

# Understanding the Salem Witch Trials through the Lens of Feminist Criminological Theory

Claire Williams

## **Abstract**

This essay seeks to explore attitudes towards women in a societal and criminological context through the lens of the Salem witch trials. Women have historically been regarded as possessing an inherent deviance, either through religious rhetoric, or pseudo-scientific assertions. This deviance is one which was only presumed to be off-set through conformation with expected gender roles; specifically marriage and motherhood. The term “witch” has traditionally been used as a controlling title for the women who dared to venture beyond these norms. Using the events of seventeenth century Salem, I attempt to expose just how little this narrative has changed over the course of three hundred years.

## **Introduction**

The Salem witch trials of 1692 have historically been shrouded in mystery, but as an example of the behaviour of an isolated community, they provide the perfect backdrop to allow us to fill in the blank corners with modern knowledge of criminological theory. Through careful historical analysis I purport to offer a feminist perspective on the Salem witch trials. I will examine how gender roles, and the perception of women as the descendants of “Eve” meant they were easy-pickings for a mass moral persecution, how the inherently deviant perception of women was mirrored by

criminological thinking of the time, and how this perception has seeped into modern day criminology.

The first section of this essay will attempt to outline the attitudes towards crime during Puritanical times in an effort to set the scene for the next section, which will briefly recount the events of the Salem witch trials. The final section deals with these events from the perspective of feminist criminology. I will draw links between the events in Salem and the attitudes toward women in a modern context, with the view to demonstrating how despite the changing narrative, a common thread of utilising scientific and social rhetoric to continuously suppress women into their predetermined roles is still very much present.

### **A brief background on Puritan attitudes toward crime:**

Queen Elizabeth's solution to the growing unrest between Catholic and Protestant groups was to establish a version of the Church of England that reconciled this divide to some extent by combining elements of both denominations.<sup>[146]</sup> Lutheran values were retained within a ceremonial superstructure resembling that of Catholicism.<sup>[147]</sup> Her efforts satisfied the majority but left small pockets of devout Catholics and more radical protestants marginalised.<sup>[148]</sup> Erikson describes these Puritans as an "austere minority" within the church who began to gather momentum under Elizabeth's relatively tolerant rule.<sup>[149]</sup> These Puritan's sought to live by the rules of the Bible alone, and by the time Charles I took the throne, the atmosphere of conflict led to a group of Puritans making the voyage, under the leadership of John Winthrop, to Massachusetts Bay in 1629 with the intention of building a society that mirrored the kingdom of God by adhering only to laws derived directly from the Bible.<sup>[150]</sup>

In 1636 a meeting was held to air out a disagreement between two leading figures of Puritan society on attitudes toward crime. John Winthrop, a local governor, was of the opinion that the law should be lenient towards deviant behaviours considering the early and unsettled state of the colony.<sup>[151]</sup> He felt this leniency

should be extended on grounds of possible ignorance of new laws and economic hardship. He represented a very modern view that discipline should be administered relative to the severity of the crime, which echoed the thinking of contemporary European criminologists such as Beccaria, who were of the view that punishment should only go so far as is necessary to act as a deterrent.<sup>[152]</sup> Winthrop's opponent Thomas Dudley took a very different stance. He advocated exclusively for harsh biblical justice. This position won out in the end as it was decided "that strict discipline, both in criminal and martial affairs, were more needful in plantations than in a settled state, as tending to the honour and safety of the gospel."<sup>[153]</sup> In context, this meant that as Europe progressed its criminological thinking, the new colony plunged itself back into medieval reasoning. As put by Erikson; "thus, at the very moment England was learning to regard the law as a product of human experience, Massachusetts reaffirmed the old medieval conviction that law is a permanent set of standards written into the design of the universe and wholly unmoved by changes in the human condition."<sup>[154]</sup>

It is important to understand this backdrop as the setting for the events to come. The philosophy of the puritans was reaffirmed as suggesting that "crimes against the public order are crimes against the symmetry and orderliness of nature itself."<sup>[155]</sup> The discipline of Massachusetts Bay was severe and held a cold righteousness<sup>[156]</sup> and lack of human sentimentality as the laws were considered unchanging, therefore took no account of the motives, harm done to the community, or any other relevant factor. Erikson points out that this "flat mechanical tone" with which justice was administered was due to the perception that justice dealt with the decisions of laws, not men.<sup>[157]</sup>

### **The Salem Witch Trials of 1692**

In 1692, the colony was in a period of uncertainty. The settlers had recently lost the charter that gave them title to the land and the courts were sloughing through a myriad of land and personal

disputes.<sup>[158]</sup> Alienated from England, and unsure of their future, the third generation of settlers seemed lost. Alan Heimert calls them “a society no longer able to judge itself with any certainty”<sup>[159]</sup> they were a perfect example of Durkheim’s theory of anomie; a normless society that desperately craved social cohesion and to clarify its place in the world.

A group of girls began spending time with a slave girl named Tituba in the kitchen of the Reverend Samuel Parris. They became known for being excitable and rumours began to spread of black masses in the forests and other occult activity. After some time, the two youngest girls began having fits in which they would scream hysterically, collapse into convulsions and crawl around on the floor barking like dogs. The town’s physician quickly came to the conclusion that the devil had come to Salem.<sup>[160]</sup> The true reason for this behaviour is unclear, it has been suggested that perhaps in an era of oppression of young girls, there may have been some excitement in the degree of power they exercised over the adult community.<sup>[161]</sup> Or perhaps it was a form of hysteria as suggested in early psychological study.<sup>[162]</sup> Recent research in the area has shown that the conditions would have been perfect for a particular strain of LSD called ergot to have been present in the rye used to make bread. This condition known as ergotism would have caused seizures and hallucinations and crawling sensations on the skin as experienced by the girls.<sup>[163]</sup>

Regardless of the reason, the girls too became convinced that they had been bewitched and after increasing pressure from the clergy to reveal those who had bewitched them, they listed three women; Tituba the slave from Barbados, raised in an exotic culture foreign and mysterious to the Puritans, Sarah Good; the perfect stereotype of the “witch.” She was a haggard woman known locally for her foul temper, neglecting her children and begging money from her neighbours,<sup>[164]</sup> and lastly, Sarah Osbourne; a woman of high social standing who was recently the subject of a great deal of scandal when she moved in with a man before marriage.<sup>[165]</sup> All three of these women were living on the outskirts of societal convention,

they had diverged from their gender role to some extent, a characteristic that made them inherently suspicious.

At the trial, the girls continued their convulsions and claimed there were spirits tormenting them. Tituba's confession however, served as all the evidence needed that there was a satanic conspiracy against Salem. She spoke of magic and spirits in different realms, implicated the other two accused women, and claimed many others in the colony were involved in this evil.<sup>[166]</sup> The magistrates continued to pressurize the girls to name their tormentors, eventually leading to the accusation of over two hundred people. Nathaniel Carey recounts, of the journey to Salem following his wife's accusation, that while staying at an inn, the girls were brought in and immediately fell into a fit and pointed at his wife, meanwhile the magistrates were conveniently sat in the adjoining room.<sup>[167]</sup> However, as the accusations began to creep up the social ladder, a scepticism began to take hold. When the president of Harvard College was accused, the magistrates told the girls they were mistaken.<sup>[168]</sup> People began to consider whether the girls themselves were consorts of the devil, and eventually the epidemic died out, but not before thirteen women and two men were hanged for their crimes.

### **A Feminist Perspective on the Salem Witch trials**

“Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live”<sup>[169]</sup> - Exodus 22:18

Like all other aspects of life, the treatment of Puritan women was rooted in Biblical times. Godbeer writes that “Eve,” as a prototype of womankind, was “double-edged;” she was considered worthy of honour as Adam's companion yet her disobedience to God at the devil's bidding made her the first witch. He writes that female bodies, as the weaker sex, and the descendants of Eve, were viewed as more vulnerable to “the Devil's influence.”<sup>[170]</sup> What this meant in context is that women were worthy of honour as wives and mothers, but were deemed witches if they “disrupted the functionality of society.”<sup>[171]</sup>

Although there are no records to indicate that any more women than men practised ‘witchcraft,’ the disparity can be seen in the almost exclusively female accusations and convictions. Godbeer says this divergence can be explained “by the compulsory gender norms of the Puritan society and the women who defied them.”<sup>[172]</sup>

If we take a look at some of the women accused, the pattern emerges quite quickly. Sarah Good, as we have already seen, defied her role as a proper Puritan woman by neglecting her children and behaving in a manner not befitting of Puritanical society. It has been speculated that Bridget Bishop, the first woman hanged, may have been accused because she stood to inherit a large amount of money from her deceased husband. She owned a tavern in her own name where minors were alleged to have been served, she was known for dressing differently in a red tunic and for being generally outspoken.<sup>[173]</sup> Similarly Sarah Osbourne had moved in with a man while unmarried. Each of these women placed themselves on the outskirts of conventional gender roles.

It’s frequently argued that the very fact that these events involved women accusing other women means the witch trials may not be construed as a gender issue. To quote Rosen; “The cry of misogyny is challenged when women accuse other women, but the reasoning to do so is because they have been indoctrinated with patriarchal beliefs.”<sup>[174]</sup> The women in Salem were indoctrinated into believing this myth that honour is contingent with maternal and feminine qualities, a classic illustration of the control exercised over women by the established order of the time, in an attempt to subdue them, for fear of their own position and standing in the community being compromised.

### **A familiar narrative**

Rosen argues that the idea of attaching the label “witch” to a woman who steps outside of her gender role can still be frequently seen today. Giving the examples of Hillary Clinton and Margaret Thatcher who have both been branded with the title at different

points. She argues that the ‘modern vilification of female politicians as witches is thus rooted in this historical context.’<sup>[175]</sup>

Even in a secular model, the idea of women as inferior, hence more inclined to deviate lest she be contained by the strict gender roles of society has been perpetuated in criminology. The following is an extract from a criminological text written more than two hundred years after the Salem witch trials by Cesare Lombroso, a famed criminologist;

“Now, once we admit that the primitive type of a species is more clearly represented in the female, we must proceed to argue thence that the typical forms of our race, being better organised and fixed in the woman through the action of time and long heredity, joined to fewer ancestral variations, are less subject to transformation and deformation by the influences which determine special and retrogressive variations in the male.”<sup>[176]</sup>

Lombroso is considered the father of positivism, a movement in criminological theory still relevant today. In Darwin’s explanation of natural selection, he proposed that some individuals may be reversions to an earlier revolutionary stage. Lombroso jumped on this idea to form his theory that evolutionary atavism is the cause of the “born criminal.” In his book “Criminal Man” he proposes features such as facial asymmetry and abundant hair distinguish those who are less evolved, thus more likely to commit crime. He followed up his book with a later text “The Female Offender” in 1895, from which the above passage has been extracted. In this later text he proposed, (ironically reminiscent of theological reasoning), that women were less evolved than men, thus more inclined to deviate. However, as the inherently weaker sex, women were more likely to be conditioned “out” of deviation by social norms (such as marriage and motherhood.)

Carol Smart evaluates work by Pollak from 1950 that endorses this idea of women as more inherently deviant than men; “he argues that women are the most able criminals as biologically and socially they are well equipped for lying, deceiving and trickery.”<sup>[177]</sup>

Smart notes that there is tendency to invoke 'common sense' in support of sexist contentions about female offenders in the place of any actual empirical facts, giving the example of Cowie Cowie and Slater's contention that; "common sense suggests the main factors of female criminality to be somatic ones, specifically hormonal factors<sup>[178]</sup>".

### **An alternative means of oppression**

Despite the narrative that women are inherently deviant, there is a second, slightly contradictory theme that has emerged in more recent feminist criminological discourse. This is the notion that the nature of women is gentle and feminine, therefore a woman who strays from this nature, by the commission of a crime for instance, must be sick, or alienated from her true nature in some way.

Smart sums up the divergent theories as follows; "those women who do commit offences are judged to be either criminal by nature (Pollak, 1950) or pathological because they deviate from the 'true' biologically determined nature of woman which is to be law abiding.<sup>[179]</sup> Despite Cowie, Cowie and Slater's claim that female criminality is caused by somatic factors<sup>[180]</sup> being unfounded in any scientific research, Smart contends that this line of thought, that women are "sick" for straying from deeply rooted perceptions of their gender, means they are more likely to be subjected to "treatment" in psychiatric institutions. Smart argues that this perpetuates women's "dependant" status and further damages their ability to control or adapt their circumstance.<sup>[181]</sup>

"Penal policy for female offenders is geared to preserving the typical female role, its intention is to make women and girls adapt to their pre-given passive social role which by definition is thought to preclude deviant behaviour."<sup>[182]</sup>

These opposing theories can be drawn together in the context of the witch trials as follows. Either women are inherently deviant and thus worthy of suspicion; (as the descendants of Eve in a theological context, or as biologically regressive in a secular



model) and only worthy of honour as wives and mothers. In a Lombrosian context, they are easily conditioned out of crime by the strict enforcement of gender norms, meaning the women not adhering to these gender roles are highly liable to deviate. The second theory is that women are inherently gentle and must be sick if they stray from their true feminine qualities, once again throwing suspicion on those women like Sarah Good and Brigid Bishop who refused to submit to expected societal roles. Regardless of the theory favoured, the outcome for the women unwilling to submit to gender norms was unchangingly bleak.

### **Conclusion**

The residents of Massachusetts Bay in 1692 were isolated from their past and unsure of their future. The colony was in a period of anomie, in order to return to a stable cohesive society they would inevitably single out a form of deviance as a threat to their way of existence. Women, already seen as inherently deviant in the eyes of the Biblical puritans were an easy target for suspicion.

The Salem witch trials present an infamous manifestation of sexist belief about women's inherent deviance unless they are confined to feminine and maternal roles. Those who wandered beyond their socially accepted remit were greeted with accusations of witchcraft, a trend carried into the modern political arena, and modern criminological thought. In Lombroso's conception of criminology, women are considered inherently deviant based on unfounded and unproved evolutionary claims, and the only way of preventing this inevitable deviance would be through the strict enforcement of social institutions. Even today women who commit crime are considered to be somehow alienated from their true nature, thus more likely to be institutionalised, resulting in a perpetuated dependence and inability to self-determine their position in society.

We would be better served if the perception of women still present in criminological theory could be left in the past along with the belief in witches and those who hunted them.

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- [146] Kai T. Erikson, *Wayward Puritans; A study in the sociology of Deviance*, (John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 1996) pg. 34
- [147] *ibid*, pg. 35
- [148] *ibid*, pg. 36
- [149] *ibid*.
- [150] *Ibid*. p. 47
- [151] *Ibid*.
- [152] Cesare Beccaria, *On Crimes and Punishment* 1764
- [153] Pg. 136 winthrop journal, I, pp. 169-172.
- [154] Kai T. Erikson, *Wayward Puritans; A study in the sociology of Deviance*, (John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 1996) p.187.
- [155] *Ibid*.
- [156] *Ibid*. p.188
- [157] *Ibid*.
- [158] *ibid*.
- [159] *ibid*.p.139
- [160] *ibid*.
- [161] *ibid*. p.143
- [162] Linnda R. Caporael, "Ergotism: The Satan Loosed in Salem?" *Science* Vol. 192 (2 April 1976)
- [163] *ibid*.
- [164] Kai T. Erikson, *Wayward Puritans; A study in the sociology of Deviance*, (John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 1996) p.144
- [165] *ibid*.
- [166] *Ibid*. p.145
- [167] *Ibid*.
- [168] *Ibid*. p.147
- [169] Exodus 22:18
- [170] R. Godbeer, *The Salem witch Hunt: A brief history with documents*. (Bedford St. Martin's Press 2011) p. 11,
- [171] Maggie Rosen, "A Feminist Perspective on the History of Women as Witches" p.24
- [172] R. Godbeer, "Witchcraft in British America. In B.P, Levack (Ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of witchcraft in early modern Europe and Colonial America* (393 – 411). (Oxford, UK: The Oxford University Press. 2013)
- [173] Patti Wigington, "Bridget Bishop – the First to Die in Salem Witch trials" (ThoughtCo 2018)

[174]Rosen, p.24

[175]Patricia Hill Collins, "Controlling images and Black Women's oppression" Nelson's Sociology pg. 45.

[176]*ibid.* p.27

[177]*ibid.*

[178]*ibid.*p.28

[179]Cæsare Lombroso, The Female Offender (D. Appleton and Company 1898) p.109

[180]Carol Smart, "Criminological Theory: its ideology and implications concerning women" (British Journal of Sociology Volume 28 Number 1 1977) p.10

[181]*ibid.*

[182]*ibid.* p7

[183]*ibid.*

[184]*ibid.* 13

[185]*ibid.*

