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Michael Brown

La Salle University, brownm54@student.lasalle.edu

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The Salem Witch Trials: Dehumanizing the Different

by Finn Michael Brown

In the year 1692 in Salem Village, Massachusetts, one of the most infamous incidents in American history occurred. A group of young girls started acting very strangely – having convulsive fits, speaking in strange tongues, shrieking at odd intervals, and being disruptive at home and also in public, including during church services. After consultations with clergy and physicians, it was the opinion that the girls had somehow become bewitched. In that time and in that place, witches were a real and present danger to the people of Salem. The preceding three centuries had seen a widespread belief in the Devil-given powers of witchcraft cause the burning and hanging of thousands, if not tens of thousands of people for being suspected witches. The very accusation was a virtual death sentence – all it took was one or more odd occurrences and someone, usually a woman, to be the scapegoat. Defending oneself was near impossible, as ‘evidence’ such as odd birthmarks, hygiene issues, promiscuity, and simple proximity to the events were considered marks of guilt. Worst of all, and prominent in the Salem incident, was the use of ‘spectral evidence’ – supposedly an assault on the person by the witch’s disembodied form. As Wendell Craker put it, “Spectral evidence refers to the common belief that, when a person had made covenant with the devil, he was given permission to assume that person's appearance in spectral form in order to recruit others, and to otherwise carry out his nefarious deeds. Ubiquitous and sensational, testimony concerning the spectral appearance of the alleged witches dominated the preliminary hearings and was a factor in the trials themselves. A special coterie of accusers had developed, first at Salem, then another at Andover, claiming the power to see the alleged specters. Testimony concerning spectral appearance was limited to these self-selected groups who were enabled by a 'special sight' to see what to others was invisible. It is doubtful that anyone was accused who was not charged with having appeared in spectral form. (Craker 332)”

The evil in the Salem Witch Trials takes several forms. There is the depletion of personhood of the accused victims, in that they were after seen as corrupted or less than human by their former neighbors, friends and relatives. There is the obstruction of good through the village elders allowing false accusations and mob mentality to prevent the accused from being allowed to live, or live unhindered – to be. There is the deception by not only the original group of girls but multiple others who saw opportunity in using the accusations to remove a rival or settle an old grudge. There is the delusion of the entire concept of Satan-worshipping witches, who rather than use their supernatural powers to enrich themselves, would waste them in plaguing young children, causing cows to dry up, and giving disease to people and crops. Last is the pure destruction of the local society – a fairly peaceful area became overrun with strife, paranoia, and moral panic. As Reed put it, “The Trials also fit all the sociological elements, basic intuitions, and theoretical associations that have developed through and around the concept of a “moral panic” ... First, the Salem Witch Trials were definitely a disproportionate response, and not only from a naturalistic perspective according to which witchcraft-qua-spellcasting does not exist (even if the social category of witch was real and important). For, even if we accept the reigning local interpretation of witches in Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1692—that they were real and harmful—one can still argue that the witch trials were a disproportionate response to the initial finding that a few teenage girls in Salem Village were “under an evil hand.” Of all the witch trials in Massachusetts in the seventeenth century, Salem was by far the largest, the

deadliest, and the most emotionally charged. This disproportion, furthermore, was eventually so extensive that it became disruptive of the very fabric of beliefs and practices that surrounded witchcraft accusations in Puritan Massachusetts. (Reed 74-75)”

How does this relate to metaphysics? According to Clarke, metaphysics is the study of being *qua* being, or the study of ‘being’ – reality – itself. In Clarke’s *The One and the Many*, he postulates two types of beings: Real and Mental. In the case of Salem, the Mental Being is of particular interest. The entirety of the justification for the trials revolves around a concept which is patently false in the Real – malefic witches and their master, the Christian Satan. Yet Clarke’s Mental Being theory would argue that they do have a quasi-reality, in that they are concepts that can be thought about by Real Beings. As Clarke writes, “Mental Being = that which is present *not* by its own act of existence but only within an idea, i.e. as being-thought-about. ‘Its being’, St. Thomas says, ‘is to-be-thought-about’ by a real mind. (Clarke, S.J., "Meaning of Being" 30)” And in this vein, the witches and their infernal Master do indeed become real; the people of Salem Village and Town, and later Andover, are so convinced of the reality of these concepts that they create a special court for the trying of the accused, execute those convicted who do not confess, seize the property of those accused, and create an atmosphere of general panic and paranoia in a good-sized area of the Massachusetts Bay Colony – all real acts and real consequences created by the Mental Beings in the minds of Real Beings, i.e. the colonists. Where Clarke would have seen the people of Salem failing is in believing that their knowledge is so complete in these things that they cannot allow other opinions or theories, regardless of evidence, to sway them from the course they have set themselves upon. They are denying the underlying truth of metaphysics itself, which is that there is always more to learn about things. They know the truth of the matter, and they will prove it by any means necessary, to root out the evil within their society. The sad, all-too-real truth is that their methods and procedures of ‘evidence’ so often brought forced confessions to completely imagined crimes, but as long as they fit the narrative, the prosecutors were satisfied.

Clarke also spoke on the concept of personhood and being. In his book *Person and Being*, he postulated multiple qualities that made a ‘Being’ a ‘Person’ – not just an animal or object, but a thinking, reasoning human. These concepts are relevant because through multiple methods – privation, obstruction, or destruction – they were denied to the accused, rendering them less than human in the eyes of the community, and far worse, in their own. For one of the first precepts of Personhood is that the Person recognizes themselves as such. “I am” is a powerful statement – the declaration that one recognizes one’s own self, a unique, distinct being with self-knowledge. The torture and indignities suffered by the accused during the Trials had the effect of breaking the will of many of these poor souls, robbing them of that quality of self. In addition, those who were forced to confess to witchcraft violated what Clarke refers to as ‘self-possession through self-determination’. As he puts it, “The second mode of self-possession proper to personal being is in the order of action, achieved through self-determination, i.e. mastery over our own actions by freedom of the will. This enables the person to say, ‘I am *responsible* for this action.’ Moral responsibility flows immediately from this self-possession through freedom. The ‘I’ of the person is where the buck stops in assigning responsibility for an act as moral. ‘I did it,’ ‘I am sorry,’ ‘I deserve praise or blame,’ not some subconscious impulse, some environmental or social pressure, something external to me – higher or lower, good or evil – taking me over... A personal being is therefore one that is in charge of its own life, a *self-governing* being. (Clarke, S.J., 48)” This is stripped away from the accused ‘witches’. Firstly, in that they are imprisoned, tortured, and hounded into confessing responsibility for acts which

were not their doing. Secondly, in the view that as ‘witches’, their will is not their own – Satan or one of his minions is directing them, making them use their ‘powers’ to injure their fellow humans, and using their semblance to beguile or injure others in pursuit of His evil plans. They have become little more than puppets, animated by the will and desires of the Adversary, and not true Persons any longer.

Indeed, the violation of Personhood goes even deeper in this dark incident. As I mentioned, there is the belief that not only are the witches themselves mere extensions of their Master’s will, but they themselves force others to do things that they would not otherwise do, through the use of dark magic. The witches are accused of causing fits of paralysis, convulsions, weakness, screaming fits and hallucinations. Martha Corey, a pillar of the local religious community, was accused soon after the first round of trials; this concerned many, as it opened the door to anyone being vulnerable to accusation, not just the poor and disliked. It led to people dehumanizing their neighbors and friends – anyone was a potential witch, and with new people getting accused constantly, even the smallest anomaly was seized upon as a possible omen that someone else was in league with the Devil. Confessed witches, eager to avoid hanging, named ‘accomplices’ by the dozen, and spun wild tales of bloody rituals and orgies of violence and lust. The accused were no longer People, they were witches, servants of evil, forever tainted by association, whether they were convicted or not, executed or not. In fact, when the panic finally passed, many in authority felt guilty enough to attempt to restore their Personhood, although for many it was too late. “Following the trials and executions, many involved, like judge Samuel Sewall, publicly confessed error and guilt. On January 14, 1697, the General Court ordered a day of fasting and soul-searching for the tragedy of Salem. In 1702, the court declared the trials unlawful. And in 1711, the colony passed a bill restoring the rights and good names of those accused and granted £600 restitution to their heirs. However, it was not until 1957—more than 250 years later—that Massachusetts formally apologized for the events of 1692. (Blumberg, par. 10)”

One of the most difficult parts of unpacking this dark period is unraveling all the many threads that lead up to it, as well as the various incidents during it. There is the question of the general mood of Salem Town and Village – the two were not the best of neighbors, having feuded over boundaries and rights for years. There were many new immigrants to the area as a result of King William’s War in 1689, overburdening the local residents. Also, the Massachusetts Bay Colony itself was in turmoil, as multiple political upheavals in recent years had left everyone uncertain of the future and where they stood. As Rebecca Brooks wrote, “One major factor was that in 1684, King Charles II revoked the Massachusetts Bay Colony’s royal charter, a legal document granting the colonists permission to colonize the area. The charter was revoked because the colonists had violated several of the charter’s rules, which included basing laws on religious beliefs and discriminating against Anglicans. Charles II died shortly after and James II replaced him and merged the Massachusetts Bay Colony into the Dominion of New England which instituted a royally-appointed government with many strict new laws. In 1689, after the Glorious Revolution occurred in England, the Massachusetts Bay colonists overthrew the unpopular Dominion of New England. In 1691, the new King and Queen of England, Mary and William of Orange, issued a new, more anti-religious charter, instead of reissuing the old charter, and also combined the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Plymouth Colony and several other colonies into one. The new charter and regime basically continued the policies of the Dominion of New England. The Puritans, who had left England due to religious persecution, feared their religion was under attack again and worried they were losing control of their colony. (Brooks,)” In this

heightened state of anxiety, many people ended up doing things that perhaps they might have been more resistant to previous to this uncertainty. This is what metaphysicians would call the evil of depletion – the constant strain of not being able to plan for the future, of not being able to trust their neighbors or government, of fear of the local natives during King William’s War, drained their ability to weather new difficulties and think clearly when the unexpected happened. The second big question is that of the people who were the accusers – what motivated them? The original group of girls laid the blame for their unusual behavior on three essentially defenseless women – Sarah Good, a homeless beggar; Sarah Osbourne, a poor elderly woman; and Tituba, an African slave in the house of Reverend Samuel Parris. Tituba had told stories of African witchcraft to the girls as entertainment. Were the girls simply lying, trying to shift blame for bad behavior onto others in an attempt to escape punishment? Or were they deluded by Tituba’s fireside tales and perhaps coached along by Reverend Parris, in an elaborate plot to remove some undesirables? Good and Osbourne both professed their innocence, but Tituba confessed, implicating both other women and others as well. Others accused people who they had grudges against, or who they believed to be ‘not the right sort’ – was it simple revenge? Was there a profit motive for those who ended up with the lands and goods of the condemned? Did it start with what might have just been a simple incident and snowballed by those who saw an opportunity to remove their enemies? Why did those not directly involved simply stand by and watch as their friends and loved ones were taken, tried and executed? There is evil in all of these things, to a greater or lesser degree, direct or indirect. Perhaps the greatest evil in this black time is that we will most likely never know the complete truth of what happened and why.

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