

The Destructive Path of Gossip in the Salem Witchcraft Trials

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The Salem witchcraft trials of 1692 began as a group of young girls in Salem Village experienced violent episodes of “fits,” subsequently blaming such attacks on other people in the area. The afflicted people eventually extended their accusations to people who did not reside in Salem Village but instead lived in other towns and with whom they seemingly were unacquainted. Susannah Martin of Amesbury, Massachusetts was executed in 1692 after four primary accusers named her as a witch. Mary Walcott, Abigail Williams, Ann Putnam Jr., and Mercy Lewis, ranged in age from 9 to 17 years.

The girls engaged as active players in the spread of gossip from parents to children, neighbors to neighbors, peers to peers, and overheard talk during town events. Gossip played a major, destructive role in starting and extending the Salem witchcraft trials as reputations based on rumor and slander were taken as truth and evidence in court proceedings. The route of gossip in the Martin case is significant in understanding how the young girls of Salem Village could accuse an old widow of Amesbury to the point of execution. How did Walcott, Williams, Putnam, and Lewis know Martin, who lived more than twenty miles north and had no appearances in Salem Village, well enough to charge her with witchcraft? Gossip functioned as an instigator for many cases within the Salem witch trials, with the Susannah Martin case showing the importance of both family relationships and probable routes of gossip.

The case of Susannah Martin proved that gossip and rumors affected reputations as accusations developed over many years, with some dating as far back as thirty years. In order to understand Martin in regards to the Salem witchcraft trials, it is critical to analyze her background and her activity in the years leading up to her execution. Susannah North, born in England in 1625 and the daughter of Richard and Joan North,

married George Martin and lived in Salisbury, Massachusetts. She had eight children and lived a modest life both socially and economically.¹

Besides an unnamed offense at a fine of 20 shillings in 1648, the court records showed that she did not appear in criminal reports until early in 1668. In 1668, her father died and left his estate to his second wife instead of his two daughters, Susannah Martin and Mary Jones. Martin and Jones both insisted that the new will was unfair and became involved in protracted litigation in order to collect a split portion of the inheritance.² They continued to protest the will that left them a significantly smaller amount than their stepmother. After their stepmother died in 1671, her will passed the estate down to her granddaughter, of no relation to Jones or Martin. Following the change of estate, Martin imitated legal proceedings “for unwarranted possession of the North estate”³ by suing the granddaughter and her husband.⁴ The court system passed Martin’s case between the General Court, the county court, and the Court of Assistants until, in 1674, it ruled against Martin and her family by upholding the inheritance set by the previous wills.⁵ Susannah Martin and Mary Jones did not win the case and were therefore left with relatively little inheritance from their father.⁶

Meanwhile, in 1669, her name appeared as charged with the suspicion of witchcraft and was brought to the Court of Assistants.⁷ Following a public insult from William Sargent accusing Martin of fornication, infanticide, and witchcraft, her husband,

¹ Carol Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1998), 89-90.

² George F. Dow, ed., *Records and Files of the Quarterly Courts of Essex County* (Salem, Massachusetts: 1911-1975), 5: 297.

³ Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape*, 92

⁴ Dow, et al., *Records and Files*, 5: 148

⁵ Dow, et al., *Records and Files*, 5: 235-236

⁶ Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape*, 90-93

⁷ Dow et al., *Records and Files*, 4: 133

George Martin, sued him for slander of his wife.⁸ The court proceedings split in two with one case of witchcraft and one case of slander. The court found William Sargent guilty of slander for fornication and infanticide and awarded Martin a monetary damage fee. In the case of witchcraft, it appeared that Martin was acquitted although the jury found her guilty. Her appearances in court diminished for the next several decades. The 1669 case created a reputation of Martin as a witch and was the first of many witchcraft accusations against her.⁹

At the time of the Salem witchcraft trials Martin was sixty-seven years old and been widowed for five years. She still resided in Amesbury, approximately twenty miles north of Salem Village, which, in the late 1600s, could have been a full day trip that few would have traveled, especially with children. Martin's connection in the Salem witch trials of 1692 started with the accusations from the afflicted girls of Salem, who insisted that her apparition appeared to them and encouraged them to become witches. The young children who accused Martin of being a witch likely knew of her reputation as well as pertinent information regarding her character that depicted her as a perfect target for witchcraft charges. They probably would not have known about Martin unless they had been engaged in a circle of gossip constituting family members who had connections with both Amesbury and Martin.

At the trial of Susannah Martin, eleven men and four women, including the four girls of Salem, testified about everything from recent occurrences to past incidents. To understand the role of gossip in the trial, it is necessary to study the older testimonies and

⁸ Dow, et al., Records and Files, 4: 129

⁹ Karlsen, The Devil in the Shape, 91

how those linked to the more recent accusations of the afflicted girls of Salem in regards to types of accusations and relationships between accusers.

The oldest testimony, which recounted an episode occurring approximately thirty years prior to 1692, was William Brown, “who testifying saith, That about on or to and thirty years ago Elizabeth his wif being a very rasional woman & sober & one that feard God”¹⁰ changed personality after having met Susannah Martin. During his wife’s first major encounter with Martin, she alleged “s’d susana martin vanisht a way aut of her sight w’ch put the s’d Elizabeth into a great fright after which time the sd martin did many tims afterward appere to her {at her house} and did much troubl her in any of her occasions.”¹¹ Following the first encounter Elizabeth claimed that Martin appeared to her and “it was as birds peking her Legs or priking her with the mosion of thayr wings and then it woold rise vp into her stumak with priking payn as nayls & pinnes of w’ch shee did bitterly complain and cry out.¹²

Such events occurred for some time after Elizabeth’s first meeting with Martin until their second major encounter. Brown repeatedly acknowledged that after his wife’s second encounter she had “ben vnder a straing kind of distemper & frensy vncapable of any rasional action though strong of body & helthy of body.”¹³ Throughout the Susannah Martin case it is evident that the main accusations of witchcraft against her consisted of apparitions followed by harmful attacks that left the victim distraught.

The testimony of Jarvis Ring displayed a second case that was similar to other accusations on Martin. His testimony included an incident that occurred “seven or eight

¹⁰ Bernard Rosenthal et al., eds., *Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt* (New York: Cambridge University Press: 2009), 257 (hereafter cited as RSWH)

¹¹ RSWH, 257

¹² RSWH, 257

¹³ RSWH, 258

years ago he had been several times afflicted in the night time by som body or som thing coming vp vpon him when he was in bed and did sorely afflict him by Lying vpon him and he could neither moue nor speake.”¹⁴ He concluded that Susannah Martin attacked him because “I did then see the pson [of Susa] na martin of Amsbery.”¹⁵

The previous cases against Susannah Martin from her neighbors in Amesbury, Massachusetts suggested the type of information that the afflicted girls of Salem Village potentially overheard. The girls proclaimed that Susannah Martin had appeared to them and hurt their bodies. All four of the afflicted girls claimed to have seen and been harmed by that apparition of Susannah Martin before her examination. They also showed signs of affliction during Martin’s examination on May 2, 1692, with all testifying that “susannah Martin did torment and afflect me most greuously in the time of hir examination for w’n she looked upon me parsonally she would strike me down or almost choake me.”¹⁶

Abigail Williams testified that “she hath severall times seen, & been afflicted by the apparition of Susannah Martin of Almsbury widow.”¹⁷ Ann Putnam Jr. attested that “there appered to me the Apperishtion of an old short woman that toald me hir name was martin and that she came from Amsbery who did Immediatly afflect me urging me to writ in hir book.”¹⁸ Mercy Lewis affirmed “there appeared to me the Apperishtion of a short old woman which tould me hir name was gooddy martin and that she came from Ambery

¹⁴ RSWH, 265

¹⁵ RSWH, 265

¹⁶ RSWH, 233

¹⁷ RSWH, 235

¹⁸ RSWH, 233-234

who did most grievously torment me by biting and pinching me urging me vehemently to writ in hir book.”¹⁹ Mary Walcott testified that

there Appered to me the apperishtion of a short old woman which tould me hir name was gooddy martin and that she came from Amsbery who did most grievously afflict & torment and afflict me by pinching and allmost choaking me to death urging me to writ in hir book or elce threating to kill me.²⁰

The testimonies against Susannah Martin by the afflicted girls of Salem Village paralleled the accusations of Martin’s acquaintances from Amesbury/Salisbury, Massachusetts showing a connection between the types of gossip circulating. Their testimonies reflected their accusations of others in the village as well as stories they heard of Martin’s previous apparitions in order for their accusations to seem more believable. The older stories presented a template for the types of accusations the girls could use when questioned about Martin. The similarity between the older testimonies and the recent testimonies showed that the gossip amongst older members of the community reached the ears of the young girls.

Once the girls knew what accusations were relevant to the Martin case, the final key to the puzzle, in the path of gossip, rested in family connections and relationships between the accusers. How did the information travel from Amesbury to Salem Village? A link between Amesbury and Salem through one previous accuser, Joseph Knight, detailed a probable connection between past accusations and recent accusations as well as the spread of gossip from one village to another.

The process of the Salem witch trials included accusations and testimonies, examination holds, and executions, which involved many different people. The probable

¹⁹ RSWH, 232

²⁰ RSWH, 235

link between the two villages consisted of people engaged in each stage of the trial. The connection among Joseph Knight, Mary Walcott, Nathaniel Ingersoll, and Thomas Putnam started with Richard and Anne Ingersoll of England, who migrated to Salem, Massachusetts. Richard and Anne Ingersoll had eight children, three of whom were involved in the later connections of the family: Alice, Bathsheba, and Nathaniel. The first and most important connection started with Bathsheba's marriage to John Knight in 1647 in Newbury.²¹ One of their eleven children was Joseph Knight (born 1652), who later became an accuser of Susannah Martin.²² Knight's suspicions began in 1686 when he suspected Martin of bewitching his horses. He and Nathaniel Clarke Jr. had gone "out into the woods together to fetch up horses [and] there met with Susana Martaine of Amsbury."²³ After their encounter with Martin, they had trouble with their horses, because they "could not git them over but there being a small knowle of land here: our horssees ran round about it the greatest parte of that daye."²⁴ Therefore, Knight concluded their previous encounter with Martin had caused her to bewitch his horses, further indicting her as a witch. What was Joseph Knight's connection to Salem Village that gives us one possible way that his beliefs of Susannah Martin traveled to the ears of the young girls?

Alice Ingersoll began the link between Joseph and Mary Walcott because she was the aunt of Joseph and the grandmother of Mary.²⁵ Mary was, of course, one of the four

²¹ Vital Records of Newbury, Massachusetts (Salem, Massachusetts: The Essex Institute: 1911) 250 (hereafter cited as Newbury VR)

²² Newbury VR, 269

²³ RSWH, 422

²⁴ RSWH, 422

²⁵ Alice Ingersoll married William Walcott in Salem, Massachusetts in 1630 and had a son Jonathan Walcott. Jonathan Walcott married Mary Sibley in 1664 in Salem Massachusetts. Walcott and Sibley had a daughter, Mary Walcott, born in 1675, see ancestry.com (<http://worldconnect.rootsweb.ancestry.com/cgi->

main accusers of Susannah Martin in Salem Village. It seems more than likely that gossip traveled from Knight in Newbury, just south of Amesbury, to Salem Village through aunts, uncles, and cousins to eventually fall on the ears of young Mary, a first cousin once removed.

The connection between Joseph Knight and Salem Village further extends to the Putnam family through the Walcott family. After his first wife died, Jonathan Walcott remarried in 1685 to Deliverance Putnam, the younger sister of Thomas Putnam.²⁶ Mary Walcott, then, had a family connection to Ann Putnam Jr., who became her step-cousin, and Mercy Lewis, the servant of the Putnam household. Thomas Putnam found himself in the middle of the Salem witchcraft crisis due to his daughter and servant's "fits." He also took part in the accusations of Susannah Martin by testifying that he "haue seen the marks of seuerall bittes and pinches which they said Susannah Martin did hirt them with."²⁷

Even if the previous connections did not occur, there is another probable link between the Knights of Newbury and the Ingersolls of Salem. Nathaniel Ingersoll, the uncle of Joseph Knight, held the position of deacon in Salem and played an extremely significant role in the Salem witchcraft trials. Ingersoll's tavern, which was where he lived, was used as a place of examination where the afflicted girls and many of the accused witches were brought. He also accused Susannah Martin of witchcraft as well as backed up the testimonies of the afflicted girls.

bin/igm.cgi?op=GET&db=adedge&id=I26580), Vital Records of Salem, Massachusetts (Salem, Massachusetts: The Essex Institute: 1911) 4: 307

²⁶ Salem VR, 4: 228

²⁷ RSWH, 234

Time and proximity of neighbors in early New England encouraged people to engage in gossip regardless of age and status. The Susannah Martin case presented an excellent example of how word spread from one village to another as it detailed the path of intricately woven family connections. It also showed the type of story that reached the ears of the afflicted, young girls of Salem. They accused Martin of the same crimes charged by her neighbors, who resided twenty miles north. Joseph Knight represented the main link as his family ties reached Salem to people intimately involved with the Martin case. Using the Martin case as an example, it is reasonable to assume that a relationship between gossip and accusations created and prolonged the hysteria of the Salem witchcraft trials of 1692.

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