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### The Abusive Men of Salem

The refrain “Tortured Afflicted Pined Consumed Wasted & Tormented” was repeated throughout the Salem witchcraft trial records. Although actual witches might not have been torturing the girls of Salem, the background of torture and abuse was palpable in the 1692 court records and even earlier. Of the six men who were executed in 1692, five were closely connected with abuse of subordinates, specifically wives and servants. The Salem court records explicitly accused George Burroughs and John Willard of abusing their wives and of violent murder. The records also indicated the other executed men’s reputation for violent and abusive behavior, both in reality and in the public imagination. The courts accused George Jacobs of beating people with a stick and John Proctor of threatening his own servant, Mary Warren, with serious bodily harm. Further, the courts fined Giles Corey sixteen years before the witch trials, for murdering his servant, John Goodell. Samuel Wardwell was the only executed man who did not fit the pattern and he was likely targeted for different reasons, including his dabbling in magic and fortune telling. Scholars have generally overlooked the evidence of abuse and have focused instead on other, more sensational, accusations. However, it is useful to look at the abuse pattern both in order to understand why these men were singled out for accusation and execution and also to understand the behavior of the afflicted girls, many of whom were subordinates themselves.

The subtext of wife abuse in the Salem witch trials is apparent in the case of John Willard. Benjamin Wilkins “testified for all his natural affections he abused his wife

much & broke sticks about her in beating of her,” and Peter Prescott confirmed that he heard Willard admit to beating his wife “with his own mouth.” Aaron Wey’s comment was to similar effect: “if I must speak, I can say you have been very cruell to poor creatures.”<sup>1</sup> Although being “cruel to poor creatures” ostensibly referred to animal abuse, the Essex County court records include cases where the phrase was employed to refer to subordinate abuse. Joane Suiflan, an Irish servant woman, accused her master of being “a cruell master unto *me* poore creature” (emphasis mine).<sup>2</sup> Willard’s case was largely a family affair, with the witnesses in the surviving documents belonging (aside from the regulars) almost entirely to Willard’s extended family.<sup>3</sup> For example, Henry Wilkins, Willard’s wife’s uncle, accused Willard of causing the death of Daniel Wilkins (Henry’s son).<sup>4</sup> In Puritan society, the woman’s original family was likely her best source of protection against an abusive husband, a dynamic that conceivably played out in the familial testimonies and accusations against Willard.

Ann Putnam Sr., instead of only accusing Willard of killing his wife or subordinates, turned him into a serial killer. Ann Sr. accused Willard of murdering Samuel Fuller, Lydia Wilkins, Goody Shaw, Fuller’s second wife, and Aaron Way’s child (to name a few). Most significantly, Ann accused Willard of killing her own child, six- month-old Sarah.<sup>5</sup> Ann Putnam Jr., ever sensitive to the rumors floating around her house, elaborated on her mother’s story one day later. “He tould me he had whiped my little sister sarah to death and he would whip me to death if I would not writ in his

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissembaum, eds., The Salem Witchcraft Papers, hereafter cited as SWP (New York, 1977), III: 827.

<sup>2</sup> George F. Dow, ed., Records and Files of the Quarterly Courts of Essex County Massachusetts (Salem, 1911-1975), 8:223.

<sup>3</sup> Bernard Rosenthal, Salem Story (Cambridge, 1993), 118.

<sup>4</sup> SWP III: 846.

<sup>5</sup> SWP III: 839.

book...after this I saw the Apperishion of my little sister Sarah who died when she was about six weeks old crieing out for vengeance against John Willard.”<sup>6</sup> With the image of the whip, Ann Jr. brought out the violent aspect of the accused men that so characterized them and frightened the afflicted girls.

However, in this case it was not Willard’s subordinate that he allegedly killed, but rather another defenseless creature, a child from Ann’s own family. Bernard Rosenthal’s theory about Sarah’s death fits within the framework of subordinate abuse in the witch trials. Rosenthal suggests that Sarah was indeed beaten to death – by her own mother. He then uses this idea to provide possible psychological explanations for the behavior of Ann Putnam Sr. and Ann Putnam Jr. Ann Sr., dealing with the guilt of beating her own child to death, found relief in the “fantasy world of blaming witches.” Willard, a man who “by reputation, and probably in fact” brutally beat his wife, became a logical target to take the blame. Ann Jr., on the other hand, “may unwittingly have revealed the family secret; she may have responded to the beating death of her sister by lashing out at her community. Rosenthal, therefore, tentatively places child abuse even in the house of the Putnams, a key family in the witchcraft accusations.<sup>7</sup> Although Rosenthal’s theory lacks concrete evidence, it is certainly a viable possibility and one that strengthens the likely connection between the abuse the afflicted girls experienced in the visible world and the abuse they imagined in the invisible world.

Another two men executed for witchcraft in Salem, George Jacobs, Sr. and John Proctor, were known not for beating their wives, but for beating their servants. George

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<sup>6</sup> SWP III: 851.

<sup>7</sup> Rosenthal, Salem Story, 40,119.

Jacobs was “an old man that goes with two sticks.”<sup>8</sup> These two sticks (or staffs) were a prominent feature of the testimonies against Jacobs. Sticks were notably prevalent in abuse cases recorded in the Essex County Court Records. For example, Thomas Bettis declared “my master haith this mani yeares beaten me upon small or frivelouse occasion...he broke my head twice, strucke me one the hed with a great stick.”<sup>9</sup>

Sarah Bibber and Mary Warren accused George Jacobs of spectrally beating Mary Walcott with a staff, and Walcott confirmed, “he used to come with two staves and beat her with one of them.”<sup>10</sup> Sarah Churchill, Jacobs’s servant, was his chief accuser.<sup>11</sup> She provided important testimony about his character – “I know you have lived a wicked life” she told him.<sup>12</sup> When Churchill was unable to do her work, Jacobs called her “bitch witch and ill names and then afflicted her.”<sup>13</sup> George Jacobs Sr., according to Mary Beth Norton, had probably beaten her severely.<sup>14</sup> Mercy Lewis also testified that Jacobs’s specter beat her black and blue<sup>15</sup> and Norton suggests that “Mercy’s recurrent statement that Jacobs beat her spectrally with his sticks could well imply that he did the same to his own maidservant in reality.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, a good number of the “afflicted girls” were likely afflicted not only by supposed magical forces but also by very real forces. Mercy Lewis, for example was the former maidservant of George Burroughs. It is likely that Burroughs, who was notorious for beating his wives, also treated his servants harshly.

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<sup>8</sup> SWP II: 484.

<sup>9</sup> Dow, ed., Records and Files of the Quarterly Courts of Essex County, 8:41.

<sup>10</sup> SWP II: 477, 481.

<sup>11</sup> Rosenthal, Salem Story, 120.

<sup>12</sup> SWP II: 476.

<sup>13</sup> SWP III: 702.

<sup>14</sup> Norton, In the Devil’s Snare, 159.

<sup>15</sup> SWP II: 483.

<sup>16</sup> Norton, In the Devil’s Snare, 372.

The Essex County Court Records prove that George Jacobs's violent behavior did not begin in his old age. In June 1677, George Jacobs was fined for striking John Tompkins. "John Waters, aged thirty-five years and Stephen Small, aged twenty years deposed that they saw George Jacobs, sr., strike John Tompkins, jr., one blow and if the latter had not held him by the arms, he would have struck him more, he being in such a passion."<sup>17</sup> Although it does not seem likely that Tompkins was subordinate to Jacobs, as records from only three years after the attack indicate that Tompkins was in possession of his own estate,<sup>18</sup> the court records certainly indicate that George Jacobs was always a violent man. Jacobs's violent temperament manifested itself, in old-man Jacobs, as a tendency to beat servants. His forceful behavior was not new to the people of Salem, who ultimately executed him for witchcraft.

John Proctor, another man executed for witchcraft in Salem, shared many striking similarities with George Jacobs, Sr. Proctor was also an old man when he was tried and hanged for witchcraft. The legal records implied that Proctor, too, regularly beat his servant, Mary Warren. Samuel Sibley testified:

Proctor replied he was going to fetch home his jade he left her there last night & had rather given 40d than let her come up sd Sibly askt why he talt so Proctor replied if they were let alone so we should all be Devils & witches quickly they should rather be had to the Whipping post but he would fetch his jade Home & thresh the Devil out of her.<sup>19</sup>

Mary Warren belonged to the group of afflicted girls, again emphasizing the connection between the afflicted girls and abuse by masters or parents that has been illustrated with Mercy Lewis, Sarah Churchill, and (less conclusively) Ann Putnam.

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<sup>17</sup> Dow, ed., Records and Files of the Quarterly Courts of Essex County Massachusetts, 6:292-293.

<sup>18</sup> Dow, ed., Records and Files of the Quarterly Courts of Essex County Massachusetts, 8:139.

<sup>19</sup> SWP II: 683-4.

The staff, the recurring image of physical abuse, was also mentioned in Giles Corey's case. Mary Warren accused Corey of "beating of me with his staffe."<sup>20</sup> However, the most relevant aspect of Corey's connection to violence and murder, referred to in Thomas Putnam's letter to Judge Samuel Sewall, occurred years before the actual witch trial:

For all people now Remember very well, (and the Records of the Court also mention it,) That about Seventeen Years ago Giles Cory kept a man in his House, that was almost a Natural Fool: which Man Dy'd suddenly. A Jury was Impannel'd upon him, among whom was Dr. Zorobabel Endicot; who found the man bruised to Death, and having clodders of Blood about his Heart. The Jury, whereof several are yet alive, brought in the man Murdered; but as if some Enchantment had hindred the Prosecution of the Matter, the Court Proceeded not against Giles Cory, tho' it cost him a great deal of Mony to get off.<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, the court records did remember the trial in which Giles Corey was accused of murder and fined for "abusing the body" of his servant, Jacob Goodell. The witnesses at the trial, significantly, included John Proctor.<sup>22</sup>

Another important genealogical connection highlights the connection between the murder trial and the witch trials. Deodat Lawson, minister of Salem Village from 1684 to 1688, named Jacob Goodwell's (or Goodell's) mother as one of the afflicted in the beginning of the Salem witchcraft outbreak. "On Monday the 21st of March, The Magistrates of Salem appointed to come to Examination of Goodw C...The Number of the Afflicted Persons were about that time Ten, viz. Four Married Women, Mrs. Pope, Mrs. Putman, Goodw. Bibber, and an Ancient Woman, named Goodall."<sup>23</sup> "Goodw C" here was Martha Corey, Giles Corey's wife. Thus, the ancient woman Goodall was

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<sup>20</sup> SWP I:243.

<sup>21</sup> SWP I:246.

<sup>22</sup> Dow, ed., *Records and Files of the Quarterly Courts of Essex County Massachusetts*, 6:190-191.

<sup>23</sup> Deodat Lawson, *A Brief and True Narrative* in Charles Lincoln Burr, ed., *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases* (New York, 1914), 154-155

afflicted in an accusation against a member of the family that murdered her son. Martha Corey herself was probably implicated in the murder of John Goodell, as other court records accuse her of “cruelly beating her servant...with a stick as big as a walking staff.”<sup>24</sup> The murder that Giles Corey committed was, therefore, highly significant to the accusation against him, and his brutality had not been forgotten. Corey had murdered a subordinate, placing him in the same category of abusive heads-of-households that the other condemned men belonged to.

An analysis of George Burroughs’s case provides the strongest evidence for subordinate abuse. The court records, along with Cotton Mather’s account of the trials, indicated that Burroughs, like Willard, had a reputation for wife-beating. Mather, in his book Wonders of the Invisible World, reported, “Now G.B. had been Infamous for the Barbarous usage of his two late Wives all the country over.”<sup>25</sup> The court records certainly bear out the fact that Burroughs abused his wives. For example, John and Rebecca Putnam testified:

in the yeare 80 Mr Burros lived in our house nine month, there being a great differanc betwixt Sd Barros & his wife, the differanc was so great that they did Desier us the deponents to com into their room to hear their difference, the contrivency that was betwixt them was that the afor s'd Burros did rquier his wife to give him a written covenant under her hand and Seall that shee would never reveall his secrits, our anser was that they had once made a covenant before god and men which covenant we did conseive did bind each other to keep their lawfull secrits, and further saith that all the time that s'd Burros did live att our house he was a very sharp man to his wife, notwithstanding to our observation shee was a very good and dutifully wife to him.<sup>26</sup>

Although “very sharp” might refer to verbal abuse, Mather clearly referred to physical abuse when he described “the barbarous usage of his [Burroughs’s] two

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<sup>24</sup> Dow, ed., Records and Files of the Quarterly Courts of Essex County, 7:149

<sup>25</sup> Cotton Mather, Wonders of the Invisible World (University of Virginia, 2003), 62.

<sup>26</sup> SWP I:176.

late wives.” In the court documents, the persistent accusations of violent murder and the descriptions of Burroughs’s incredible strength<sup>27</sup> implied that Burroughs’s mistreatment of his wives extended beyond verbal abuse.

Ann Putnam, Jr. took Burroughs’s infamous misuse and ostensible murder of his wives to a new level, by turning these conceptions into a vivid vision. The vision included the wives coming back from the dead in winding sheets and their blood crying out for vengeance against their murderous husband. The graphic nature of Ann’s vision, which included the first wife saying how Burroughs had “stabed hir under the left Arme and put a peace of sealing wax on the wound.”<sup>28</sup> indicated that the image of Burroughs as murderer and wife abuser had a powerful hold over the minds of the afflicted girls. The reference to sealing wax, which also featured in Rebecca and John Putnam’s deposition,<sup>29</sup> illustrated how the story of Burroughs and his wives, with slight modification, was circulating among the Putnam family and presumably other families as well.

The circulations of such stories of wife abuse likely had an even more direct effect on the testimony against Burroughs, as his second wife, Sarah Ruck Hathorne, was the sister-in-law of the examining magistrate, John Hathorne. According to Norton, “Even more than the members of the Putnam and Parris households ... Hathorne would have been aware of the persistent tales of mistreatment,” long before Burroughs was charged with being a witch.<sup>30</sup> One such tale appears in Mary Webber’s testimony, a 53 year old woman who testifies that in Casco Bay, about six or seven years earlier, she heard Sarah

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<sup>27</sup> SWP I:162.

<sup>28</sup> SWP I:166.

<sup>29</sup> SWP I:176.

<sup>30</sup> Norton , In the Devil’s Snare, 125.



“tell much of her husband unkindness to her” and “that she dare not wright to her father to acquaint [him] how it was with her.”<sup>31</sup>

While the available court records, and especially Mather’s account of the trial, indicate that Burroughs was plausibly an infamous wife beater, little evidence substantiates the rumor that Burroughs had murdered his wives. It appears that Burroughs’s first wife died shortly after childbirth. Although she likely died from medical complications, Mary Walcott related what was likely the popular rumor of the time, “when his [Burroughs’s] wife was in travil but he kept hir in the kithin tell he gave hir hir deaths wound.”<sup>32</sup> Whether or not Burroughs truly murdered his wives, his status as wife abuser took hold of the public imagination and led to murder accusations.

Susannah Sheldon added to the accusations against Burroughs and claimed that he had caused the deaths of numerous children (two his own). At the same time she clearly manifested the fears that a man such as Burroughs, an abusive head of a household, certainly engendered. She was afraid that Burroughs would “tear [her] to peeses,” “starve [her] to death,” and “choake [her].”<sup>33</sup> The focus on deprivation of food and male violence was undoubtedly a concern for Sheldon and the other afflicted girls, most of whom were either servants or approaching marriageable age. In the context of wife and child abuse, the constant emphasis in the court documents on Burroughs’s strength is not at all surprising.

Many testimonies against Burroughs concerned his wives and the murders he supposedly committed. Mather provided a striking summary:

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<sup>31</sup> SWP: I:162.

<sup>32</sup> SWP I: 174.

<sup>33</sup> SWP I:171.

There came in several Testimonies relating to the Domestick Affayrs of G. B. which had a very hard Aspect upon him; and not only prov'd him a very ill man; but also confirmed the Belief of the Character, which had been already fastned on him Twas testified, That keeping his two Successive Wives in a strange kind of Slavery, he would when he came home from abroad pretend to tell the Talk which any had with them; That he has brought them to the point of Death, by his Harsh Dealings with his Wives, and then made the People about him to promise that in Case Death should happen, they would say nothing of it; That he used all means to make his Wives Write, Sign, Seal, and Swear a Covenant, never to Reveal any of his Secrets; That his Wives had privately complained unto the Neighbours about frightful Apparitions of Evil Spirits, with which their House was sometimes infested; and that many such things have been Whispered among the Neighbourhood.<sup>34</sup>

Much of Mather's summary is substantiated by the trial records themselves. For example, the focus on Burroughs's wives revealing secrets and going to others to ask for respite from their abusive husband also appears in Ann Putnam Jr.'s testimony. In Ann's vision, Burroughs tries to protect himself by telling Ann "that his Two first wives would appeare to me presently and tell me a grat many lyes but I should not beleve them." The spectral wives describe how Burroughs had murdered them and command Ann to "tell these things to the Magestraits before Mr Burroughs face."<sup>35</sup> The dynamics of how wives dealt with abuse, either by keeping it secret or by going to a friend or magistrate, are an important backdrop of these testimonies.

An additional dynamic that came through in Ann's testimony is the fact that Burroughs was a minister, a man who should, presumably, be more righteous than others. Burroughs's wives tell Ann "that they shall be clothed with white robes in heaven, when he should be cast into hell,"<sup>36</sup> bringing to the forefront the minister's language of heaven and hell and using it against him.

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<sup>34</sup> Cotton Mather, *Wonders of the Invisible World* (University of Virginia, 2003), 64.

<sup>35</sup> SWP I:166.

<sup>36</sup> SWP I: 166.

The extent to which the murderous image of Burroughs permeated the public mind is hinted at in Ann Jr.'s testimony against John Willard. Ann imagined Willard wanting to kill Daniel Wilkens but not having enough power to do so. He would, therefore, "goe to Mr Burroughs and git power to kill daniel wilknes."<sup>37</sup> The most basic explanation for this enigmatic statement is that Willard had to go to Burroughs to gain power because Burroughs was the ringleader of the witches. An added implication, however, could be that, in the mind of Ann and the other accusers, Willard was almost a protégé of the infamous wife beater and man of excessive strength - George Burroughs. Whether or not Burroughs was a murderer, the accusations of wife abuse brought against him are certainly plausible. Indeed, Burroughs' mistreatment of his wives became a salient feature of the case brought against him in 1692.

In order to fully understand the significance of the subtext of abuse in the Salem witchcraft accusations, the larger social context of the time must be explicated. Mary Beth Norton, in Founding Mothers and Fathers, describes the family government system of Puritan New England. "He [the head of the household] essentially acted as a justice of the peace with respect to his dependents. The state expected him to maintain order in his family and supported his right to correct his subordinates."<sup>38</sup> The problem was, however, when the head of the household used an excessive amount of force. Norton notes that an emphasis on the maintenance of orderly households afforded some degree of protection to dependents: "Because a family governor's restraint in exercising his authority was a crucial indicator of a properly functioning domestic unit, the lack of such restraint was

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<sup>37</sup> SWP III: 851.

<sup>38</sup> Mary Beth Norton, Founding Mothers and Fathers (New York, 1996), 42.

concomitantly seen as a fault that should be corrected by civil authorities.”<sup>39</sup> The men executed for witchcraft did not practice restraint and needed to be corrected; their failure represented the dysfunctional family units that threatened to undermine the social system.

Of course, the line between acceptable and unacceptable coercion of subordinates was blurry.<sup>40</sup> Abuse cases in Essex County provided many examples of the confusion engendered by attempting to determine what constituted a reasonable amount of force. For example, “Phillip Fowler was presented for abusing his servant, Richard Parker, and although court justified any person in giving meet correction to his servant, which the boy deserved, yet they did not approve of the manner of punishment given in hanging him up by the heels as butchers do beast for the slaughter.”<sup>41</sup> The matter, however, could also go in favor of the master, as can be seen in the case of Jacob and his wife Isabel (his second wife, Ann Pudeator, was executed for witchcraft in 1692). “Jacob Pudeator, for striking and kicking his wife, court being informed that the woman is “of great provocation” had his sentence moderated.”<sup>42</sup> The men’s treatment of subordinates in the witchcraft accusations of 1692 clearly fell outside of what the courts and the people deemed acceptable. The emphasis placed by the Putnams on their observation that Burroughs’s wife was “a very good and dutiful wife to him”<sup>43</sup> provided a clear example of the failure of the “family government” system. The men, therefore, along with committing terrible and frightening acts, stood for the breakdown of the social system in which a powerful man must be able to reasonably control his family and subordinates.

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<sup>39</sup> Norton , *Founding Mothers and Fathers*, 116.

<sup>40</sup> Norton, *Founding Mothers and Fathers*, 117.

<sup>41</sup> Dow, ed., *Records and Files of the Quarterly Courts of Essex County Massachusetts*, 8:302-3.

<sup>42</sup> Dow, ed., *Records and Files of the Quarterly Courts of Essex County Massachusetts*, 5:377.

<sup>43</sup> SWP I:176.

The proportion of executed men who had a history of subordinate abuse, and the way this history was incorporated into witchcraft accusations, is particularly striking. People who were accused of witchcraft stood out from their neighbors in some way and this consistent pattern of abuse both closes in on one such distinction and explains other dynamics of the witchcraft trials, including the behavior of the afflicted girls. The picture that emerges from the court records is that of violent, threatening men who disrupted the social order of the community. Men were supposed to control their family and subordinates, and some force was sometimes considered necessary. However, excessive use of force violated the colonial New England “family government” system. It is likely that the men executed in Salem (and the abuse they represented) haunted the afflicted girls especially, as many of them were themselves subordinates and members of dysfunctional households. The experience of affliction in the invisible world could very well have grown out of the experience of real affliction in the visible world.

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