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### Public Shaming and Power Shifts in Salem

Public shaming has long been used in societies to maintain order in communities, and to enforce not only laws, but unspoken rules or societal constraints. However, while public shaming can be a valuable tool for communities, it can also lead to unjust rule – some might even call it mob rule. While many citizens of the United States tend to glorify democracy and the effects of democracy, the democratization of the justice system through public shaming has resulted in disastrous consequences in American history and promises dangerous repercussions if it continues to be used in the future. This claim is evidenced by an analysis of literary works from the seventeenth century and later which reveal a trend of bullying through public shaming. After a long absence from society, these unsettling trends seem to be reappearing in the twenty-first century.

In Salem, Massachusetts in 1692, too much reliance upon public punishment led to the disaster known as the Salem Witchcraft Trials. While witchcraft trials were not uncommon in the seventeenth century, the Salem trials stand out in history as the most disastrous because of the many deaths and executions which took place as a result of these trials. Because one of the Trials' most strident witnesses, Ann Putnam, confessed in 1706 to fabricating her testimony against alleged witches of Salem, I assume that at least some—perhaps most – of the afflicted young women of Salem were indeed faking their afflictions and falsely accusing others of witchcraft. If this was true, then it should be asked why so many young girls falsified

testimonies against innocent people and how they came to be in a position where they were able to do so.

An analysis of the documents left from this time period shows that these young girls may have gained this kind of power because the Salem Puritan leaders' reliance on public shaming as a way to expand their congregations. They attempted to scare their community into religious fervor by making the Salem trials public, by which they unintentionally gave power to the masses, masses that were unused to having such power, particularly to girls and young women, and this transfer of power ultimately resulted in the deaths of innocent people.

Puritan leaders in America may have decided to rely on public trials because they had a history of public justice, something that may not have been present in other witchcraft trials because of the unique environment in which the early settlers lived. During the seventeenth century, the line between public and private affairs was blurred. This is in large part because in order to create a strong community in the wilderness of the early American continent, families had to rely heavily on each other. Without a strong, unified community there was little chance of survival.

Even when the Puritans first settled in Massachusetts they knew the importance of sticking together as a community and their laws reflected this knowledge, emphasizing the importance of the family unit, and showing how involved the community really was in raising the next generation. To illustrate the Puritan's emphasis on community rather than the individual I will be looking at the laws set by the New Haven Colony, which were similar to the laws of other Puritan communities that felt that they had a duty to "contain the corruptions sown in human nature (Scott, 17). New Haven consequently set laws such as the following "If any man

have a stubborn rebellious son, . . . which will not obey the voyce of his father, or the voyce of his mother . . . such a son shall be put to death. . .” and that “That no persons shal be either contracted, or joyned in marriage before the intention of the parties proceeding therin, hath been three times published. . . and that no man unless he be a magistrate in this jurisdiction, or expressly allowed by the general court shall marry any persons. . . (19-20).” These types of laws which enforce the obedience of children (particularly boys), and control who can marry people allow the society more control over their population and allowed the survival of such communities through encouraging unity, whereas other communities which had no social order might have been torn apart by the lack of unity in such a wild country.

From these laws it is evident that public interference in matters of individual households was common, and it was important that everyone knew what was going on in everyone else’s lives in order to make sure that the community was healthy and unified. Noting the lack of privacy in affairs, it is therefore no surprise that a common form of punishment in the early seventeenth century was public shaming, as seen in Cotton Mather’s *Pillars of Salt* from 1699. This was a publication of narratives of criminals and their journeys into sin, which was published in order to help warn the public of the evils of sin and call them to repentance. This type of public shaming, and public examples, were used as a way to educate and enforce values and laws on the public. Mather and other colonial leaders did this through extracting testimonies from the condemned about how their small sins at the beginnings of their lives led to them becoming criminals. The story of Ester Rodgers is one example of how *Pillars of Salt* turned private individuals into public figures, making them an example of how small sins lead to “ways of wickedness” (Mather, 96). Rodgers, in her account (which was transcribed and edited by

someone in the clergy), begins her tale by relating how failing to keep the Sabbath holy, and failing give herself in secret prayer to God led her to commit infanticide twice (97-98). Similarly, the Salem witch trials would have served to publicize the way that small sins led to being chained to the devil through witchcraft and the Puritan leaders would have hoped the publicity would persuade the community to continue in righteousness or repent of their sins.

Puritan leaders may also have had another motive to make the witchcraft trials public. During the 1690s, Puritan congregations were beginning to dwindle, causing Puritan ministers to look for ways to bring people back into the church and witchcraft became a tool in which leaders were able to do this. Evidence of this can be seen by looking at one Samuel Parris, a business man and Puritan minister who “had been experiencing difficulty in filling the village meetinghouse for weekly worship and even in persuading the congregation to pay his salary. However, most villagers turned to him for explanation and guidance during the witchcraft episode, and church attendance and Parris's stature in the village soon soared” (Mixon 182). This shows that the appearance of witches may have been seen as an opportunity to bring people back to church. Ministers likely would have emphasized the appearance of witches in the community as evidence of God chastening his people through affliction and would have subsequently enjoyed the popularity and increased attendance accompanying such trials.

However, the decision to make the witchcraft trials public, while possibly motivated by good intentions, was also unprecedented. As I mentioned earlier, the Salem witchcraft trials were not the first to occur and while they may not have been an everyday event, witchcraft trials were by no means unheard of. In fact, they were common enough in Europe that there were rules, handbooks, and conventions for such trials. One handbook was written by Richard

Bernard and titled, “A Guide to Grand-Jury Men.” This handbook was relied upon heavily by the Salem Puritan leaders, though the liberties they took in following Bernard’s advice may have contributed to the disastrous end result of the trials.

A written account from 1664 of the witchcraft trials from Bury St. Edmunds tells of the accusations and trials against accused witches Rose Cullender and Amy Denny, an account which was available and relied upon by the leaders of Salem during their witchcraft crisis. This detailed account walks the reader through how the evidence against these women was sorted out, and how the trials proceeded. While the trials share many similarities with the Salem witch trials, there are some specific differences between the Bury St. Edmunds trials and the Salem trials which may have led to the accusing girls’ abuse of power in Salem. Most importantly there is the difference of how the witnesses and the afflicted were questioned. While in Salem the afflicted and the accused were interrogated publically, in the Bury St. Edmunds trials the afflicted and the witnesses were questioned separately and privately from the accused – not publically. It was the public questioning of witness and the afflicted which ultimately compromised the integrity of the trials and led to public shaming which was taken advantage of by the young girls of Salem.

To illustrate this, I will begin with an analysis of the procedure followed in the Bury St. Edmunds trials. After their testimonies were written down, those in charge of the Bury St. Edmunds case talked to Rose Cullender, the accused, and questioned and examined her both physically and mentally. They found several physical abnormalities which were noted to be used against her. Then, after examining both witnesses and accused separately, the victims’ relatives

who had been witnesses to their fits and afflictions testified at the trials, but none of the afflicted were deemed well enough to testify themselves (Norton 36).

While there were several professed victims of these supposed witches, their trials and a decision about their deaths were not made in haste. Rather, several of the leaders heading the investigation such as Mr. Serjeant Keeling felt, at least initially, that there was insufficient evidence that the afflicted children were indeed bewitched and not just hallucinating. Additionally, he felt that if the accused were convicted only on the basis of the children's testimonies it would cause hysteria, "For if that might be allowed, no person whatsoever can be in safety, for perhaps they might fancy another person, who might altogether be innocent in such matters" (*A Tryal* 17). Keeling recognized that taking the afflicted child's word as truth would result in a transfer of power from those in charge of investigating charges of witchcraft to those who were making the accusations.

Therefore, more evidence was needed before conviction in order to avoid a widespread panic and free-flowing accusations of neighbor against neighbor. From this account, it would seem that the leaders such as Mr. Serjeant Keeling were hesitant to allow the afflicted more power than they already had. Immediately believing the afflicted on their testimony alone would indeed have allowed these children the power to continue to accusing any person in the community and would have set a dangerous precedent. This marks a crucial distinction between these witchcraft trials and the ones found in Salem.

In order to gather more evidence, the afflicted were brought again before the accused and experiments were performed such as blindfolding the afflicted and then bringing the accused and other people to touch them, testing them to see if the afflicted could tell which the accused was.

Leaders of Salem performed similar tests, likely using the trials of Amy Denny and Rose Cullender as precedent, but leaders such as John Hale who wrote a reflection on the Salem witchcraft trials expressed his belief that such tests may not have been adequate. Although he was instrumental in the beginnings of the trials, he himself admitted in these reflections that he worried that he “unwittingly encourage[ed] of the sufferings of the innocent” by believing the witnesses too quickly (Hale 11).

In the case of the Salem witchcraft trials Puritan leaders who took it upon themselves to direct the Salem trials in their own way, with their own rules, following some, but not all of the precedents set by cases such as the Bury St. Edmunds case. While Salem leaders looked to men such as Richard Bernard, author of “A Guide to Grand-Jury Men,” a handbook which was meant to inform community leaders about how to conduct such trials, they did not always follow all of his advice. Among other things, Bernard specifically advised the leaders of Salem that the witnesses and suspects should be questioned, “apart, & not in the hearing one of another” (Norton 42). Rather than interrogating the witnesses and suspects separately and then comparing accounts, the witnesses and suspects were questioned together in a public hearing. This allowed the witnesses and accusers to be present for the other's hearing and omitted the key evidence of whether different witness testimonies were consistent with each other because of the potential for each witness to be contaminated by having heard the testimony of others in court which could likely change their memory or perception of events.

During the Salem trials, most of the afflicted were young women, and as such they received a lot of attention from the community, a side effect of the publicity of the trials. Their testimonies were sought after and they found that they had the power to make life very difficult

for other people. Interestingly, many women who were accused as witches were often disputing with another, more powerful family in the community. This raises the question of whether or not the accusations of witchcraft began as type of political game (Norton 23, 47). Regardless of whether the afflictions and accusations began as a political game, the public trials led to a sort of empowerment for young women. Mary Norton notes that before the witchcraft trials “Women, especially young women, were not expected to speak unbidden in either court or church – indeed, the latter, they were often not expected to speak at all” (Norton 55). In the seventeenth century, the woman’s domain was the home, especially the kitchen, cellar and pantry (Ulrich 13). Outside of the home, women’s sphere of power was drastically reduced. Plausibly, these women who felt that they lacked a say in their community may have felt that this newfound attention was a tool that they could wield which would give them greater influence in the Salem community.

And once the accusations of witchcraft began, the accusing girls who were supposedly afflicted did indeed find that they had a new role in the community. The leaders’ attention and reliance on their testimonies resulted in the realization of the aforementioned Mr. Serjeant Keeling’s fear of young people’s ability to spread panic and hysteria. By so quickly relying on these young women’s testimonies, the Salem leaders gave them power in the community which they quickly seized and wielded, quite possibly for their own political or personal purposes. Because their word was taken as truth, they could accuse several different people, one after another, resulting in innocent deaths.

Since the Salem trials, the practice of public shaming seems to have slowly faded out with time, possibly due to increased scrutiny and criticism of the practice. Indeed, in 1787

Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, actively sought for public shaming's demise, saying, "Ignominy is universally acknowledged to be a worse punishment than death" (qtd. in Ronson). However, recently, with the rise of social media and the prevalence of the internet, public shaming appears to be making a comeback – a concerning trend which becomes more evident when we apply America's historical past to the present.

In fall of 2015 at Yale University, a faculty member sent out an email to students reminding them to be responsible when dressing up for Halloween. What was probably a well-intentioned email quickly became a controversial trending topic across the nation. Students from Yale responded forcefully and negatively to the email, tweeting hateful tweets to and about the author of the email, and demanding her resignation and a public apology (Friedersdorf). The same year, students at the University of Missouri demanded through social media and public protests the resignation of the president of the university due to what the students perceived as failure to combat racism on campus (Eligon).

In 2015, a father took a fifteen second video of his teenage daughter whose hair he had recently chopped off in punishment for sending a boy a somewhat revealing picture of herself. The video was an attempt to publically shame her. Sadly, the father's attempt at discipline through public shaming resulted in the girl's suicide when she jumped from a bridge over a highway and consequently died the next day from her injuries while in the hospital (Hess). Ironically, a scrolling look through the comments section on almost any article about this tragedy shows a plethora of people attempting to either publically shame any teenage girls who have found themselves in similar situations, or on the other side, to publically shame the father for his actions.

These kinds of events, despite taking place mainly on social media, are similar to the events in Salem. The invention of social media has given people the ability to band together to create a powerful online presence just like how the Puritan leaders' reliance on the young women of Salem gave the girls a powerful presence in the community. In both situations a form of justice was carried out according to these newly empowered groups and people were hurt – whether innocent or guilty.

Looking at modern events in context of the Salem trials may also help illuminate the perspective of these young women as teenagers who found power in publically shaming others and ultimately abused it in a form of bullying. The internet and social media has ushered in a new era of public shaming – one in which the virtual world deals out very real consequences. Parents have begun using social media to punish their children, posting embarrassing photos or videos, using exposure to the virtual world to shame their children. While this practice has become quite controversial because of the growing tendency for publically shamed children to commit suicide, public shaming is being used for more than disciplining wayward children. Public shaming on social media is now also being used as a sort of democratized justice system where masses of people, especially young people, can target one person, often a stranger, for breaking a social custom or norm, as seen at Yale University and The University of Missouri.

The reality is that the apparent abuse of power by the young women of Salem was avoidable as is the abuse of power by thousands of social media users. Had the Salem Puritan leaders not chosen to ignore the sound advice from preceding witchcraft trials to keep the trials private, these girls might not have attained the type of power that ultimately overthrew the soundness of the justice system and allowed innocent people to die. Unfortunately, while the

young women of Salem eventually lost their power, the power given to millions of online users created by modern day public shaming does not seem to be going away, and innocent people will continue to be hurt because of that power.

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