

ANALYSIS

The Crucible (1953)



Arthur Miller

(1915-2005)

“I was half inside the car when Molly [Kazan] came out and asked, unforgettably, if I realized that the United States Electrical Workers union was entirely in the hands of Communists....and told me that I no longer understood the country.... ‘You’re not going to equate witches with this!’... Molly’s instant reaction against the Salem analogy would be, as I already sensed, the strongest objection to such a play. ‘There are Communists,’ it would be repeatedly said, ‘but there never were any witches.’...What was manifestly parallel was the guilt, two centuries apart, of holding illicit, suppressed feelings of alienation and hostility toward standard, daylight society as defined by its most orthodox proponents....the liberal, with his customary adaptations of Marxist theory and attitudes, was effectively paralyzed.” [1952]

Arthur Miller
Timebends: A Life
(Grove 1987) 334, 339

“In *The Crucible*, which opened...last night, he seems to me to be taking a step backward into mechanical parable, into the sort of play which lives not in the warmth of humbly observed human souls but in the ideological heat of polemic. Make no mistake about it: there is fire in what Mr. Miller has to say, and there is a good bit of sting in his manner of saying it. He has, for convenience’s sake, set his troubling narrative in the Salem of 1692. For reasons of their own, a quartet of exhibitionistic young women are hurling accusations of witchcraft at eminently respectable members of a well-meaning, but not entirely clear-headed society.

On the basis of hearsay—‘guilt by association with the devil’ might be the phrase for it—a whole community of innocents are brought to trial and condemned to be hanged. As Mr. Miller pursues his very clear contemporary parallel, there are all sorts of relevant thrusts: the folk who do the final damage are not the lunatic fringe but the gullible pillars of society; the courts bog down into travesty in order to comply with the popular mood; slander becomes the weapon of opportunists (‘Is the accuser always holy?’); freedom is possible at the price of naming one’s associates in crime; even the upright man is eventually tormented into going along with the mob to secure his own way of life, his own family.

Much of this—not all—is an accurate reading of our own turbulent age, and there are many times at the Martin Beck [theater] when one’s intellectual sympathies go out to Mr. Miller and to his apt symbols anguishing on the stage. But it is the intellect which goes out, not the heart. For Salem, and the people who live, love, fear and die in it, are really only conveniences to Mr. Miller, props to his theme. He does not make them interesting in and for themselves, and you wind up analyzing them, checking their dilemmas against the latest headlines, rather than losing yourself in any rounded, deeply rewarding personalities. You stand back and think; you don’t really share very much.”

Walter F. Kerr
New York Herald Tribune
(23 January 1953) 12

“Arthur Miller has written another powerful play. *The Crucible*, it is called, and it opened at the Martin Beck last evening in an equally powerful performance. Riffing back the pages of American history, he has written the drama of the witch trials and hangings in Salem in 1692. Neither Mr. Miller nor his audiences are unaware of certain similarities between the perversions of justice then and today. But Mr. Miller is not pleading a cause in dramatic form. For *The Crucible*, despite its current implications, is a self-contained play about a terrible period in American history. Silly accusations of witchcraft by some mischievous girls in Puritan dress gradually take possession of Salem. Before the play is over, good people of pious nature and responsible temper are condemning other people to the gallows.

Having a sure instinct for dramatic form, Mr. Miller goes bluntly to essential situations. John Proctor and his wife, farm people, are the central characters of the play. At first the idea that Goodie Proctor is a witch is only an absurd rumor. But *The Crucible* carries the Proctors through the whole ordeal—first vague suspicion, then the arrest, the implacable, highly wrought trial in the church vestry, the final opportunity for John Proctor to save his neck by confessing to something he knows is a lie, and finally the baleful roll of the drums at the foot of the gallows.

Although *The Crucible* is a powerful drama, it stands second to *Death of a Salesman* as a work of art. Mr. Miller has had more trouble with this one, perhaps because he is too conscious of its implications. The literary style is cruder. The early motivation is muffled in the uproar of the opening scene, and the theme does not develop with the simple eloquence of *Death of a Salesman*. It may be that Mr. Miller has tried to pack too much inside his drama, and that he has permitted himself to be concerned more with the technique of the witch hunt than with its humanity. For all its power generated on the surface, *The Crucible* is most moving in the simple, quiet scenes between John Proctor and his wife.

By the standards of *Death of a Salesman*, there is too much excitement and not enough emotion in *The Crucible*.... After the experience of *Death of a Salesman* we probably expect Mr. Miller to write a masterpiece every time. *The Crucible* is not of that stature and it lacks that universality. On a lower level of dramatic history with considerable pertinence for today, it is a powerful play and a genuine contribution to the season.”

Brooks Atkinson
The New York Times
(23 January 1953) 15

“The issue of civil liberty is too serious to be confused by its defenders as well as its enemies. Freedom is under menacing fire at home as well as abroad. But Arthur Miller, in his new play *The Crucible*, seems to us to have provided more confusion than defense. Some may argue—as many of the drama critics did—that this is just a play about Salem, Mass., in the time of the 1692 witch hunt. Having seen it ourselves, we dissent. It is inconceivable that Miller is unaware that the year is 1953 and that a play about Salem’s witch hunt was inevitably bound to stir contemporary echoes.... Actually most of the reviewers recognized the contemporary analogy, but few of them examined its validity until the magazine critics got around to the play somewhat later....

Whatever his original intention, Miller has pushed the people of Salem around in a loaded allegory which may shed some light on their time but ultimately succeeds in muddying our own. The frenzied cruelty of Salem stemmed from superstition and fantasy: Lives were ruined and lost in the wild attempt to

prove that witches were the root of all suffering. In Miller's script the labored implication is that modern political hysteria is similarly founded on totally irrational fear of nonexistent demons. It would be nice if life were that simple.

Unhappily, the despotic threat that confronts modern society is real; the people who loved freedom in Czechoslovakia, China and other places now ruled by tyranny can testify to that. The threat is as real as it was when Nazism was overrunning the world. International Communism is a disciplined, fanatic movement whose secret battalions have seized whole nations and enslaved millions of people. There *are* spies and saboteurs; there *are* accused agents who are guilty... The irony is that Miller's most fiery lines seem designed to caricature America's jitters rather than Prague's terror.... The Communists took over Czechoslovakia in February 1948, replacing the coalition government that had ruled since the end of World War II. A systematic repression began, ending with the Prague trials of November 1952, at which eleven men, after public confession, were condemned to death. [My] reference here is to those trials, which were widely accepted as a mockery of justice....

In a matter of months the people of Salem banished the spectre of the witch and regained their own senses. But the problem of our age is how to resist the real and continuing peril of totalitarianism without destroying our freedoms in the process. It is how to combat authentic dangers without yielding to panic and hysteria. That is infinitely more complicated a problem than the cure of Salem's dementia.... There is an equal contempt for truth in a defense of free speech which pretends that the Soviet challenge is an elaborate hallucination of Western man, as fanciful as the madness that bedeviled Salem."

New York Post
(1 February 1953) 9

"The strong John Proctor, who has before him as an example the steadfastness of his beloved wife, is nevertheless made to weaken, to 'confess' to a lie—in order to give more theatrical effect to his final resolve to proclaim, and to die for, the truth.... Proctor will lie privately, but he refuses to sign so that his lie can be made public. The one really neat turn of character comes during the questioning of Proctor's wife. After Proctor has assured the judge that his wife never lies, she falters and does lie to save her husband's reputation—not knowing that this very action brings on his ruin. She testifies that her husband is not a lecher and that Abigail—chief denouncer of the 'witches'—was dismissed from her service only for incompetence—this after John has sworn that Abigail was his eager whore. A neat twist, dramatically effective, psychologically sound.

On the other hand, when basic soundness and immediate effectiveness conflict, Miller plumps for the box-office. The opening of the last act, for instance, presents two women who are being put out of their cell to make it a reception room for the deputy governor. No reason is given why the deputy governor could not have an office, if not a cell, of his own. If that last act opening is intended to provide a sort of emotional rest, like the Shakespearean comic interlude, it is as clumsy as the opening of the first act is confused.... The climactic growth of tension...is excellently managed.

But...the calculating craftsman, not the deeply moved creator, is at work. Take even such a detail as calling the first act a 'Prologue.' There is nothing at all in it to justify separating it by that kind of label from the rest of the play. It would be as logical to call the last act an 'Epilogue.' But the three-act play is the fashion of our time; a play in four acts might seem Ibsenian, dated. So *The Crucible* as a 'Prologue and Three Acts.' It *conforms*. This is trivial, no doubt, but it is a further indication that the play is not so much a creation of dramatic art as a concoction of the author's contriving mind."

Joseph T. Shipley
"Arthur Miller's New Melodrama Is Not What It Seems to Be"
The New Leader XXXVI
(9 February 1953) 25-26

"[Miller] has labored hard at his statue and it has not come to life. There is a terrible inertness about the play. The individual characters, like the individual lines, lack fluidity and grace. There is an O'Neill-like striving after a poetry and an eloquence which the author does not achieve. 'From Aeschylus to Arthur Miller,' say the textbooks. The world has made this author important before he has made himself great;

perhaps the reversal of the natural order of things weighs heavily upon him. It would be all too easy, script in hand, to point to weak spots. The inadequacy of particular lines, and characters, is of less interest, however, than the mentality from which they come. It is the mentality of the unreconstructed liberal....

The analogy between 'red-baiting' and witch hunting can seem complete only to communists, for only to them is the menace of communism as fictitious as the menace of witches. The non-communist will look for certain reservations and provisos. In *The Crucible*, there are none. To accuse Miller of communism would of course be to fall into the trap of oversimplification which he himself has set.... His view of life is dictated by assumptions which liberals have to unlearn... In Hebrew mythology, innocence was lost at the very beginning of things; in liberal, especially American liberal, folklore, it has not been lost yet; Arthur Miller is the playwright of American liberal folklore....

Such indeed is the viewpoint of the dramatist of indignation, like Miss [Lillian] Hellman or Mr. Miller. And it follows that their plays are melodramas—a conflict between the wholly guilty and the wholly innocent.... *The Crucible* is a melodrama because, though the hero has weaknesses, he has no faults. His innocence is unreal because it is total. His author has equipped him with what we might call Super-innocence, for the crime he is accused of not only hasn't been committed by him, it isn't even a possibility: it is a fiction of traffic with the devil.... Innocence is, for a mere human being, and especially for an artist, insufficient baggage.... *The Crucible* is about guilt yet nowhere in it is there any sense of guilt because the author and director have joined forces to dissociate themselves and their hero from evil. This is the theatre of two Dr. Jekylls."

Eric Bentley
"The Innocence of Arthur Miller"
New Republic CXXVIII
(16 February 1953) 22-23

"After an engagement of six months and the acquisition of a prize or two, Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* has come out in a new edition at the Martin Beck Theatre. Although the new edition is motivated by the necessity for economy during the hot months, the changes have improved Mr. Miller's drama. *The Crucible* has acquired a certain human warmth that it lacked amid the shrill excitements of the original version. The hearts of the characters are now closer to the surface than their nerves.

The changes include a brief new scene between Abigail Williams and John Proctor that completely motivates their clash in the following scene laid in the courtroom.... And Mr. Miller had personally redirected a good deal of the performance—giving it more variety and humanity than it had when it was new.... Del Hughes is excellent as the liberal-minded Rev. John Hale, who is honestly seeking after the truth despite his personal complacency....

Even in its new edition *The Crucible* does not seem to this theatergoer like Mr. Miller's most eloquent drama. The prologue tries to pack too much information into a distracted first act. The last scene is a vacillating one; it gives the impression of changing points of view impulsively. Although Mr. Miller does not dwell specifically on the analogies between the Salem witch trials of 1692 and the hysterical bush-beating search of subversives [Communists stealing atomic secrets and distributing propaganda] today, the analogies lurk in the background, and they are too inexact to be wholly persuasive. The overtones of a thesis play are the mediocre parts of *The Crucible*."

The New York Times
(2 July 1953) 20

"*The Crucible* does not, I confess, seem to me a work of such potential tragic force as the playwright's earlier *Death of a Salesman*; it is the product of theatrical dexterity and a young man's moral passion rather than of a fruitful and reverberating imagination. But it has, in a theatre of the small success and the tidy achievement, power, the passionate line—an urgent boldness which does not shrink from the implications of a large and formidable design.... His characteristic theme is integrity, and its obverse, compromise.... In *The Crucible*...he has stated his theme again with a wholly admirable concision and force."

Richard Hayes

Commonweal
(20 February 1953) 498

“If *The Crucible* is a drama of 1953, as well as of 1692, it does not follow that it is a simple parable. On the contrary it is self-contained rather than contained by time of place. It is the terrible and tragic situation that provides the real setting.... The situation is convincing to the last irrational detail. The conflict emerges in subtly differentiated forms and shadings.... Beginning slowly, with a prologue somewhat diffuse and confusing, the play gathers momentum and power with each act. The final scene, just before the hanging, is immensely moving, summarizing the theme of the play with an eloquence that carries the audience...out of the theatre in a mood of resolve rather than despair.”

Freda Kirchwey
Nation
(7 February 1953) 131-32

“*The Crucible*, although it set few records on Broadway, has been steadily popular elsewhere... It attracted such large audiences over a period of several months last year that the San Francisco company turned professional and continued for some time to produce the same play as its first professional offering. In France, too, the play has been popular....

The Crucible dramatizes brilliantly the dilemma of an innocent man who must confess falsely if he wants to live and who finally gains the courage to insist on his innocence—and hang. To increase the impact of this final choice, Mr. Miller has filled his play with ironies. John Proctor, the fated hero, has been guilty of adultery but is too proud to confess or entirely to repent. In order to save his wife from execution by showing that her leading accuser is ‘a whore,’ he has at last brought himself to confess his adultery before the Deputy Governor of Massachusetts Bay; but his wife, who ‘has never told a lie’ and who has punished him severely for his infidelity, now lies to protect his name. Denying that he had been unfaithful, she convinces the court that he has lied to save her life. In the end, Proctor, reconciled with his wife and determined to live, can have his freedom if he will confess to witchcraft, a crime he has not committed.

This battery of ironies is directed against the basic objective of the play: absolute morality. In the twentieth century as well as the seventeenth, Mr. Miller insists in his preface, this construction of human pride makes devils of the opponents of orthodoxy and destroys individual freedom. Using the Salem episode to show that is also blinds people to truth, he has his characters turn the truth upside down. At the beginning of the play, the Reverend John Hale announces fatuously that he can distinguish precisely between diabolical and merely sinful actions; in the last act the remorseful Hale is trying desperately to persuade innocent convicts to confess falsely in order to avoid execution. The orthodox court, moreover, will not believe that Abigail Williams, who has falsely confessed to witchcraft, falsely denied adultery, and falsely cried out upon ‘witches,’ is ‘a whore; but it is convinced that Proctor, who has told the truth about both his adultery and his innocence of witchcraft, is a witch....

The helplessness of an innocent defendant, the court’s insistence on leaping to dubious conclusions, the jeopardy of any ordinary person who presumes to question the court’s methods, the heroism of a defendant who cleaves to the truth at the cost of his life, the ease with which vengeful motives can be served by a government’s attempt to fight the Devil, and the disastrous aid which a self-serving confession gives injustice by encouraging the court’s belief in the genuineness of the conspiracy—all this makes the play almost oppressively instructive, especially when one is watching rather than reading it....

But Mr. Miller’s pedagogical intention leads him into historical and, I believe, aesthetic error. Representative of the historical distortion is [1] his decision to have the Deputy Governor declare the court in session in a waiting room in order to force a petitioner to implicate an innocent man or be held in contempt of court. Obviously suggested by the techniques of Senator McCarthy, this action is unfair to the Puritan Judge. And it is only the lease of a number of such libels. [2] In the Salem of 1692 there were indictments and juries; in *The Crucible* there are none. Mr. Miller’s audience sees in detail the small mind and grandiose vanity of Samuel Parris, the selfish motives of the afflicted girls, the greed of Thomas Putnam; but it does not learn that [3] a doubtful judge left the court after the first verdict, that [4] there was a recess of nearly three weeks during which the government anxiously sought procedural advice from the

colony's leading ministers, or that [5] the ministers...hit squarely on the very logical fallacies in the court's procedure which *The Crucible* so clearly reveals.

[6] In 1692 there was a three-month delay between the first accusations and the first trial. Each defendant was examined first, later indicted, and then tried. In *The Crucible* the first 'witch' is condemned to death just eight days after the first accusations, when [7] only fourteen people are in jail. Whatever its eventual justice, a government which adheres to trial by jury and delays three months while 150 people are in jail is quite different from a government which allows [8] four judges to condemn a woman to death within a week of her accusation.

Since Mr. Miller calls his play an attack on black-or-white thinking, it is unfortunate that the play itself aligns a group of heroes against a group of villains. In his 'Notes on Historical Accuracy,' Mr. Miller remarks scrupulously that he has changed the age of Abigail Williams from eleven to seventeen in order to make her eligible for adultery. [9] But this apparently minor change alters the entire historical situation. For Mr. Miller's Abigail is a vicious wench who not only exploits her chance to supplant Elizabeth Proctor when the time comes, nor only maintains a tyrannical discipline among the afflicted girls, but also sets the entire cycle of accusations in motion for selfish reasons. Although Mr. Miller's preface to the book suggests other psychological and historical reasons for the 'delusion' and even admits that there were some witches in Salem Village, his portrayal of Parris, Abigail, and the Putnams tells his theatre audience that a vain minister, a vicious girl, and an arrogant landgrabber deliberately encouraged judicial murder and that a declining 'theocracy' supported the scheme in order to remain in power. One might fairly infer from the play itself that if Abigail had never lain with Proctor nobody would have been executed....

[10] Mr. Miller consistently develops historically documented selfish motives and logical errors to grotesque extremes. Every character who confesses in *The Crucible* does so only to save his skin. Every accuser is motivated by envy or vengeance, or is prompted by some other selfishly motivated person. And the sole example of ordinary trial procedure is an examination in which the judges condemn a woman because they regard her inability to recite her commandments as 'hard proof' of her guilt.... The witch hunters of *The Crucible* are so foolish, their logic so extremely burlesqued, their motives so baldly temporal, that one may easily underestimate the terrible implications of their mistakes. Stupid or vicious men's errors can be appalling; but the lesson would be even more appalling if one realized that intelligent men, who tried to be fair and saw the dangers in some of their methods, reached the same conclusions and enforced the same penalties.

[11] The central fault is Mr. Miller's failure to present an intelligent minister who recognizes at once the obvious questions which troubled real Puritan ministers from the time the court was appointed. Cocksure in the first act and morally befuddled in the last, Mr. Miller's John Hale is in both these attitudes a sorry representative of the Puritan ministry. [12] 'Spectre evidence,' the major issue of 1692, is neither mentioned nor debated in *The Crucible*. Preferring to use Hale as a caricature of orthodoxy in his first act, Mr. Miller does not answer the question which a dramatist might devote his skills to answering: What made a minister who saw the dangers, who wanted to protect the innocent and convict the guilty, side with the court? Even though the dramatist must oversimplify history, the fact that dramatic exposition may be tedious does not excuse *The Crucible's* inadequacies; Mr. Miller finds plenty of time for exposition in the first act and in the later speeches of Hale and the Deputy Governor. The fault lies in Mr. Miller's understanding of the period; its consequences damage his play as 'essential' history, as moral instruction, and as art."

David Levin
"Salem Witchcraft in Recent Fiction and Drama"
The New England Quarterly XXVIII
(December 1955) 537-42

"It is not to be concluded that Proctor's concession to the mad conformity of the time parallels Miller's testimony [in 1956 to the U.S. House Committee], for Proctor had never in fact seen the Devil, whereas Miller had in fact seen Communists.... If the position taken by Miller were in all cases right, then it would seem wise to supplement the Fifth Amendment with one holding that no man could be required to

incriminate another. If this were done, the whole machinery of law enforcement would collapse; it would be simply impossible to determine the facts about a crime.”

Richard H. Rovere
“Arthur Miller’s Conscience”
New Republic CXXXVI
(17 June 1957) 13-15

“*The Crucible* tells the story of the Salem witch hunt. When the play opens, a group of young girls, including the Minister Parris’s own daughter, have been conjuring spirits in the forest. Two of them are in a hypnotic trance. A religious expert in witchcraft is called in (‘Now let me instruct you. We cannot look to superstition in this. The Devil is precise’), and soon the girls, in a state of revivalist enthusiasm, are calling out the names of people they have seen with the Devil. A court is set up. At first only the riff-raff are named, but gradually the circle widens as social feuds become entangled with personal emotions, and presently Elizabeth Proctor, a cold, harsh Puritan, is framed by one of the girls (Abigail), whom she has dismissed from her service after finding her in adultery with her husband, John Proctor.

Proctor, supported by a tough old individualist, Giles Corey, takes it on himself to oppose the court. He persuades one of the girls, Mary Warren, to confess that it is all a fraud, and by admitting his adultery with Abigail, tries to discredit her as a witness. But Elizabeth, called in to confirm his testimony, lies for the only time in her life, and Mary is once again contaminated by hysteria. After this, Proctor himself is condemned. The last act deals with the struggle of his conscience. To escape the gallows, he has only to confess that he is in league with the Devil. Is not life, he reasons, like Brecht’s Galileo, worth a compromise? ‘Let Rebecca go like a saint; for me it is a fraud!’ But, finally, he tears up his confession. ‘You have made your magic now, for now I do think I see some shred of goodness in John Proctor. Not enough to weave a banner with, but white enough to keep it from such dogs.’

A summary can do no justice to the richness and complexity of the play. Sartre’s film version, which turned it into a projection of the class struggle, kept some of the power, but lost the depth of the original.... John Proctor stands four-square in his own time and place. This is not to say that his story is historically accurate. It is one of the fallacies of our pseudo-realism that historical accuracy is the same as reality.... But Proctor is real because he stands at the heart of all the complex tensions of the Salem community. He is totally involved as a human being: socially, as a farmer in a farming community who, against his will, is caught up in the town’s factions; intellectually, because his mind rejects the insanity of the witch hunt; emotionally, because he is linked with that insanity through his adultery with Abigail; morally, because this adultery is not just a sin against the community, but a sin against his own conscience, so that his death becomes more than a pointlessly heroic gesture, a rediscovery of his own goodness....

The most immediately powerful scene in the play is the one in which Mary Warren tries to expose the fraud. Again, everything that happens is realistic, but it is a realism which takes into account the fact that delusions too are real to those who hold them, and can change a given reality. As Mary testifies, the other girls fix their eyes on the ceiling. Mary has become a bird trying to possess them. Presently, she *does* possess them. Everything she says is repeated, horrifyingly, in chorus by the girls, until Mary’s own mind is broken down, and she herself is screaming at the ceiling.”

Albert Hunt
“Realism and Intelligence: Some Notes on Arthur Miller”
Encore VII
(May-June 1960) 12-17, 41

“The pattern is varied slightly in *The Crucible*. The Man Who Learns here is the Reverend Hale, but unlike the earlier two plays, it is not he who suffers the death in the third act. But Hale takes the play over so completely from the victim, Proctor (who after all only Knows and is static), that the latter’s martyrdom seems almost a sentimental afterthought. ‘I denounce these proceedings,’ Hale says at the curtain of the second last scene, but the tide of majority stupidity has already engulfed them. He is too late too, and this is his tragedy.”

William Wiegand
“Arthur Miller and the Man Who Knows”

“It means: do not be misled by the play’s historical theme into forgetting the main point, which is that ‘witch trials’ are always with us, and especially today; but on the other hand do not hold Mr. Miller responsible either for the inadequacies of his presentation of the Salem trials or for the many undeniable and important differences between those trials and the ‘witch trials’ that are going on now.... One need not believe in witches, or even in God, to understand the events in Salem, but it is mere provinciality to ignore the fact that both those ideas had a reality for the people of Salem that they do not have for us.... In *The Crucible* [Miller] reveals at every turn his almost contemptuous lack of interest in the particularities—which is to say, the reality—of the Salem trials.

The character and motives of all the actors in this drama are for him both simple and clear. The girls who raised the accusation of witchcraft were merely trying to cover up their own misbehavior. The Reverend Samuel Parris found in the investigation of witchcraft a convenient means of consolidating his shaky position in a parish that was murmuring against his ‘undemocratic’ conduct of the church. The Reverend John Hale, a conscientious and troubled minister who, given the premises, must have represented something like the best that Puritan New England had to offer, and whose agonies of doubt might have been expected to call forth the highest talents of a serious playwright, appears in *The Crucible* as a kind of idiotic ‘liberal’ scoutmaster, at first cheerfully confident of his ability to cope with the Devil’s wiles and in the last act babbling hysterically in an almost comic contrast to the assured dignity of the main characters. Deputy Governor Danforth, presented as the virtual embodiment of early New England, never becomes more than a pompous, unimaginative politician of the better sort....

Abigail Williams, one of the chief accusers in the trials, was about eleven years old in 1692; Miller makes her a young woman of eighteen or nineteen and invents an adulterous relation between her and John Proctor in order to motivate her denunciation of John and his wife Elizabeth. The point is not that this falsifies the facts of Proctor’s life (though one remembers uneasily that he himself was willing to be hanged rather than confess to what was not true), but that it destroys the play, offering an easy theatrical motive that even in theatrical terms explains nothing, and deliberately casting away the element of religious and psychological complexity which gives the Salem witch trials their dramatic interest in the first place. In a similar way, Miller risks the whole point of *Death of a Salesman* by making his plot turn on the irrelevant discovery of Willy Loman’s adultery. And in both plays the fact of adultery itself is slighted: it is brought in not as a human problem, but as a mere theatrical device, like the dropping of a letter; one cannot take an interest in Willy Loman’s philandering, or believe in Abigail Williams’s passion despite the barnyard analogies with which the playwright tries to make it ‘elemental’....

His plays are as neatly put together and essentially as empty as that skeleton of a house which made *Death of a Salesman* so impressively confusing. He is the playwright of an audience that believes the frightening complexities of history and experience are to be met with a few ideas, and yet does not even possess these ideas any longer but can only point significantly at the place where they were last seen and where it is hoped they might still be found to exist.... The marriage of the liberal theatre and the liberal audience has been for some time a marriage in name only, held together by habit and mutual interest, partly by sentimental memory, most of all by the fear of loneliness and the outside world... The hero of this audience is Clifford Odets. Among those who shouted ‘Bravo!’ at the end of *The Crucible*—an exclamation, awkward on American lips, that is reserved for cultural achievements of the greatest importance—there must surely have been some who had stood up to shout ‘Strike!’ at the end of *Waiting for Lefty*. But it is hard to believe that a second Odets, if that were possible, or the old Odets restored to youth, would be greeted with such enthusiasm as Arthur Miller calls forth.... Arthur Miller is the dramatist of a later time, when the ‘message’ isn’t there at all, but it has been agreed to pretend that it is....

Arthur Miller is Odets without the poetry. Worst of all, one feels sometimes that he has suppressed the poetry deliberately, making himself by choice the anonymous dramatist of a fossilized audience. In *Death of a Salesman*, certainly, there were moments when reality seemed to force its way momentarily to the surface. And even at *The Crucible*—though here it was not Miller’s suppressed talent that broke through, but the suppressed facts of the outside world—the thread that tied the audience to its dramatist must have

been now and then under some strain: surely there were some in the audience to notice uneasily that these witch trials, with their quality of ritual and their insistent need for 'confessions,' were much more like the [Communist] trial that had just ended in Prague than like any trial that has lately taken place in the United States. So much the better, perhaps, for the play's 'universal significance'; I don't suppose Mr. Miller would defend the Prague trial. And yet I cannot believe it was for this particular implication that anyone shouted 'Bravo!'

For let us indeed not be misled. Mr. Miller has nothing to say about the Salem trials and makes only the flimsiest pretense that he has. *The Crucible* was written to say something about Alger Hiss and Owen Lattimore [Soviet spies in the U.S. State Department], Julius and Ethel Rosenberg [Soviet spies executed for stealing atomic secrets], Senator McCarthy [who exposed spies in the government and the U.S. Army], the [Communist] actors who have lost their jobs on radio and television, in short the whole complex that is spoken of, with a certain lowering of the voice, as the 'present atmosphere'.... Seeing all this on the stage, we are free to reflect that something very like these trials has been going on in recent years in the United States. How much like? Mr. Miller does not say. But *very* like, allowing of course for some superficial differences: no one has been pressed to death in recent years, for instance....

The play reaches its climax with John and Elizabeth Proctor facing the problem of whether John should save himself from execution by making a false confession; he elects finally to accept death, for his tormentors will not be satisfied with his mere admission of guilt: he would be required to implicate others, thus betraying his innocent friends, and his confession would of course be used to justify the hanging of the other convicted witches in the face of growing community unrest. Now it is very hard to watch this scene without thinking of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg [proven guilty of treason], who might also save their lives by confessing. Does Mr. Miller believe that the only confession possible for them would be a false one, implicating innocent people? Naturally, there is no way for him to let us know....

One remembers also, as John Proctor wrestles with his conscience, that a former close associate of Mr. Miller's [Director and friend Elia Kazan] decided some time ago, no doubt after serious and painful consideration, to tell the truth about his past membership in the Communist party, that he mentioned some others who had been in the party with him, and that he then became known in certain theatrical circles as an 'informer' and a 'rat.' Is it possible that this is what Mr. Miller was thinking about when he came to write this scene? And is he trying to tell us that no one who has been a member of the Communist party should admit it? Or that if he does admit it he should not implicate anyone else? Or that all such 'confessions' may be assumed to be false? If he were trying to tell us any of these things, perhaps we might have some arguments to raise. But of course he isn't; he's only writing about the Salem trials, and who wants to maintain that John Proctor was guilty of witchcraft?

But if Mr. Miller isn't saying anything about the Salem trials, and can't be caught saying anything about anything else, what did the audience think he was saying? That too is hard to tell. A couple of the newspaper critics wrote about how timely the play was, and then took it back in the Sunday editions, putting a little more weight on the 'universal significance'; but perhaps they didn't quite take it back as much as they seemed to want to: the final verdict appeared to be merely that *The Crucible* is not so great a play as *Death of a Salesman*. As for the rest of the audience, it was clear that they felt themselves to be participating in an event of great meaning: that is what is meant by 'Bravo!' Does 'Bravo!' mean anything else? I think it means: we agree with Arthur Miller; he has set forth brilliantly and courageously what has been weighing on all our minds; at last someone has had the courage to answer Senator McCarthy.

I don't believe this audience was likely to ask itself what it was agreeing to. Enough that someone had said something, anything, to dispel for a couple of hours that undefined but very real sense of frustration which oppresses these 'liberals'—who believe in their innermost being that salvation comes from saying something, and who yet find themselves somehow without anything very relevant to say. They tell themselves, of course, that Senator McCarthy has made it 'impossible' to speak; but one can hardly believe they are satisfied with this explanation....

The Salem trials have the disadvantage that they must be distorted in order to be fitted into the framework of civil rights in the first place.... This offers us a revealing glimpse of the way the Communists

and their fellow-travelers have come to regard themselves. The picture has a certain pathos. As it becomes increasingly difficult for any sane man of conscience to reconcile an adherence to the Communist party with any conceivable political principles, the Communist—who is still, let us remember, very much a man of conscience—must gradually divest his political allegiance of all actual content, until he stands bare to the now incomprehensible anger of his neighbors...he is only a dissenter-in-general, a type of personality, a man frozen into an attitude.

From this comes the astonishing phenomenon of Communist innocence...his opinions and behavior are only the opinions and behavior of a 'liberal,' a 'dissenter.' You are therefore accusing him of being a Communist because he is a liberal, because he is for peace and civil rights and everything good.... Outside, there awaited all kinds of agonizing and concrete problems: were the Rosenbergs actually guilty? Was Stalin actually going to persecute the Jews? But in the theatre they could know, immediately and confidently, their own innate and inalienable rightness....the Revolution—or 'liberalism,' or 'dissent'—has entered into them as the grace of God was once conceived to have entered into the 'elect,' and, like the grace of God, it is given irrevocably."

Robert Warshow
"The Liberal Conscience in *The Crucible*"
The Immediate Experience
(Doubleday 1962) 189-203

"Whether we are to accept his Salem as historical or as an analogy for the United States in the early fifties, Miller needs to create a mood of mass hysteria in which guilt and confession become public virtues. For this reason, Proctor is not so intensively on stage as the protagonists of the earlier plays are; the playwright has to work up a setting for him, has to give his attention to the accusers, the court, the town.... It would be simple enough to dissect Miller's use of Salem and to show, as so many critics have, that the Massachusetts witch hunts are not analogous to the postwar Communist hunts....

It is John Proctor who shows most clearly Miller's attitude. His hero might have been another Willy Loman, another Joe Keller, an acceptor not a defier of society, and his play would have had just as much—perhaps more—propaganda value.... Ironically, not even Elizabeth's 'He have his goodness now' can make Proctor's dignity convincing. The simplicity of the real situation is impossible on stage. Miller's need to push Proctor to his heroic end causes him to bring to *The Crucible* too many of the trappings of the standard romantic play; the plot turns on that moment in court when Elizabeth, who has never lied before, lies out of love of her husband and condemns him by that act. This is a sentimental mechanism almost as outrageous as the hidden-letter trick in the last act of *All My Sons*....

Although Proctor is never completely successful as a character, Miller makes an effort to convince us that he is more than the blunt, not so bright good man he appears to be.... We are to assume that Proctor is a solid man, but an independent one, not a man to fit lightly into anyone else's mold. When we meet him, however, he is suffering under a burden of guilt—intensified by his belief that Elizabeth is continually judging him. Miller makes it clear that in sleeping with Abigail Williams, Proctor has become 'a sinner not only against the moral fashion of the time, but against his own vision of decent conduct.' In Act III, when he admits in open court that he is a lecher, he says, 'A man will not cast away his good name.' When he is finally faced with the choice of death or confession (that he consorted with the Devil), his guilt as an adulterer becomes confused with his innocence as a witch; one sin against society comes to look like another, or so he rationalizes. In the last act, however, Elizabeth in effect absolves him of the sin of adultery, gives him back the name he lost in court, and clears the way for him to reject the false confession and to give his life: 'How may I live without my name?'...

There are distressing structural faults in *The Crucible*, violations of the realistic surface of the play, such as the unlikely scene in Act I in which Proctor and Abigail are left alone in the sick girl's bedroom. Nor was it such a good idea for Miller to attempt, in that play, to suggest the language of the period; the lines are...awkward and...stagily false."

Gerald Weales
"Arthur Miller: Man and His Image"
American Drama Since World War II

“At the time we produced *The Crucible*, Miller was already the most powerful rational voice in the American theatre.... While it lacked the terrifying impartiality of greater drama, *The Crucible* had nevertheless the vehemence of good social protest.... And in our program notes we stressed the McCarthy parallel, speaking of guilt by association and Ordeal by Slander.... While the power of mass psychosis is one of the strongest elements in the play, there is a melodrama in the fervency that always made me uncomfortable.... It is the *mind* which rebels finally against its formulas while the emotions may be overwhelmed by its force.... A master of conventional dramaturgy, with all the skills of building and pacing, he drives past the turbid aspect of social hypnosis to the predetermined heroism of Proctor.... This absence of doubt reduced the import of *The Crucible* for those who thought about it, while increasing the impact for those who didn't.

Several critics have pointed out that the analogy between witches and Communists is a weak one, for while we believe in retrospect there were no witches, we know in fact there were some Communists [hundreds, supported by thousands of liberals], and a few of them were dangerous.... *The Crucible* was not really the 'tough' play that Miller claimed; I mean dramatically tough, tough in soul, driving below its partisanship to a judgment of anti-social action from which, as in Dostoyevsky, none of us could feel exempt. I wouldn't have asked the questions if Miller didn't prompt them with his reflections on Social Drama and the tragic form....

Miller wants the Puritan community without Puritan premises or Puritan intuitions (which is one reason why, when he appropriates the language, his own suffers in comparison). His liberalism is the kind that, really believing we have outlived the past, thinks it is there to be used. The past doesn't lie around like that. And one of these days the American theatre is really going to have to come to terms with American history. Axiom for liberals: no play is deeper than its witches.”

Herbert Blau
“Counterforce I: The Social Drama”
The Impossible Theater
(Macmillan 1964) 188-92

“In dramatizing the Salem witch hunts at the end of the 17th century, Miller explores the roots of intolerance and mass hysteria. A few girls, fettered by a rigid Puritan moral code, seek an outlet in secret dances at night in the woods. Discovered, they manage to elude punishment by declaring themselves victims of the Devil and by ecstatically accusing several harmless women of witchcraft. The whole community is caught in a frenzy. Envy, greed, and superstition rule. The Devil's supposed human assistants are blamed for every mishap, be it the miscarriage of a woman or the death of a pig. Deputy-Governor Danforth, a monster of dogmatism, meticulously executes the verdict of mob madness.

The central plot concerns John Proctor, a forthright farmer, his wife Elizabeth, and Abigail, the ringleader of the girls. Abigail had once seduced Proctor and now tries to eliminate Elizabeth by declaring her a witch. Attempting to clear his wife, Proctor implicates himself. He refuses to save his neck with a false confession and is led to the gallows. Though the characters sometimes seem to lack human substance, they are effectively profiled and clash in gripping dramatic scenes. In his concern for historical accuracy and a universal comment, Miller does not emphasize contemporary parallels.”

Theodore J. Shank, ed.
A Digest of 500 Plays: Plot Outlines and Production Notes
(Crowell-Collier 1963) 337-38

“If we are to judge solely from his next play, *The Crucible*, we would have to say that Art did think of himself as a sinner; the central character in it expresses contrition for a single act of infidelity. I had to guess that Art was publicly apologizing to his wife for what he'd done.... I believed it was the duty of the government to investigate the Communist movement in our country. I couldn't behave as if my old 'comrades' didn't exist and didn't have an active political program. There was no way I could go along with their crap that the CP was nothing but another political party, like the Republicans and the Democrats. I knew very well what it was, a thoroughly organized worldwide conspiracy....

Molly [his wife] was criticizing the parallel Art had seen in the story of the Massachusetts witch trials and becoming indignant. 'What's going on here and now is not to be compared with the witch trials of that time,' she said to me and, first chance she got, to Miller. 'Those witches did not exist. Communists do. Here, and everywhere in the world. It's a false parallel. Witch hunt! The phrase would indicate that there are no Communists in the government, none in the big trade unions, none in the press, none in the arts, none sending money from Hollywood to Twelfth Street [Communist Party headquarters].... In a way Miller admired my wife, but not so much as he resented her....

Molly knew what she was talking about; she'd been in the trenches. She'd been assistant editor of *New Theatre* magazine when it had published *Waiting for Lefty*... I thought Molly was right in her dispute with Miller.... I thought Art's bright idea questionable and his claim later that his play should not be read for 'contemporary significance' seemed dishonest to me.... [Congressmen] pointed to Hollywood as 'the Communists' greatest financial angels'."

Elia Kazan
Elia Kazan: A Life
(Knopf 1988) 367, 449-51

COMMUNIST PERSPECTIVE

"*The Crucible* is a mirror Miller uses to reflect the anti-communist hysteria inspired by Senator Joseph McCarthy's 'witch hunts' in the United States. Within the text itself, Miller contemplates the parallels, writing 'Political opposition [Communist totalitarianism] is given an inhumane overlay, which then justifies the abrogation of all normally applied customs of civilized behavior. [Communists worldwide are estimated to have murdered over 110 million people!] A political policy [preventing the overthrow of the democratic U.S. government by Communists loyal to the Soviet Union] is equated with moral right, and opposition to it with diabolical malevolence."

back cover
The Crucible by Arthur Miller
(Penguin 2003)

Michael Hollister (2015)