

The Touch of Evil:  
*The development & influence of the touch test in the Essex County Witchcraft Trials of 1692*

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When [suspected witches] have been brought before the Afflicted, they have struck them down with their Eyes, and raised them again with a touch of their hands...It was first discovered occasionally, but sence hath been used for an experiment, and is found never to fail.<sup>1</sup>

This except from Samuel Willard's *Some Miscellany Observations* explains a staple of court proceedings in the 1692 witchcraft trials in Essex County: the touch test. Although the test was oft-cited evidence of witchcraft in the Salem trials, it wasn't until the examination of Abigail Soams on May 13, 1692—two and a half months after Tituba confessed to witchcraft—that the magistrates first 'discovered' the test. Following the examination of this "Single woman...accused of Sundry acts of witchcraft,"<sup>2</sup> the test became integrated into witch examinations, and, while not accepted as definite evidence, aided accusers in their testimonies against their supposed afflictors. The touch test came into being and quickly spread, not by chance, but rather as a result of historical and situational forces surrounding the examination, and its aftermath. The touch test was pivotal to the development of the Essex County witchcraft crisis—just as it strengthened and sustained the trials, it would eventually become a target for criticism, which contributed to ending the ordeal.

Mary Warren, a maidservant who had already been involved in the trials as both an afflicted person and an afflicter,<sup>3</sup> had charged Abigail Soams for afflicting her with witchcraft.<sup>4</sup> In the examination, when Soams glanced at her accuser, Mary Warren fell "into a dreadful fit... continually Crying out that it was this very Woman" who had been afflicting her—confirming

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Samuel Willard, *Some Miscellany Observations On Our Present Debates Respecting Witchcrafts, In A Dialogue Between S. & B. By P.E. and J.A.* (Philadelphia: Printed by William Bradford 1692) 9. As reprinted on [www.17thc.us/docs/willard.shtml](http://www.17thc.us/docs/willard.shtml). 'Hereafter abbreviated as SMO'

<sup>2</sup> Bernard Rosenthal, *Records of the Salem Witch Hunt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 265. 'Hereafter abbreviated as RSWH.'

<sup>3</sup> RSWH, 196.

<sup>4</sup> RSWH, 265.

the identity of a woman she had supposedly only seen in apparition form.<sup>5</sup> Soams, befuddled by Warren's accusations, implied that her accuser must be mistaken:

I have been said she myself Distracted many atime, and my [senses] have gone from me, and I thought I have seen many a Body hurt mee, and might have accused many as well as she doth. I Really thought I had seen many persons att my Mothers Campe at Glowster, and they greatly afflicted me as I thought.<sup>6</sup>

Once again, Warren fell into a dreadful fit, and Soams was ordered to "take Warren by the hand," which relieved the affliction. Seeing this alleviation, the judges formed a test, which yielded the same result three times:

[Soams] touched [Warren] and immediately Warren Recovered, which no sooner done but Soams opened her Eyes and looked on the afflicted; and struck her into another most dreadful and horrible fit, and in this manner she practised her Witchcrafts several times before the Court.<sup>7</sup>

Having seen evidence of witchcraft in the afflicting looks and the relieving touch of the accused witch, the court found in Soams' examination a test that would be used in many trials to come.

In his 1984 account of the trials, York University sociologist Richard Weisman writes, "through experimentation, [judges] learned that, if the suspect touched the victim, the fits would abate."<sup>8</sup> His implication, that the phenomenon was discovered through experimentation, does not take into account the situational factors that led to creation of the test in this particular examination. In part, the development of the touch test can be attributed to Warren's past experiences in examinations. When she was examined as an afflicter, a month earlier, her entrance into the courtroom caused "the afflicted [to fall] into fits." Then, when she was questioned about witchcraft, Warren too "fell into a fit," and "continued a good space...that she did neither see, nor hear, nor speak." Her theatrics were so convincing that the court decided that

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<sup>5</sup> RSWH, 268.

<sup>6</sup> RSWH, 268.

<sup>7</sup> RSWH, 268-9.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Weisman, *Witchcraft, magic, and religion in 17th-century Massachusetts* (Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 150. 'Hereafter abbreviated as WMR.'

she “could [not] give account of things, by reason of fits, & so sent [her] forth.”<sup>9</sup> Under pressure, Warren—consciously or not—was prone to the fits that would characterize her behavior as an accuser.

Under pressure, fits were a familiar defense mechanism for Warren. Therefore, when Soams implied that Warren had just been seeing things due to a temporary loss of the senses, it should not be surprising that Warren once again fell into a fit. The increasing intensity of Warren’s theatrics explains the more curious question, as to why Soams was told to touch Warren, in order to relieve the fits. In his commentary on Soams’ examination, Binghamton University English professor Bernard Rosenthal notes, “Mary Warren’s performance in her new role as an accuser revealed the extremes of affliction she could counterfeit...She was probably the most self-harming of all the accusers.”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Warren had just played the role as a fit-ridden accuser the day prior to Soams’ examination, in the May 12 examination of Alice Parker. Parker, too, joined the voices<sup>11</sup> that responded to Warren’s spectacles with disbelief, saying that “she wished God would open the Earth and Swallow her up presently, if one word of this was true and make her an Example to Others.”<sup>12</sup> While it may be speculation, it seems that Warren, with her propensity toward theatrics, felt she needed to react to added doubts on behalf of Soams, by upping the ante, so to speak. Presented with increasingly violent fits that showed little sign of ceasing, the judges reached for any possible way to relieve Warren of her pain, and so demanded that Soams touch her out of desperation.

The touch of the afflicted and the accused had already shown itself to be significant in past witchcraft trials. At the Bury St. Edmunds trials in England, and in a colonial examination

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<sup>9</sup> RSWH, 196-7.

<sup>10</sup> RSWH, 269.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil’s Snare* (New York, Alfred A Knopf, 2002), 212. ‘Hereafter abbreviated as IDS.’

<sup>12</sup> RSWH, 261.

conducted by Samuel Willard in 1671, magistrates blindfolded accusers, to see if they would recognize the touch of their alleged afflicters.<sup>13</sup> While these tests were different from those conducted in 1692, they would have been well-known to both judges and lay-folk at the time,<sup>14</sup> and would support the possibility finding evidence in a touch. Another example that the judges could draw from was the April 11 examination of Elizabeth Proctor:

Abigail's hand came near to said Eliz: Proctor it opend (whereas it was made up into a fist before) & came down exceeding lightly as it drew near to said Proctor , & at length with open & extended fingers touche said Proctors hood very lightly, & immediately said Abigail cryed out, Oh! my fingers, my fingers, my fingers burne...<sup>15</sup>

This situation is quite different from the touch test in Soams' trial—the afflicted tried to hit the accused and got burned, as opposed to the accused touching the afflicted to relieve pain. Still, if the magistrates were 'experimenting' with finding evidence,<sup>16</sup> as Weisman suggests, then the precedent of a touch being related to witchcraft highlighted a fertile topic for exploration.

Of course, this explanation assumes that the magistrates were dissatisfied with the types of evidence for witchcraft already at their disposal. In early June, a group consisting of four judges and Governor Phips asked "several ministers" for their opinions "upon the present witchcraft in Salem village,"<sup>17</sup> implying that insecurities about the proceedings up to that point had been brewing. Considering the defenses that citizens raised in favor of previously accused witches, such as widely-signed petition attesting to Rebecca Nurse's good character,<sup>18</sup> the

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<sup>13</sup> *A Tryal of Witches, at the Assizes Held at Bury St. Edmunds for the County of Suffolk; on the Tenth Day of March, 1664. Before Matthew Hale Kt...* (London, Eng., 1682). As cited in IDS, 37.

<sup>14</sup> IDS, 40.

<sup>15</sup> RSWH, 176.

<sup>16</sup> WMR, 150.

<sup>17</sup> "Return of Several Ministers..." printed in Thomas Hutchinson, *The History of Massachusetts from the First Settlement Thereof in 1628, until the Year 1750*, 3d ed. (Boston, 1795), 2:52; Council minutes, 13 June 1692, CO 5/785, f 90. (as cited in...??)

<sup>18</sup> RSWH, 162.

pressure on the judges was great. Indeed, with nearly seventy people already imprisoned,<sup>19</sup> the burden that the witchcraft accusations were placing on communities was, by the time of Soams' trial, undeniable.

The need for the judges to vindicate their past actions extended to the creation of the touch test, as the evidence they had previously employed were targets for criticism. Particularly prevalent and contentious, above witch's marks, puppets, or peculiar feats, was spectral evidence. Although spectral evidence was brought up in nearly every witchcraft examination in Salem, the evidence drew criticism on both empirical and religious grounds. Given its growing contention, the judges at Soams' trial were likely well aware this staple of witchcraft proceedings seemed to be losing ground.<sup>20</sup> With the touch test, they countered disapproval of their previous decisions by strengthening the evidence of witchcraft.

Following its first use in the Soams examination, the touch test would become a staple of evidence of witchcraft in Salem. Nathaniel Cary's account of his wife's examinations, on May 24—just eleven days after Soams relieved Warren via touch—attests to how quickly examiners and accusers adopted the test:

The [accused] Prisoner was placed about 7 or 8 foot from the Justices, and the Accusers between the Justices and them...the Prisoners Eyes must be constantly on the Justices ; for if they look'd on the afflicted, they would either fall into their Fits, or cry out of being hurt by them...then the Justices said to the Accusers, "which of you will go and touch the Prisoner at the Bar?" then the most couragious would adventure , but before they had made three steps would ordinarily fall down as in a Fit; the Justices ordered that they should be taken up and carried to the Prisoner, that she might touch them; and as soon as they were touched by the accused, the Justices would say, they are well, before I could discern any alteration; by which I observed that the Justices understood the manner of it.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> WMR, 148.

<sup>20</sup> WMR, 150.

<sup>21</sup> RSWH, 309-10.

It does not seem that Mary Warren was present at this jailhouse examination, as Cary identifies the afflicted as “two Girls of about Ten Years old, and about two or three other, of about eighteen.”<sup>22</sup> However, as Cornell University historian, Mary Beth Norton, explains, “people must have constantly discussed the most recent fits and complaints of the afflicted, along with other news stemming from examinations and, later, trials.”<sup>23</sup> The afflicted girls likely heard of the relief that a touch offered in the Soams examination, and, when justices brought them to be touched by the accused, acted accordingly.

Considering that the Court of Oyer and Terminer was organized on May 27, just a few weeks after Soams’ examination, the increasing visibility of the 1692 version of the touch test had convenient timing. With newly added emphasis on a court to define the terms of prosecution,<sup>24</sup> the court’s creation lent itself to incorporating any new evidence against supposed witches in its proceedings. Accordingly, the touch test showed up, in similar form, in many of the examinatinos over the summer of 1692. However, in spite of the test’s prevalence, it was not used as definitive proof of witchcraft, but rather as one of many pieces of evidence. This might make it seem as though the test was inconsequential in the development and decline of the trials, but records of perceptions of the test show that this is not true.

Given that the speculation about whether or not a person was a witch had relied on rumored accounts of a suspect’s behavior, or individuals’ visions of specters and fantastic occurrences,<sup>25</sup> the spiritual world lacked a widely visible foundation. In a letter to an unnamed minister, dated October 8, 1692, Thomas Brattle wrote about the role of the touch test in filling this void: “What can the Jury or Judges desire more, to convict any man of witchcraft, than a

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<sup>22</sup> RSWH 309.

<sup>23</sup> IDS, 6.

<sup>24</sup> WMR, 148.

<sup>25</sup> IDS, 46.

plain demonstration, that the said man is a witch?"<sup>26</sup> This empirical evidence was not only useful in condemning a witch, but also in adding to the belief in witchcraft outside of the court room. Take, for example, the case of Martha Tyler, who confessed to being a witch, but later recanted her confession. Reverend Increase Mather recorded his meeting with her:

Goodwife Tyler did say, that, when she was first apprehended, she had no fears upon her, and did think that nothing could have made her confess against herself. But since, she had found, to her great grief, that she had wronged the truth, and falsely accused herself. She said that, when she was brought to Salem, her brother Bridges rode with her; and that, all along the way from Andover to Salem, her brother kept telling her that she must needs be a witch, since the afflicted accused her, and at her touch were raised out of their fits, and urging her to confess herself a witch.<sup>27</sup>

Although Tyler repeatedly defended her innocence, the visibility of the touch test was so convincing, that even her own brother in law could not deny her connection to witchcraft. There were surely other factors that caused Tyler to admit guilt, but this case demonstrates the strong influence that the touch test had on strengthening speculation about afflictors.

In addition to providing empirical evidence, the touch test added to the spiritual foundations of witchcraft. The Reverend John Hale's *Modest Inquiry into the Nature of Witchcraft*, published in 1702, explained the otherworldly connection:

And Mr. *Glanvil* sapposeth a Philisophical reason for it, viz. that the Witch by the cast of her eye sends forth a Malefick Venome into the Bewitched to cast him into a fit, and therefre the touch of the hand doth by a sympathy cause that venome to return into the body of the Witch again.<sup>28</sup>

The judge's theological understanding, which John Hale herein explains, left out parts of Glanvil's writing that would contradict the test's 1692 usage. Whereas the 1692 touch test relied on the glance of a proximate witch, Glanvil wrote of a witch's "internal sight" that could send

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<sup>26</sup> "Letter of Thomas Brattle, F.R.S., 1692," printed in George Lincoln Burr *Narratives of the witchcraft cases, 1648-1706*. (1914). Prepared for the University of Virginia Library Electronic Text Center. Reprinted on <http://etext.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/BurNarr.html>. 'Hereafter referred to as NWC.'

<sup>27</sup> RSWH, 694.

<sup>28</sup> John Hale, *A Modest Enquiry into the Nature of Witchcraft*...(Boston, 1702). Printed in NWC,



“magical venome” to a person from “hundreds of miles distance.” More significantly, although he wrote that “magical influence is diffused out of the material bodies of the witches into the material bodies of others,” he did not explicitly say that the diffusion had to be through a witch. To the contrary, to justify his claim, he gave the example of Jesus’ *holy* ability to heal with a touch!<sup>29</sup> More than thirty years after his death, authorities misrepresented Glanvil’s explanation to spiritually justify the 1692 court proceedings.

Despite the shoddy explanation of the test, and whether or not lay observers of the examinations were aware of the test’s theological intricacies, the spectacle undoubtedly aroused many more anxieties than questions about the malefic power of the spiritual world. As Cotton Mather explained, “In all the Witchcraft which now Grievously Vexes us, I know not whether any thing be more Unaccountable, than the Trick which the Witches have, to render themselves and their Tools Invisible.”<sup>30</sup> Essex County Puritans believed that they lived beside a spirit world, and were plagued by fears of an otherworldly battle raging in New England. Just as the touch test provided empirical evidence that someone was a witch, the inexplicability, and later rationalization, of the spectacle confirmed the ever-present threat of an invisible evil.

The touch test clearly helped convince many people—judges, clergy, and lay people alike—of the existence of witchcraft, and the culpability of the accused. The test did, however, draw criticism, even in the early stages of its development. Nathaniel Cary responded to the “inhumane dealings” of his wife’s May 24 touch test examination, by wishing that “God would take vengeance on [the judges],” and that “God would deliver [his wife and him] out of the hands

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<sup>29</sup> Joseph Glanville, *Plain evidence of the actual existence of witches, proved from the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and from other authorities*. Ed. W. Fordyce (Newcastle, 1834). 10.

<sup>30</sup> Cotton Mather *Wonders of the Invisible World* (1692) 246. Printed in NWC.

of unmerciful men.”<sup>31</sup> John Alden, a merchant visiting Salem from Boston who was accused of witchcraft, wrote about the ridiculousness of the test used in his May 28<sup>th</sup> examination:

They bid Aldin look upon the Accusers, which he did, and then they fell down. Aldin asked Mr. Gidney, what Reason there could be given, why Aldin's looking upon *him* did not strike *him* down as well; but no reason was given that I heard... Aldin began to speak of the Providence of God in suffering these Creatures to accuse Innocent persons.<sup>32</sup>

Still, when the test was first developing, its criticism was scarce and scattered. It was not until the touch test became increasingly visible, that this lay dissention contributed to formal dissent, and eventually the end of the witchcraft trials.

By October, influential politicians, theologians, and academics had integrated criticisms of the touch test in their writings. In a letter dated October 8, 1692, Brattle wrote to an unnamed clergyman that reiterated Alden’s point of confusion. He raised the question of how “witches [who]...by a look of the eye, do cast the afflicted into wits...do not cast others into fitts, and poison others by their look,”<sup>33</sup> and gave accounts of negative public sentiments toward the touch test. As a well-respected scholar and merchant, Brattle’s voice likely rang clearer than the voices of the accused and their families. Samuel Willard, a pastor from Boston, criticized the touch test in *Some Miscellany Observations*, which was published during the trials. In the form of a dialog between Salem and Boston, he wrote:

B. The use of [the touch test], as a Trial, is utterly unlawful, as will ere long be made to appear to the World: and besides, the thing is not evidential, when it is clone; but exceedingly fallacious: yea indeed, it is not any whit more a Presumption than the former, if so much.

S. But it never fails

[...]

S. Some tell us that there is a natural cause for it.

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<sup>31</sup> RSWH, 309-10.

<sup>32</sup> RSWH, 334. Although it was published by Robert Calef, and the account is in the third person, Rosenthal notes that it is very likely that ‘Alden himself either narrated or wrote it.’

<sup>33</sup> “Letter of Thomas Brattle, F.R.S., 1692,” printed in NWC.

B. And you believe them! The effect is preternatural, and the thing unaccountable: and mens wild guesses in such an affair, ought not to pass for Maxims, where life is concerned.<sup>34</sup>

Reflections on the touch test from these and other critics, such as Increase Mather, contributed to “a rising chorus of voices [that] had been raised against the court,”<sup>35</sup> which would bring about the close of the witchcraft crisis.

Of course, the touch test was by no means the main point of criticism of the trials, and there were many other factors that led to the end of the ordeal. Still, a letter from Governor Phips to the Earl of Nottingham cited the problematization of the touch test as a cause to rethink the court proceedings. Signaling the beginning of the end of the witchcraft ordeal, Phips wrote:

“Mr. Increase Mather and severall other Divines did give it as their Judgment...that the look and the touch of the suspected persons was not sufficient prooffe against them...upon this consideration I permitted a spetiall Superior Court to be held at Salem in the County of Essex on the third day of January... [The court’s] method of proceeding being altered, all that were brought to tryall to the number of fifty two, were cleared saving three”<sup>36</sup>

Over time, following the devaluation of the touch test and other evidence that been accepted in court, every one of the remaining defendants was either acquitted or pardoned.<sup>37</sup> In *More Wonders of the Invisible World*, Robert Calef outlined the decline of the trials, citing reprieves that “prevented the execution of seven condemned,” including “Daston” [Lydia Dustin], who had more evidence against her “than against any at Salem.” Agreeing with this statement, the judge still apparently replied, “there was not enough come in against her to bear a just reproof.”<sup>38</sup>

Clearly, something had changed since May, when Mary Warren’s theatrics in Abigail Soams’ trial led to the creation of the touch test. After the Court of Oyer and Terminer, by

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<sup>34</sup> SMO. 14-5.

<sup>35</sup> IDS, 283.

<sup>36</sup> *Letters of Governor Phips to his Home Government, 1692-1693*. Printed in NWC.

<sup>37</sup> IDS, 292.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Calef *More Wonders of the Invisible World* (1700). Printed in NWC.

necessity, seized the opportunity to integrate the test as evidence, the spectacle quickly became a staple of examinations. Just as its growing prevalence added to the empirical and theological proof of witchcraft, and strengthened accusations, it also increasingly became a target for criticism. Dissent began with the accused and their loved ones, but eventually became more formal, and influential figures integrated criticisms into their writings. Officials took the criticism into account, and, accordingly, rejected what the court had previously accepted as evidence. Although there are many causes and explanations for the end of the trials, the reformulation of valid evidence certainly signaled the decline of the witchcraft crisis of Essex County. Although the touch test was only one point of criticism of the court proceedings, it was by no means insignificant. Its rise and decline coincided with that of the trials, and the ordeal in Essex county would not have been the same without it.

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