Senator Joseph McCarthy & Miller’s Dramatic License

Senator Joseph Raymond McCarthy and the Communist trials of the 1950s
Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy (1908-1957), arguably the greatest demagogue in American history, gained national attention in 1950 when he claimed that the State Department had been infiltrated by Communists. In a speech in West Virginia, the Senator proclaimed, “I have in my hand a list of 205 cases of individuals who appear to be either card-carrying members or certainly loyal to the Communist Party.” For the next four years, he searched for Communist subversion through televised and highly publicized hearings before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. He subpoenaed some of the most prominent entertainers of the era (e.g., Orson Welles, Lucille Ball, Dashielle Hammett, and Lillian Hellman) before HUAC, demanding “the naming of names.” Careers and lives were ruined by McCarthy’s accusations, which were based on unidentified sources, and weak evidence. In April 1954, McCarthy accused the Secretary of the Army of concealing foreign espionage activities. The Secretary countered that members of McCarthy’s subcommittee staff had threatened army officials in order to obtain preferential treatment for an associate of the subcommittee who had been recently drafted. The Senator and his committee were cleared of these charges, but McCarthy was censured by the Senate, and his power slowly declined.

Dramatic License
While Miller freely admitted that this play was not intended to be a history, he researched the information for the witch trials from primary documents in Salem. He was careful not to misrepresent characters or their actions. Miller did make some changes for the sake of the story. One of the largest was the Abigail Williams and John Proctor affair. Miller inferred from actions noted in court documents that Abigail and John had a relationship. Miller created all conversations to support this idea. Furthermore, Abigail was actually eleven years old when the story takes place. While girls were often wed around her age, Miller made her older in his story to make his audience more comfortable with this plot line. Miller’s other significant alterations are the exclusion of characters and the compression of time. For example, Parris was still married at the time and had two other children, and there were several other judges and afflicted witnesses. Likewise, in reality, Rebecca Nurse was hanged several weeks before John Proctor, and Giles Corey’s “pressing” did not occur until a month or two later. These changes were most likely necessary to make the play “fit” onto the stage.