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Trial of Giles Corey.

Figure 1 [HTTP://SALEM.LIB.VIRGINIA.EDU/IMAGES/PEOPLE/TGC1.JPG](http://SALEM.LIB.VIRGINIA.EDU/IMAGES/PEOPLE/TGC1.JPG)

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POWER STRUGGLES IN SALEM

In the unusually chilly winter of 1692, Betty Parris, child of prominent Salem Village minister, Samuel Parris, began to complain of a fever.¹ Soon Betty was running amuck, her behavior becoming increasingly peculiar and spreading to her slightly older cousin, Abigail Williams.² The two girls began “getting into holes, and creeping under chairs and stools, and to use sundry odd postures and antic gestures, uttering foolish, ridiculous speeches, which neither they themselves nor any others could make sense of.”³ This behavior must have put a terrible strain on Parris himself (eager to maintain a precarious position as Salem’s minister) and Parris’ wife, who some historians speculate suffered from chronic ill health.⁴ The antics of the two girls led to suspicion of witchery, especially after one of the girls (probably Abigail) admitted to taking part in a practice which was associated with the dark arts: attempting to read the future by suspending an egg white in a tall glass of water, and observing the shapes the egg white made as it elongated.⁵ The girls’ purpose was charmingly innocent—discovering the occupation of their future husbands—but this furtive yet exciting pastime must have soured shockingly when the egg white elongated into the shape of a coffin.⁶ How had the girls been permitted to carry on such witchcraft within their own home? Who had taught the girls such evil practices? Suspicion was cast (by the girls and by the village) upon the Parris’ unfortunate and powerless slave, Tituba.⁷

Power dynamics played a significant role in the Salem Witch Trials—the first accusers powerless within the framework of Puritan society, thus readily and greedily grasping the power granted them by their supposed possession. The accused were either easily exploited due to their powerlessness, or unusually powerful and threatening. And, of course, the majority of the accusers and accused were women.⁸ Women’s position in Puritan society was extraordinarily complex—while the soul itself was regarded as a feminine force, Puritan society perpetuated a

culture of feminine self-loathing that many women, accusers and accused, were clearly affected by.⁹ The entire witch trial played out in the context of power struggles between the increasingly metropolitan Salem Town and the more rustic Salem Village (where the trials themselves were carried out).¹⁰ How best to examine these power structures? I shall first provide a summary of women's and children's respective positions in Puritan society and how their positions could be corrupted by malefic witchcraft, and the cultural forces impacting their sense of selves. I shall then turn my attention to four of the most pivotal and archetypal accused (Tituba, Bridget Bishop, Rebecca Nurse, and Mary English) and three of the accusers (Mary Warren, Ann Putnam Sr., and Ann Putnam Jr.). Lastly, I will describe the trials themselves, discussing how power, not religion or gender roles, perpetuated the Salem Witch Trials.

Women's position in Puritan society has long been debated by historians, and various historians have come to very different conclusions. About women's self-image, Elizabeth Reis, author of *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England*, comments, "In the state of sin they [women] thought of themselves as completely worthless, virtually unredeemable, slaves of Satan."¹¹ Reis discusses how confession narratives illuminate this difference in the way men and women perceived themselves-- whereas women, such as Goodwife Jackson, referred to herself as a "poor silly creature... I thought I was a rebellious wretch against God, and so I continued long," men usually referred to specific sins, making no mention of their wicked natures in their confessions.¹² While Satan was in hot pursuit of human souls, he did so by tempting, torturing, and afflicting the human body.¹³ A standard conviction during the Salem Witch Trial states the "afflicted" were: "hurt Tortured Afflicted Pined, Consumed, wasted, & tormented..."¹⁴ Because women were perceived as being significantly weaker physically than men, it was popularly assumed that women's souls were particularly

vulnerable to the devil's wiles.¹⁵ More women than men were members of the Puritan Church, and thus supposedly among God's elect, yet the belief women were more likely to be serve Satan was pervasive.¹⁶ A Puritan author, Joseph Swetnam, stated, "Then who can but say, that Women spring from the Devil, whose heads, hands, hearts, minds, and souls are evil?"¹⁷ Another Puritan scholar, Meric Casaubon, didn't believe women were inherently more corrupt than men—he simply believed women were less mentally capable than men. He dismissively wrote about women, "all men know [women] to be naturally weaker of brain, and easiest to be infatuated and deluded."¹⁸ This weakness of the brain, causing women to be easily led astray, was one of the reasons many Puritans felt women were likelier than men to be swayed by Satan's temptations.¹⁹

The Puritan Reverend Richard Bernard, quoted by Mary Beth Norton in *In the Devil's Snare*, provided additional reasoning as to why women were more likely than men to become witches, focusing not only on the role of women as descendants of Eve, but on the social role women played in Puritan communities.²⁰ Bernard felt ever since Eve succumbed to the devil's temptations, Satan preferred women as his cohorts, because women were "more credulous" and "more malicious" after being angered or hurt than men were, "and so herein more fit instruments of the Divell."²¹ The other component of Bernard's argument is less theologically sound, but perhaps more influential in terms of popular Puritan thought. Women were then (as they are now) perceived as being chattier than men, "lesse able to hide what they know from others," and thus they were more likely to spread their knowledge of witchcraft to other women, in a vast neighborly network of maleficium.²² Women's seemingly innocent social gossip could transmit knowledge of witchcraft beyond men's ken, applying to areas of life such as childbirth, which men knew little (if anything) about. Bernard also believed women were "proud in their rule," and eager to assert their power in all possible domains—including the realm of witchcraft.²³ (One

may speculate Bernard was correct and that a few women were, perhaps, anxious to exert power in the supernatural realm as a way to compensate for their powerless situation in Puritan society.)

Becoming a witch was seen as a relatively ritualized process, involving numerous discrete steps, such as the signing the devil's book (although there was disagreement among the possessed as to the precise nature of the book itself and the ritual of signing), baptism by Satan and partaking in Satan's communion, and the possession of a familiar.²⁴ The origins of the concept of signing the devil's book are unclear, but the logic behind demonic baptism and communion is obvious. Such rites, held in parallel with rites of proper churchgoers, made a devilish mockery of the church—a crime many church officials and magistrates couldn't abide.²⁵ A confessing witch, Mary Lacey Jr., said she'd been "Baptised by the old Serpent at newburry falls," and many other witches later stated they'd been involved in the same baptism.²⁶ Betty Johnson told the tale of attending a witch meeting conducted by the disgraced minister George Burroughs (who was later executed as a witch), where she not only took a "Mock Sacrement" but agreed to "afflict folk & pull downe the kingdom of Christ and sett up the devils kingdom."²⁷ I count the possession of a familiar as a step toward becoming a witch as this was one (and perhaps the most important) way a witch could supposedly be identified—by looking for physical marks indicating where a familiar had sucked on the witch's body, receiving sustenance from the witch's blood.²⁸ Such marks resembled moles, so the majority of the accused bore such a "witch's teat," and these marks contributed to the hysteria's spread.²⁹ One could be a witch without such a mark, but the presence of one was considered damning evidence against an accused witch, and this notion was presumably comforting to many who craved the ability to distinguish witches from the larger mass of Salem Villagers.

This process culminated in the witch giving herself (or himself) soul and body to the devil.³⁰ There is but a frail Biblical foundation for the concept of humans actually having sexual intercourse with the devil, yet this notion pervades Puritan thought on witchcraft. The verse “What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own?” (1 Corinthians 6:19) is often construed to mean human bodies rightly belong to Christ, but there is no explicit discussion of actual fornication with the devil as a possible sin humans are capable of committing.³¹ In medieval folklore, the witch’s familiar, then referred to as the witch’s incubus, was often seen as the witch’s sexual partner, but Satan himself doesn’t make an appearance in these speculations.³² One wonders if a church official used this notion as a metaphor, and his audience interpreted his phrase overly literally, thus disseminating the concept through popular channels instead of theological ones. Even famous Reverend Increase Mather was unconvinced about the sexual component of witchery: “What fables are there concerning incubi and succubae and of men begotten by daemons! No doubt but the devil may delude the fancy, that one of his vassals shall think... he has carnal and cursed communion with them beyond what is real.”³³ Despite the ambivalence of many Puritan theologians regarding this component of witchcraft, the idea clearly had a profound influence on Puritan laypeople’s conception of witchery.

Several confessing female witches were open about their sexual relationship with the devil—Abigail Hobbs, a wild young woman completely beyond her hapless parents’ control, spoke casually of having “Sold her selfe boddy & Soulle to the old boy” prior to the Salem Witch Trials.³⁴ Other confessing witches were unlikely to make a blatant declaration, but such a sexual component of witchcraft was implied by several confessors.³⁵ This aspect of witchery was another reason women were perceived as likelier targets of the devil’s manipulations than men.

Kimberly Chehardy states, "... when studying Puritan New England, there tends to be an element of tolerance when dealing with the crime of sodomy.... The sodomite was a sinner and was bound to be punished, but he/she was not differentiated from the community."³⁶ This is true in practice, but theologically, according to one Puritan writer, homosexuality was "farre more abominable than adultery... the most abominable unaturelle sinne."³⁷ Oddly, as the popular conception of fornication with the devil appears to have predominated at the Salem Witch Trials, it appears that perhaps the specifically theological view of homosexuality held sway at the trials. The community as a whole may have been prepared to countenance the perceived sin of homosexuality, but church authorities directing the progression of the trials (Samuel Parris, Reverend John Hale, etc.) likely blanched at the thought of the devil sodomizing a male witch. Puritans didn't understand homosexuality as the expression of a particular sexual identity—it was a sin much like adultery.³⁸ However, unlike adultery, homosexuality was more explicitly linked to unorthodox theological views, as many Puritans associated homosexuality with the Quakers, who they considered effeminate and morally lax.³⁹ Thus the act of homosexuality simply carried more theological baggage than straightforward heterosexual activity, even when carried out between a woman and Satan.

Also, perceived power disparities between male and female witches echoed power disparities between men and women in Puritan society. While female witches were seen as dangerous because they were more powerful than a woman ought to be, male witches were generally perceived as the greater threat.⁴⁰ Not only were male witches implicitly guilty of homosexuality (which was seen as a greater sin than a woman fornicating with the male devil), they held a more powerful place in the social order and thus were capable of wreaking greater destruction. The Reverend George Burroughs, for instance, was noted and feared for his

supposedly superhuman strength and abilities, and these powers played a decisive role in his eventual conviction and execution.⁴¹ An eyewitness, Thomas Greenslit, testified at Burroughs' trial that he had seen the accused "lift and hold Out a gunn of Six foot barrel or thereabouts putting the forefinger of his right hand into the Muzle of s'd gunn and So held it Out at Armes End Only with that finger."⁴² Elizabeth Reis comments, "Interestingly, only male witnesses offered unusual strength as evidence that Burroughs had colluded with Satan and become a witch; his terrible strength, in sharp contrast to their own limited abilities, resonated with their notions of manliness and their expectations about how the devil might empower male witches."⁴³ Thus, male witches were feared not merely because of their implied homosexual relationship with Satan, but because male witches were a considerably more powerful force than female witches. Female witches were loathed because they possessed powers considered unnatural for women; male witches were feared because of the devastation they could wreak on Puritan society.⁴⁴ All witches were demeaned and pressured by the court, but accused male and female witches responded differently to Judge Hathorne's bullying and belittling, reflecting this difference in social status which applied even when one was implicated in witchcraft.⁴⁵

However, several female witches were perceived as unusually hostile in light of expected womanly behavior, and this characteristic was supposedly revealed in courtroom testimony. While never the focus of court proceedings, sexual themes colored several depositions against accused female witches, particularly Bridget Bishop, who I will discuss in more depth later. If such stories were provided, they implied the witch in question was sexually aggressive, and thus unwomanly.⁴⁶ An encounter between William Stacey and Bridget Bishop's specter was described: "... in the winter about midnight... this Deponent felt something betweene his lips Pressing hard ag't his teeth: and withall was very Cold... he at the same time seeing the said

Bridget Bishop sitting at the foot of his bed: being to his seeming, it was then as light as if it had been day... the said Bishop or her shape clapt her coate close to her Leggs & hopt upon the bed."⁴⁷ Bridget then reportedly hopped about the room and departed, taking all the light with her.⁴⁸ Samuel Gray also speaks of seeing Bridget in his bedroom—he once locked his door against her, yet she mysteriously reappeared, and “between sleepeing and wakeing he felt something Come to his mouth or lipes cold, & thereupon started & looked up & againe did see the same woman...”⁴⁹ John Louder provided even more vivid testimony to this effect against Bridget Bishop, stating:

aboute the dead of night [I] felt a great weight upon my Breast and awaking looked and it being bright moon light did clearely see s'd Bridget Bushop—or her likeness sitting upon my stomake and putting my Armes of... the bed to free myselfe of that great oppression she presently layd hold of my throate and almost Choa[ked] mee and I had no strength or power in my hands to resist or help myselfe, and in this Condition she held mee to almost day...⁵⁰

Here, we can clearly see a reason female witches were fearsome: they were capable of subverting the usual sexual paradigm, acting as an aggressor in sexual situations instead of as a passive participant. The situation Louder describes sounds a great deal like rape, which was a capital offense in Puritan society.⁵¹ Then as now, women were far more likely to be rape victims than men.⁵² However, female witches were seen as having unusual, unwomanly powers, and were thus in a position to evoke fear in men's hearts—including fear of sexual attack. Female witches were often perceived as frighteningly forceful and confrontational, and thus, in a way, overly masculine (Bridget Bishop is an exemplary example of these qualities).⁵³ Thus, a perhaps unconscious fear of rape also was a factor in many Puritan men's fear of witchcraft.

Lastly, sexuality may have been a conscious or unconscious motivation for the initial possessed girls. As historians inclined to Freudian analysis observe, many of the possessed girls were teenagers, experiencing the development of their sexuality in a repressive society.⁵⁴ Freud discussed how such underlying tension (sexual or otherwise) could be expressed physically through hysterical disorders (now referred to as conversion disorders).⁵⁵ Many frequently observed symptoms of hysterical disorders (blindness, muteness, paralysis) are remarkably consistent with the symptoms initially seen in the possessed girls.⁵⁶ However, I find the explanation that many of the girls were suffering unconscious psychological anguish due to Salem's vulnerability to Native American attack, and the memory of the slaughter of many of their relatives at Native American hands, more persuasive. (This case is eloquently argued by Mary Beth Norton in *In the Devil's Snare*.)⁵⁷ Really, Puritan society wasn't as sexually repressive as many believe—marital sex was not grudgingly permitted, but explicitly encouraged.⁵⁸ I do find it intriguing that the one accused witch later exonerated by all the girls at his trial was, in fact, the youngest male witch accused—Nehemiah Abbott Jr. The trial record states, "... he [Abbot Jr.] was ordered to be abroad, and the accusers to go forth to him and view him in the light, which they did, and in the presence of magistrates and many others discoursed quietly with him, one and all acquitting him..."⁵⁹ It is possible the teenage possessed girls were more inclined to be merciful toward an attractive young man than an old codger like Giles Corey, but one can only speculate.

K. David Goss, in *Daily Life During the Salem Witch Trials*, casts a rosier, less conflicted picture of Puritan womanhood. He states, "At the time of the Salem witch trials, most women sought the role of wife and mother, serving their family as the 'deputy-husband' and helpmate to their husband who was head of the household."⁶⁰ He emphasizes women did,

indeed, perform tasks traditionally considered to be in the male domain: working as cobblers, gunsmiths, blacksmiths, and tanners. He states that these women were rather unusual in Puritan society, but his description of Puritan womanhood is still quite favorable.⁶¹ When discussing women's roles in marriage, Goss quotes Leland Ryken, who stated, "The Puritans devalued celibacy, glorified companionate marriage, affirmed married sex as both necessary and pure, established the ideal of wedded romantic love, and exalted the role of the wife."⁶² Goss draws on this to declare Puritan women had more societal power than women anywhere in Western Europe.⁶³ This is, generally speaking, true, but Goss' statements about the enlightenment of Puritan society seem a tad optimistic. There's a vast difference between the stated, abstract ideals of a culture and the manner in which the ideals in question are put into practice. While Puritan theology did explicitly state women and men were equals in the eyes of God, there is no doubting that women were seen as the devil's preferred targets.⁶⁴ This isn't necessarily strictly the role of patriarchal society in Puritan New England (although the Puritans certainly did live in a patriarchal society) -- women themselves strongly believed this, leading to self-loathing and anxiety about the state of one's soul.⁶⁵ Men like John Alden, when confronted with a witchcraft charge, could conduct themselves thusly: "... Aldin said he hoped he should give glory to God, and hoped he should never gratifie the Devil; but appealed to all that ever knew him, if they ever suspected him of being such a person, and challenged anyone, that could bring in any thing upon their own knowledge, that might give suspicion of his being such a one."⁶⁶ Men, when contemplating their own sin, were better able to judge their own sinfulness, and could trust the record would bear them out.⁶⁷ As seen in confessing witches, women were more likely to nervously scrutinize their consciences and find themselves wanting.⁶⁸ Or, women would feel pressured to respond to accusations obliquely, as did Martha Corey, who said: "The Lord open

the eyes of the magistrates and ministers: the Lord show his power to discover the guilty” instead of commenting upon the court’s injustice directly.⁶⁹ The line between everyday sin and implicitly covenanting with the Devil was blurred for Puritan women, contributing to their societal powerlessness and their own feelings of inescapable inadequacy.⁷⁰

Young Puritan girls could expect a future similar to their mother’s present-- marriage, several pregnancies, and constant work.⁷¹ (This preoccupation with marriage could certainly explain why Abigail Williams and Betty Parris were so eager to find out what their future husbands’ occupations would be-- not only was the knowledge enticing because it might lead them to believe they would marry a boy they were already acquainted with, but it would let them know how much luxury they could expect in their future.) Puritan children were introduced to the stark dichotomies of Puritan theology at a young age. A primer written by Cotton Mather includes a section entitled “Verses for Children,” which includes the anxiety-provoking poem, “Tho I am young yet I may die, / and hasten to eternity: / There is a dreadful fiery hell, / Where wicked ones must always dwell: / There is a heaven full of joy, / Where godly ones must always stay: / To one of these my soul must fly, / As in a moment when I die.”⁷² Puritan children were thus taught about the fragility of life, but really, they didn’t need such lessons. The majority of the “afflicted girls” who would later become pivotal in the Salem Witch Trials were intimately familiar with death and had been so from an early age.⁷³ Mercy Lewis, Abigail Williams, and Elizabeth Hubbard were orphans.⁷⁴ (Mercy Lewis had witnessed the murders of both her parents by Native Americans—an event some historians speculate unbalanced her mind.)⁷⁵ Mary Walcott and Mary Warren had both lost their mothers (significantly, Mary Warren’s mother passed away under suspicious circumstances—witchcraft was strongly suspected).⁷⁶ These girls

didn't need to be preached to about death, but the importance of maintaining one's soul in good condition upon the eventuality of a sudden, unexpected death was paramount.⁷⁷

Puritan children were also continually reminded of their fundamental immorality. A catechism taught to Puritan youth, involving call and response, was: "Q. What is your birth sin? A. Adam's sin imputed to me, and a corrupt nature dwelling in me. Q. What is your corrupt nature? A. My corrupt nature is empty of grace, bent unto sin, only unto sin, and that continually."⁷⁸ Again, it was emphasized that one was powerless to avoid sin or better oneself fundamentally without accepting Jesus as one's savior, and even then, one's actual salvation was tenuous.⁷⁹ These lessons could have had various impacts upon the future "afflicted girls," who undoubtedly heard them. Perhaps some among them felt they were unalterably doomed to hell. Their feelings of powerlessness to alter their fate and anxiety regarding impending damnation could have translated into physical, hysterical symptoms they associated with possession.⁸⁰ Perhaps Puritan suggestions that the devil was perpetually lurking prompted paranoia, sparking these impressionable girls to see the devil everywhere, especially in places where their elders taught them devils were likely to dwell-- women deemed unusual by society. Perhaps suddenly being among the most powerful people in the village, with the ability to expose the devil's own, made certain of the girls feel more assured of their personal salvation. If one assumes the girls were conscious of the fraud they were committing (as later evidence implies), it is possible they (especially the older girls, like Mary Walcott, who was seventeen), had simply become overwhelmed by the strictures of society and "must have some sport," as the girls later lamely declared.⁸¹ It is also possible some of the girls chose to knowingly commit atrocities because then their fate would be sealed--no longer would they be subject to uncertainty about whether they were saved or damned. This wasn't an especially rare occurrence among the Puritans-- a

noteworthy number of anguished Puritans, tormented by not knowing whether they were to be saved or damned, chose suicide—an act proscribed by Puritan law—so they’d be certain of their eternal fate.⁸² One such victim was a young boy, Abraham Warner, who drowned himself thirty-two years before the witchcraft trials. His suicide note read, “O Father, I have kept my soul as long as ever I could; My ruin was pride and stubbornness of my tender years.... I have a younger brother that follows my steps... I beseech you to take pains with him and correct him as well as counsel him, that he may not be undone soul and body as well as I.”⁸³ While Puritan children were allowed some pleasures forbidden to adults, the unbearable weight of adult stresses bore down on children, too, affecting their sense of self and their place in society unalterably.⁸⁴

Having set a broad context for the witch trials, I can now turn to the key figures themselves. The first woman to be accused by the “afflicted children” was Tituba Indian, one of Samuel Parris’ slaves.⁸⁵ It is speculated she was responsible for showing the children divinatory methods, and either instigating, participating in, or turning a blind eye to their “witchcraft.”⁸⁶ Little is known about Tituba’s roots—she may have been among those captured by Philip Wroth, an Englishman who justified his ill treatment of innocent Venezuelan natives (of whom Tituba may have been one) by assuming they were allies of the Dutch, England’s current enemy.⁸⁷ Tituba may also have been born in Ghana.⁸⁸ However, historians are certain she was taken to Barbados as a slave.⁸⁹ Samuel Parris was then working as a merchant (and not a successful one) in Barbados, where he purchased Tituba.⁹⁰ Tituba was either already married to fellow slave John Indian upon purchase, or she married him later.⁹¹ It is likely Tituba was responsible for the majority of childcare in the Parris household, as Parris was busy with sermon-writing and secretarial paperwork, and Mrs. Parris was frequently ill.⁹² Tituba also would have been responsible for maintaining the house. Cleaning the fairly large parish house would have taken

quite a bit of time, so it is possible Betty and Abigail had unusual latitude in their conduct, simply because no one was scrutinizing their actions closely.⁹³ English was undoubtedly Tituba's second language, or perhaps her third, depending on whether she learned Spanish while in Barbados. Her understanding of English appears shaky in records of her confessions. As a slave, Tituba was at the bottom of the social ladder. Thus, when Betty and Abigail were declared "under an evil hand" by Dr. Griggs, and the girls, in the midst of exquisite agonies, blamed Tituba for their suffering, no target seemed likelier.⁹⁴ Frances Hill, author of *A Delusion of Satan: The Full Story of the Salem Witch Trials*, observes, "Children's sadism toward 'inferiors' with power, such as nannies and governesses... is an all too familiar phenomenon."⁹⁵ Tituba was snatched up by Parris, who questioned her and subjected her to whippings, trying to induce her to confess.⁹⁶ Eventually, Tituba made a partial confession, more damning than helpful. A theme throughout Tituba's confession is her powerlessness against Satan. She claims, "they [devilish apparitions] tould me Serve him & that was a good way... I tould him I was afrayd, he tould me he would be worse then to me... I answer I will Serve you noe Longer he tould me he would doe me hurt then."⁹⁷ In her even more pitiful second examination, she said, "he [Satan] Say goe & doe hurt to them and pinch them & then I went in, & would nott hurt them a good while, I would not hurt Betty, I loved Betty, but they hall me & make me pinch Betty..."⁹⁸ Her claims seem all the more plausible considering Tituba's situation. As a slave, Tituba was no longer used to being perceived as having a will of her own. As a powerless member of society, the echoes of her actual situation, as seen in her (likely consciously fabricated) confession are heartrending. Tituba also mentions that the devil took advantage of her desire for pretty things, promising her all of her heart's desire.⁹⁹ Thus, the devil manipulated the discontent of powerless women.

However, Tituba escaped execution. The first woman to be hanged was Bridget Bishop.¹⁰⁰ Bishop had achieved considerable notoriety throughout Salem Village, making her a likely target for a witchcraft accusation. Both a victim of domestic abuse and a domestic abuser, her relationship with her second husband, Thomas Oliver, was scandalously vitriolic.¹⁰¹ (Her first marriage, to Samuel Wasselbe, may not have been more peaceful—the “afflicted girls” later claimed Bridget had murdered him.)¹⁰² Public shouting matches between Bridget and Thomas Oliver were frequent enough to be distressing to the inhabitants of Salem, who greatly prized outward social serenity.¹⁰³ Goodwife Mary Ropes observed she often saw Bridget’s face “...bloody and at other times black and blue.”¹⁰⁴ Bridget was known to strike her husband, and also to scream “Old devil!” at him, both at home and in the streets of Salem.¹⁰⁵ The couple was sentenced to a whipping, avoidable by paying a fine (they chose to pay the fine). Later, Bridget was publicly humiliated by being gagged, labelled with a card detailing her shrewish offenses, and set in the public market place. (Her husband was also sentenced, but his daughter paid a fine so he could avoid such degradation and embarrassment. Apparently, her stepmother didn’t deserve such consideration in her stepdaughter’s view.)¹⁰⁶ Prior to conviction for witchcraft, suspicion of witchcraft stalked Bridget, even after the death of Thomas Oliver and the corresponding cessation of public domestic squabbling. She was, according to William Stacey, forced to humbly ask him if his father would be willing to grind her grist, because “folks counted her as a witch.”¹⁰⁷ William later implied she was, indeed, a witch. Bridget, extremely angry, directly confronted him in public, and when he, to her face, suggested she was a witch, she turned her back on him and walked off, blatantly showing disrespect for his opinion.¹⁰⁸ This unwomanly confrontational quality in Bridget’s character confirmed her witchery to many.¹⁰⁹ Bridget was suspect because she displayed powers undesirable and supposedly unusual in

women—argumentativeness, physical combativeness, etc. These ill qualities, however, were clearly exacerbated by Bridget's own feelings of powerlessness—whatever she did, she was still suspected. She could never be free from distrust. From her neighbors' vanishing money to startling seizures, Bridget was blamed, and she was unable to productively protest.¹¹⁰ At her trial, no matter how often she repeated, "I am innocent I know nothing of it I have done no witchcraft," she would not be believed.¹¹¹ She thus became angrier and angrier, and less and less "womanly"—in the end condemning her to death.

Unlike Bridget Bishop, Rebecca Nurse had an untainted reputation in Salem Village.¹¹² The only noteworthy skeleton in her closet was a politically active female Quaker cousin, who once, incredibly shockingly, took part in a protest where all the participants were entirely nude.¹¹³ Rebecca herself was regarded as a good Christian woman--- "unsurpassably respectable," according to Frances Hill.¹¹⁴ However, Rebecca's husband, Francis, was hardly rich. He was forced to mortgage his family's farm, an occurrence which didn't bode well for the financial futures of their seven children.¹¹⁵ This undoubtedly worried Rebecca, as the entire Nurse family was extremely closely knit (the summer before the Salem Witch Trials, Francis and Rebecca willingly placed themselves in even greater debt in order to hire a neighbor to take their son's, Benjamin's, place in the Virginia militia, so Benjamin could stay home with his wife and newborn child).¹¹⁶ As a respectable, but indebted, family, the Nurses were on the fringe of Salem Village's "good" society. Rebecca's power and social standing were precarious, as was the financial future of her family. Is it such a shock that when Benjamin Holton's swine wrought havoc on her vegetable garden, Rebecca exchanged heated words with Benjamin Holton?¹¹⁷ She had just lost a considerable part of her family's livelihood. Unfortunately, Holton died soon after

his tiff with Rebecca. While no one thought anything of it at the time, this event later was offered as “proof” of Rebecca’s evil.¹¹⁸

Similarly, Mary English was a respectable woman, coming from an impoverished background.¹¹⁹ Mary’s mother had managed to work her way out of Mary’s father’s debts spectacularly, leaving her surprisingly considerable estate to Mary alone.¹²⁰ The “afflicted girls” later cited Mary’s mother as a tormenter as well, unaware that she was, in fact, already dead.¹²¹ (Carol Karlsen, author of *Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, emphasizes the unusual amount of property held by many of the accused witches. She speaks of Mary English a great deal.)¹²² Mary was also married to Philip English, a successful and wealthy merchant from Jersey.¹²³ Philip spoke French as his first language in a place where the French language was associated with Catholicism, which was greatly unpopular in Salem Village.¹²⁴ Philip’s ties with French culture and society also made inhabitants of Salem associate him with French meddling and intrusions that resulted in English political strife.¹²⁵ Philip and Mary lived in an unusually large and fancy house, containing multiple stories, finished cellars, several hearths and ovens, a counting house, and several parlors.¹²⁶ This ostentation, combined with Philip’s overt Gallic customs, offended the sensibilities of many Puritans in Salem.¹²⁷ When this distrust was combined with Mary’s freedom to run her husband’s affairs while he was away at sea, she became even more suspicious.¹²⁸ Her unusual power in a patriarchal society rendered her suspect.

Mary Warren bridged the gap between the accusers and the accused, as she filled both roles during her lifetime.¹²⁹ Her childhood was tainted by supposed witchcraft, making her understandably vulnerable to suspicion and panic when confronted by presumed witchery. Goodwife Alice Parker (hanged during the Salem Witch Trials) once asked Mary’s father to “mow her grass.”¹³⁰ Goodwife Parker wanted Abraham to harvest her long grass and tie it into

suitable bundles, so her cows would have hay during the winter. (Goodwife Parker's husband, who usually would have been expected to do the work, was frequently absent, due to his work as a fisherman.)¹³¹ Warren agreed to do the favor for Goodwife Parker, provided he wasn't too busy taking care of his own family's concerns. As it turns out, he didn't have the time—a fact he likely regretted until the end of his days. Goodwife Parker came to his house in a rage, and informed Abraham, “He had better he *had* done it.”¹³² Soon after, a terrible illness (most likely smallpox) struck the Warren's home, and Mary's mother died. Mary's sister, Elizabeth, survived the disease, but lost her hearing.¹³³ It is likely Mary Warren ended up working as a servant for John and Elizabeth Proctor (also accused witches) as a direct result of her mother's death and her sister's incapacitation.¹³⁴ Her father had lost his helpmate, and Mary had lost her childhood's freedom. Prior to Goodwife's Parker perceived act of witchcraft, Mary had average prospects for a girl of her age. After, her prospects were significantly worsened due to her servile status.¹³⁵ When Mary received the opportunity for revenge on Goodwife Parker, through her status as one of the possessed, Mary was naturally eager to exploit the chance. She told the court

she had seen Alice Parker afflict: Mary Walcot: Eliz Hubbard An Putnam & goodwife Vibber the last night: by choking...s'd Parker has afflicted me: has brought me the book: to siign to she brought: me a poppit: & a needle & thretned: to stab: me... she: bewitched my mother & was a caus of her death: also that she bewitched my sister: Eliz.: that is both deaf and dumb.¹³⁶

It is clear Mary was initially motivated by her desire to get the upper hand on a specific person who had wronged her and her family. Then, her zest spiraled out of control, much to her chagrin later. Power struggles displayed in the Salem Witch Trials were not purely societal struggles; they also occurred between individuals and families, quite clearly.

Witchcraft seemingly ran in the Putnam family, on Ann Putnam Sr.'s side. Two of her brothers, James and John, apparently experienced a sort of demonic "possession" prior to the actual witch trials.¹³⁷ Both her brothers' "possessions" began, quite interestingly, after disappointing courtships. James, after falling in love with Rebecca Maverick, the daughter of Reverend John Wheelwright, felt confident she preferred him to her other suitor, William Bradbury.¹³⁸ Suddenly, James was struck by an unusual illness—he felt as though a "living creature" was racing through his entire body, "ready to tear me to pieces."¹³⁹ This illness waxed and waned for nine months, leaving James incapacitated. In the midst of his sickness, Rebecca Maverick married William Bradbury, leaving James heartbroken.¹⁴⁰ James' doctor, Dr. Crosby, was baffled by James' illness, and eventually informed James he believed James had fallen under a witch's curse.¹⁴¹ Dr. Crosby urged James to reveal the name of his tormentor, and James, after initial reticence, named William Bradbury's mother as a potential witch.¹⁴² Dr. Crosby supported James in this assertion, but no legal action was ever taken, and James gradually improved (although he never married, preferring to remain true to Rebecca).¹⁴³ Ann's brother John, however, was not so fortunate. John was romantically involved with Jemima True—the accused Mrs. Bradbury's granddaughter.¹⁴⁴ John was sure his parents would approve the match, despite his youth and his elder brother's experience, but his parents neither his parents nor Jemima's relations were thrilled.¹⁴⁵ Jemima's parents convinced John's parents the couple was too young to wed, and John and Jemima's relationship was terminated by their parents.¹⁴⁶ John was incredibly depressed, and soon after, he became "by degrees much crazed."¹⁴⁷ According to William Putnam (John's primary caretaker), John never named anyone as his tormentor, but everyone in the family suspected Mrs. Bradbury nonetheless.¹⁴⁸ Ann Putnam Sr.'s father was also not in full possession of his faculties at his death.¹⁴⁹ Witchcraft may have been suspected.

Lastly, Ann's infant daughter Sarah died suddenly, likely after convulsions—perhaps convulsions like Ann Putnam Jr. later experienced.¹⁵⁰ Ann Putnam Sr. and Jr. had both experienced losses of power in terms of their ability to take care of loved ones and protect them from the malevolent and insidious manipulations of witches, but Ann Putnam Sr. was fortunate to be married to one of the most powerful men in Salem Village, Thomas Putnam.¹⁵¹ Through his political machinations, wealth, and assertive personality, she (and her daughter) could perhaps reassert themselves and wreak havoc on those who had wounded their family.¹⁵² It is important to remember witchcraft was incredibly real to the accusers. Denying the reality of witchcraft to these families then would now be like denying the reality of cancer to a family who had just lost a loved one to this devastating disease. To accuse someone of witchcraft was to be proactive and powerful, while to bite one's tongue could mean death for a family member. The tensions that must have been inherent in being a member of this dysfunctional family perhaps did result in Ann Putnam Jr. developing a hysterical somatoform disorder of some sort (as many historians speculate), and her mother, fearing losing another loved one to witchcraft, finally experiencing a breakdown.¹⁵³

Now, turning to the trials themselves, we may see how feelings of powerlessness, inadequacy, and lust after power created the horrors of the Salem Witch Trials. Through all the examinations, the powerlessness of the defendants, particularly when being examined by the ruthlessly single-minded John Hathorne (who, unfortunately, died before seeing himself portrayed as a villainous scoundrel in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*), is evident.¹⁵⁴ There was no way for an accused person to defend herself or himself adequately without confessing and thus, in the view of some, libeling themselves before God.¹⁵⁵ Sarah Churchill, an accused witch who eventually confessed, said she believed "If she told mr Noys

[another court official] but once she had set her hand to the Book he would believe her but if she told the truth and said she had not set her hand to the Book a hundred times he would not believe her.”¹⁵⁶ Hathorne once asked Bridget Bishop, “doe you not see how they are tormented you are acting witchcraft before us what do you say to this why have you not an heart to confesse the truth?” To this, Bridget replied, “I am innocent I know nothing of it.”¹⁵⁷ The afflicted girls blatantly controlled the progress of Bishop’s trial.¹⁵⁸ Whenever Bridget moved slightly, the girls (and a widening pool of possessed individuals) would move in the same way, but grotesquely and painfully.¹⁵⁹ Trials were frequently interrupted by the possessed’s fits.¹⁶⁰ No doubt Bridget was shocked, disturbed, and perhaps disgusted by the display, but she was unable to put an end to what she perceived as mere foolishness.¹⁶¹ Ezekiel Cheever, the Court’s occasional secretary, commented Bridget seemed “very angrie” about the accusations.¹⁶² Her fervent emotionality and disputatiousness only tightened the noose around her neck. Goodwife Cloyce, one of Rebecca Nurse’s sisters, went so far as to say, “Oh! you are a grievous liar” in response to an afflicted person’s deranged accusation.¹⁶³ But, no matter what the accused said, hysteria persisted. During Elizabeth Proctor’s examination, Abigail Williams attempted to strike her, and Ann Putnam also offered to.¹⁶⁴ Yet, Elizabeth Proctor kept a marvelously cool head, gently telling Abigail, “Dear Child, it is not so. There is another judgement, dear child.”¹⁶⁵ Despite Elizabeth Proctor’s mercifulness, the girls continued to exploit their temporary position of power.

How were women worked into this powerless position, in which confession meant sinning, and silence meant death? Lying through confession wasn’t an attractive option, as “Margaret Jacobs related that her false confession wounded her soul and that she retracted it because the Lord ‘would not let me go on in my sins... [I was in] such horror of conscience that I could not sleep for fear the devil should carry me away for telling such horrid lies.”¹⁶⁶ However,

what did confessing to witchcraft imply and entail? How could women prove they were innocent of this particular crime? Could they possibly, once accused, prove their innocence in the Puritan atmosphere of panic and detestation? Elizabeth Reis argues proving innocence of witchcraft was an utter impossibility for women: “Female deniers had an especially difficult time proving their innocence because they had to prove not only that they had never signed the devil’s pact but also that they had never even implicitly covenanted with the devil through ordinary sin. Few women, however, lacked guilt and remorse for prior sins and shortcomings...”¹⁶⁷ To admit any wrongdoing was to imply suspicion on grounds of witchcraft was somehow warranted.¹⁶⁸ Insistence on an unstained soul was considered suspiciously arrogant, and denoted a person’s damnation in Puritan theology.¹⁶⁹ There was no way to escape. Women’s own feelings of inadequacy and guiltiness (especially among women such as Rebecca Nurse, Elizabeth Proctor, and Mary English, who were incredibly devoted to their religion) made women likely to be unable to adequately defend themselves against accusations of witchcraft.¹⁷⁰ While initially denying accusations vehemently, the accused may well have been anxiously examining their consciences, wondering if they had accidentally covenanted with the devil. Bridget Bishop herself, hardly known for her meekness, when asked “What do you say of those murders you are charged with?” had to compromise in her answer, replying, “I hope, I am not guilty of Murder.”¹⁷¹ Perhaps Bridget’s reply was intended to be sarcastic, but even if it was, it reflects the standard qualified answers of accused women.

It is certain the trials would never have occurred without the (perhaps unconsciously) power-hungry possessed accusers, who became drunk with the unaccustomed authority associated with their status as “afflicted children.”¹⁷² Suddenly, they had power to condemn or exonerate. Regardless of whether the girls were in full command of their faculties while falling

into fits and shrieking, the sudden increase in power they received due to their religious significance must have been heady indeed. So too must have been the attention.¹⁷³ I believe it is safe to assume Samuel Parris was an inattentive father and uncle to Betty and Abigail. As he was relatively new to the ministry, and insecure about the permanency of his position in Salem, he likely spent most of his time writing sermons, worrying about writing sermons, and forming the necessary political connections to ensure his job's safety.¹⁷⁴ Elizabeth Parris might also have been often absent in the girls' lives. Her illness is a logical reason why she didn't keep a closer eye on her children and prevent them from dabbling in dark arts.¹⁷⁵ The attention the girls received, as they writhed and moaned, must have been a strangely welcome occurrence. The girls may have been experiencing genuine agonies—the respected minister Deodat Lawson states, "... while they have been so strained in their fits, and had their arms and legs...wrested as if they were quite dislocated, the blood hath gushed plentifully out of their mouths... which some, that they might be satisfied that it was real blood, took upon their finger, and rubbed on their other hand."¹⁷⁶ However, in calmer moments when they weren't experiencing torments, they must have been overawed by their sudden power.¹⁷⁷ Perhaps they realized their power depended on the effectiveness of their conscious or unconscious performances, leading them onto new dramatic heights.¹⁷⁸ It is certain that as the Salem Witch Trials continued, and the hysteria intensified, the possessed accusers became increasingly convinced of their own powers.¹⁷⁹

As the girls became more confident in their unshakeable position of authority in spiritual matters related to witchcraft, they became rasher, and started taking unprecedented risks. One particularly noteworthy example occurred after a group of the possessed girls overheard Goodwife Ingersoll (the wife of the local tavern keeper) denying Elizabeth Proctor's guilt.¹⁸⁰ As

Daniel Elliot testified on Elizabeth Proctor's behalf, "...theare being present one of the afflicted persons which cried out and said thears goody procter William raiment juner being theare present told the garle he beleved she lied for he saw nothing then goody ingerson told the garl she told aly for theare was nothing."¹⁸¹ Out of context of the meeting house, the girl's antics looked more ridiculous than terrifying or prophetic.¹⁸² The girl, perhaps surprised and a little embarrassed, replied, "she did it for sport they must have some sport."¹⁸³ Were all the convoluted machinations associated with the Salem Witch Trials simply "some sport"? Were the girls bored and playing a morbid, sadistic game involving potentially lethal power struggles? The answer to these questions will never be satisfactorily known. But, we do know the possessed individuals started accusing people higher and higher up on the social ladder, eventually even accusing Governor Phipps' wife.¹⁸⁴ This was the last straw.

How did the Salem Witch Trials truly end? The awful event didn't end with Rebecca Nurse's powerful and moving last words prior to her hanging, likely responsible for changing many hearts and minds.¹⁸⁵ The trials didn't end with the last batch of hangings, nor with the dissolution of the Court of Oyer and Terminer, which was responsible for sentencing these powerless or powerful women.¹⁸⁶ The trials ended when the girls, after being driven many miles to a neighboring town to ferret out potential witchcraft in that location, starting falling into fits and howling and moaning on their way home, pointing at an unknown elderly woman in the street. Instead of horrifying, shocking, and panicking surrounding bystanders, as they had in Salem, the bystanders just stopped and stared blankly at the girls' antics. Not being rewarded for their behavior by any positive attention or grants of power, the girls' fits gradually petered out.¹⁸⁷ Many (but not all) were never "afflicted" again.¹⁸⁸ Ann Putnam Jr., an aforementioned accuser, later confessed in 1702 and apologized regarding her part in the trials, saying,

I desire to be humbled before God for that sad and humbling providence that befell my father's family . . . , that I, then being in my childhood, should, by such a providence of God, be made an instrument for the accusing of several persons of a grievous crime, whereby their lives were taken away from them . . . for which I desire to lie in the dust, and earnestly beg forgiveness of God.¹⁸⁹

Hence one once seemingly omnipotent possessed girl became humbled before the Puritan God. The Puritanical structure which perpetuated feelings of female powerlessness and guilty inequality was slow to crumble, but the Salem Witch Trials were enough to convince people that relying on the words of a few powerful individuals with little evidence was not an ideal scenario in a court of law.¹⁹⁰ Regulations banning spectral evidence were passed, and the assumption that a person is innocent until proven guilty in part stems from the horrors of the Salem Witch Trials.¹⁹¹ While these changes came too late for the condemned powerful or powerless women, their legacy truly lingers on.

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181. Benjamin Ray, ed. “Daniel Elliott for Elizabeth Proctor,” in “Elizabeth Proctor,” *Salem Witch Trials: Documentary Archive and Transcription Project*. Essex County Archives, Witchcraft Vol. 1, 27. http://saalem.lib.virginia.edu/texts/tei/swp?div_id=n106.
182. Hill, *A Delusion of Satan*, 104.
183. Benjamin Ray, ed. “Daniel Elliott for Elizabeth Proctor.”

184. Norton, *In the Devil's Snare*, 279.

185. Hill, *A Delusion of Satan*, 172.

186. Goss, *The Salem Witch Trials*, 19-20.

187. Hill, *A Delusion of Satan*, 200.

188. *Ibid.*, 200, 215.

189. *Ibid.*, 215.

190. *Ibid.*, 207.

191. Norton, *In the Devil's Snare*, 291.