

The Role of the Public During the Salem Witch Trials

By Samantha Myers

After the first warrants were released accusing Salem residents of witchcraft, the suspects were brought to Nathaniel Ingersoll's Ordinary for their preliminary examinations. The news of the examinations, partially due to a morning village meeting, spread like wildfire and the large crowd of spectators that arrived forced the examinations to move to the more spacious Salem Meeting House located down the road.¹ Witnesses and other curious spectators crowded the space, sitting on pews, standing in the alleys, or finding spots on stairs.² Further overflow of spectators would watch from the windows. At Nehemiah Abbot Jr's public examination, so many people were in the windows that the "accusers could not have a clear view of him."³

Such spaces held the trial proceedings of the witchcraft cases, where the accusers would come face-to-face with the accused, publicly condemning them for a variety of evil acts in front of neighbors and family members. Most of the public moments of the Salem trials occurred during the examinations because there was a crowd, and other legal proceedings that maintained a select audience were "pretty tame" and did not reflect "witchcraft hysteria."⁴ The judicial system surrounding the Salem trials was not out of control, but the public examinations were the closest that Salem came to legal chaos.⁵ Although information on the public is sparse due to the attention that was directed toward the accused and the accusers, glimpses of the public sphere can be comprehended through public events such as the examinations and the executions.

The decision for the Salem examinations to be constructed as public functions defied the ordinary procedure. This is a unique, significant component to the crisis, as well as a contributing factor to the hysteria that ensued across Salem and neighboring

¹ Most of the examinations took place at Ingersoll's Ordinary or the Salem Village Meeting House. Later, the Thomas Beadle Tavern was also a scene for the examinations. Bernard Rosenthal, et al, *Records of the Salem Witch-hunt*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 45.

² Rosenthal et al, *Records of the Salem Witch-hunt*. 46.

³ Ibid, 205.

⁴ Yet much detail surrounding the trials as legal proceedings remains unknown. Ibid, 21.

⁵ Ibid, 22.

communities. According to Mary Beth Norton's *In the Devil's Snare*, participants in the Salem trials did not "record the rationale" for public examinations "but they were probably responding to an intense community interest in the witchcraft accusations."⁶ Although there is no clear stated reason why the examinations were public, the rationale falls into line with Puritan ideology, especially the religion's propensity for public engagement. Puritanism is rooted in purifying oneself as well as the collective community.

In his sermon, "A Model of Christian Charity (1630)," prominent Puritan John Winthrop defined the communitarianism in the religion, describing an idyllic relationship between the public and the private. Winthrop described the idea of a "cohabitation" between government of both civil and ecclesiastical, and explained that "the care of the public must oversway all private respects, by which, not only conscience, but mere civil policy, doth bind us."⁷ Puritans did not so much have an interest in the public, but rather a *duty* to the community, especially in improving it. This can explain one reason why Puritans felt responsibility to purge the devil and witches from Salem. The very roots of Puritan ideology urged no separation between the public and private. Even though Puritanism might be a means of explaining this inclination toward community examinations, these legal proceedings were still highly unusual for Puritan culture as well, thus allowing this theory to serve only as a starting point of analysis.

Another explanation for the public interest in the Salem trials is because the crisis *developed* in the public sphere despite its initiation in the Parris household, a private environment. Former Salem minister Deodat Lawson described an instance that occurred on March 20, where afflicted persons "had several Sore Fits, in the time of Publick Worship."⁸ Abigail Williams, one of the main accusers in the trials, interrupted Lawson

⁶ Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692*. (New York, NY, 2002), 25.

⁷ John Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity (1630)." *The Winthrop Society: Descendants of the Great Migration*. Web. http://www.winthropsociety.com/doc_charity.php.

⁸ Lawson served as minister of Salem Village from 1684-1688. He was replaced by Samuel Parris. Deodat Lawson, "A Brief and True Narrative of Witchcraft at Salem Village." *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases 1648-1706*. Ed. George Lincoln Burr. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1914. 155.

during his first prayer, which he deemed as “being so unusual.”⁹ This event was one of the earlier cases where the afflicted intruded into the public space of the church, and whether intentionally or not, received attention from the public. In her other book titled *Founding Mothers and Fathers*, Norton defined a duality in meaning and gender attributes for the concept of the public. She divided public in terms of *formal public* and *informal public*, representing “state/church/authority” and “community” respectively.¹⁰ In seventeenth-century English colonies, the formal public was comprised of exclusively adult males, and the informal public was inclusive of women of all ages, younger men and indentured servants.¹¹ Norton explained that for some issues, voices that “dominated the discussions in the informal public,” such as women’s voices, would “[affect] the decisions of the formal public as well.”¹² That theme appeared to have been true at the Salem trials, which began from the voices of the “afflicted” girls, who were assaulted with fits and pointed fingers at neighbors and citizens whom they believed to be the root of their discomfort.

Typically, females rarely voiced their opinions in church, but these afflicted girls “became the focal points” of their families and the town, when they otherwise “resided at or near the bottom of the familial hierarchy.”¹³ The Salem crisis exhibited an unexpected infringement into the public in the form of interruptions from girls and servants who found means of achieving agency in their community. This agency included a type of political power, or power over the public, to stand as public figures with which the community empathized. The public of Salem bonded together with the afflicted. Public fasts were used to facilitate the community and to provide widespread empathy for the afflicted.¹⁴

In addition to influencing the widespread public, the afflicted dominated the spaces where the trials occurred, exhibiting their variety of symptoms. The afflicted

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Mary Beth Norton, *Founding Mothers & Fathers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society*. (New York, NY., 1996), 20.

¹¹ Ibid, 21.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Norton, *In the Devil’s Snare*. 51.

¹⁴ Norton referenced the public fast that occurred on Thursday, March 31, 1692. (Ibid, 70).

would be present at the grand jury hearings, trial proceedings, and the examinations in the presence of the public.¹⁵ Lawson illustrated the effect of the afflicted on the public examinations, where they strongly influenced the audience. At Rebecca Nurse's examination, there was intense pandemonium.¹⁶ When Ann Putnam had a fit during the examination the "others" in the room were "grievously afflicted."¹⁷ Lawson described hearing and being amazed by a "hideous scritch and noise" after leaving the Meetinghouse and being a little distance away from it.¹⁸ "Some that were within told me the whole assembly was struck with consternation, and they were afraid, that those that sate next to them, were under the influence of Witchcraft."¹⁹

Upon hearing about the manner of the trials, a group of Boston ministers voiced their opinions and advice for Salem in an informational letter in June of 1692 titled, "The Return of Several Ministers consulted by his Excellency and the Honorable Council, upon the present Witchcrafts in Salem Village." This document addressed "[t]he afflicted state of our poor neighbors that are now suffering by molestations from the Invisible World," and urged caution in the legal proceedings. The ministers advised "that there may be admitted as little as is possible of such noise, company, and openness as may too hastily expose them that are examined."²⁰ Yet, the magistrates ignored the advice for "privacy in Examinations" and this was precisely the reason the examinations were so unforgettable.²¹

Lawson provided a clear picture of the ingredients of the examinations in his book. Lawson himself can be categorized as a member of the public, because although he had a history with Salem, he was not present for the duration of the examinations, and witnessed only a small part of the examinations. Instead, he came to Salem, took up

¹⁵ Rosenthal et al, *Records of the Salem Witch-hunt*, 46-51.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 157.

¹⁷ Deodat Lawson, *A Brief and True Narrative*. 159.

¹⁸ *Ibid*.

¹⁹ *Ibid*.

²⁰ Paul S. Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum. *Salem-village Witchcraft: A Documentary Record of Local Conflict in Colonial New England* (Boston 1993), 117.

²¹ Robert Calef, "More Wonders of The Invisible World." *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases 1648-1706*. (New York, NY., 1914), 356.

temporary residence at Nathaniel Ingersoll's tavern and took on the role of observer.²² He described the examinations:

There were at the time of Examination, before many hundreds of Witnesses, strange Pranks played; such as taking Pins out of the Clothes of afflicted, and thrusting them into their flesh; many of which were taken out again by the Judges own hands.²³

The role of the public in the Salem crisis is not explicitly described or referenced in remaining documents due to the attention on the afflicted and accused. Yet the presence of the public can be seen through scenes of the examinations, where the collective crisis exhibited itself best.

Events at the public examination of Martha Corey exemplified the dynamics among the accused, accusers, magistrates, and crowd. As an outside observer, Lawson provided a comprehensive view of the examination scene, while the literal records, recorded by a few different men of the Salem community including Samuel Parris, documented the legal dialogue and the public interruptions. Although it is known that the afflicted dominated the spaces where the examinations took place and exerted control over them due to their hysterical fits, the onlookers, comprised of neighbors and members of the public, additionally played major roles in the proceedings.

Lawson described the courthouse as “[t]hronged with Spectators.”²⁴ While the record of Corey's examination provides a framework, Lawson filled in the gaps in the dialogue with a more narrative account. In the beginning of the examination, Corey “desired to go to Prayer, which was much wondred at, in the presence of so many hundred people.”²⁵ In the description, Lawson referenced the crowd multiple times alongside the afflicted and other important persons. “If she did but bite her Under lip in time of Examination the persons afflicted were bitten on their armes and writs and produced the Marks before the Magistrates, Ministers and others.”²⁶ The “others” or

²² Lawson arrived at Nathaniel Ingersoll's on March 19, 1692; Lawson, *Brief and True Narrative (1702)*, 152.

²³ Deodat Lawson. *Letter to Nathaniel Higginson*. Salem: London Massachusetts Historical card catalog, 1692. Web. <saalem.lib.virginia.edu/letters/lawsons_london_letter.html>.

²⁴ Lawson, *Brief and True Narrative*. 155.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

“spectators” were important to the unfolding of the examination. Their participation was significant. While Corey’s back-and-forth dialogue with Hale was the primary element to the examination, her examination was also interjected by the afflicted that were accusing her. Additionally, and more interestingly, various spectators provided verbal contributions to the examinations as well, mostly to Corey’s detriment.

At one point, Corey was confronted with evidence from a seemingly random witness named Crossly, which accused her of standing with the Devil. This was the only instance a man named Crossly (thought to be Henry Crosby) appeared in the Salem records.²⁷ Crossly was most likely not a formal witness and did not create a deposition, which was expected of a witness and completed by many of the afflicted girls.²⁸ After she denied Crossly’s evidence, Parris recorded that “3. or .4. Sober witnesses confirm’d it.”²⁹

Throughout the examination, interjections, presumably from the crowd were referred to, but barely elaborated in detail. For instance, Parris recorded that “[w]itnesses spoke” and “some body said..”³⁰ The examinations were filled with many erratic exclamations and most of these interjections came from an unnamed source in the crowd. Attributing names to every single person that contributed to the examinations would have been a difficult task, and therefore was not achieved. This was the best recorded example of the collective, anonymous public’s role in the proceedings.

The crowd was also used as a source of information for the officials, often siding with the afflicted and adding to the negative position of the accused. “[T]he standers by said she was squeezing her fingers her hands being eased by them that held them on purpose for trial”³¹ Additionally, the language of the interrogator, Hathorne in this case, indicated that the crowd and the afflicted stand together, against the one accused. “Do not you see these children & women are rational & sober as their neighbors When your hands are fastened,” Hathorne asked.³² It is difficult to determine whether or not the afflicted truly dominated the public, or if the public’s presence fueled the afflicted’s behavior. The

²⁷ Ibid, 148.

²⁸ Rosenthal et al, *Records of the Salem Witch-hunt*, 22.

²⁹ Ibid, 145.

³⁰ Ibid, 146.

³¹ Ibid, 147.

³² Ibid.

afflicted's dominance might have been heightened because they had a slew of public supporters and empathizers that backed up their claims and evidence. All in all, it is important to view the public as an entity, and a component to the Salem trials. It is apparent that the dynamic between these important characters of the examinations truly contributed to the hysteria. Although labeled as "spectators" and "audience," the onlookers at the examinations were clearly not observing, but a passionate and participating entity to the trials.

Another method of gaining a voice in the trials, besides informal or formal contributions in public examinations, was writing or signing a petition. Petitions were used to voice support for an accused person, and in some cases an accused person used petitions for his or her rights.³³ Rosenthal argued that "[a]nxiety and panic were not so pervasive that people were afraid to sign petitions for accused."³⁴ It probably was safer to support an accused person in the form of a petition than to assert opposition in the public examinations, where the courtroom generally sided with the afflicted. John Proctor, Mary Bradbury and Rebecca Nurse all received support from public persons in the form of petitions.

In the case of John Proctor, a small fraction of the public attempted to oppose the overwhelming public's inclinations to demonize the accused and support the afflicted, and thus his trial reflects the disparity among public opinion. Proctor had a sentiment of opposition toward the afflicted girls, which is most likely why he was accused. Yet, he still received support from his neighbors in the form of a petition. These gradations in public opinion were not as apparent due to Salem's overwhelming hysteria at first glance, but the existence of petitions help reveal this concealed other side.

Multiple afflicted girls accused Proctor of witchcraft, and a part of his accusations maintained his disillusionment with the afflicted. Proctor defied the public tendency to identify with the afflicted, and instead doubted them. Proctor illustrated, as we can say, unpopular opinion. On March 25, Samuel Sibley and John Proctor engaged in a conversation where Proctor said that the afflicted "if they were let alone so we should all be Devils & witches quickly" and that they "should rather be had to the Whipping

³³ Rosenthal et al, *Records of the Salem Witch-hunt*, 53.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 22.

post.”³⁵ This, along with evidence from Mary Warren that claimed he “was always very averse to the putting up Bills for publick prayer” was used against him.³⁶ Yet, after he and his wife Elizabeth were put on trial, they received a wide range of support from the community, where two petitions were signed supporting their innocence. One petition was signed by twenty people and another was signed by thirty-two, and almost all the signers did not play a significant role in the Salem proceedings.³⁷

Instead, such previously faceless members of the public attempted to assert some power over the witchcraft events, where they said they wanted to “speak upon our personall acquaintanc, & observation...”³⁸ One petition began: “The Humble, & Sincere Declaration of us, Subscribers, Inhabitants, in Ispwich, on the Behalf of our Neighbours John Proctor & his wife now in Trouble & under Suspition of Witchcraft.” Those that signed the petition acknowledged themselves as neighbors and observers, and proclaimed the victimization of the Proctors. The persons that signed these petitions probably did so to exert their voice because they did not reside in Salem (they resided in Ispwich) and could not insert opposition in person at the examinations. But witnesses who presented exculpatory evidence and wanted to submit petitions defending the accused were not allowed.³⁹

Although there is little information surrounding the executions, the hanging of the convicted witches were also a public function, serving as an endnote to the messiest of the trials. At these executions, there was likely a sermon or speech delivered from a person of power, or at the very least a final thought from the accused facing the moment of their death. According to Samuel Sewall, on the day when George Burroughs and fellow accused witches were executed at Salem, there was “a very great number of Spectators” present, including Mather.⁴⁰ Both Sewall and Robert Calef described Burroughs’ speech to the crowd where he prayed and proclaimed his innocence. Calef

³⁵ Norton, *In the Devil’s Snare*, 71.

³⁶ Rosenthal et al, *Records of the Salem Witch-hunt*, 199.

³⁷ Ibid, 534-535. One person who signed this petition played a minor role in the trials. George Locker had been the constable ordered to arrest Sarah Good on February 29.

³⁸ Ibid, 535.

³⁹ Rosenthal et al, *Records of the Salem Witch-hunt*, 53.

⁴⁰ Harvey Wish, ed., *The Diary of Samuel Sewall* (New York: Putnam, 1967), 72.

wrote that “when he was upon the Ladder, he made a Speech for clearing of his Innocency, with such Solemn and Serious Expressions, as were to the Admiration of all present.”⁴¹ Burroughs’ prayer was so well spoken and “uttered with such composedness” that he “drew Tears from many (so that it seemed to some, that the Spectators would hinder the Execution.)⁴² Similarly, Sewall described that “by his Speech, Prayer, protestation of his Innocence, did much move unthinking persons, which occasions their speaking hardly concerning his being executed.”⁴³

The fact that the accused addressed the crowd right before their deaths, rather than turning to personal introspection, indicates that these experiences were very much embedded in the collective public. In response to Burroughs’ words, Cotton Mather, who was present on horseback, “addressed himself to the People” declaring that Burroughs was not an ordained Minister, and reminding them of his guilt. Calef explained that “this did somewhat appease the People, and the Executions went on...” This picture of Burroughs’ execution provides a glimpse at the public’s position during these shared hangings, most particularly, the crowd’s shifting sentiment to whoever commanded attention through public speaking.

Although insights into the public during the Salem trials might be limited, the public’s presence can be viewed in the dynamics among the accused, accusers and magistrates at public events such as the examinations and executions. In fact, viewing the public as an entity in relationship to these factions is important in understanding the proceedings. The crowds at the examinations and the executions played an important role in the unfolding of events. The public was under the influence of the individual that commanded the most attention and assertion. Although the power seemingly lay with the afflicted and magistrates, the balance of power was reciprocal. It could be argued that the public’s involvement fueled many of the drastic actions of the examinations. Furthermore, as seen with the petitions, a small amount of the public also asserted themselves in opposition to the overwhelming public sentiment, and showed empathy for

⁴¹ Robert Calef. “More Wonders of The Invisible World,” in Burr, ed., *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases 1648-1706*. (New York, NY., 1914), 298.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Sewall, *The Diary of Samuel Sewall*, 72.

the accused, rather than the accuser. The Salem proceedings would have had a very different outcome if the examinations were not public experiences that engulfed the community's attention and energy. It is this very characteristic that contributed to the hysteria that serves as the distinctive trait to the Salem crisis that is imperative to our understanding of this historical event.

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