

The Salem Witch Trials

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The Salem witch trials occurred in colonial Massachusetts in 1692 and 1693, not in 1962. They developed through accusations of witchcraft, local conflict, religious fear, flawed legal procedures, and a social environment in which testimony about invisible or “spectral” attacks could be treated as evidence. More than two hundred people were accused. Nineteen were executed by hanging, one man, Giles Corey, was pressed to death after refusing to enter a plea, and others died in jail. Women formed the majority of those accused and executed, but men were also targeted. A feminist criminological interpretation can illuminate how gender expectations shaped suspicion, credibility, and punishment. However, the trials should not be used to equate feminism with Puritan persecution. Feminist criminology emerged to examine how law, crime, victimization, and punishment are shaped by gender and power. The Salem proceedings instead demonstrate how patriarchal institutions, moral panic, social marginality, and unreliable evidence can turn fear into state violence. (Massachusetts Trial Court Law Libraries)

The Setting of Salem in 1692

Salem Village was a divided community. Families disagreed over church leadership, property, taxes, and the village’s relationship with Salem Town. The region also lived with insecurity caused by warfare on the northern frontier, disease, political change, and religious anxiety. Puritan theology accepted the reality of Satan and witchcraft, but belief alone does not explain why accusations spread so rapidly at that particular moment. Social tensions provided a setting in which unusual behavior and personal conflict could be interpreted as signs of supernatural attack. The crisis became dangerous when authorities created legal procedures capable of converting fear and rumor into arrest, imprisonment, and execution. (Norton)

The First Accusations

In early 1692, Betty Parris and Abigail Williams, members of the household of Reverend Samuel Parris, began experiencing unusual fits and behavior. Other young people reported similar afflictions. After pressure to identify a supernatural cause, accusations were directed at Tituba, Sarah Good, and Sarah Osborne. The original essay described Tituba as a “slave girl,” but she was an enslaved woman in the Parris household whose background has been debated by historians. Sarah Good was poor and socially marginalized, while Sarah Osborne had been involved in property and family conflict and did not conform comfortably to community expectations. Their vulnerability made them easier targets than socially powerful women might have been.

Tituba's Confession and the Expansion of the Crisis

Tituba initially denied practicing witchcraft but later confessed under intense questioning and described a wider satanic conspiracy. Her confession helped transform three accusations into a community-wide search for hidden witches. Confession could offer temporary protection because authorities wanted information about accomplices, while denial could lead to execution. This created a dangerous incentive: people who confirmed the court's assumptions and accused others might survive, while those who maintained innocence remained at risk. Tituba's position as an enslaved woman also meant she possessed little social or legal power. Her testimony should therefore not be treated as a free and reliable admission detached from coercion.

Gender and the Image of the Witch

European and colonial ideas about witchcraft often portrayed women as especially vulnerable to satanic influence because they were believed to be physically, intellectually, or morally weaker than men. These assumptions grew from patriarchal theology and social structures rather than evidence. Women were expected to be obedient, pious, sexually controlled, industrious, and properly situated within households. A woman who was outspoken, poor, quarrelsome, independent, widowed, or involved in disputes could be interpreted as violating feminine expectations. Carol Karlsen argues that many accused New England women occupied complicated positions in systems of inheritance, property, and family authority. Gender did not mechanically cause every accusation, but it shaped the cultural vocabulary through which women became imaginable as witches. (Karlsen)

Women Were Not One Uniform Group

A feminist interpretation should not portray all women in Salem as united victims of men. Girls and women made accusations, testified, confessed, defended relatives, and participated in community conflict. Some gained temporary authority because magistrates listened to their accounts of spectral harm. Yet this authority remained dependent on a court controlled by male officials and on a religious framework that ultimately reinforced patriarchal power. Accusers themselves could be frightened, pressured, traumatized, or influenced by peers and adults. Their participation does not disprove gender analysis; it shows that people can act within institutions whose assumptions they did not create.

Feminist Criminology and "Double Deviance"

Feminist criminology examines how women who violate law may also be judged for violating gender expectations. This is sometimes described as double deviance: a woman is punished both for the alleged offense and for failing to conform to an ideal of femininity. The concept helps explain why an

accused woman's speech, sexuality, poverty, household role, or reputation could become evidence against her. Sarah Good's homelessness and confrontational behavior made her appear disorderly. Bridget Bishop, the first person executed, had a reputation that included conflict and allegedly unconventional conduct. Such characteristics did not prove witchcraft, but they were interpreted through a gendered moral lens.

Bridget Bishop and Reputation Evidence

Bridget Bishop was tried and hanged on June 10, 1692. Testimony against her included claims about spectral appearances, previous disputes, physical evidence of uncertain value, and stories about events said to have occurred years earlier. Her case illustrates how reputation can replace proof. Once a person is categorized as deviant, ordinary conflict and coincidence may be reinterpreted as confirmation. Feminist criminology is useful here because women's sexual and social reputations have often influenced criminal-justice outcomes. Fair legal systems must separate evidence of a charged act from moral judgments about whether a defendant conforms to expected behavior.

Spectral Evidence

Spectral evidence consisted of testimony that the spirit or apparition of an accused person had harmed someone. The central problem was that such claims could not be independently tested. An accused person might be physically elsewhere yet be told that a supernatural image bearing their appearance had attacked a victim. Some religious leaders questioned whether Satan could assume the form of an innocent person, making the evidentiary logic unstable even within contemporary belief. Reliance on spectral evidence gave accusers extraordinary power and deprived defendants of an effective way to disprove allegations. The trials demonstrate why criminal procedure requires evidence that can be examined, challenged, and corroborated.

The Court of Oyer and Terminer

Governor William Phips established the Court of Oyer and Terminer to hear the witchcraft cases. The proceedings lacked protections later associated with due process. Defendants did not have modern legal representation, evidentiary standards were weak, and the presumption of supernatural conspiracy influenced questioning. The court accepted confession, spectral claims, touch tests, bodily searches, and neighborhood stories. Judges were not neutral observers of a hypothesis; they often questioned defendants from within the assumption that witchcraft was real and widespread. Institutional design therefore magnified social fear rather than testing it.

Moral Panic and Deviancy Amplification

Stanley Cohen's concept of moral panic helps explain how a perceived threat becomes exaggerated through authorities, media-like communication, rumor, and public reaction. Salem's alleged witches became "folk devils" blamed for illness, conflict, and misfortune. Each accusation appeared to confirm that a hidden network existed, leading to further arrests and more pressure to confess. This feedback loop resembles deviancy amplification: the response to alleged deviance produces conditions that generate more reports, greater fear, and harsher control. The category of witch expanded until respected church members, property owners, and politically connected people were accused. Once accusations reached socially powerful individuals, skepticism increased. (Cohen)

Class, Property, and Social Marginality

Gender interacted with class and status. Poor women, widows, enslaved people, and women without strong male protection could be vulnerable because they lacked resources and respectable networks. Property conflict also influenced some accusations. A woman who inherited or controlled property could disrupt expectations about male economic authority, though no single economic explanation covers all cases. Feminist analysis is strongest when it considers intersecting power: gender, class, race, enslavement, age, family status, and community reputation affected people differently. Tituba's experience cannot be understood in exactly the same way as that of a white property-holding woman.

Men Accused of Witchcraft

The involvement of male defendants prevents a simplistic claim that the trials were only a campaign against women. Men such as George Burroughs, John Proctor, and Giles Corey were accused and died. Some were targeted because they defended accused women, challenged proceedings, or became connected to alleged conspiracies. Nevertheless, the gendered construction of witchcraft remained important. Men could be accused of participating in a crime culturally associated with female weakness and disorder, while women formed the larger accused group. A complete interpretation must hold both facts together.

Giles Corey and Coercive Procedure

Giles Corey refused to enter a plea and was subjected to *peine forte et dure*, in which heavy stones were placed upon him. He died after several days. His death was not a hanging for witchcraft but a coercive attempt to force a plea. The case demonstrates how legal procedure can become punishment before guilt is established. It also shows that institutions may use extreme force when a defendant refuses to participate in a process perceived as illegitimate. Modern legal safeguards against compelled self-incrimination, cruel punishment, and arbitrary detention respond to this

broader danger.

The Collapse of the Trials

As accusations spread and respected people were implicated, criticism grew. Increase Mather warned that it was better for guilty people to escape than for innocent people to be condemned, particularly when evidence was uncertain. Governor Phips eventually dissolved the Court of Oyer and Terminer, and the succeeding court did not treat spectral evidence in the same way. Executions stopped. Later jurors, judges, and accusers expressed regret, and Massachusetts took steps toward compensation and legal exoneration. These acts could not undo the deaths, imprisonment, illness, property loss, and family trauma caused by the proceedings.

Why the Comparison with Modern Feminism Fails

The original essay compared modern feminism to Puritan persecution and claimed that both punish people for repressed thoughts. This comparison is historically and conceptually unsound. Feminism is not one unified institution, and feminist criminology generally challenges unequal power, gender stereotyping, sexual violence, discriminatory law, and the exclusion of women's experiences from research. Like any political movement, feminist arguments can be debated and criticized, but disagreement should be based on specific claims and evidence. Equating advocacy for gender equality with a colonial court that executed people on spectral testimony reverses the historical lesson. The trials reveal the danger of gendered suspicion and unaccountable authority—precisely the kinds of problems feminist scholarship often examines.

Women, Crime, and the Myth of Natural Deviance

The original essay also suggested that women are considered “inherently deviant” and biologically likely to commit crime. Feminist criminology criticizes this assumption rather than endorsing it. Early criminological theories often judged women against stereotyped standards of femininity and treated female offending as biological abnormality. Contemporary scholarship examines social context, victimization, economic inequality, policing, and how institutions respond differently according to gender. A woman who commits an offense is responsible for her conduct under law, but she should not be treated as unnatural or more morally corrupt because of her sex. The Salem trials demonstrate the harm caused when gender stereotypes substitute for proof.

Lessons for Evidence and Due Process

The most enduring legal lesson is that fear does not justify unreliable evidence. Serious accusations require transparent standards, the ability to confront witnesses, impartial decision-makers, and

procedures designed to test rather than confirm allegations. Confession must be voluntary, and defendants should not be punished for maintaining innocence. Courts must resist public pressure and distinguish behavior that is unpopular from conduct that is legally proven. These lessons apply beyond witchcraft. Moral panics concerning race, religion, sexuality, political ideology, youth culture, or mental illness can create similar pressure for exceptional punishment.

Conclusion

The Salem witch trials were a crisis of religion, community conflict, gendered suspicion, and failed legal procedure in 1692–1693. Women were disproportionately accused because cultural expectations made them especially imaginable as witches, while poverty, property conflict, race, enslavement, and reputation shaped vulnerability. Men were also accused and killed, showing that the crisis cannot be reduced to a single cause. Feminist criminology helps analyze double standards, patriarchal authority, and the treatment of women who departed from prescribed roles. It does not support equating feminism with Puritan persecution. The central lesson of Salem is that institutions must not convert fear, stereotypes, and unverifiable claims into punishment. Justice depends on evidence, due process, accountability, and the willingness to protect unpopular defendants when public certainty is at its highest.

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