

Marika Levidow

Mary Beth Norton

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Physical Objects in Spectral Evidence: Legitimate Harm?

The Salem witch trials of 1692 stood out in early American witchcraft cases for the scale, swift escalation of the trials, and the number of executions. But why did the trials gain so much momentum at the beginning? And why did accusations by young girls, people of the lowest status in Puritan society, motivate the explosion of the trials? Throughout the trials, various accusers frequently complained that accused witches “torment[ed them]...most dreadfully by biting, pinching, and almost choking [them]” to death.¹ However, in some documents the phrasing refers to “pricking” by pins.² At other times, knives, rapiers, rope, sticks, and iron rods appeared within the accusers’ accounts, deviating from the regular script.

In the first phase of the trials, before Bridget Bishop’s execution on June 10, every time physical objects appeared in spectral evidence to cause harm, a young or teenaged girl gave the initial account. Sometimes the girls gave the account to the court and sometimes an adult recounted the younger accuser’s story. Adults and boys never mentioned physical objects as the source of their spectral affliction until later in the trials. Objects in the records of the early trials provide a potential explanation for why society felt the urgency to initiate such an extensive witch-hunt so quickly. The young female accusers’ mentions of physical objects in their afflictions added legitimacy to their spectral charges, counteracting their low social status. The girls’ legitimacy fanned the flames of the trials until there was no turning back.

¹ Bernard Rosenthal, and Gretchen A. Adams. Eds., *Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 151.

² Rosenthal and Adams. *Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt*, 139.

The evidence presented before the court during the Salem trials and more broadly in seventeenth century witchcraft cases across New England fell into three categories: maleficium, spectral evidence and confessions.³ Maleficium was witchcraft intended to cause harm to persons or property while spectral evidence included afflictions, which were supposedly caused by the specter of a witch.⁴ Spectral afflictions included being “deaf , sometimes dumb, and sometimes blind” or sometimes lying “in a benumbed condition” and “be[ing] drawn together...tied neck and heels; and presently be[ing] stretched out,” as exemplified by Elizabeth Knapp in 1672.⁵ In addition, specters inflicted bites, pinches, and strangled their victims which left marks on the bodies of the afflicted. Before Salem, maleficium complaints were more likely to initiate witchcraft cases and were widely accepted by New England’s ministers and magistrates as legitimate. With maleficium there seemed to be physical evidence of the harm perpetrated by a witch with the direct help of the Devil.⁶

Although maleficium evidence did not come close to the modern standard of proof, in the seventeenth century everyone believed in the existence of witches and thus it was entirely possible that Mary’s flu and John’s dead cow were the work of witchcraft from an unhappy neighbor. On the other hand, spectral evidence was more difficult to link directly to a specific witch in a trial. The courts accepted that afflictions were caused by the Devil, but the possibility that the Devil could impersonate an innocent person through their specter made it difficult to

³ Wendel D. Craker, “Spectral Evidence, Non-Spectral Acts of Witchcraft, and Confession at Salem in 1692,” *The Historical Journal* 40 (1997): 332.

⁴ "maleficium, n.". OED Online. June 2017. Oxford University Press.
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/244658?redirectedFrom=maleficium> (accessed November 06, 2017).
 Craker, 332.

⁵ David D. Hall, *Witch-Hunting in Seventeenth-Century New England: A Documentary History 1638-1693* (Boston: Duke University Press, 2008), 269.

⁶ Elizabeth Reis, *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 79.

establish clear guilt of the accused. This uncertainty cast some doubt on the validity of spectral evidence for proving guilt in witchcraft trials.

Physical objects in spectral evidence did not fit perfectly into any of these categories and appeared in three forms during the trials. Most often physical objects such as knives, pins, and rods were present in spectral evidence as extensions of the “biting, pinching, and choking” phenomena that left marks on the bodies of the afflicted such as teeth marks. For example, during the deposition of Ann Putnam Jr. she stated that Sarah Good “did prick me [with pins] and pinch me most grievously.”⁷ Sarah Good’s specter supposedly used pins to torment and inflict pain in the same manner as it used hands and teeth.

Physical objects also appeared in the witchcraft records during physical examinations of the accused to determine whether or not they were witches. In the physical examination of George Jacobs Jr., the examiner “[ran] a pinn through two of [his witches’ teats]” where animal familiars supposedly suckled.⁸ In the examination of Bridget Bishop as recorded by Ezekiel Cheever, Jonathan Walcott claimed he had struck at Bishop’s specter with his sword and “her garmet [sic] being looked upon they find it cut or toren two ways.”⁹ Cheever used a sword to connect Bishop’s specter with her normal physical body. Objects appeared in examinations because they provided a more tangible, physical aspect to the trials. The entire court could see the results of these examinations, whereas specters could only be seen with a special sight the afflicted possessed.¹⁰ Finally, objects also appeared in culturally shared references to witchcraft such as riding on sticks and the Devil’s book. This paper focuses on the first group of objects,

⁷ Rosenthal and Adams. *Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt*, 138.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 517.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 184.

¹⁰ Craker, “Spectral Evidence, Non-Spectral Acts of Witchcraft, and Confession at Salem in 1692,” 332.

physical objects that witches or their specters used to inflict harm.¹¹ These mentions of objects are interesting because although they occur in spectral evidence, they share the physical nature of examinations or maleficium accusations; both of which were more commonly accepted forms of evidence against suspected witches.

Spectral evidence presented in court generally included the actions of the specter and accounts of affliction it caused. Abigail Williams' testimony against Martha Cory represented a typical account of a spectral affliction:

Abigail Williams Wittnesseth & saith that divers times in the months of March last past...she the said Abigail was much disquieted by the apparition of Martha Kory, by which apparition she was sometimes haled to & fro, & sometimes pinched, & sometimes tempted to put her hand on the Devils book, & that she hath several times seen her at the Devils Sacrament.¹²

Young Abigail Williams, a girl of 11 or 12, claimed that Martha Cory's specter pulled her around, pinched her, attended witch meetings, and attempted to persuade Abigail to mark the Devil's book and become a witch herself. In most accounts, as in Abigail's testimony against Cory, specters harmed without physical objects by biting, pinching, or choking, which only required the specter's own ghost - teeth, fingers, and hands - to inflict harm. New Englanders also believed specters were responsible for the fits that the afflicted experienced during examinations.¹³ Here, "haled to and fro" reflected contortions of the body such as those Elizabeth Knapp reported, a staple of spectral affliction.

¹¹ I consider a case to contain an object in spectral evidence if it mentions affliction by the specter using an object. I accept the language of 'pricking' as a specter using an object because it implies the use of pins, however I do not count instances where specters "strick [someone] down" because someone can be knocked over with an arm or by pushing. An object is not implied in this circumstance. Rosenthal and Adams. *Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt*, 657.

¹² Rosenthal and Adams. *Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt*, 338.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 339.

At the beginning of the Salem trials themselves, specters using physical objects to inflict harm and torment appeared almost exclusively in the depositions and testimonies of young and teenaged women. In the examination of one of the first accused witches, Tituba, Samuel Parris's native slave, John Hathorne stated that Ann Putnam Jr (age 12) "did complain of a knif, that they wold have her cut her head off with a knife."¹⁴ Although Samuel Parris's daughter, Betty Parris (age 9) and the other young girl in his household, Abigail Williams, had already accused Tituba of witchcraft, Ann Putnam Jr was the first recorded accuser to claim a specter used a physical object as a weapon within the document record. It is significant that the first reference to an object in the trials was a knife, an object with clear associations to violence, instead of a less ominous pin. The violence and drama of a knife emphasized the danger of the specter Ann encountered and the seriousness of the accusation.

In later accusations before June 10, the young girls used a script that claimed specters did "grievously torture [them] by pricking and pinching" or that specters did "tortor [them] most grievously by pinching and pricking" them with pins.¹⁵ During this period of the trials, afflicted young and teenaged girls mentioned objects in accounts of their affliction in thirty-five out of 313 total documents. Mentions of violent encounters continued over the course of the trials with twenty-one subsequent accounts before Governor William Phips dissolved the Court of Oyer and Terminer on October 29.¹⁶

The first mentions appeared in March with the examinations of Sarah Good, Sarah Osburn, and Tituba. On March 21 Ann Putnam Jr mentioned Martha Cory beating "the maid at Mr. Tho[mas] Putnam's" with an iron rod, and on March 25 Edward Putnam stated that he saw

¹⁴ Ibid., 128.

¹⁵ Ibid., 139.

¹⁶ See Figures I and II

the mark of a specter on Ann, this time “the mark both of bite and chaine.”¹⁷ Then objects other than pins did not appear in spectral evidence again until early May, coinciding with an increase in adults recounting the afflicted girls’ stories. Mentions of different weapons reemerged when Mary Walcott (age 17) stated that George Jacobs Sr “used to come with two staves and beat her with one of them” on May 10.¹⁸ Mercy Lewis (age 19) and Abigail Williams corroborated her claim. After June 10 adults began to mention objects in their accounts of affliction in addition to children and teenagers. The documents also contained fewer incidences of affliction with objects after June 10.¹⁹

In contrast to these patterns, the statements by adults before June 10 mentioned animal familiars, witches’ teats, and specters visiting them in the night rather than attacks with objects.²⁰ Mentions of knives, rods, staffs, and even the girls’ emphasis on specters pricking them with pins differed from the experiences of adult men and women who encountered specters. Pins violated their bodies and could draw blood, whereas pinching could only redden the skin. The girls described direct, violent attacks whereas the adults described less threatening, albeit frightening, encounters without much bodily harm. The difference in spectral experiences revealed the vulnerability of the young girls, as opposed to the older members of society that could more easily fend off the attacks of the Devil. The young girls and the adults were distinct groups of accusers within the trials.

¹⁷ Ibid., 146, 153, 163.

¹⁸ Ibid., 253, 254.

¹⁹ See Figure II

Rosenthal and Adams number each separate document included in their volume regardless of type. Testimonies, warrants, examinations etc. are all considered separate documents, even when they pertain to the same accusation.

²⁰ Ibid., 141.

If a young woman did not directly give an account of physical objects in spectral evidence, the only other time objects appeared before June 10 was when an adult in their family or household reported the girl's encounter. In one such instance on March 30, Thomas Knowlton Jr gave a deposition versus Rachel Clinton, declaring that "my daughter Mary...cried out in a dreadful manner that she was...prickt to death".²¹ Even though Thomas Knowlton Jr was the individual deposed, the instance of a physical object used for harm, in this case a pin, was part of his daughter's experience with a specter rather than his own. Adults found it important to tell these girls' stories. Mary Beth Norton points out that children under the age of fourteen were not legally supposed to give testimony in court and so their accounts lacked legitimacy.²² However, if an adult as witness recounted the experiences of a young girl, the testimony was seen as valid. Several of the afflicted girls were under fourteen and therefore needed adults to vouch for them.

It is quite possible then that girls' experiences determined legitimate by their adult relatives or household members were the only ones even recorded. In addition to the legal issue of age, young women were at the bottom of the social hierarchy in their households, which further diminished their legitimacy.²³ As a result, adults played an important role in advocating the stories of the young afflicted girls. In the case of the Perleys' daughter, her parents, Samuel and Ruth, told the court that Elizabeth How "pricked [their daughter] with pins" and made her "[fall] down into dredful fits." However, they admitted their daughter said "[they] would not beleve her."²⁴ Evidently the Perley daughter eventually convinced her parents that her affliction was real. Adults would only vouch for girls in their household who they genuinely believed were

²¹ Ibid., 166.

²² Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 2002), 21.

²³ Norton, *In the Devil's Snare*, 51.

²⁴ Rosenthal and Adams. *Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt*, 351.

afflicted. The recorded instances of girls' afflictions within the trial documents were those compelling enough for an adult to recount in court.

Here, and in other cases, physical objects in spectral encounters might have played a role in convincing adults of the validity and urgency of their claims. The harm done to young girls by specters with weapons was more threatening than the typical pinching. A beating with George Jacobs Sr's staff had the potential to break bones and cause serious bruising and pain.²⁵ Such an attack would have alarmed adults genuinely concerned for the wellbeing of a young person. The girls lacked legitimacy and these mentions of weapons grabbed the attention of adults who could vouch for them in a more formal setting.

Women and particularly young girls were also much more removed from the state and the law than men, which would have further decreased the legitimacy of their accounts. Women were rarely prosecuted for crimes against authority such as "neglect of an assigned duty" or "contempt of a government official or body," but men were, demonstrating the peripheral relationship between women and government in colonial New England.²⁶ Women were less beholden to the state and it less to them. Young girls would have been even further removed than adult women and therefore would have needed to go to further lengths to interest adults and the courts in their afflictions. Thus, the physical objects in their spectral encounters helped the afflicted girls bridge the distance between themselves and the state by gaining the trust of adults who could vouch for them.

The exception to the rule was Tituba, who claimed that Sarah Good and Sarah Osburn's specters forced her to hurt the girls. Although she was not technically afflicted, she described

²⁵ Ibid., 253.

²⁶ Mary Beth Norton, *Founding Mothers and Fathers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1996), 329.

spectral encounters involving a knife in her examinations. Tituba was likely older than the other girls because she was married, but her status as a Native American slave meant she was equally as untrustworthy as young girls. She too used references to objects used for harm in spectral evidence in order to add legitimacy to her story.²⁷

Once the trials had gained momentum, adults had less reason to doubt the afflicted girls. By June 10 maleficium evidence and accusations had piled from adults in Salem in addition to the girls' accounts.²⁸ The girls were hardly alone in their accusations. Additionally, depositions from later months in 1692 contained the same language of grievous affliction and torment regardless of the accuser, but rarely referenced objects. In depositions given against Abigail Faulkner Sr. of Andover, Rose Foster and Martha Sprague along with the young Ann Putnam Jr. and Mary Walcott all adhered to the same basic language of torment in their descriptions of affliction.²⁹ The relative absence of objects as weapons indicated that the afflicted no longer needed to gain as much legitimacy for the courts to believe them. Despite the lull in afflictions and accusations in the two weeks following Bridget Bishop's execution on June 10, it clearly marked a turning point in the trials because of the rarity of hanging for a witchcraft accusation in New England.³⁰ Once she was executed Salem was committed to the trials so the same level of legitimacy was no longer necessary for the girls to be heard. The entire community was involved by that point. Perhaps the afflicted girls felt as if society finally heard them or maybe the community became committed to prosecuting every instance of alleged witchcraft.

Regardless, the legitimacy the afflicted girls gained through objects changed the course of the trials. Convicted witches were rarely executed before Salem and so the number of people

²⁷ Rosenthal and Adams. *Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt*, 134.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 395.

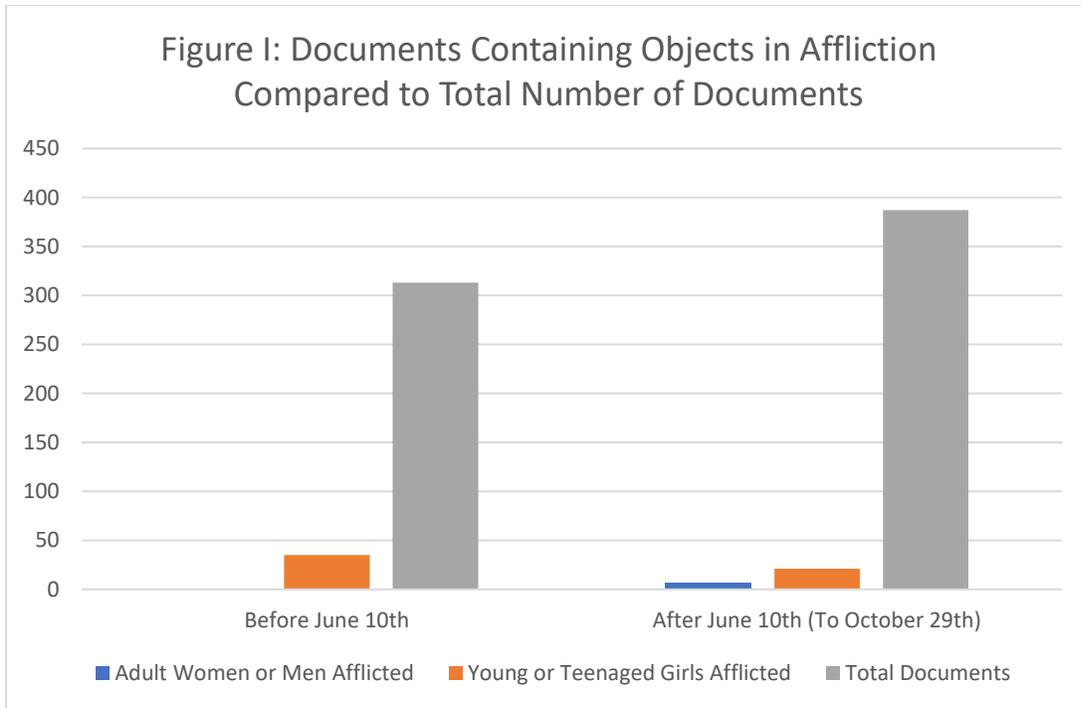
²⁹ *Ibid.*, 667-670.

³⁰ Norton, *In the Devil's Snare*, 211.

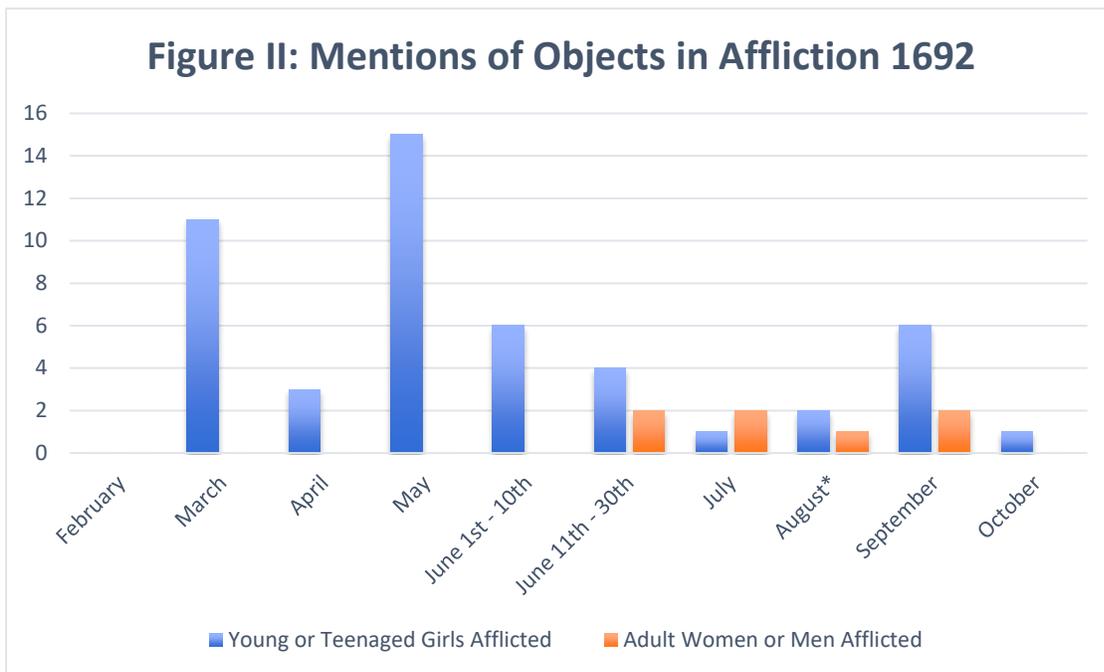
executed in such a short period of time in 1692 was remarkable.³¹ The appearance of physical objects in spectral evidence at the beginning of the trials was certainly not the only reason for the unique nature of Salem, but the legitimacy that the afflicted girls gained through their references to physical objects roped the entire community into the trials. Indeed, in response to the initial afflictions of Betty Parris and Abigail Williams, Samuel Parris first sought the aid of a doctor and then spent a month attempting to cure them with prayer and fasting.³² The mentions of physical objects coincided with the beginning of formal accusations to the magistrates. Had the adults in their lives not believed in the urgency of the girls' accounts, their cases would likely not have gone to trial or the accusations would have ended in more acquittals like in other New England witchcraft cases. The accounts of pins, knives, and rods in the afflicted girls' spectral evidence brought the community to Bridget Bishop's execution, and from that point on the trials had a momentum of their own. The physical objects young and teenaged girls depicted in their accounts of spectral harm helped the afflicted gain legitimacy in the courts, where they were normally excluded and disregarded. Had the adults of Salem not believed the girls, the trials might not have taken off with the energy and fervor that resulted in twenty executions by the end of 1692. The objects inflicting harm on young girls gave a sense of urgency to the trials that created deadly momentum.

³¹ John Demos, *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1982), 301.

³² Norton, *In the Devil's Snare*, 20.



*Includes all of Rosenthal and Adams' numbered documents in each time period specified



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³³ I omitted ten descriptions of specters using objects to afflict victims during the month of August because they were in confessions of accused witches rather than warrants, testimonies, examinations, or depositions. Additionally, Emerson Baker and other scholars have pointed out the unique nature of these 'Andover confessions' which began in July and stretched into September for their "formulaic" nature. The accused confessed to similar acts of witchcraft and used similar language in their confessions. The appearance of objects in these confessions might have been a result of the confessors saying what they thought they were supposed to say.

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Figures I and II include documents 1-701, ending with the dissolution of the court of Oyer and Terminer on October 29th, 1692.

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