

Perjuriū Maleficis: The Great Salem Scapegoat

by Alec Head

The Salem Witch Trials, often heralded as a sign of a religious community delving too deep into superstition, were hardly so simple. While certainly influenced by religion, the trials drew upon numerous outside elements. Though accusations were supposedly based in a firm setting of religious tradition, an analysis of individual stories—such as those of Rebecca Nurse, John Alden, and George Burroughs—shows that the accused were often targeted based on a combination of either fitting the existing image of witches, personal feuds, or prior reputations.

The Puritans of Salem considered themselves to be “God’s chosen people,” building a new land, a heaven on earth.¹ As with many endeavors in the New World, the Puritans faced innumerable struggles and hardships; their path would never be an easy one. However, rather than accepting their hurdles through a secular perspective, the Puritans viewed matters through a theological lens to explain their difficulties. While other, non-Puritan colonies faced similar challenges, the Puritans took the unique stance that they lived in a “world of wonders,” in which God and Satan had hands in the daily lives of humanity.² In effect, this led to desperate—eventually deadly—searches for scapegoats.

Upon his arrival in Salem, Reverend Samuel Parris publicly insisted that the hardships were neither by chance nor mere human hand. After all, if they were God’s chosen people, any opposition must have been instigated by the devil.³ Satan would not simply content himself with individual attacks. Rather, Parris insisted, grand conspiracies were formed by diabolical forces to destroy all that the Puritans built. Preaching that the final battle drew ever nearer, he urged the Puritans to beware their enemies. Some were easy to identify; French and Wabanaki Indian forces, with whom they had ongoing conflicts, made clear representatives of Satan.⁴ Others, rather conveniently, were any who spoke against Parris, who wielded fear in ways that advanced his own power and standing within Salem.⁵

¹ Mary Norton, “They Called it Witchcraft,” *The New York Times*, Oct. 31, 2002, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/10/31/opinion/they-called-it-witchcraft.html>

² David Hall, “A World of Wonders” in *Worlds of Wonder: Days of Judgment*, (Harvard University Press, 1990).

³ Elaine Breslaw, *Tituba: Reluctant Witch of Salem: Devilish Indians and Puritan Fantasies*, (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 94.

⁴ Norton, “They Called it Witchcraft”

⁵ Emerson Baker, *A Storm of Witchcraft: The Salem Trials and the American Experience*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 15.

Despite a prescribed Puritanical disdain for all things magical, Salem's interest in the occult was on the rise.⁶ Salemites who focused primarily on practices traditionally considered white magic, such as fortune-telling and healing, nonetheless flouted Puritan dogma and authority. Various theories for the prevalence of occult ritual in Salem have been hypothesized by historians. Some, such as Paul Boyer, suggest Reverend Parris' slave, Tituba, represented an exotic presence and brought knowledge of voodoo to the town.⁷ Elaine Breslaw, on the other hand, alleges that such practices more closely mirrored traditional English ritual, and that Tituba's only knowledge of such came from her former mistress, an Englishwoman.⁸ Regardless, Parris soon began preaching in opposition to even the most innocuous of rituals, claiming they opened Salem to conspiratorial threat of maleficium, or evil magic.

Fire and brimstone notwithstanding, a group of girls decided to play a simple magical game. The group, Elizabeth "Betty" Parris (daughter of Reverend Parris), Abigail Williams, Elizabeth Hubbard, Ann Putnam, Mary Walcott, and Mercy Lewis, sought to divine the faces of their future husbands.⁹ They broke an egg into a Venus glass, and were stunned when it took the form of a coffin. Betty Parris soon thereafter fell into a series of fits, potentially associated with anxiety born of her rebellious act.

The other girls consulted with Tituba to create a witch cake in order to practice countermagic and determine who cursed Betty.¹⁰ Salem society widely assumed that due to Tituba's Arawak heritage, she would have knowledge of witchcraft. Due in large part to the Wabanaki conflict, Indians and the devil were inextricably linked in the Puritan mind, to the point that the devil was often described as having taken the form of an Indian.¹¹ Unfortunately, the continued magical practice worsened Betty's condition, and the other girls soon became afflicted as well. Reverend Parris, rather than accept his daughter's role in the practice, simply amplified his teachings.

Power soon became the most desired commodity in Salem. By continuing his fearmongering, Parris opportunistically consolidated more power upon himself.¹² To distance his family from wrongdoing, he emphasized the idea of Tituba as an outside corrupting force on his daughter and the other girls.¹³ Subsequently arrested, Tituba discovered a power of her own on the witness stand. Rather than defend herself to the end, as had some who were accused, Tituba authored a tale detailed enough to make even the most successful fantasy writers envious. Confessing nigh-innumerable acts of

⁶ Breslaw, *Tituba*, 94.

⁷ Paul Boyer, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft*, (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1976), 181.

⁸ Breslaw, *Tituba*, 90, 94, 96.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹¹ Norton, "They Called it Witchcraft"

¹² Breslaw, *Tituba*, 95.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 112.

witchcraft, she held the ear (and arguably, the sword) of Salem for days.¹⁴ Per Tituba, covens of witches met in the woods to plot dastardly vengeance upon the godly Puritans, all in the name of the devil. Parris, Tituba claimed, was correct all along in assuming a conspiracy to be afoot. While her claims of a book filled with names of those making Faustian bargains for magic initially placed all power within Tituba's hands, said power soon diffused throughout Salem as neighbors turned on one another.¹⁵

What started with clear evidence (such as herbs or magical tools) and discernible rituals soon faded into subjective chaos. Trials initially required scant evidence, such as tools used in rituals and birthmarks deemed "witch marks," used to suckle familiars, or impish animals said to be companions of witches.¹⁶ Eventually, even this evidence was considered unnecessary, and was thereafter replaced by spectral evidence. Those who claimed to be tormented or afflicted by a witch would step forward and testify that they had seen the spectral form of said witch appearing before them. This testimony was enough to indict—and in many cases, convict and execute—witches. Cotton Mather appeared to be conflicted regarding non-concrete evidence. He contradicted himself on the topic of spectral evidence more than once, at times accepting its implications, while at others denying them under the idea that witches may take the form of innocents. Furthermore, Mather was unable to make up his mind on an additional method of magical testing, in which the afflicted could be paraded in front of the accused, and at their touch cease their writhing; Mather refuted them initially as an act, yet later affirmed their accuracy.¹⁷

One overarching theme in patterns of accusations, that of past grievances, began to take form surrounding the accused. Nearly everything that went wrong required scapegoats in the form of witches, and the solutions were made rather convenient if those they had grudges against had cast curses on them. The majority of initial accusations and subsequent counter-accusations were characterized by factionalism and feuding. Clashes between families that went back generations were handled by crying witchcraft, a tool also used to cope with recent political upheavals.¹⁸

Other women, determined by their neighbors to fit the standard mold for witches—predominantly widows, unmarried women, and those who were married yet remained barren or mostly barren—were persecuted.¹⁹ A group of 172 women were accused of witchcraft yet never formally charged. Judges presiding over this group

¹⁴ Ibid., 105.

¹⁵ Ibid., 114.

¹⁶ Cotton Mather, "Witchcraft at Salem: Cotton Mather and Spectral Evidence" in *A Documentary History of Religion in America to 1877*, Third Ed. Editors Edwin S. Gaustad and Mark A. Noll, (Grand Rapids: Williams B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 103-104.

¹⁷ Frances Hill, *A Delusion of Satan: The Full Story of the Salem Witch Trials*, (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1997), 164-165.

¹⁸ Boyer, *Salem Possessed*, 179-180.

¹⁹ Baker, *Storm of Witchcraft*, 127.

were supposedly so convinced of their innocence they did not bother bringing them to trial. That many others were brought to trial and convicted on accusations without empirical evidence implies that some pre-existing trait of those arrested made them stand out, even before trials. The accused were predominantly women, as per tradition, drawing contrast to the men accused, such as John Alden and George Burroughs.²⁰

During the trial of Rebecca Nurse, the judge determined for unknown reasons to contradict past trials, rejecting spectral evidence. With a lack of witch marks discovered when examined—a thorough process—there appeared to be no evidence on which to try Nurse. Rather than dropping the case outright, the judge passed petitions around town, asking her neighbors to speak for or against her. With the majority signing that Rebecca was “upright and unwitchlike [*sic*],” she was found not guilty.²¹ This method reflected the writings of Cotton Mather on upstanding citizens. During one of his phases during which he opposed spectral evidence, Mather insisted that tangible, legal evidence be provided for cases, especially for individuals of good repute.²² However merciful this appeared, it must be clarified that Mather went on to give examples of such evidence, including such circumstantial signs as drunkenness, which he believed allowed witchcraft to manifest more easily. It thus stands to reason that had her neighbors complained over some minute detail of Rebecca Nurse’s personality flaws, she would have been easily convicted.

Such systems of evidence gave inordinate power to the accusers. While it is impossible to determine historically whether they truly suffered symptoms or merely acted to portray them, those afflicted would otherwise have had little say in Salem. Prior to the witch trials, women in Salem had no legal standing; the court required the husbands or fathers of accusers to pursue cases on their behalf.²³ Others, such as the poor, were given their chance to flip Salem upside down following Tituba’s testimony that she saw women wearing clothes marking them as upper class (as Salem laws at the time prevented lower classes from wearing such finery, even if they owned it) and members of the clergy.²⁴ The poor, traditionally the primary group accused of witchcraft, were given a new power of agency through testimony. Through such, those who had been marginalized in Puritan society were given voices of authority.

Rebecca Nurse’s case, and the rejection of spectral evidence that accompanied it, served to undermine the credibility and authority of her accusers. Should they fail to wrest control back, their newfound agency would be lost. Thus, the moment Rebecca’s

²⁰ Carol Karlson, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1987).

²¹ Marion Starkey, *The Devil in Massachusetts: A Modern Enquiry into the Salem Witch Trials*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1949), 159.

²² Mather, “Spectral Evidence,” 103-104.

²³ Baker, *Storm of Witchcraft*, 98-100.

²⁴ Breslaw, *Tituba*, 120.

verdict was read as “not guilty,” her accusers burst into chaos, screaming and flailing their arms in apparent torment.²⁵ Despite the utter lack of motive for Nurse to afflict the girls at such timing, and no evidence showing she had anything to do with their behavior, the judge was swayed, and made comments encouraging the jury to reconsider. They did so, and Rebecca was found guilty of witchcraft; the torment apparently ceased. Governor Phips, noting the extreme circumstances, intended to grant her a reprieve from execution. Signing it and sending it off, he was shortly thereafter met by Nurse’s accusers, who swore their torment resumed the moment he signed the reprieve, leading them to convulsions of pain.²⁶ Frightened by what he had apparently spared, Phips immediately recalled the reprieve order. Rebecca Nurse was hanged July 19, 1692.

A case of one’s reputation preceding oneself is an understatement regarding the arrest of John Alden. Well known throughout the New World, Alden was the son of the prestigious John Alden I, cooper of the *Mayflower*. Notably, John Alden II was not a Puritan, nor had he ever set foot in Salem. Alden was on his way back from failed negotiations with the French, who along with their Indian allies had taken captives for ransom, including Alden’s son.²⁷ Given safe passage by the French, Alden exploited the opportunity, seized a French ship, and returned home without the captives. This, unfortunately for Alden, rapidly spread by rumor to Salem.

Alden’s poor reputation soon became fertile ground for distant accusations by Thomas Putnam, Mary Warren, and others. Rumors were joined by the sermons of Cotton Mather, cautioning Puritans from even straying to the edges of Puritan land.²⁸ Even doing so briefly risked being taken control of by Satan. Though he was not a Puritan himself, this served as justification against Alden, who had spent considerable time in the frontier. Mather’s words were bolstered by the testimony of Abigail Hobbs, who declared that the misfortunes in the ongoing war with the Wabanaki were a direct result of witchcraft.²⁹

Due to being a prominent, wealthy, and successful man, the accusing women and Thomas Putnam were said to hate the very idea of Alden, despite never having met him. Alden defended himself when he was accused by asking why he would torment those he had never met and was met with deafening silence. Alden’s arrest warrant shows that he was arrested May 31, 1692.³⁰ He was described as “...guilty of witchcraft in cruelly tortureing & afflicting several of their Children and others ... Apprehend the

²⁵ Starkey, *Devil in Massachusetts*, 160.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 164.

²⁷ Louise Breen, *Transgressing the Bounds: Subversive Enterprises among the Puritan Elite in Massachusetts, 1630-1692*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 205.

²⁸ Baker, *Storm of Witchcraft*, 107.

²⁹ Mary Norton, *In the Devil’s Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2002), 114.

³⁰ John Hathorne, “Warrant for the Apprehension of John Alden,” *Salem Witch Trials Documentary Archive and Transcription Project*, Accessed Jan. 18, 2017, http://salem.lib.virginia.edu/texts/tei/swp?div_id=n6.

body of the said John Alden and Imediately bring him before us to Answer what shall be objected ag't him in that behalfe... [sic]." Among his accusers were Mary Walcott, Mercy Lewis, Abigail Williams, Ann Putnam, Elizabeth Booth, and Mary Warren. Later, Alden's name would be on a list of the accused, which ironically read, "Capt. Aldin complaint of a long time... [sic]."³¹

Alden's self-proclaimed victims declared him to be a highly ranked member of the magical community, as evidenced by his dealings with the French, who, as mentioned prior, were considered to be in league with the devil.³² That the negotiation took place at all was deemed far more important than the negotiation itself, given how poorly it went. In fact, the existence of Alden's connections to the French and their Indian allies would haunt him throughout the proceedings.

Salem first put Alden through a series of preliminary measures to establish his witch nature prior to arrest. Keeping a full account of the proceedings, Alden set the scene:

Those wenches being present, who plaid their juggling tricks, falling down, crying out, and staring in Peoples Faces; the Magistrates demanded of them several times, who it was of all the People in the Room that hurt them? one of these Accusers pointed several times at one Captain Hill ... the same Accuser had a Man standing at her back to hold her up; he stooped down to her Ear, then she cried out, Aldin, Aldin afflicted her; one of the Magistrates asked her if she had ever seen Aldin, she answered no...³³

It was clear the witness accusing Alden was coached, though by whom remains unknown.

When pushed for more information, Alden's accusers fell into established patterns of rumors and hearsay. It was said that "he sells Powder and Shot to the Indians and French, and lies with Indian Squaes, and has Indian Papooses [sic]."³⁴ In this, the true motivation for the accusations came out. His reputation had indeed preceded him, to an extent worth levying witchcraft charges against him.

Regardless of the threat posed to him, it is clear that Alden considered himself to be far above the petty Puritans. His account included people who called him out as "...a bold fellow with his Hat on before the Judges..."³⁵ In fact, displaying utter disdain, he stated that the judges seemed to have no more legal training than clerks. Made to look

³¹ "List of Accused and Accusers," *A Guide to the Online Primary Sources of the Salem Witch Trials*, Accessed Jan. 18, 2017, <http://www.17thc.us/primarysources/document.php?id=222>.

³² Breen, *Transgressing the Bounds*, 206.

³³ John Alden, "Captain John Alden's Narrative" in *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases*, Editor George Burr, (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2012), Kindle Loc. 6630.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, Loc. 6645.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

upon those writhing in their convulsions, he noted that they immediately stopped as he made eye contact.³⁶ He arrogantly reiterated his innocence and speculated that their suffering was God's providence, as was the "suffering of these Creatures to accuse Innocent persons."³⁷ Brought to a nearby tavern for more proof of his crimes, Alden was ordered to touch the afflicted, who encountered a cessation of fits immediately.³⁸ This was seen as definitive proof, conflicting with other sources claiming fits could only be stopped by contact with the most pious members of society. It seems the touch tests could mean anything accusers wished them to, in order to inspire arrests.

Thankfully for his own sake, Alden observed the direction the witch hunts were going. Noting perhaps what little evidence was needed to arrest him, he likely assumed that it would be enough to convict him. With the assistance of friends, Alden broke out from jail and fled to New York.³⁹ His location was well known, and he remained in the public view. Not only is it clear that Salem officials did not bring him back, there is no record indicative of an attempt to do so.⁴⁰ This implies that officials were not as vehement about the trial of Alden, potentially not even believing the charges against him. Alden eventually returned, after the mania died down, and all charges against him were dropped.⁴¹ Despite the former push for executions, it became clear that many judges were less than sure of their convictions when removed from the heat of the moment.

Less fortunate than Alden was the fate of George Burroughs. A former minister of Salem, Burroughs was forced from his position over his apparent theological developments. Burroughs, arrested a month and a day before Alden, marked a changing point as justification for the whole endeavor. Had only women been accused, they would not have been seen as competent enough for a widespread conspiracy; Burroughs' arrest justified arresting the women.⁴² As a minister, he was quickly established as the coven leader to which Tituba alluded.

Like Alden, Burroughs went into the witch hunt surrounded by rumors. Significantly, rumors spread about his theology which led to his initial departure from Salem. Cotton Mather makes reference to the parish quarrel, though leaves out details present in other sources; given his usually judgmental nature, this perhaps implies that he, at least, was unaware.⁴³

³⁶ Hill, *Delusion of Satan*, 145.

³⁷ Alden, "John Alden's Narrative" Loc. 6660.

³⁸ Hill, *Delusion of Satan*, 145.

³⁹ Alden, "John Alden's Narrative" Loc. 6678.

⁴⁰ Thomas Brattle, "Things to Wonder At: Letter of Thomas Brattle," in *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases*, Editor George Burr, (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2012), Kindle Loc. 3391.

⁴¹ Alden, "John Alden's Narrative" Loc. 6678.

⁴² Breen, *Transgressing the Bounds*, 207.

⁴³ Cotton Mather, "His Relation to the Salem Trials: The Wonders of the Invisible World," in *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases*, Editor George Burr, (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2012), Kindle Loc. 4021.

When brought to trial, Burroughs was questioned on theological matters, with many early questions having naught to do with witchcraft. Of note, only his eldest child had been baptized.⁴⁴ When asked when he'd last taken the Lord's Supper, he responded that he could not remember. He later clarified that he refused the Lord's Supper at churches where infants were baptized.⁴⁵ It was clear to those listening that he'd either sold his soul to the devil or become an Anabaptist, at a time when the two were effectively synonymous.

Mary Warren accused Burroughs of tormenting her over the previous month in spectral form. In her testimony, she clarified that Burroughs was the leader of the group, sealing his fate. Given as proof of his leadership was a description of a vision in which she "saw and hard him blow a Trumpett [sic]" and "Capt Allding [sic]" among others appeared.⁴⁶ This contrasts with the evident lack of interest to secure Alden following his escape, implying a contradiction in the evidence and its relevance.

During Burroughs' trial, Mary Lacey Jr. failed to describe a traditional devil's sacrament, despite insisting she observed Burroughs take it.⁴⁷ Although it was clear she had no knowledge of the matter, she was still believed when she too made accusations of Burroughs being the leader of the witch conspiracy, as it fit the narrative the magistrates sought to hear. Cotton Mather noted that Burroughs was "...Accused by five or six of the Bewitched, as the Author of their Miseries; he was Accused by eight of the Confessing Witches, as being an Head Actor at some of their Hellish Rendezvouzes, and one who had the promise of being a King in Satans Kingdom, now going to be Erected... [sic]."⁴⁸ Whereas Alden was said to arm Indians with weapons of physical war against the Puritans, Burroughs was said to lead a spiritual—and thus more important—war.⁴⁹ George Burroughs was found guilty of witchcraft and hanged August 19, 1692.⁵⁰

Throughout the witch trials, it became increasingly clear that the justice served was a farce. Perhaps John Alden was correct when he derided the judges as being untrained. The magistrates were far from impartial, effectively acting as inquisitors. One went so far as to refuse aid to a fainting defendant mid-trial, stating that if she was strong enough to torment others, then she was strong enough for a trial.⁵¹ Indirectly

⁴⁴ Bernard Rosenthal, *Salem Story: Reading the Witch Trials of 1692*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 130.

⁴⁵ Breen, *Transgressing the Bounds*, 208.

⁴⁶ Mary Warren, "Mary Warren v. George Burroughs, John Alden, Elizabeth Cary, and Ann Pudeater," *Salem Witch Trials Documentary Archive and Transcription Project*, Accessed Jan. 18, 2017, http://salem.lib.virginia.edu/texts/tei/swp?div_id=n6

⁴⁷ Norton, *In the Devil's Snare*, 233.

⁴⁸ Mather, "Wonders of the Invisible World," Loc. 4021.

⁴⁹ Breen, *Transgressing the Bounds*, 207.

⁵⁰ Hill, *Delusion of Satan*, 229.

⁵¹ Frances Hill, *The Salem Witch Trials Reader*, (Cambridge: Da Capo Publishing, 2000), 69-70.

declaring her guilty, this cast off even the semblance of impartiality. In many cases, the magistrates skipped bond processes altogether in cases where it ought traditionally to have been offered.⁵² This demonstrates a passion or desire to see the accused locked up, even at the expense of morals. This flew in contrast with the moral basis given for the trials themselves. It also demonstrates another instance of the magistrates' inexperience in such positions, as either they made a conscious decision to defy legal norms or were unaware of them.

During the late stages of the trials, the accusers found themselves discredited. Governor Phips ordered a stop to the use of spectral evidence when such was brought against his wife; thirty cases were dismissed immediately, with another twenty-three of the remaining twenty-six found not guilty.⁵³ The other three were found guilty due to confession, though Phips granted reprieves of execution. Soon thereafter he gave the order that those imprisoned and awaiting trial be released.

The war with the French and Wabanaki continued for six years after the trials, though by the trials' end, it had slowed and was turning in favor of the English.⁵⁴ As such, the need for a diabolical conspiracy as scapegoat faded. Within five years of the trials, one judge and twelve jurors apologized, and the colony held an official day of fasting and prayer to atone for the grave injustices they caused. While a lovely sentiment, nothing could erase the crimson stain left by the executions of innocents caught up in a world of past grievances, stereotypes, and scapegoats. They were sacrificed as part of the *Perjurius Maleficis* - the lie of witches.

⁵² Rosenthal, *Salem Story*, 53.

⁵³ Hill, *Delusion of Satan*, 200-203.

⁵⁴ Norton, "They Called it Witchcraft."