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The Witchcraft Crisis of 1692

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Thomas Brattle and Robert Calef: Dissenting Views of the Salem Witch Trials

The Salem witchcraft crisis began in February of 1692 when Betty Parris, the daughter of Reverend Samuel Parris, and her cousin Abigail Williams, Reverend Parris' niece, began having fits. The girls described a sensation of being pinched and pricked with pins, screamed and made strange noises, contorted their bodies into peculiar positions, and complained of being visited by the 'specters' of local townspeople. The girls' afflictions were quickly attributed to witchcraft.

The first to be accused as witches were Sarah Good, a homeless beggar woman; Sarah Osborne, who had scandalized her community by her marriage to an indentured servant; and the slave Tituba. In March, Martha Corey, four-year-old Dorothy Good, and Rebecca Nurse were also accused of witchcraft. Unlike Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne, Martha Corey and Rebecca Nurse were both fully covenanted members of the Salem Village and Salem town churches respectively. Accusations against respected members of the community as well as outcasts continued. Indeed, even the former minister of Salem Village, George Burroughs, would be hanged for the crime of witchcraft. By the time the crisis came to an end in April 1693, twenty people had been executed and additional five, including two children, died in prison awaiting trial or pending release.¹

New England at this time was a region under considerable duress. Records indicate that Native American attacks upon communities like Salem were routine. The war against the French

¹ Emerson Baker. *A Storm of Witchcraft*. Oxford University Press. (New York, 2016): 14-41.

and their Native Americans allies had recently brought a high degree of violence to the northern colonies. Many current inhabitants of Essex County had previously fled from Maine for this reason.² The Salem communities, both town and village, were communities on edge, as was much of New England, threatened by alien, hostile forces beyond their control.

A modern observer could be tempted to view the 1692 Salem witchcraft crisis as reflecting the tenor and dominant beliefs of the Christian world at that time. Puritans in Europe and the New World, for example, firmly believed in the existence of witches. Many believed that the inability to recite the Lord's Prayer was proof positive of an accused's status as a witch. New Englanders of the time were most certainly convinced of the existence of the Devil, witches, angels, and miracles. All sorts of supernatural forces were thought to control nearly all aspects of daily life.

Yet even in those times some men viewed the Salem proceedings with suspicion, alarm and contempt, and who voiced their objections. From the refusal of Giles Corey, one of the accused to enter a plea to judge Samuel Sewall's later letter of apology for his involvement in the trials, to contemporaries who criticized the proceedings of the Salem community in the years after, there were individuals who raised their voices in protest in direct condemnation of the trials. Two of the most well recorded accounts of dissent came after the trials had concluded. Thomas Brattle sent his letter to an unnamed recipient in October 8, 1692 and it is unknown exactly when his concerns became public. Robert Calef published *More Wonders of the Invisible World* in 1700, years after the end of the trials, but not too late to attempt to discredit the trials and certainly Cotton Mather.

² Mary Beth Norton. *In the Devil's Snare*. Alfred A. Knopf, (New York, 2003): 83-111.

Thomas Brattle was born in Boston on June 20, 1658, the son of Captain Thomas Brattle, once believed the wealthiest man in the colony, who left his son a sizeable sum of money and a substantial amount of land upon his death. Brattle attended the Boston Latin School, where he met Cotton Mather, a fellow student. He then went on to attend Harvard University in 1676, where he excelled in mathematics and science. From 1682 to 1689, Brattle pursued his studies in science in London, England.³ Brattle was a notable scholar, but he was primarily a merchant. He also acted as the treasurer of Harvard College from 1693 to his death in 1713. At the time, Boston functioned as the intellectual, financial and judicial heart of New England, and Harvard University was an institution of particular importance.⁴

Unlike Thomas Brattle, very little is known about the life of Robert Calef. His father's name was Joseph and he was baptized in Stanstead, Suffolk, England on November 2, 1648. Sometime before 1688, Calef emigrated from England to New England and was a clothier, a tradesman rather than a member of the educated upper classes. Calef's name did not appear in the records of the witchcraft crisis, but he did maintain a private correspondence with Mather that probably began in September 1693. Calef was an "overseer of the poor" in Boston from 1702 to 1704 and held the position of assessor in 1707. He then moved to Roxbury where he was a selectman. Calef died in Roxbury on April 13, 1719.⁵

³ Edward Doubleday Harris. *An Account of Some of the Descendants of Capt. Thomas Brattle*. D. Clapp and Son (Boston, 1867), 6-9; Thomas Brattle. "Letter of Thomas Brattle, F. R. S., 1692." in G. L. Burr, *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases, 1648-1706*, 1914, University of Virginia, Dec. 1998. 167-168. Accessed November 3, 2017. <http://web.archive.org/web/20110212201547/http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbib/toccer-new2?id=BurNarr.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=2&division=div1#n1>

⁴ Burr, *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases*, 167.

⁵G. Andrews Moriarty. "The Calef or Calef Family". *New England Historic and Genealogical Register*, vol. 113 (Boston, 1959): 184-8; Calef, Robert. "More Wonders of the Invisible World." in Burr, G. L., *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases, 1648-1706*, 1914, University of Virginia, Dec. 1998, 291-295. Accessed November 3, 2017.

In response to the Salem proceedings, Brattle registered his concerns and criticisms with a letter directed to an unknown clerical correspondent, addressing him simply as “Reverend Sir,” on October 8, 1692. Brattle first criticized the ‘touch test,’ a method used to detect witches in which an afflicted person touched the suspected witch, and if his or her afflictions vanished upon the touch, witchcraft was confirmed. Brattle made the point that the origins of the ‘touch test’ could not be found in scripture, Christian tradition, or even the existing law. Drawing on the logic he gained through his academic background, Brattle believed that such superstitious methods had no place “in a land of such light as New England.” “The reasonable part of the world,” he went on to write, “when acquainted herewith, will laugh at the demonstration, and conclude that the said [Salem Gentlemen] are actually possessed, at least with ignorance and folly.”⁶

Brattle also questioned the credibility of the defendants who had already confessed to some charges of witchcraft. He condemned the confessors as “unfit to be evidence either against themselves, or anyone else” on the grounds that they “do very often contradict themselves, as inconsistently as is usual for any crazed, distempered person to do.” Brattle asserted that the condition of the afflicted was not the result of witchcraft, and suggested that the afflicted displayed signs of mental instability. Others would “soon be convinced,” he argued, “that there is nothing at all in these arguings, if they would but duly consider of the premises.”⁷

Further, Brattle strongly criticized the use of the afflicted as a means to obtain further evidence. Some afflicted Salem girls were tasked with identifying an alleged culprit in Andover,

<http://web.archive.org/web/20110212202126/http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbin/toccer-new2?id=BurNarr.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=5&division=div1#n199>

⁶ Brattle in Burr, *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases*, 172.

⁷ Brattle in Burr, *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases*, 174.

Massachusetts and transported there, as if they uniquely possessed the power to identify malfeasance. Brattle warned that the presence of these girls could infect others, even in the absence of actual evidence of witchcraft, and compel accusations not previously considered. The source of the threat, he suggested, was the girls themselves, with their wild histrionics.

Brattle lamented the outcome of this trip and noted that husbands “who, having taken up that corrupt and highly pernicious opinion, that whoever were accused by the afflicted, were guilty” had urged their wives to confess to the crimes of which they were accused.⁸ Brattle argued that the highly charged and superstitious tenor of the investigations was stimulating panic and irrationality within the community.

Brattle also denounced the use of spectral evidence; that is, the testimony of the afflicted that an invisible ‘specter’ of the accused tormented them. Brattle directly challenged the legality of spectral evidence, offering the fictional example of the supposed murder of “A.B.,” suggesting that spectral evidence had no legal weight. Brattle deployed an openly satirical tone:

When any man is indited for murdering the person of A.B. and all the direct evidence be, that the said man pistolled the shadow of the said A.B. tho’ there be never so many evidences that the said person murdered C.D., E.F. and ten more persons, yet all this will not amount to a legal proof, that he murdered A.B.; and upon that inditement, the person cannot be legally brought in guilty of the said inditement; it must be upon this supposition, that the evidence of a man’s pistoling the shadow of A.B. is a legal evidence to prove that the said man did murder the person of A.B. Now no man will be so much out of his witts as to make this a legal evidence; and yet this seems to be our case; and how to apply it is very easy and obvious.⁹

Brattle went on to directly question the integrity of the court. He noted that one of the accused was the mother in law, one Mrs. Thatcher, of one of the judges, and that she conspicuously avoided arrest as a result of the relationship. The court had, according to Brattle,

⁸ *ibid.*, 180.

⁹ *ibid.*, 176.

openly shown favoritism in terms of who suffered arrest and jail, as opposed to those accused but conveniently related to someone on the court. Specifically, Brattle noted at least one of the accused was allowed to remain under house arrest instead, and ultimately fled “the house, the town, and the Province.” “If he may be suffered to go away,” asked Brattle, “why may not others? If others may not be suffered to go, how in Justice can he be allowed herein?”¹⁰

Brattle’s passion culminated in his final charge to his reader, decrying the impact of the trials on the liberties of innocent people. “Liberty was evermore accounted the great privilege of an Englishman;” he wrote, “but certainly if the Devil will be heard against us, and his testimony taken to the seizing and apprehending of us, our liberty vanishes, and we are fools if we boast of our liberty.”¹¹ Brattle did not question that the Devil was ultimately responsible for the crisis. He was careful not to accuse the afflicted of lying outright, although he termed them mentally unstable and unreliable.

Brattle predicted “that ages will not wear off that reproach and those stains which these things leave behind the them upon our land. I pray God pity us, Humble us, Forgive us, and appear mercifully for us in this our mount of distress.”¹² Thus Brattle expressed the extent of his horror at the injustice and irrationality of the behavior of the judges and discarded his balanced, usually even tone.

In response to Cotton Mather’s *Wonders of the Invisible World* (1693), a vigorous defense of the trials and the central belief that witches were tools of the Devil, Calef wrote *More Wonders of the Invisible World* (1700.) In sharp contrast to Brattle’s point by point discussions, Calef’s work was a broad attack on Mather and those who adhered to what Calef called “Pagan

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 178.

¹¹ *ibid.*, 182.

¹² *ibid.*, 190.

and Popish Assertions,” placing full blame on those assertions as the root cause of the hysteria surrounding the accusations and trials.¹³

The difference in tone between the two works could not be more striking. Brattle addressed his reader as “Reverend Sir,” and termed himself a “real friend and humble servant” to his reader, and never entirely abandoning his temperate and respectful tone, despite the serious charges he made against the court proceedings. At his most passionate, Brattle implored his reader and colleague to consider his concerns. Calef, on the other hand, began his book with an elaborate, mock deferential apology for his own inadequacies as a scholar, exaggeratedly deferring to the greater knowledge of his betters. In so doing, Calef not so subtly mocked academic snobbery (and might have been trying to entertain his readers.)

Calef’s attack, unlike Brattle’s, was sweeping and harsh. At times he contemptuously described the afflicted as “wenches” and “children,” and did not hesitate to state that they were lying.¹⁴ Brattle typically referred to the girls as “afflicted,” calling into question their mental status, but not their intentions. Calef openly insulted and demeaned his opponents, calling them pagans, Catholics, and heathens, profound insults in his time, especially to those who purported to defend God.

Rather than making Brattle’s secular and highly specific arguments against the trials, Calef focused on a core theological argument that human thought and reasoning were imperfect, whereas knowledge from scripture was infallible. Therefore, certainty could only be derived from man’s sole source of truth. Proofs and arguments not cited in scripture were human

¹³Calef, in Burr, *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases*, 301.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, 353

inventions, and should be dismissed completely as “superstition.” The trials, he insisted, relied on fanciful human superstitions.

Calef also warned that relying on superstitions without any base in scripture created a dangerous environment that bastardized the true meaning of God’s commands: “Were the notion in question innocent and harmless, respecting the Glory of God and well being of Men, I should not have engaged in them... for tho Christians in general do own the Scriptures to be their only Rule of Faith and Doctrine, yet these Notions will tell us that the Scriptures have not sufficiently, nor at all described the crime of Witchcraft.”¹⁵

Calef argued that those who placed stock in the accounts of the accused, in spectral evidence, in touches of the hand, etc. placed belief in notions of men, not scripture, and had condemned innocents on the basis of “pagan fallacies.” In addition, these “notions” caused people to perceive that the Scriptures fell short when describing the crime of witchcraft, a view that Calef decried as blasphemous. Calef avoided accusing people of directly criticizing scripture. However, he suggested that their fanciful elaborations regarding witches and the Devil implied a belief that scripture was somehow inadequate in its doctrine regarding witches and the Devil. That, of course, bordered on the edge of calling his opponents heretics. He also argued, like Brattle, that “Spectral Sight” functioned often as “the chief Evidence against those that Suffered,”¹⁶ thus pointing to fundamental weaknesses in the court’s procedures.

Neither Brattle nor Calef denied the existence of witches and both men firmly believed in the Devil. In some ways, Brattle and Calef were men very much of their times. They still saw the world as controlled by supernatural forces and never questioned that. However, unlike some

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 301

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 306.

of their contemporaries, both Brattle and Calef saw the witch trials as the result of Devil's direct influence, rather than as a result of the witches themselves. Brattle and Calef did not attempt to prove that the accused were not witches. Rather, they both argued that the evidence of the accused's witchcraft was neither legally nor theologically sound, opining that only scripture or careful reason could offer credible means of proving witchcraft.

Writing shortly after the conclusion of the last trials (although he could not have known it at the time) Brattle penned his letter to a single recipient and made no attempts to disseminate his letter through publication. Calef on the other hand wrote several years after the trials had concluded and published a full book, rather than just writing a private a letter. He also clearly intended his book to be read by a specific subset of readers who were familiar with Mather's *Wonders of the Invisible World*. By deliberately naming his book after Mather's, Calef accomplished two objectives. He insulted Mather and he courted readers by simply adding 'More' to the title of Mather's *Wonders of the Invisible World*. Calef chose a provocative title that matched his sensational tone and was clearly insulting and snarky. So that no one missed the point, Calef included some of Mather's letters verbatim, setting him up to be discredited.

The energy and expense of publication suggested that Calef wanted to undermine the legitimacy of the legal proceedings of the Salem witch trials, or at least undermine Cotton Mather's reputation. Brattle's arguments did not focus on any single individual, and he quoted no one. He focused on what he saw as flawed arguments and inadequate evidence. In contrast to Brattle, Calef's book was an ad hominem attack as well as a scathing critique of the trials.

Calef took down a known and respected theologian of the time and a member of the elite Harvard community. Brattle had no obvious opponent, whereas Calef carefully chose his adversary and positioned himself in opposition to the esteemed theologian. Calef systematically

presented Mather's fallacies and offered his own rebuttals, letting the reader draw his conclusions, but in a sense guaranteeing the conclusions. For example, Calef pointed to Mather's endorsement of the idea that witches could summon the Devil. He rejected the belief that the Devil could approximate God-like powers when prompted to by a witch. This, Calef argued would equate the powers of the Devil with the powers of God and had no base in scripture.

Calef was selective in his discussion of Mather, taking care to present those parts of Mather's writing that would most effectively put him in a bad light. For example, Calef discussed the death of George Burroughs, who was one time minister of Salem Village from 1680 to 1683. In response to a dispute regarding pay between Burroughs and the powerful Putnam family, Burroughs left the congregation and resettled in Maine. Although Burroughs eventually was able to make good on his debt to the Putnams, ill will towards him remained among some in the community.¹⁷

While still residing in Maine, Burroughs was accused of witchcraft by congregants including Anne Putnam, arrested, and brought back to Salem to stand trial. He was condemned to be executed on August 19, 1692. The spectacle of Burroughs' execution greatly disturbed some onlookers, as Burroughs was able to recite the Lord's Prayer in its entirety without mistakes. As some in the crowd began to raise questions about injustice, Cotton Mather, speaking from atop his horse, admonished and reassured the crowd below that this was God's justice.¹⁸ This was the only execution attended by Mather. Calef made sure he would pay for it.

A sense of how the Burroughs' execution would be seen by subsequent generations can be seen in Nathaniel Hawthorne's description: "Ah no; for listen to the wise Cotton Mather, who,

¹⁷ Baker, Emerson. *A Storm of Witchcraft*, 129-137.

¹⁸ Baker, Emerson. *A Storm of Witchcraft*, 35.

as he sits there on his horse, speaks comfortable to the perplexed multitude, and tells them that all had been religiously and justly done, and that Satan's power shall this day receive its death-blow in New England."¹⁹ in the end, Calef was lethally effective in his attempt to smear Mather.

Calef took considerably more personal risk than Brattle did by publishing his book. He spent his own money, devoted great effort and publicly challenged a specific and eminent theologian to direct intellectual combat. Lacking formal education, Calef could have been publicly humiliated for overreaching his knowledge and status, and invited counter attack with his vehement and even reckless charges. Brattle, on the other hand, could not have known how or even if his letter would be circulated. Moreover, his academic credentials provided a screen of protection against derision for overreaching his station. For a man without formal education to publish a book that openly condemned members of the intellectual and religious elite took courage, and was undoubtedly a bolder move than that made by Brattle.

In the end, both men provided voices of integrity and reason in an age mired in ignorance and anxiety. They were essential then, and no less now.

¹⁹ Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *Main Street*. Read Books. (Vancouver, 2008): 38.

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