

SALEM WITCHCRAFT TRIALS: THE PERCEPTION OF WOMEN IN HISTORY, LITERATURE AND CULTURE

UDC 821.111(73).09

Ana Kocić

University of Niš, Faculty of Philosophy, Serbia

E-mail: anakocic@hotmail.com

Abstract. *The paper deals with the (in)famous phenomenon of Salem witchcraft trials through historical and cultural perspectives with a special emphasis on their implications for the perception of women. The author first gives a brief overview of the most relevant historical sources on both Salem witchcraft trials and the role of women in Colonial America. The second part of the paper examines the treatment of Salem trials in a contemporary drama, establishing the link with theoretical considerations and focusing on the perception of women.*

Key words: *Salem, witchcraft, trials, women, drama*

1. INTRODUCTION

Salem witchcraft trials have long inspired interest of scholars and researchers and this phenomenon is analyzed on many levels: sociological, historical, anthropological, psychological, demographical, theological. The focus of this paper is the possible interpretation of Salem events in view of the role and the position of women in Colonial America. Furthermore, through the analysis of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, especially its female protagonists, an attempt is made to see whether this role has been redefined in this modern reinterpretation of this event.

2. SALEM WITCHCRAFT TRIALS – THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

2.1 Events in Salem

Although it is difficult to tell with certainty what happened in Salem in 1692, a majority of historical sources suggest that everything started when a group of young girls from Salem Village began having strange fits accompanied by hysterical reactions, un-

provoked laughter and crying, incoherent babbling, attempts to fly, and in some instances a hypnotic-like trance. What preceded these bizarre fits apparently were secret enchanting sessions with Tituba, a slave of Indian origin¹ from the Caribbean, during which Tituba and several young girls from Salem Village used folk magic to predict who their husbands would be. When the afflicted girls were examined by a local doctor, no physical cause for such strange behavior could be found; therefore, in accordance with the general attitude and beliefs of that period, the logical conclusion was that there must have been some interference on the part of Satan. Since two of them were from the house of Reverend Parris, a local minister, Parris immediately called the ministers from the neighboring parishes for a consult.

A series of interrogations began, leading to the accusations against a number of Salem inhabitants, most of whom were tried and nineteen of whom were convicted for witchcraft and executed. The afflicted girls became the main accusers and witnesses as the judges controversially used spectral evidence, i.e. the evidence given by witnesses who claimed to have seen the spirit or specter of an accused person committing acts of witchcraft (Goss, 2008). This process, perhaps best described as a peculiar mass hysteria, soon began spreading even to the neighboring areas; the number of accused increased drastically, but the situation became alarming when some women of higher social status, a pastor's wife among them, stood in danger of accusations. Finally, after much dispute, especially about the admissibility of spectral evidence in court, the trials were completely stopped by the official ban issued by the Governor of Massachusetts, authorized by the English home government: all remaining accused were pardoned and those awaiting trial were granted amnesty.

However, these events not only deeply undermined the Puritan order in New England, but also became an important historical point against which many contemporary events would be measured. Furthermore, bearing in mind that a majority of the accused and convicted were women, as well as that all of the accusers were women, this episode was important for the (re)definition of the role of women in New England. The following section will give some of the more important characteristics of a woman's life in Colonial New England.

2.2 Women in New England

Bremer (1995) states that the position of women in Colonial America was clearly that of subordination to men. However, he points out that women were given more prominence in the New England Puritan societies than in the respective Catholic and Anglican surroundings, since the Puritan institution of marriage was based on both procreation and companionship. Introducing companionship as an (even more) important purpose of marriage effectively meant making marriage a civil contract for the success of which both parties were equally responsible.

Though Reis (1999) does not dispute this view in terms of women's importance for the family and household maintaining tasks, she claims that women in New England were generally considered to be more sinful than men by nature, i.e. although souls were considered to be sexless in Puritan theology, women's souls were considered to be more susceptible to the workings of Satan, and were consequently to be guarded more carefully

¹ Nowadays the opinions of scholars who deal with these events seem to be divided; namely, there is a faction that considers Tituba to have been of Afro-American descent. Also, many popular representations of Salem events on film and in literature view Tituba as an African-American. Still, the official records from the 17th century clearly state that she was an Indian.

against it and more severely punished if transgressed. She claims that women of New England deeply internalized this view of their natural depravity, which affected their spiritual and everyday lives, implying that such a particular state of mind in Puritan women may have played a significant role in triggering the events in Salem.

3. VARIOUS INTERPRETATIONS OF SALEM WITCHCRAFT TRIALS

As previously mentioned, Salem events caused much controversy in the 17th century, but also continued to interest researchers to this day. The main question remained: what caused Salem witchcraft trials to achieve such proportions? Furthermore, the question of the ultimate culprit and/or the scapegoat recurred. Various interpretations have been offered and most of the contemporary ones can be classified according to different focal points as presented here.

3.1 Socio-political Interpretations

Salem events interpretations based on demographic, sociological, economic and political analyses mainly highlight class and political strives among the leading families of Salem Town and Salem Village, as well as the war with the Indians which closely coincided with the Salem trials.

One of the more important works in this line of thought, Boyer and Nissenbaum's study *Salem Possessed* (1974) focuses on the two competing economic factions within the Salem community – the one with the fortunes on the rise, those families who were inclined towards a nearby prosperous port of Salem Town, and the one with the fortunes in decline, the families who were in favor of establishing an autonomous farming community in Salem village. These authors claim that the declining faction used the witchcraft accusations to deal with their opponents².

Another possible explanation was offered by Mary Beth Norton (2002), who maintains that the war with the Indians led between 1689–1697 and the traumatic effect it had on the inhabitants of Salem played the major role in these events. Her position is that the danger that threatened the Salem community from the *Red Devils*, as they called the Indians, provided a plausible excuse for Salem authorities to blame their military failure on the Devil and at the same time created a fertile ground for the mass hysteria that followed.

In his well-known demographic study J. P. Demos (1982) views Salem events as a small part of a much larger social pattern of behavior conditioned by the New England system of beliefs and psychology. According to him, witchcraft episodes served as a perfect excuse to New England ministers to give moral instructions and warnings to their parishioners, thus preserving and strengthening the established order in the community. Furthermore, he gives a profile of a *typical* witch – it is most often a middle-aged *woman* of a lower social standing, not favored by the community due to frequent disputes and outbursts in public. Although Demos highlights the social component in profiling a person who was most likely to be charged with and condemned for witchcraft, his data analysis shows that such persons were more often than not – women, the fact emphasized in several contemporary theories dealing with the Salem phenomenon.

² A similar idea can be found in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*, where Judge Pyncheon accuses Matthew Maule of witchcraft in order to seize his fortune.

3.2 Interpretations focusing on the role of women

It is unwise to deny that Salem witchcraft trials is a very complex issue, but bearing in mind that the majority of the accused, as well as all of the accusers were women many scholars have seen and treated it as a gender issue. Here we will present two of the best known theories in that line: Carol Karlsen's and Elizabeth Reis's.

Karlsen's feminist study *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman* (1987) deals with witchcraft trials on a larger scale: she analyzes data from both Europe and New England, establishing that the majority of the accused and executed were women and most often women over forty, past their childbearing and childrearing years, therefore, most likely to be care-receivers than care-givers. Furthermore, she claims that those women were particularly the ones who did not fit into the typical Puritan framework of a good, obedient wife, the one who is supposed to help reinforce the male-dominated hierarchical structure of the society³. Unlike the above mentioned Demos's study, Karlsen maintains that the accused and executed women were predominantly held in higher esteem in the society, the ones who by exhibiting non-conformist views and employing independent judgment endangered male hegemony, and consequently, God's preordained system of order in which women, children and servants were supposed to submit to male authority. She also states that after the Salem events became over-proportioned and the leading male clerical and political elite were forced to admit their mistake and some even publicly apologize to the victims and their families, the beliefs in witchcraft and the perception of women in New England were forever irrevocably redefined.

Another influential work which deals with the major role of women in the Salem witchcraft trials is previously mentioned Professor Reis's work *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England* (1999). She focuses on the question why mostly women were accused and executed for witchcraft and echoes Karlsen's view that the trials were mostly means of keeping the non-conformist New England women subservient to male-ordained authority, while also providing an answer rooted in Puritan theology. Namely, she draws on the writings of Puritan clergy which testify that women in New England were considered to be more closely connected to evil than men, and therefore, in need of constant oversight in order not to succumb to the devil impulses embedded in their nature(s). Similarly to Karlsen, she holds that the Salem episode, despite its many innocent victims, greatly contributed to the redefinition of the public opinion of women, devil and sin in general.

4. SALEM WITCHCRAFT TRIALS IN ARTHUR MILLER'S *THE CRUCIBLE*

Since the focus of this paper is to consider Salem events from the perspective of the role and position of women, previously mentioned theories will be used to view some representations of Salem events in American literature. Perhaps the best known work inspired by Salem witchcraft trials is Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. Miller used the Puritan context as a parallel to and a critique of the infamous anti-Communist McCarthy hearings and the *Red Scare* hysteria in the USA in the 50s. Although Miller's focus was primarily socio-political, we will focus on the women in his play and their representations in an attempt to establish a link between the theoretical explanations of Salem events (predominantly the gender-centered ones) and their recontextualization in Miller's work.

³ One cannot help but invoke the opening scene of Hawthorne's *Scarlet Letter*, when Hester Prynne is more severely condemned by her own sex, than by the Puritan men.

One of the characters in the play, albeit somewhat marginal is Rebecca Nurse, a prototype of what Karlsen and Reis would call *a handmaiden of the devil*, i.e. a prominent, wise, independent woman with a high reputation in the Salem society. In her character description, Miller mentions that she was the wife of man of rising fortunes, just like in previously mentioned Boyer and Nissenbaum's study, who was the target of the class in decline. Furthermore, he explicitly states that Rebecca's reputation in Salem was such that in order to explain the fact that she was among the accused, one would have to *look to the fields and boundaries of that time* (p. 24). After she is tried and sentenced to death, she accepts her fate with ultimate dignity and pride to the very end, refusing to admit her supposed guilt and thus succumb to the pressures of male authority imposed on her. She is represented, and at one point directly referred to as a saint, whose brave conduct and willingness to choose death over renouncing herself inspires wavering John Proctor to do the same thing. Her figure stands in sharp contrast with the accusers, who are, in Miller's play represented as vengeful, deceitful, ambition and jealousy-driven villains, but also, her good judgment, kindness, mercifulness and calmness create a model opposed to the hysteria, selfishness and short-sightedness of her judges.

Another similar female character is John Proctor's wife, Elizabeth. She also exhibits good judgment and graceful and dignified behavior when faced with false accusations. Furthermore, as Miller departed from historical facts and placed the love triangle involving John Proctor, Abigail Williams and Elizabeth Proctor at the center of the events in Salem, she is forced to face both her internal dilemma of whether to forgive her husband and an external one – a potential charge and condemnation on the part of Salem community. The main reason why she is charged, in Miller's play is the jealousy and wickedness of a young girl who used to be her husband's mistress and, after being rejected, childishly refuses to accept the truth and plots against his wife in a desperate attempt to take her husband and also, significantly, her place in the society as a mistress of a prospering home. When questioned by Reverend Hale, Elizabeth Proctor bravely replies: *I cannot think the Devil may own a woman's soul, Mr. Hale, when she keeps an upright way as I have. I am a good woman, I know it; and if you believe I may do only good work in the world, and yet be secretly bound to Satan, then I must tell you I do not believe it.* (p. 68). This remark of hers illustrates the New England view of women as advocated by Reis, implying that the main role of a woman is to *keep an upright way*, meaning to support the established order, but also indirectly resents the ever-present suspicion under which a woman's soul is placed. Furthermore, despite her meek and gentle appearance, she exhibits a much greater courage and strength of character than her husband: she is the one who is not afraid to stand up to the judges and speak her mind plainly and openly, at a point even openly challenging the doctrine, thus inspiring her husband to act in a similar way. Perhaps significantly, the wife is the one who is morally superior to the husband, but she is also the one who is capable of showing mercy, sympathy and greater understanding of family values and proper social conduct; even more importantly, the woman is the one who remains determined and upright under pressure.

Since it would go well beyond the scope of this paper to mention and analyze all ten female characters in this play, we will only mention one more which may seem somewhat controversial. Miller has often been accused of too liberal departing from historical facts regarding the Salem events and one of the more conspicuous examples of that sort is the fact that he made Tituba an African-American sorceress, thus introducing a powerful element of a race issue. Making Tituba a woman, a slave, a member of a different race, and an enchantress

– the most vulnerable character in the play, only made her more visible to the audience and the readers. Tituba is the first one to be accused and her treatment reveals an immediate readiness to blame the Devil's work on an outsider who is unable to defend herself not only because of her lowest social position but also because she is unable to speak the language of her accusers properly. This inherent fear of *the other* is similar to what previously mentioned Norton's work identified as a possible cause of underlying collective neurosis of the Puritan New England society, which provided a fertile ground for mass hysteria. At the same time, in the scene of her confession, when she is badgered by a minister, there is a very powerful picture of the clergy starting their rise to power by subjugating the weakest element of the society, which is paralleled to the US Government actions in the 50s.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we should say that the issue of Salem witchcraft trials is certainly not to be viewed lightly or comprehended easily, bearing in mind a complex interplay of factors which brought about these events and many similar *witch hunts* which have occurred since. Although most of this paper is dedicated to the role of women in Salem events and the consequences they had for the definition and redefinition of the perception of women both in Colonial New England and in contemporary societies, the author's idea is not that these events should be viewed in light of gender issues only. Rather, an attempt was made to shed more light on one of the many aspects of these trials, both as an issue that should not be neglected and as a potentially challenging and promising field for further research in history, sociology, culture and gender studies.

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SUĐENJA SALEMSKIM VEŠTICAMA: POIMANJE ŽENE U ISTORIJI, KNJIŽEVNOSTI I KULTURI

Ana Kocić

U ovom radu (ne)slavni fenomen suđenja salemskim vešticama se posmatra kroz istorijsku i kulturnu perspektivu, sa posebnim naglaskom na implikacije koje on pruža za poimanje žene. Najpre se daje kratak pregled najznačajnijih istorijskih izvora koji se bave, kako suđenjima u Salemu, tako i položajem žena u kolonijalnoj Americi. Drugi deo rada se bavi viđenjem salemskih suđenja u jednoj modernoj drami, pri čemu se uspostavlja veza sa teorijskim razmatranjima, dok je fokus na poimanju žene.

Ključne reči: *Salem, veštice, žene, drama*