **The vulnerability of the Salem holistic worldview**

The alleged justice pursued during the investigations (until the arrested women stand trial on witchcraft charges) reveals the vulnerability of the Salem social structure which claims unity to itself premised on its religious history. The *leitmotif* of justice is carried on since Act Two at the Proctors’ until the court of law becomes the actual setting for the rest of the events. The symmetry designed by Miller between the Proctors’ house and the court unfolds the power of institutions in the preservation of the moralism typical of the Salem holistic worldview. This juxtaposition of the private side by side with the communal lets slip the truth about the paranoid mindset of the Salemites who insist on driving off any potential threat to (what they see as) their extant homogeneity:

This arraignment of Proctor in his own house and in his own conscience helps to convey how closely private lives are linked with society. Proctor's own problem is inseparable from that of the community: his own personal dilemma transformed into a social crisis, is thereby intensified to a dramatic pitch. (Bonnet, 34)

Bonnet begins by observing the uncomfortable exchange between the Proctors as an intensifier of the larger crisis in Salem. I have pointed out in a previous subsection that holism in *The Crucible* is synonymous with an overflowing tension between self and society. The same has occurred to Jean-Marie Bonnet except that he diagnoses the feel of crisis in line with the dramatic concern of how to make events presage one another in such a way that the play does not miss its holistic leitmotif running throughout: namely the witch-hunt.

Bonnet is suggesting that crisis is ubiquitous in Salem and that the differences we register are only in scale. In other words, the tense casual talk at the Proctors’ (about how well-seasoned the rabbit is, added to Elizabeth’s counsel to her husband to bring home some Lilacs, and her frigid response to his preliminaries) is a harbinger of more serious things to unfold. Bonnet makes the precision that a “latent” (ibid) conflict is endemic to this family until it has exploded at court. “We have therefore an essentially explosive situation where unity at once ensures and endangers the individual's safety” (Bonnet, 33). Bonnet approaches

the intoxicated underlay behind the image of human concord in Salem. In this sense, he reveals the self vs. other relationship neither as one of cooperation nor of competition. Bonnet presents a disturbing connection between the individual and the Salem holistic community: a connection which ultimately veers towards internal animosity. We make out that holism has swayed from its initial purpose of maintaining the Salemites as a united whole into the hysteria of mutual arraignments.

The witch-hunt fever brings to the surface the vulnerability of a holistic system to the slightest frictions among its subjects. Suffice it, for example, that Reverend Hale catches sight of the needle stuck in Mary Warren's puppet at the Proctors' in order for an entire cross-examination about trafficking with the Devil to be let loose. More trivial details (such as Proctor's absenteeism from the church on Sabbath Day, or that he has baptized only two out of his three children) are amply sufficient to accentuate Hale's suspicion of the Proctors as advocates of the Devil. This is to justify Bonnet's skeptical remark that Holism can at times "endanger the individual's safety" (33). A spokesman of Puritan holism, Hale is a revered official appointed by court to track down the Devil among the individual Salemites. However, his painstaking scrutiny of the Devil is an index of the absurdity of his very task. Arthur Miller cast on Hale's demonological formula: "We cannot look to superstition in this. The Devil is precise" (*Crucible*, 37) an ironic light thus invalidating the very purgatorial denotation of the witch-hunt within the Salem holist society.

## Conclusion

Behind its mask of homogeneity lies the "darker purpose" of the holistic system in Salem. This "purpose" is inscribed in the Calvinistic interference with the individual's sense of pleasure, art and freedom. In this context, holism comes fully into view as the crisis between the individual and his repressive sociopolitical order. The witch-hunt in the village of Salem is a tool which ascertains the manipulation of its citizens by people in power. Pulling the strings of the Salemites has been dramatized in Miller's artform to parallel the chaos widely engendered by the Red Scare of the 1950s. Part of the aesthetic worth of *The Crucible* is this depiction of a decisive episode in the history of America. However, at its micro-level, the play also invites certain changes in the conception of such dualities as individual and community, also language and context. The girls' orchestration of the testimonies during the witch-trials (thanks to their convoluted bodies and ranting voices) betrays the wobbly ground of the accusations as nothing beyond the will of the patriarchal majority to exterminate the Other—especially women—from its holistic realm. The absurdity of this metaphysical pursuit (namely the witch-hunt) snowballs into a graver paranoia when Hale reproaches Proctor for the latter's rational denial "that there may even be witches in the world" (*Crucible*, 66). The truth underlying this growing anxiety about the otherworldly is the holistic principle in Salem to keep its townsfolk united in what appears as a persisting state of religious priggishness. Miller's theatrical dexterity resides in his understanding of the crisis typical of holism and which finds shape in the free-play of signs between the discourse of religious earnestness (wielded by the authorities of the village) and the individual will striving for prominence.

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