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From Accusation to Execution: A Case Study

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From Accusation to Execution (A)

Early in American history, prior to the Revolutionary War, there was no separation between church and state. The town of Salem, Massachusetts was a Puritan society, where its residents adhered to a particularly strict form of Protestantism that crept into all aspects of daily living. In order to become full members in church, Puritans had to experience conversion, a personal encounter with God. For the experience to be accepted, the individual had to testify in front of the church. This requirement was created in order to ensure that only the elect – those who were pre-destined to go to Heaven – became full members of the church. Considering the lack of separation between church and state, there was much at stake in whether or not individual had a conversion experience. Conversion could reassure a person psychologically and theologically that they were, in fact, in good standing with God and also brought them access to additional privileges in the town.

Puritanism created an incredibly tight-knit community. While, naturally, there were feuds between neighbors, the Puritan way of life encouraged Salem residents to watch over one another. Any eccentricities or perceived disruption of the social order were watched closely and often reported to the church. These eccentricities could be behavioral or circumstantial – not only were social outcasts or subversive women targeted, but widowed women and the elderly. It was women in particular who were watched closely, for fear that they might seek out more equal standing in society.

Despite these efforts to control and regulate social dynamics, all was not peaceful in late-17th-century Salem. Salem Village, a small western part of the larger Salem Town, successfully separated from Salem Town when Reverend Samuel Parris came to power. Salem Village founded an independent church headed by Parris, braving a lot of controversy in the process. Parris and the residents of Salem Village were convinced that the residents of Salem Town were evil. Association with evil during Puritan times could indicate to others that an individual was predestined to go to Hell; therefore, it was in the best interest of all residents to not only *be* good, but also only associate with those who were good. Though Salem Town was beginning to loosen requirements to be a full member of the church, Parris was far more conservative in his leadership of Salem Village's church. Salem Village slowly divided into factions – those who agreed with Parris' principles, and those who were supportive of a slightly more liberal church, like in Salem Town. Old feuds between neighbors festered and new feuds were created.

In 1692, nine-year-old Elizabeth “Betty” Parris, daughter of Reverend Parris, and 11-year-old Abigail Williams fell ill. They began having strange fits and convulsions, and claimed to be experiencing visions. The visions they described went beyond the visual realm, however – they claimed that other residents of Salem were physically provoking and torturing them. It is impossible to know whether their symptoms were real, psychosomatic, or intentionally manufactured, though one could make a case for any of these:

- The girls may have been suffering from a psychotic episode.
- The girls may have been severely distressed by their rigid society and lack of freedom, and became ill from this stress, without a distinct neurological or biological cause.

- The girls may have feigned ill in order to gain a sense of agency over their lives and increase their own social standing in a society where women were subordinate and had little control.

Typical religious remedies for these fits – fasting and prayer – failed to work, and the girls continued to suffer from convulsions and visions.

Though the motive for the fits is subject to debate, they had very real consequences. Quickly, Reverend Parris and others determined that the girls were being possessed by some sort of evil. Soon after, the term “witchcraft” was thrown around, despite a lack of witchcraft accusations in Salem up to this point. The witchcraft accusations quickly spiraled out of control, with other young girls becoming afflicted with symptoms similar to those of Betty and Abigail.

In February 1692, three women were accused of witchcraft: Tituba, Sarah Good, and Sarah Osborne. Tituba was an enslaved woman belonging to Reverend Parris, presumed by most historians today to have been either Native American or black. Since Tituba lived in the same household as Betty Parris and encouraged the use of non-traditional remedies to cure Betty, she was a natural suspect. She also was the first to confess to witchcraft. Sarah Good was known in Salem as a hostile beggar, fitting the stereotype of a witch well. Good’s first husband died, and despite a second marriage, she was quite poor. Good never confessed to witchcraft, but she did accuse Sarah Osborne of the crime. Sarah Osborne was a widow who attempted to secure her dead husband’s property for herself and her new husband, rather than putting her sons in control of the property. This upset social norms in Salem Village, where women could not own property, leading to her stigmatization. Osborne never confessed and she did not accuse anyone else.

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From Accusation to Execution (B)

The first few accusations led to many more, not only because of Abigail Williams and Betty Parris' strange sickness spreading, but because of accused witches accusing others of witchcraft. Many witches were arrested, and awaited trial. In May of 1692, a new governor was brought to Salem Village, Sir William Phips. Phips set to work on establishing a court to try witches, leading to a series of executions of convicted witches. Tituba was eventually released from prison, though her whereabouts after her release are unknown. Sarah Osborne died in prison. Sarah Good was eventually executed, but was not the first witch to be executed in Salem, despite being one of the first accusations.

It was Bridget Bishop who was executed first. Bridget Bishop's life is somewhat obscured by conflation with Sarah Bishop, another accused woman; accounts that refer to Bridget Bishop as a tavern owner who served minors, flaunted Puritan ideals, and wore a red bodice likely are actually referencing Sarah.

Bridget Bishop, on the other hand, appears to be widowed, and then remarried, at the time of the Trials, and between 55 and 65-years-old. Bishop's first husband died without a will – this left her property, and therefore an outcast in Salem. Thomas Oliver, her second husband, accused her of witchcraft in 1680, saying “she was a bad wife,” and that “the Devil had come bodily to her.” She was known to often have bruises and marks on her face throughout her marriage to Oliver, indicating abuse in the relationship. The couple was known to fight in public, and were punished on several occasions for doing so. Oliver died in 1679, and Bishop made claim to his property, further subverting her role as a Puritan woman.

By the time Bridget was again accused of witchcraft in the Salem Witch Trials, she was married to her third husband, Edward Bishop. The earlier accusations against her from Oliver likely played a role in her arrest during the Salem Witch Trials.

The first time she was accused of witchcraft, Bishop had made it out alive by denying all accusations. The second time, however, things were not so easy for her. Abigail Williams, Mercy Lewis, Ann Putnam, and Elizabeth Hubbard were present at her trial, and frequently fell into fits because of Bishop's attempts at defense. Claiming innocence was no longer working for Bishop, and she became frustrated with the Court, which only served to fuel their conviction that Bishop was a witch.

Upon examination, the Court found a witch's teat on her body. However, upon another examination only several hours later, the supposed witch's teat had disappeared. One might think that this would help Bridget's case, but it only seems to have condemned her further – the presence and then disappearance of the teat surely was evidence of witchcraft.

Bridget Bishop was hanged on 10 June 1692. Not long after, Sarah Good, Rebecca Nurse, Susannah Martin, Elizabeth How, and Sarah Wild were executed, on 19 July 1692.

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Teaching Notes: From Accusation to Execution

This document serves as a guide for instructors teaching the “From Accusation to Execution” case.

Overview

The accusations made against Sarah Good, Sarah Osborne, and Tituba, and the ensuing Salem Witch Trials of 1692-1693, stand out as some of the most notorious events in Colonial American history. By the end of the trials, 20 people had been executed and almost 200 had been accused of practicing witchcraft. The residents of Salem were Puritans, who practiced a form of Christianity with rigid moral codes. Religious and societal constriction frequently leads to rebellion, and the Salem Witch Trials epitomize this dynamic. This case walks students through the events that lead to the first accusations, how some of the early accusations played out, and the accusation and execution of Bridget Bishop. The case explores questions about what it means to have agency, how women can oppress other women, and how women are constrained by social and religious norms, both during the trials and in present-day society.

Pedagogical Objectives

The primary objective of this case is to spark conversation about female agency across time, particularly in relation to the disciplines of anthropology, theology and religious studies, and psychology. It raises questions about how much agency women have, how this has changed over time, and how the lived experience of one woman can affect the lived experiences of other women. It also explores the phenomenon of women oppressing other women, and how this factors into the agency of individuals. This case is best taught in the context of similar, modern events, such as the #MeToo Movement and controversies about the hijab. Users could pair this case with articles about the #MeToo movement, in particular articles by women opposing or questioning the movement (see Tarbox, 2018; Jagsi, 2018), or with articles about the “liberation” of Muslim women (see Abu-Lughod, 2013).

Teaching the Case

A Case

Students would be asked to read the A Case, and then discuss some or all of the following questions. They should attempt to predict the outcomes of the individuals mentioned at the end of the case.

- What is at stake for Salem residents who do not experience conversion?
- What is at stake for Abigail Williams and Betty Parris when they begin making accusations?
- What is at stake for the women who are accused?
- What is at stake for the Puritan church in Salem?
- What reasons for the accusations seem most likely? Why?
- In what ways are the accused women similar, and in what ways are they different?
- What are the risks of executing the accused women? What are the risks of freeing them?
- How much agency do the accusers have in their own lives?
- How much agency do the accused have in their lives?
- In what ways could a witch panic harm Salem? In what ways could it help the community?

- What might be the fates of Sarah Good, Sarah Osborne, and Tituba? Are they the same for all three? If yes, why? If no, why not?

B Case

Students would then be asked to read the B Case, and discuss some or all of the following questions. After discussing some of these questions, present-day issues such as the #MeToo Movement and the hijab controversy can be discussed.

- In what ways does Bridget Bishop meet the stereotypical representation of a witch? In what ways does she differ from it?
- In what ways might have Bridget Bishop's agency been compromised? In what ways might she have tried to compensate for this? How might this have led to her being accused of witchcraft?
- Could Bridget Bishop have avoided execution once she was accused? If so, how might she have done this?
- How might Bridget Bishop's execution affect Abigail Williams and Betty Parris?
- What sorts of socially deviant behavior might warrant this sort of attention in modern society? What might the consequences be?
- Are there any recent events that have stigmatized women in a similar way?

Further Resources

Abu-Lughod, L. (2013). "Do Muslim Women Need Saving?" Retrieved from <https://org.uib.no/smi/seminars/Pensum/Abu-Lughod.pdf>

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