

On Cue: The Performance of Affliction in Salem

Abstract

The Salem witch-crisis of 1692 began with the manifestation of bizarre, medically inexplicable symptoms by children. During the interrogation of suspected witches in the courtroom, groups of the “afflicted” exhibited their sufferings in unison. As the record shows, these demonstrations were not just tolerated but endorsed and even cued by the presiding magistrates. In a setting where confession was strong evidence of guilt, emotive displays by accusers with a license to perform might well squeeze a confession out of a suspect. In a number of cases, including the critical first confession, that is just what appears to have happened. However, even when suspects did not confess, the dramatically enacted torments of their accusers were cited in official documents as evidence against them. Little wonder the magistrates elicited and validated these spectacles.

Affliction and Diagnosis

Though it stands out in American memory like a singularity, the Salem witch prosecutions of 1692 did not come from nowhere. In a specifically Puritan precedent dating to 1602, fourteen-year-old Mary Glover of London began to suffer violent fits, loss of sight and speech, and other symptoms of bewitchment following an encounter with an old charwoman, Elizabeth Jackson.¹ In several other instances both in England and New England, the first of which antedated Salem by a full century, children suddenly began to suffer bizarre, heart-rending torments, doctors diagnosed them as preternatural in origin,

and the witch or witches deemed responsible were tried and executed. This sequence occurred in the Warboys case of the early 1590's, which helped establish the symptoms of bewitchment;² the Cullender case tried in Bury St. Edmunds in 1662, an important point of reference for the magistrates of New England thirty years later;³ and the Goodwin case in Boston in 1688-89.⁴ While the events of 1692 transcended these precedents and engulfed entire communities, they followed the same general course, beginning with the exhibition of bizarre symptoms by children.

The first affected in Salem Village were Abigail Williams, aged 11 or 12, and her younger cousin Betty Parris. The girls' symptoms were so shocking that when the head of the household—Rev. Samuel Parris, the pastor of Salem Village—called in a physician, the diagnosis was one of preternatural affliction. After Parris's West Indian slave Tituba made a cake with the children's urine in an effort to identify the witch responsible for their plight, she herself was accused of witchcraft, and the girls grew worse. As an observer, Rev. John Hale, later wrote, "These children were bitten and pinched by invisible agents; their arms, necks, and backs turned this way and that way, and returned back again, so as it was impossible for them to do of themselves, and beyond the power of any . . . natural disease to effect."⁵

According to an account given by Cotton Mather, the Goodwin children too were persecuted by invisible beings and grotesquely bent and twisted.⁶ It is as if the symptoms of bewitchment could spread like a disease in their own right. And so they did. As cases in Salem Village and beyond multiplied, young accusers exhibited torments and writhings much like those in the Parris and Goodwin families—sufferings regularly interpreted by

onlookers as both pitiful and beyond the scope of nature. Not only did the afflicted have similar fits, but they often had them at the same time and in the same place: the courtroom. Clusters of accusers present at the examination of suspected witches regularly suffered in unison. While the orchestration of these scenes casts doubt on their authenticity, the evidence suggests that many at the time found them compelling.

Just as striking as these torments was their instantaneous cessation at certain key moments during the examination of suspects. In many cases, the recorder of the proceedings made a specific note of this remarkable reversal of group behavior, holding it up as striking evidence of the guilt of the accused. Hence the following entry in the transcript of the interrogation of Martha Carrier (later executed):

The tortures of the afflicted was so great that there was no enduring of it, so that she was ordered away and to be bound hand and foot with all expedition, the afflicted in the meanwhile almost killed, to the great trouble of all spectators, magistrates and others. Note: As soon as she was well bound they all had strange and sudden ease.⁷

The magistrates appear to be as responsive to the torments of the afflicted as everyone else. It is they, after all, who order the accused bound. The “strange” cessation of torments at that point seems to make the incident all the more wondrous in the eyes of the recorder.

From the beginning, many have concluded that the accusers’ agonies were feigned. As shown by Bernard Rosenthal’s *Salem Story*,⁸ such a judgement by no means precludes a

rich reading of the crisis of 1692. Without denying that the accusers dissembled their sufferings, the present article calls attention to the role of the magistrates in authorizing and eliciting these performances in the courtroom. Just as they validated the accusers' exhibition of suffering at the hands of Martha Carrier by having her bound, the magistrates generally incorporated such histrionics into the proceedings they oversaw and gave them the status they enjoyed in official documents. Without the court's quite open approval and encouragement, the accusers might never have ventured to inflame the proceedings as they did.

Models and Cues

In and of itself, the fact that the accusers so often acted out their torments in the manner of a chorus—writhing together and stopping as if in response to the same signal—suggests strongly that their behavior was staged. They acted as they were guided and expected to act by the officers of the court in order to give emotionally compelling proof of bewitchment, and they ceased their torments when doing so incriminated the accused (as with Martha Carrier) or when the accused was already incriminating herself. Though one of their number famously let slip offstage that “they did it for sport” (SWP 665), this was sport carefully managed. The accusers did not improvise or free-lance their behavior but followed cues, examples, established patterns, and unwritten rules, often in unison. Later groups of accusers conformed to the precedents laid down by those who came before them, and it appears that the same exhibitions staged to great effect in preliminary

hearings were also staged during the trials per se, transcripts of which have not survived.⁹ As noted, even the initial outbreak of symptoms in the Parris household appears to have been modeled on a recent case of bewitchment—the Goodwin case.

Though we do not know which of the two girls, Abigail Williams or Betty Parris, manifested symptoms first, the double occurrence of a bizarre syndrome in a single household implies that one mirrored the other, or else that the two somehow fashioned their affliction together. The pathos of this double misfortune moved John Hale, who closes his description of the children's state by observing that they "were in all things afflicted as bad as John Goodwin's children at Boston, in the year 1689."¹⁰ The strong resemblance is probably not coincidental. As reported by Cotton Mather, the Goodwin case "has given matter to discourse and wonder to all the country [that is, county],"¹¹ and the recurrence of the weird torments of the Goodwin children in the Parris household may have told the concerned of Salem Village that something outside the realm of nature was taking place. In any case, a template for the performance of bewitchment was already in existence—indeed, in circulation—when Abigail Williams and her younger cousin began to display the Goodwin symptoms conjointly. The Goodwin case led to the execution of an old woman, Goody Glover, on the charge of witchcraft.

The reproduction of grotesque symptoms and torments from one case to another would have held all the more significance for John Hale because he, like others, judged that the accumulation of evidence proves witchcraft. As he explains, the first principle governing prior New England witch prosecutions was that "the Devil could not assume the shape of an innocent person in doing mischiefs unto mankind,"¹² whence it follows that if

the shape or specter of a witch is sighted performing an unholy rite or persecuting the innocent, the witch is guilty. This principle came to life in the Salem prosecutions, ultimately proving highly controversial. Second only to the law limiting the Devil's freedom of operation was the principle that "Witchcraft being an habitual crime, one single witness to one act of witchcraft, and another single witness to another such fact, made two witnesses against the crime and the party suspected."¹³ That is, allegations of witchcraft reinforce each other. Such a belief in the evidentiary value of duplication would tend to promote the mushrooming of accusations in a witch-hunt. If the norms of evidence call for a catalogue of examples of a witch's practice, then a catalogue there will be.

With the exception of the case of Mary Glover, in each of the aforementioned cases preceding Salem more than one child in a given household was afflicted. Five daughters of Robert Throckmorton (in the Warboys case), two daughters of Samuel Pacy (in the Cullender case), and four of the children of John Goodwin of Boston had all been bewitched. If only one child in the Parris household had exhibited strange symptoms, it might have been hard to know what to make of them; some years before, the minister Samuel Willard found himself unable to interpret the bizarre symptoms, including fits and barks, of his servant Elizabeth Knapp.¹⁴ However, two children with identically strange symptoms tell an unmistakable tale—a tale of witchcraft. If two sightings of a witch are better than one, the same is true of the signs marking the work of a witch. In turn, those who interpreted the symptoms displayed by Abigail Williams and Betty Parris as evidence of a war between Good and Evil heightened their import, validated their performance, and encouraged more of the same.

As if emboldened, Abigail Williams went on from these modest beginnings to become one of the leading accusers in Salem, testifying in word and deed against most of those who went to the gallows. She was joined in many cases by Elizabeth Hubbard, servant of the doctor who originally diagnosed her bewitchment. As one “intimately familiar” with the torments jointly manifested by Williams and Betty Parris,¹⁵ the older Hubbard presumably understood both how they were to be enacted and how they were likely to be construed by the community. In the courtroom both Williams and Hubbard received a stream of information about the appropriate staging of an affliction beyond the realm of nature.

Often claiming that the specter or invisible shape of the accused was torturing them at that very moment, the afflicted were a constant presence in the Salem courtroom. According to the editors of the Salem transcripts, “even shrewd observers on guard against fakery often became convinced” that the torments of the accusers “had a diabolical source” (SWP 8). This impression was confirmed when the torments ceased as soon as the accusers were touched by the suspect, in conformity with the belief that the touch of a witch cures the injuries she inflicted. To the recorder of the interrogations this sequence read like living proof of the guilt of the accused; hence the innumerable notations in the transcript like this one in the case of Mary Marston: “Note that hitherto she still struck down the afflicted persons with her eyes and recovered them again by laying her hand upon their wrist or arm” (SWP 546).

While allegations of past malicious acts by the accused might be difficult to sift, afflictions that took place in the here and now, before the eyes of all assembled, had

seemingly unique evidentiary value.¹⁶ Similarly, while critics of spectral evidence argued that the devil could indeed take the shape of an innocent person—hence Susannah Martin’s claim that if the devil could impersonate Samuel, he could impersonate her as well (SWP 554)—the accusers’ afflictions in the presence of examined suspects were performed so vividly that any question about the value of spectral evidence became academic, at least for the court. The very indictments of one defendant after another cite the sufferings of accusers in the courtroom during interrogation. If the magistrates sought to gather evidence to present to a grand jury or at trial, and if shows of affliction in their courtroom were accepted as such evidence, then we can well understand why they authorized these performances. How could they have failed to authorize the scenes that gave them exactly what they were looking for?

Drama begins with the entrance of characters onto the stage, and the afflicted, seated together like a chorus in the front of a crowded courtroom, regularly went into throes of distress when an accused witch entered for questioning. This practice may have begun with the first interrogation, that of the beggar Sarah Good. The importance of cuing was established during the same interrogation when the magistrates “desired the children all of them [sic] to look upon her and see if this were the person that had hurt them and so they all did look upon her and said this was one of the persons that did torment them—presently they were all tormented” (SWP 356). (One of the “children” present, Elizabeth Hubbard, was actually 17.) The magistrates’ request had the effect of a stage direction. With this precedent laid down, collective reactions by the accusers during the questioning of suspects became an established practice in the courtroom. But if the accusers knew

when and how to stage a histrionic reaction, they also knew when to go quiet. They were to act out when the suspect entered or when the magistrates prompted, but were also to cease when events dictated, whether prompted or not. The pattern of a violent group reaction followed by an uncanny group quiet, often during a confession, runs through the interrogations and is often noted by the recorder, to whom it seemed especially telling. Frequently the recorder was none other than Samuel Parris, in whose household the epidemic of bewitchment began.

The magistrates' signals were both explicit and implicit. On May 31, when they asked Martha Carrier challengingly, "Can you look upon these and not knock them down?" the accusers knew then and there that if Martha Carrier did gaze at them, and perhaps even if she did not, they were to be struck down. "All the afflicted fell into the most intolerable outcries and agonies" (SWP 185). (As we have seen, the magistrates were greatly moved by these exhibitions which they themselves solicited.) The importance attached to the accusers' performances is stamped all over the documents of the Salem prosecutions, beginning with the first: that of Sarah Good. Following her examination on March 1, Sarah Good was indicted for afflicting Elizabeth Hubbard and Ann Putnam Jr. during the examination itself (SWP 366-67). Like Martha Carrier, she was hanged. When Abigail Williams, Elizabeth Hubbard, Ann Putnam Jr. and Sarah Vibber (aged 36) were permitted to sign the indictment of Sarah Good as witnesses, the court might as well as have given them and their confederates formal permission to stage the sort of demonstrations that told so ominously against Sarah Good. There was so much collusion between magistrates and accusers that some interrogations read like duets.

It is probably because the accusers had this sort of arrangement with the court that several behaved unusually when a new magistrate, Thomas Danforth, the Deputy Governor of the colony, acted as examiner of Elizabeth Proctor on April 11—the first session held in Salem Town, as opposed to Salem Village. Unlike John Hathorne and Jonathan Corwin—the magistrates who conducted the interrogations in which the terms of the accusers' behavior were set—Danforth treated the accusers coldly and without deference. In fact, much as if he had some doubt of them, he bound them solemnly to “speak the truth, as you will answer it before God another day” (SWP 659). When he then asked whether Elizabeth Proctor tormented them, Mary Walcott, Mercy Lewis, Ann Putnam Jr. and Abigail Williams went uncharacteristically silent one after another, only to resume and even intensify their outcries and torments after a time. It appears they were momentarily unsure of the ground rules when confronted with the formidable Danforth. Eventually Danforth turned against the witch prosecutions.

Confessions

Over the frenzied course of the prosecutions, dozens confessed to being witches, and their narratives are highly similar. The devil appears as a black man; there are flying poles and unholy meetings and ceremonies; the confessor is lured into signing the devil's book—thus entering his service—by some attractive promise that proves to be false. In the end, the one great boon of being a witch is that you can persecute your neighbors. Though the narratives are indistinguishable, it seems that it was their fixed, stereotypical character

that certified their truth for the magistrates. The symptoms of bewitchment exhibited so dramatically by the afflicted of Essex County were as standardized as the thematic patterns of confession narratives. As with confessions, so with these performances, it was their conformity with the conventions of the genre that made them credible. When the magistrates cued the afflicted during the examination of suspects, they called on them to follow these conventions, and that is what they proceeded to do.

As soon as Hathorne and Corwin “desired the children all of them” to gaze upon Sarah Good “and see if this were the person that had hurt them” there could be no mistaking the importance of concerted shows of affliction in the eyes of the court. If the accusers did not already understand that they were to coordinate their responses, they understood then. Addressed as one, they reacted as one. Quite as if the magistrates not only cued what they expected of the afflicted but signaled their endorsement of this choral performance, the scene in the Sarah Good interrogation was to be repeated by other accusers in other interrogations.

Did Abigail Williams, Betty Parris, Ann Putnam Jr. and Elizabeth Hubbard meet to concert their courtroom behavior before the interrogation of Sarah Good, in which they set the standard of successful performance? Given that the first two were cousins and neighbors of the Putnams, they could have done so without attracting notice. But the groups of accusers that followed could not afford to make a practice of meeting secretly. In a world as intimate as Salem Village and its environs, people were under the eyes of the community, and at some point groups gathering to plot tactics would risk being observed. Accusers regularly claimed that they saw the specters of the accused attending a meeting

of witches, and in the feverish atmosphere of the time, a clandestine gathering of accusers themselves might have looked only too much like a cabal. Accusers could have found themselves accused, just as the same Mary Lacy Jr. who recovered at the touch of Stephen Johnson was made to touch the afflicted Mary Warren (of whom more presently). But the accusers did not have to meet secretly to script their performances; they needed only follow established procedures, the magistrates' signals, and the flow of circumstance. If a meeting might raise suspicion, a strong group reaction to the presence of an accused witch was exactly and obviously what the magistrates sought, because it looked like proof of guilt. If two witnesses to an act of witchcraft are better than one, a group of accusers reacting unanimously is better—more dramatic, more incriminating—than any solo performance.

If successive groups of accusers probably did not meet to plot their collective behavior, neither did they regularly succumb to a mass psychogenic illness. If that were the case, then the torments exhibited in the courtroom by the several clusters of accusers would be similar in kind to the symptoms that race through a school like a panic upon the detection of a peculiar odor,¹⁷ or the eruption of unexplained symptoms in a community upon the rumored discovery of a toxic dump nearby,¹⁸ or an illness with no discernible cause that springs up in a workplace. In cases like these, people caught up in the communal reaction appear to model their symptoms upon one another, however unknowingly, and some degree of modeling may have been at work in the display of the same unusual symptoms in Abigail Williams and Betty Parris more or less at once, and in the reproduction of these symptoms in the world beyond their household. However, there

is an element of chaos in mass psychogenic illnesses that is quite missing from the choral performances in the Salem courtroom, which stopped as well as started on cue. (In the case of the non-existent dump, for example, panicked citizens were unable to turn off the belief that they were being poisoned; “there was even talk of evacuating the area.”)¹⁹ To account for the ability of the Salem afflicted to manifest their torments as a group at the appropriate moment and not otherwise, we need only assume that they followed established practices or heeded the prompts of the magistrates who so clearly sought their cooperation.

But why did the magistrates enlist the aid of persons they persisted in calling children? The evidence suggests that they used the accusers’ emotive performances to pressure the accused into confessing their guilt, although even if the accused did not confess, the performances of affliction were not for nothing. They could still be cited in an indictment, even a death-warrant, as evidence of witchcraft. Confronted with the coordinated torments of a group of accusers, suspects were caught in a nightmarish double-bind with no way out.

Because a confession was the evidentiary gold standard, the magistrates did all they could, within the law, to extract one. But there is more to pressuring suspects than battering them with loaded questions. The magistrates may have thought, and certainly acted as if they thought, that subjecting the accused to the moral torture of seeing others suffering at their hands could also get them to confess. This would explain why the magistrates not only ignored the precept that witches and their victims should be questioned separately,²⁰ and not only permitted tumultuous demonstrations in the

courtroom, but at times virtually directed these spectacles. They made the accused behold their own handiwork. In effect, they demanded of the accused, “Do you not see what you have done?” After all, the tortures of the afflicted were enough “to move an heart of stone to sympathize with them,” as Hale wrote of the first victims, Abigail Williams and Betty Parris, both of whom attended the interrogation of the first suspect, Sarah Good. Given that the magistrates probably did not consider pre-teens like these two or Ann Putnam Jr. legally competent witnesses in capital cases,²¹ why did they give them a license to perform in the courtroom if not to exert pressure on the accused?

The first confession came on the first day of interrogations: March 1, 1692. The confessor was Tituba, and the documents suggest that she confessed in response to the accusers’ show of affliction. Elizabeth Hubbard and Ann Putnam Jr. both deposed that they were tortured by Tituba (that is, Tituba’s specter) “at the beginning of her examination” (SWP 756), corresponding to the point in the transcript where she is asked, “Why do you hurt these children?” In short order, Tituba went from denying that she hurt them to alleging that Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne hurt them to admitting that these two witches made her hurt them. Asked “Are you not sorry you did hurt them?” Tituba answered, “Yes” (SWP 747). Here, then, was the first glimpse of the diabolical conspiracy that obsessed the magistrates, and it seems to have come about as a result of a coordinated exhibition of torment. By the conclusion of the first day of interrogations, the magistrates were so deeply invested in the performances of the accusers that later accusers would have known just how to conduct themselves in the courtroom: as Abigail Williams, Ann Putnam, Betty

Parris and Elizabeth Hubbard had done. But the four had shown more than how to stage fits; they had also shown when *not* to stage them.

Samuel Parris deposed that when his slave was examined, the accusers were “tortured,” but when she confessed, “they were immediately all quiet the rest of the Indian woman’s examination” (SWP 756-57). Having been prompted to act out their sufferings in concert during the questioning of Sarah Good, the accusers now added the skill of falling quiet, and remaining so, when necessary. It was as they were learning by degrees how to perform affliction to best effect. But how is it that their violent torments ceased as if on cue, even though no signal by the magistrate was given, as soon as Tituba began to confess?

As noted, the purpose of interrogation in Salem was to elicit a confession. Not only was a confession strong evidence of guilt, not only did it obviate the legal requirement of two witnesses in a capital case, but the confessor might well implicate others, thereby advancing the investigation itself. Tituba did just this. The accusers did not need to be told that when Tituba delivered her lengthy confession, they were to recede into the background—that is, to resume the behavior normally expected of them as girls and young women. Their torments had served their purpose. If they had continued to shriek, writhe and faint during Tituba’s confession, they would have upstaged her and distracted from the examination even as it began to bear fruit.

Just as the examination of Sarah Good established the practice of collective reaction by the accusers, so that of Tituba established the rule of collective silence when the accused confessed. When Abigail Hobbs (aged 14) gave the fullest confession to date

on April 19, “the afflicted, i.e. the bewitched persons, were none of them tormented” (SWP 409). Indeed throughout the examinations, “As long as the accused person persisted in affirming her innocence, or seemed less than forthright in her answers, the agonies of the afflicted would go on, eventually reaching an almost unbearable intensity. . . . But as soon as the suspect *confessed*, not only did the afflicted girls gain relief, but they frequently embraced and tearfully ‘forgave’ their supposed tormentor” (SWP 23)—a precedent set following the examination of Abigail Hobbs. As we will see, a number of the accused do appear to have broken in response to “the agonies of the afflicted.” By the same token, however, these displays were not spontaneous. When Elizabeth Johnson Jr., aged 22, entered the courtroom on August 11 prepared to make a full confession, there were no exhibitions of torment, according to the transcript of the event. If the purpose of such performances was to elicit a confession, yet the suspect was already willing to confess, they would have been a sideshow.

Touch Tests

The Cullender case of 1662 also featured histrionic displays in the courtroom, although not everyone found them credible.

“During the time of the trial, there were some experiments made with the persons afflicted, by bringing persons to touch them; and it was observed that when they were in the midst of their fits, to all men’s apprehension wholly deprived of sense and understanding, closing their fists in such manner as the strongest man in the court could

not force them open; yet by the least touch of one of these supposed witches, Rose Cullender by name, they would suddenly shriek out, opening their hands, which accident would not happen by the touch of any other person.”²² Unconvinced that the accusers were without sense and understanding, a nameless skeptic in the courtroom took exception to the touch test. Pointing out that “there might be a great fallacy in this experiment,” he cautioned that “there ought not to be any stress put upon this to convict the parties, for the children might counterfeit this their distemper and . . . suddenly alter the motion and gesture of their bodies, on purpose to induce persons to believe that they were not natural.”²³ In response, the judge—the renowned Matthew Hale—ordered a test in which an accuser was blindfolded and a third party substituted for one of the accused witches (Amy Denny); when the child then reacted as she did to Amy Denny herself, a number of observers concluded that she was indeed counterfeiting. As if he did not know what to do with tests that yielded conflicting results, Hale did not mention them in his charge to the jury and allowed both Amy Denny and Rose Cullender to hang.

In the Salem courtroom no skeptic stood up to argue that the accusers might intentionally “alter the motion and gesture of their bodies,” and the magistrates conducted no test of their veracity, with one exception that went nowhere. (See below.) Evidently they felt that the touch tests were tests enough.

The touch test was first employed in the Salem courtroom on May 13, when Abigail Soames was ordered to take the hand of her accuser while the latter was suffering convulsions. “Soames being commanded while [Mary] Warren was in a dreadful fit to take

Warren by the hand, the said Warren immediately recovered; this experiment was tried three times over and the issue the same [sic]" (SWP 734-35). That the magistrates specifically directed the accused to touch Mary Warren demonstrates just how deeply they were involved in the staging of events in the courtroom. The administration of the test three times at the their behest—an unusual sequence—suggests that it stunned them. Here, then, was an example to be followed by other performers. Just as the magistrates' request that "the children all of them" look upon Sarah Good and react accordingly did not need to be repeated every time the accusers were called upon to show affliction, the directive for the touch test did not have to be given again and again in so many words; the first set of three had the effect of a precedent. Perhaps more than any other feat, the mastery of the touch test by the entire corps of accusers, without any overt prompt, illustrates their mastery of staging in the courtroom.

With each and every later test, the same sequence took place. Thus,

When [Jane] Lilly was brought into the Court of Justice, Mary Warren, Elizabeth Booth and others of the afflicted were struck down into a dreadful fit and recovered again by a touch of Lilly's hand. (SWP 539)

[Mary Lacy Jr.] was brought in and Mary Warren in a violent fit. Q: How dare you come in here and bring the Devil with you to afflict these poor creatures? A: I know

nothing of it, but upon Lacy's laying her hand on Warren's arm she was then recovered from her fit. (SWP 520)

When [Mary] Osgood was first called, she afflicted Martha Sprague and Rose Foster by the glance of her eyes and recovered them out of their fits by the touch of her hand. (SWP 616)

Upon mentioning of [Mary Parker's] name, several afflicted persons were struck down, as Mary Warren, Sarah Churchill, Hannah Post, Sarah Bridges, Mercy Wardwell. And when she came before the justices, she recovered all of the afflicted out of their fits by the touch of their hand. (SWP 631)

In the time of [Stephen Johnson's] examination he afflicted Martha Sprague, Mary Lacy and Rose Foster by looking on them and recovered them again by laying his hand upon their wrist or arm. (SWP 509)

While the recorder notes the stilling of affliction each time as if it provided independent confirmation of the guilt of the accused, it is clear that the accusers perform the same script over and over again. Like stories of spectral sightings, touch tests play out identically because they follow the same model.

Any number of accusers all managed the touch test. In the cited examples alone we have Elizabeth Booth, Martha Sprague, Rose Foster, Sarah Churchill (or Churchwell, aged

about eight), Hannah Post, Sarah Bridges, Mercy Wardwell, and Mary Lacy (that is, Mary Lacy Jr.), as well as unspecified “others,” in addition to Mary Warren. No doubt, the central coterie of accusers in the Salem courtroom—Mercy Lewis, Abigail Williams, Elizabeth Hubbard, Ann Putnam, Susannah Sheldon and Mary Walcott—also knew the touch test. All followed a precedent that was highly impressive if only because the person who staged it was highly motivated.

The fact is that Mary Warren had a strong reason to dramatize in the most persuasive way possible her affliction at the hands of a witch. Having come under suspicion, she was examined on April 19, weeks before the first touch test. When the afflicted fell into fits at the sight of her, the magistrates addressed her menacingly: “You were a little while ago an afflicted person, now you are an afflicter. How comes this to pass?” Though events at this point are unclear, it appears that Mary alleged that “the afflicted persons did but dissemble” (SWP 793). As if to give the magistrates a notion of what genuine affliction looked like, she proceeded to fall into fits so violent that she had to be removed from the courtroom. Afflicted or not, she was sent to Salem jail, and several under indictment later deposed that she admitted there that “her head was distempered” (SWP 803) when she professed to see apparitions of witches. But despite questions surrounding the original performer of the touch test and thus the test itself, it appears the test retained its evidentiary value, at least until the set of beliefs supporting the prosecutions crumbled in the fall of the same year. If spectral evidence loses its validity, touch tests do so as well.

License to Perform

A revealing example of the compact between performers and magistrates in the Salem courtroom concerns the exhibitions by Tituba's husband, known as John Indian, also a slave of Samuel Parris. While no one knows what moved young accusers like Abigail Williams to send people to the gallows on false charges of witchcraft, John Indian's motive for impersonating one of the afflicted seems clear enough. Upon seeing Tituba broken by her interrogators and jailed, John presumably decided that it was more prudent to become an accuser in his own right than to wait to be subjected to the same fate. His shows of affliction in the courtroom are duly noted in the transcripts but not cited in indictments, which implies that he had the same staging privileges as the other accusers even though, being a slave, he did not have the legal standing of those others. While the terms of his compact with the court seem peculiar, the compact itself serves to remind us that all accusers performed with the court's permission and sufferance.

Though the magistrates were moved by the performances of suffering in which they were so plainly invested, there were some even then who scoffed at them. When John Indian alleged before Danforth that he was afflicted "a great many times" by Sarah Cloyse, the accused cried out, "Oh! you are a grievous liar" (SWP 659). When challenged to gaze at her accusers during her examination on May 31, Martha Carrier retorted, "They will dissemble if I look upon them" (SWP 185). For his part, Thomas Brattle, a contemporary, noted with rare acuity that "many of these afflicted persons, who have scores of strange fits in a day, yet in the intervals of time are hale and hearty [sic]."²⁴ How then could one

indictment after another allege that the afflicted were wasting away? Some years after the fact, one of the foremost accusers, Ann Putnam Jr., made a pained if defensive confession that her accusations had indeed been false. “I justly fear,” she said, “that I have been instrumental with others, though ignorantly and unwittingly, to bring upon myself and this land the guilt of innocent blood.”²⁵ In 1692, however, the afflicted like Ann Putnam Jr. or Mary Warren (at least when she was on the right side of the line) served as a rich vein of information about the goings-on of the invisible world, and so they were regular presences in the courtrooms they enlivened with their displays of suffering.

At one point, though, the idea of testing the accusers themselves seems to have crossed the minds of the magistrates. On April 22, when Deliverance Hobbs was ushered into the courtroom, they did not disclose her name but instead asked the accusers, one by one, to identify this woman they alleged to be a witch. The results were mixed, with Mercy Lewis and an unnamed confederate left speechless. But the magistrates quickly put this exercise to one side and got down to the business of interrogating Deliverance Hobbs, while the accusers resumed their accustomed practice of dramatizing their torments. Two failures of the identity test did not compromise the group’s standing in the courtroom or their license to perform.

As members of a Puritan culture that abhorred playhouses, the magistrates of Salem would never have admitted that they colluded in the transformation of their courtroom into something of a playhouse, but so they did. On this makeshift stage it became permissible for girls and young women to perform actions that would never have been appropriate otherwise, such as contorting their frames and otherwise making a

spectacle of themselves. Only because they had the court's authorization were they able to stage these scenes. By statement and implication, the magistrates let the afflicted know what they were permitted and expected to do, and the afflicted went from there. When they acted as if the specter of Sarah Good tormented them even as the woman stood feet away, they had the court's full approval; the magistrates made that plain when they then demanded, "Sarah Good, do you not see now what you have done?" (SWP 356).

Sarah Good did not confess, but the accusers' torments appear to have moved others to do so, both before and after it became clear that confessors were not, as yet, being executed. As we know, Tituba confessed soon after being asked, "Why do you hurt these children?" quite as if the sight of the accusers suffering before her eyes were too much for her (SWP 747). Her resistance broken by the intolerable demonstrations of suffering going on in front of her, Deliverance Hobbs confessed on April 22. When the proceedings moved to Andover in July, the drama intensified. Mary Lacy Jr. at first maintained that she knew nothing of witchcraft, but broke when Mary Warren fell to the floor as she (Mary Lacy Jr.) merely looked at her (SWP 520). Whether her conscience stabbed her or she confessed because she calculated that she had better do so, we will never know. (Two days later, Mary Lacy Jr., now on the other side, went into fits during the examination of Martha Emerson, niece of the condemned and soon-to-die Martha Carrier.) Sarah Bridges at first denied the charges against her, but after conceding that the afflicted were "strangely struck down" by her, "she owned she had been in the devil's snare" for some time and had signed his book (SWP 139). As soon as Mary Osgood was ushered into the courtroom, two of her accusers went into torments, from which they were released by

her touch. Immediately afterward she launched into a detailed, circumstantial and entirely fictitious confession. Sarah Wilson Sr. (aged 44) told Cotton Mather that while she had no awareness of being a witch, the sight of the afflicted crying out against her made her doubt herself (SWP 855). Evidently it was not easy to ignore these demonstrations.

Their confessions notwithstanding, Mary Lacy Jr., Sarah Bridges and Mary Osgood each pleaded Not Guilty at trial and were acquitted. The prosecutions unraveled of their own excesses. As public opinion came around to the belief that Satan could indeed take the shape of an innocent person, the sufferings of accusers who claimed to see the invisible shape of their tormentor could no longer be accepted as evidence. Of course, this did not mean the authorities concluded that the accusers had been dissembling all along, only that their sufferings did not necessarily reflect on the defendant. Even so, once the Court of Oyer and Terminer was dissolved at the end of October 1692, any renewal of fits and screams by Abigail Williams, Mercy Lewis, Ann Putnam Jr. and the others could only have been interpreted as an effort to re-ignite the fire that tore through Essex County and took twenty lives. Their license was revoked.

Stewart Justman
2024

¹ John Swan, *A True and Brief Report of Mary Glovers Vexation* (London, 1603).

² Anon., *The Most Strange and Admirable Discovery of the Three Witches of Warboys* (London, 1593).

³ Gilbert Geis and Ivan Bunn, *A Trial of Witches: A Seventeenth-Century Witchcraft Prosecution* (London: Routledge, 1997).

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- ⁴ Cotton Mather, *Memorable Providences* (Boston, 1689).
- ⁵ John Hale, *A Modest Inquiry into the Nature of Witchcraft* (Boston, 1702), p. 24.
- ⁶ Cotton Mather, *Memorable Providences*, p. 1f.
- ⁷ Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Salem Witchcraft Papers* (New York: Da Capo, 1977), pp. 185-86. Hereafter abbreviated SWP in my text.
- ⁸ Bernard Rosenthal, *Salem Story: Reading the Witch Trials of 1692* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
- ⁹ Rosenthal, *Salem Story*, p. 68; Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York: Knopf, 2003), p. 26.
- ¹⁰ Hale, *A Modest Inquiry into the Nature of Witchcraft*, p. 24.
- ¹¹ Cotton Mather, *Memorable Providences*, p. 1.
- ¹² Hale, *A Modest Inquiry into the Nature of Witchcraft*, p. 20.
- ¹³ Hale, *A Modest Inquiry into the Nature of Witchcraft*, pp. 20-21.
- ¹⁴ See David Hall, *Witch-Hunting in Seventeenth Century new England: A Documentary History, 1638-1693* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1999), p. 197f.
- ¹⁵ Norton, *In the Devil's Snare*, p. 22.
- ¹⁶ Rosenthal, *Salem Story*, pp. 81, 166.
- ¹⁷ Timothy Jones, Allen Craig, Debbie Hoy et al., "Mass Psychogenic Illness Attributed to a Toxic Exposure at a High School," *New England Journal of Medicine* 342;2 (2000): 96-100.
- ¹⁸ "The Dump That Wasn't There," *Science* 215 (1982): 645.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ Richard Bernard, *A Guide to Grand-Jury Men* (London, 1630), p. 224.
- ²¹ Norton, *In the Devil's Snare*, pp. 21, 335.
- ²² See Geis and Ivan Bunn, *A Trial of Witches*, p. 170.
- ²³ Ibid.

²⁴ See George Lincoln Burr, ed., *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases 1648-1706* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1914), p. 187.

²⁵ Rosenthal, *Salem Story*, p. 37.