

Suckling Familiars and Unnatural Protrusions  
*The Witch's Mark in the Salem Witchcraft Trials of 1692*

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She had been a witch ten years and then she opened her breast and the black man gave her two little things like young cats and she put them to her breast and suckled them they had no hair on them and had ears like a man (Susannah Sheldon, 1692)<sup>1</sup>

During the early months of the 1692 Salem witchcraft crisis, suckling animal familiars and witch's marks appeared in various accusations and confessions. The witch's mark was a condemning piece of evidence used in previous witchcraft trials in England and the colonies. Although statements about suckling animal familiars appeared often in 1692 Salem, the physical examination for the witch's mark ultimately proved unsuccessful. Due to the transient and inconclusive of the witch's mark, the magistrates instead relied on other types of legal proof to convict suspected witches.

Throughout most of European history, the Devil was a source of terror and fascination. During the Middle Ages, Europeans depicted the Devil as animal-like, with horns, a tail, and sharp teeth. After the sixteenth century, the English began to perceive the Devil as human-like, with the power to recruit witches. These human witches had animal familiars, which suckled blood from a "teat" on the witch's body. A teat was an unnatural protrusion of visible flesh used to nurse an animal familiar. During the seventeenth century, English criminal law increasingly convicted witches on the basis of physical evidence, like the witch's mark. Along with direct confessions, the presence of animal familiars and witches' marks were the most important pieces of legal proof used to convict a witch.<sup>2</sup>

English reliance on the witch's mark peaked during the 1645-1647 Essex County witchcraft trials. The lead witch-hunters, Matthew Hopkins and John Stearne, used the witch's mark as legal proof of guilt. In order to make a pact with the Devil, witches would allow an

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Rosenthal, *Records of the Salem Witch Hunt* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 293. Hereafter abbreviated as RSWH.

<sup>2</sup> Malcolm Gaskill, *Witchfinders* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 44, 59.

animal familiar to suckle their blood. During examinations and testimonies, accusers and confessors often conjured images of witches suckling animal familiars. In order to convict someone of having a witch's mark, a jury of matrons would examine the suspect's body for any unnatural protrusions. Later criticisms of Hopkins and Stearnes included their reliance on the witch's mark, since many 'innocent' people also had unusual protrusions.<sup>3</sup>

In the New England colonies, witchcraft trials also included suckling animal familiars and the witch's mark. As in England, in the colonies witches suckled "imps" on their breasts, directly intervening in the nursing process.<sup>4</sup> For example, in 1653 Elizabeth Godman expressed fear that the Devil would come to suck her, and in 1659 Job Tyler accused John Godfrey of turning into a bird and suckling his wife. During Eunice Cole's public whipping in 1656, Richard Ormsbury found "a blue thing like unto a teat" under her breast, but Cole claimed it was a sore and violently scratched it away. However, others persisted that Cole had a witch's mark, and in a later physical examination women found:

A place in her leg which was provable where she had been sucked by imps of the like, the second testifieth that they heard the whining of puppies or such like under her coats as though she had a desire to suck.<sup>5</sup>

During Elizabeth Morse's trial in 1680, a gatekeeper heard "a strange kind of noise, which was like a whelp sucking of the dam, or kittens sucking" the suspected witch.<sup>6</sup> Many of the residents of Essex County, Massachusetts, were probably familiar with previous witchcraft accusations and trials, and therefore the witch's teat. Consequently, reports of animal familiars and witches nursing familiars appeared often in 1692.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 107.

<sup>4</sup> John Demos, *Entertaining Satan*, 179-181. Hereafter abbreviated ES.

<sup>5</sup> David D. Hall, *Witch-hunting in Seventeenth Century New England* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1999), 64, 117, 216, 224. Hereafter abbreviated WH.

<sup>6</sup> Demos, *ES*, 141.

In fact, the Salem magistrates were knowledgeable about these past trials and English laws about witchcraft. According to John Hale, John Hathorne and Jonathan Corwin consulted “Learned Writers about witchcraft,” such as Joseph Keble and Michael Dalton.<sup>7</sup> Keble’s 1683 *An Assistance to Justices of the Peace* was the most up-to-date English law book. Drawing heavily on past English witchcraft commentaries, especially those of Dalton and Richard Bernard, Keble emphasized using physical evidence to convict a witch. In his section on “proof,” Keble discussed animal familiars and the witch’s mark. A witch’s familiar could be in the form of a human, “dog, cat, foal, fowl, hare, rat, toad...and to these their Spirits they give Names, and they meet together to Christen them.” Keble noted twice that witches would have “fed or rewarded their spirit” using “some big or little Teat upon their Body.” Besides suckling a teat, the Devil also left other marks on a witch’s body, which could appear and disappear. The witch’s mark had two main components: first, it was “insensible, and being pricked will not bleed,” and second, the marks were “often in [the witch’s] secretest parts, and therefore require diligent and careful search.” However, once found, a witch’s mark was full proof that a witch had a familiar and had “made a league with the Devil.”<sup>8</sup>

Accordingly, during the first month of the 1692 Salem witchcraft trials, Hathorne and Corwin frequently asked about animal familiars and suckling. On March 1, the magistrates examined Sarah Good, Sarah Osborne, and Tituba. During these crucial examinations, Hathorne and Corwin wanted one of the suspected witches to confess. Neither Good nor Osborne gave much insight into the world of witchcraft; however, later in the day the Indian slave Tituba confessed that she was a witch. Through her confession, suckling animal familiars entered the legal realm of the Salem witchcraft trials. Tituba’s confession was in essence a reconstruction of

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<sup>7</sup> John Hale, *A modest enquiry into the nature of witchcraft*, 415.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Keble, *An Assistance to Justices of the Peace, for Easier Performance of Their Duty* (London, 1683), 217-219.

the magistrates' leading questions, such as "doe not those Cats Suck you?" Tituba, as an illiterate slave, would not have been familiar with the precedent of nursing animal familiars, but she used the magistrate's questions to create shocking witchcraft tales. Although Tituba denied suckling an animal, she claimed that Sarah Good had a yellow bird that she would nurse "between the fore finger & Long finger upon the Right hand." Tituba explained that she made a pact with the Devil by signing his book. Tituba's emphasis on the Devil's book rather than the animal familiar was an underlying theme throughout the trials.<sup>9</sup>

Sarah Good's husband, William Good, and daughter, Dorothy Good, also accused Sarah Good of suckling animal familiars. William Good testified that Sarah had "a wart or tett a little below her Right shoulder which he never saw before."<sup>10</sup> William Good's testimony confirmed that an animal familiar's mark appeared on the body as a teat. Furthermore, on March 24 Dorothy Good—at four years of age—also confessed to practicing witchcraft. She alleged that her mother gave her "a little snake that used to suck on the lowest joint of [her] forefinger... where [the magistrates] observed, a deep red spot, about the bigness of a flea bite."<sup>11</sup> During the first month of the Salem witchcraft trials, Tituba and Dorothy Good confessed that witches suckled animal familiars, and William Good provided evidence of a witch's mark. However, until the establishment of the Court of Oyer and Terminer, the accusations of suckling could not be legally tested.

On March 19, when Deodat Lawson visited Salem, he noted that the afflicted girls saw witches "suckling [their] familiar in various places."<sup>12</sup> On Sunday, March 20, during a sermon, the afflicted girl Abigail Williams called out "Look where Goodwife C[orey] sits on the beam

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<sup>9</sup> RSWH, 134.

<sup>10</sup> RSWH, 141.

<sup>11</sup> RSWH, 156.

<sup>12</sup> Deodat Lawson, *A Brief and True Narrative*, in WH, 283.

suckling her yellow bird betwixt her fingers.”<sup>13</sup> The next day, Martha Corey was examined. During Corey’s examination, Betty Parris, Abigail Williams and Ann Putnam accused her of torturing them and affirmed, “she had a Yellow-Bird, that used to suck betwixt her Fingers,” which Corey denied.<sup>14</sup> For the next month, however, the afflicted girls no longer mentioned suckling animal familiars in their testimonies.

Almost a month later, on April 19, the magistrates received their third confession from Abigail Hobbs. Although Hobbs conjured images of “dogs & many creatures” in the shape of the Devil, when the magistrates asked “do not some creatures suck your body?” she denied the accusation. Instead, Hobbs confessed that animal familiars made her “put my hand” to the Devil’s book.<sup>15</sup> Hobbs’ confession followed Tituba’s confession of making a pact with the Devil through signing his book, rather than a familiar suckling blood. For the next month, the magistrates stopped questioning about suckling animal familiars during examinations, and instead focused on physical afflictions and signing the Devil’s book.

Susannah Sheldon was the only afflicted girl to report a witch suckling an animal familiar during her examinations. In the month of May, she accused 8 suspected witches—Dorcas Hoar, Sarah Buckley, Bridget Bishop, Mrs. English, Giles Corey, Martha Corey, John Willard, and Elizabeth Colson—of nursing an animal familiar. Sheldon’s preoccupation with suckling started on May 2 during Dorcas Hoar’s examination, two weeks after Abigail Hobbs denied that witches nursed animal familiars. Susannah Sheldon alleged that Hoar had two cats, and must have implied that they suckled Hoar. This accusation prompted the magistrates to ask Dorcas Hoar, “What do you say to those cats that suckt your breast,” and then “You do not call them cats, what are they that suck you?” Hoar denied suckling any animal, but then Susannah Sheldon and

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 283.

<sup>14</sup> RSWH, 148.

<sup>15</sup> RSWH, 190-192.

Abigail Williams “cried there was a blew bird gone into her back,” implying that one of Hoar’s familiars had returned to her.<sup>16</sup>

Later in the month on May 17, Susannah Sheldon gave a sworn deposition that a number of accused witches suckled animal familiars. Susannah Sheldon asserted that the Devil gave Sarah Buckley “two little things like young cats she put them to her breast and suckled them.” Bridget Bishop had a snake that “crep into her bosom” and Mistress English had a “yellow bird in her bosom.” Meanwhile, Giles Corey had two “tircles,”<sup>17</sup> which he put “to his breast and gave them suck.” The next night Martha Corey—who was previously accused of suckling a bird—“pulled out her breast and the black man gave her a thing like a blake pig it had no hair on it and she put it to her breast and gave it suck.” The next day on May 18, Susannah Sheldon reported that she saw John Willard, Elizabeth Colson, and an unidentified man suckling animals:

I saw this Willard suckle the Apparition of two black pigs on his  
breasts And this Colson suckled As It Appeared A Yellow bird this  
old man Which I knew not suckled A black snake.<sup>18</sup>

Although Susannah Sheldon later had the reputation of being untrustworthy, this accusation revealed a new dimension of the witchcraft story. Sheldon’s outburst of suckling scenarios most likely disturbed the magistrates and brought suckling animal familiars back to the forefront of their attention. Her testimony also came during a turning point of the witchcraft trials, since Governor William Phips had just arrived in Massachusetts. The implications of Sheldon’s testimony were a top priority when Phips commissioned the Court of Oyer and Terminer on May 27. A little more than a week after Susannah Sheldon’s disturbing tale of community members nursing animals, the magistrates ordered a proper physical examination, with one doctor and eight women. This examination followed physical examinations conducted

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<sup>16</sup> RSWH, 226.

<sup>17</sup> According to dictionary.com a “tercel” is a male hawk.

<sup>18</sup> RSWH, 294.

during previous witchcraft trials, whereby “experts” searched suspected witches for hidden teats. On June 2, eight of the suspected witches had a physical examination.

The physical examination proved largely unsuccessful, as it produced contradictory evidence. The first piece of inconsistent evidence came from the people who did not have a witch’s mark. The physical examination found no marks on Sarah Good, John Willard, Alice Parker, or John Proctor. Just one week earlier, Susannah Sheldon testified that John Willard suckled pigs, yet he did not have teats. Even more shocking, Sarah Good, who was accused by Tituba, Dorothy Good and William Good of suckling an animal familiar, did not have a witch’s mark. Even John Willard and Alice Parker, who were not previously accused of suckling animals, were already deemed guilty in the eyes of the magistrates and much of the community. The conclusion that these obvious witches did not have a witch’s mark underscored the unreliability of the physical examination.

Bridget Bishop, Rebecca Nurse, Elizabeth Proctor, and Susannah Martin all had “a preteraturall Excrecence of flesh between the pudendum and Anus much like tetts & not usual in women.” Out of these four women, Bridget Bishop was the only one formerly accused of suckling an animal familiar. Furthermore, three to four hours later all of the teats changed. While the teat disappeared for Bishop and dried out for Nurse, Elizabeth Proctor had a new “tett red & fresh,” and Susannah Martin’s breasts were empty, as she was presumably suckled in the intermission.<sup>19</sup> The witch’s mark seemed to be transient, and therefore poor evidence of legal proof. During Bridget Bishop’s trial that afternoon, Cotton Mather wrote that “a jury of women, found a preternatural teat upon her body; but upon a second search, within three or four hours, there was no such thing to be seen.”<sup>20</sup> In comparison to the other charges of maleficum and

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<sup>19</sup> RSWH, 362-363.

<sup>20</sup> Cotton Mather, *Wonders of the Invisible World*, in WH, 301.



afflictions, the witch's mark probably seemed insignificant and untrustworthy. The fact that only half of these people had teats showed that the witch's mark could not be a reliable way to confirm guilt.

Those who had a supposed teat must have viewed this evidence as implicating, though, since the next day on June 3 Rebecca Nurse's daughters testified that their mother "has been troubled with an Infirmity of body for many years which the Jury of women seem to be Afraid it should be something Else." On June 23, Rebecca Nurse personally petitioned the Court, pleading that the magistrates acknowledge that the "teat" was natural and a product of giving birth. Furthermore, Nurse pleaded that the court hire "some other Women to Enquire Into this Great: Concern, those that are Most Grave wise and skillful."<sup>21</sup> Rebecca Nurse's concern about the witch's mark showed how it could condemn a suspected witch. In the end, the magistrates' main preoccupation continued to be the afflicted girls and the devil's book.

The witch's mark briefly appeared later in the Salem witchcraft trials. During the summer of 1692, the Andover victims and suspects incorporated the witch's mark into some of their testimonies. According to John Hale, a few of the confessors said they had "Imps suck them, and shewed sores raw where they said they were suckled by them."<sup>22</sup> For example, on July 21 Mary Lacy Jr. accused Martha Carrier of having cats, birds and even imps suck her body.<sup>23</sup> Later in August, Elizabeth Johnson Sr. and Jr. both confessed to practicing witchcraft and nursing animal familiars. While Elizabeth Johnson Sr. had a "Browne puppee" that "sucks on her breast," Elizabeth Johnson Jr. nursed two black cats on a knuckle of her forefinger.<sup>24</sup> Although suckling animal familiars still appeared in the supernatural world, they did not seem to manifest as witch's

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<sup>21</sup> RSWH, 380, 414.

<sup>22</sup> Hale, 417.

<sup>23</sup> RSWH, 475.

<sup>24</sup> RSWH, 569, 543.

marks. None of these accused women (or any other accused woman) had a physical examination. Even Martha Corey, who was accused more than once of suckling a familiar, never had a physical examination.

In fact, the only other physical examination was conducted on August 4 for two suspected male witches, George Burroughs and George Jacobs. George Jacobs possessed “3 tetts,” and when the examiners stuck “a pin through 2 of them and he was not sinceible of it.”<sup>25</sup> This test followed Keble’s instructions that a witch’s mark would not bleed when pricked, proving Jacobs’ guilt. Yet the ringmaster witch, George Burroughs, did not have any teats, again confirming the unreliability of the physical examination. The Andover confessions and the second physical examination were anomalies in the post-June 2 Salem witchcraft trials. Considering that there were at least 144 people accused of witchcraft during 1692, and 20 of them executed, suckling accusations only made a tiny dent in the examination and trial records.<sup>26</sup>

After analyzing the witch’s mark and suckling animals in 1692 Salem, the question remains: why were these nursing themes present in witchcraft trials? Historian John Demos proposed that the suckling motif followed Freudian personality development, yet this question must also be analyzed within the framework of seventeenth-century New England.<sup>27</sup> The people of Essex County, Massachusetts, were Puritans familiar with the Bible’s teachings. In Genesis, God gave humans the right to rule over animals. Yet Eve committed original sin by trusting the Devil, who appeared in the shape of a snake. In the Devil’s dominion, witches christened and raised animals, and even fed them human blood. Therefore, a human who trusted one of the

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<sup>25</sup> RSWH, 517.

<sup>26</sup> Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil’s Snare* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 5.

<sup>27</sup> According to Demos’ theory, the infant weaning process was a highly traumatic experience, since the natural human tendency to suckle was repressed. During adolescence, this repressed oral tendency was projected onto the figure of a witch. Therefore, the repressed desire to nurse manifested as visions of animals suckling witches. See John Demos, “Underlying Themes in the Witchcraft of Seventeenth-Century New England,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 75, No. 5 (1970), 1325.

Devil's conniving animals committed sin like Eve, and also broke God's rule to manage and command animals. Furthermore, throughout the Bible, the role of a woman was a provider and mother. The act of breastfeeding was the essence of motherhood in colonial America, as it represented the selfless, life-giving force of a mother.<sup>28</sup> Ministers would often use imagery of the breast and breast-feeding to refer to the Church and God, for example encouraging people to "suck the breast while it is open."<sup>29</sup> The witch, on the other hand, was a wicked mother who gave life to supernatural animals. The imagery of a wicked animal nursing from a human must have been so despicable that it could only exist in the Devil's world.

The relative absence of physical examinations for the witch's mark after the 'unsuccessful' June 2 examination helps explain the difference between Salem and precedent witchcraft trials. Unlike past trials, Salem was a public spectacle. The examinations and trials occurred in the public sphere. Afflicted girls would cry out in agony after the look or touch of a witch, as captivated audiences looked on. Unlike public demonstrations like physical afflictions, lurid stories, and the touch test, the examination for the witch's mark occurred without an audience. During a physical examination, the magistrates had no power over the results. Yet how could the obvious witches, like Sarah Good or John Proctor not have a witch's mark? After the magistrates realized that the first physical examination returned results inconsistent with their own verdicts, they discounted the test as unreliable. The reliance on public displays both supports the failure of the witch's mark as reliable proof, and more importantly shows why so many more people were executed in Salem.

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<sup>28</sup> Historical discussion of the witch's mark has neglected to analyze the importance of breastfeeding in colonial America. As previously mentioned, witchcraft was commonly used as an explanatory model for death and disease. Interestingly, breast milk was used as medicine, and thought to cure a variety of ailments like pain, blindness, and hysteria. See Marilyn Salmon, "The Cultural Significance of Breastfeeding and Infant Care in Early Modern England and America," *Journal of Social History*, Vol 28 No 2 (1994), 249.

<sup>29</sup> Salmon, 253.

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