

Salem Witch Trials

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Abstract

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Puritan Literature and the Salem Witch Trials

Introduction

Between the months of June to September of 1692, the infamous witch trials in Salem, Massachusetts resulted in the deaths of twenty men and women as a result of witchcraft charges. Hundreds of others faced accusations and dozens were jailed for months during the progress of the trials. There are an infinite number of explanations for the hysteria that overtook the Puritan population of Salem. For example, a combination of economics, religious temperaments, personal rivalries, and precocious imaginations added to the furor (Hoffer, Weisman). Significantly, a book published by Cotton Mather in 1689, “Memorable Providences Relating to Witchcraft and Possessions” also contributed to instigating the events (Silverman).

What were the Salem Witch Trials about?

The Beginnings

During February of 1692, a young Salem woman named Betty Parris became “strangely” ill. Her symptoms included wildly running around, diving under furniture, contorting in pain, and complaining of fever (Hoffer, Reis, Weisman). At this time, the Puritan writer Cotton Mather had already published what was a popular and widely read book, “Memorable Providences.” Mather’s narrative described an incident of witchcraft in Boston, and Betty Parris’ behavior was quickly interpreted in the contexts of Mather’s account of the Boston “witch” (Silverman).

While Mather introduced a narrative of witchcraft into the Puritan consciousness, the talk of witchcraft escalated when other local girls, including eleven-year-old Ann Putnam, seventeen-year-old Mercy Lewis, and Mary Walcott, began to demonstrate similar symptoms of unusual behavior (Reis). A doctor was called to examine the girls, and he suggested that the girls’ problems might have a “supernatural origin.” In many ways, the doctor’s inability to diagnose

the medical nature of the problems increased the widespread acceptance that witches were involved. From there, the controversy took over and the Puritan imagination embraced the descriptions that Mather had described in his account of witches in Massachusetts.

Meanwhile, the number of girls affected continued to increase and a local West Indian slave girl, Tituba, was targeted because she had been known for speaking of her native folklore, which involved stories of black magic and witchcraft (Breslaw, Reis.). Historian Peter Hoffer suggests that the girls "turned themselves from a circle of friends into a gang of juvenile delinquents..." Feminist Reis argues that there were other factors involved, such as sexual abuse and social conditions of such high anxiety that were significant in exacerbating the girls' likeliness for hostility.

Arrest warrants were issued in February 1692 and the trials actually began in June of that same year. When Tituba, one of the first arrested, admitted she was a witch and named other accomplices, any skepticism that may have existed was overwhelmed by the desire to "hunt" for more witches (Breslaw, Hoffer, Weisman).

What fueled the Hysteria?

Cotton Mather was a minister of Boston's Old North church, and a true believer in witchcraft (Silverman). He had investigated the strange behavior of four children of a Boston mason named John Goodwin. The children had been complaining of sudden pains and "...crying out together in chorus" (Silverman: 56). Mather concluded that witchcraft, specifically that practiced by an Irish washerwoman who had yelled at the children (Mary Glover), was responsible for the children's problems. Publishing his conclusions in one of the best known of his 382 works, "Memorable Providence," Mather vowed to "...never use but one grain of

patience with any man that shall go to impose upon me a Denial of Devils, or of Witches" (In Silverman: 69).

Mather's subsequent influence in Salem is significant. As a new court was created for trials in the witch-cases and five judges were appointed, three were close friends with Cotton Mather. Additionally, Mather's own narrative became textual fact for determining the evidence of witches. This played easily into the court's agenda (Silverman). Mather himself urged the judges to seek confessions from the accused, accepting claims such as "spectral evidence" as legal testimony (Silverman).

Mather's account of the incidents in Boston in 1688 reads much like great fiction, more than an objective report of events. The persuasive influence of behavior that might be understood as non-Puritan, as described by Mather (below) enabled the townspeople of Salem to interpret any kind of social behavior as potentially that of a witch:

About Midsummer, in the year 1688, the Eldest of these Children, who is a Daughter, saw cause to examine their Washerwoman, upon their missing of some Linnen ' which twas fear'd she had stollen from them; and of what use this linnen might bee to serve the Witchcraft intended, the Theef's Tempter knows! This Laundress was the Daughter of an ignorant and a scandalous old Woman in the Neighbourhood; whose miserable Husband before he died, had sometimes complained of her, that she was undoubtedly a Witch, and that whenever his Head was laid, she would quickly arrive unto the punishments due to such an one. This Woman in her daughters Defence bestow'd very bad Language upon the Girl that put her to the Question; immediately upon which, the poor child became variously indisposed in her health, an visited with strange Fits, beyond those that attend an Epilepsy or a Catalepsy, or those that they call The Diseases of Astonishment.

As Reis suggests, the young girls in Salem who had read and discussed this account of Mather's had clearly been excited by the prospects of "acting out" the possibility that the elders of the town were more than capable of distressing and punishing the children, in particular the girls, who were subject to harsh and repressive codes of behavior (23).

It was Mather who urged the judges to consider "spectral evidence," and to consider the confessions of witches the best evidence of all. As the trials progressed, and growing numbers of people confessed to being witches, Mather became firmly convinced that "...an Army of Devils is horribly broke in upon the place which is our center" (In Silverman: 96). On August 4, 1692, Mather delivered a sermon warning that the Last Judgment was near at hand, and portrayed himself among those "leading the final charge against the Devil's legions."

The End of the Hysteria

Almost as quickly as it started, the Salem trials ended. As Weisman indicates, no execution caused more unease in Salem than that of the village's ex-minister, George Burroughs. Burroughs, was identified by several of his accusers as the ringleader of the witches. When Burroughs found himself on "Gallows Hill," where so many had already been hanged, he began to recite the Lord's Prayer aloud. In attendance was Cotton Mather, who was forced to interrupt the hanging, as he himself had recorded that any witch was incapable of reciting religious prayers.

By September of 1692, doubts were developing as to how so many townspeople could possibly be guilty. Reverend John Hale said, " It cannot be imagined that in a place of so much knowledge, so many in so small compass of land should abominably leap into the Devil's lap at once" (In Hoffer: 123).

Concurrently, Increase Mather, the father of Cotton, published a work entitled "Cases of Conscience," and argued that it "...were better that ten suspected witches should escape than one innocent person should be condemned" (In Silverman: 190). Increase Mather urged the court to exclude his son's assertions of "spectral evidence." At around the same time, Samuel Willard, a highly regarded Boston minister, published and circulated "Some Miscellany Observations," which suggested that the Devil might create the specter of an innocent person (Silverman).

Subsequently, a period of atonement began in the colony. Judges and jurors who had participated in the witch trials began issuing apologies for their lack of judgment and, by the end of 1692, all the accused who were still awaiting trials were released -- thus ending the witch hunts, the accusations, and any evidence of witches in Salem.

Conclusion

What is clear from the historical accounts of this time period is the influence of social hysteria in perpetuating the witch trials. However, what remains largely contestable is any certainty as to what started the witch trials and what inspired the confession of Tituba. As with much of Puritan history, it is only in the texts of white male religious rules that information can be gleaned (Breslaw).

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