

Archival Research Assignment

The Salem Witch Trials, beginning in 1692 and lasting through May of the following year, infused Massachusetts with panic and turmoil as a witch epidemic infected the land. Many innocent people were accused and convicted as witches, and many were executed because of it. Some people, despite the hysteria, did not condone the methods used to punish the supposed witches. “Some Miscellany Observations on our Present Debates Respecting Witchcrafts” is a dialogue reflecting the controversy surrounding these trials. Published in 1692 during the climax of the trials, this dialogue is between the anonymous “S” and “B” – which, as it is mentioned in the citation, are later to be deciphered by David C. Brown as Salem and Boston, respectively. In this dialogue, Salem and Boston discuss the ramifications of the witch trials. Boston argues that the way in which Salem has been going about finding, accusing, and trying the supposed “witches” is utterly wrong and immoral – chastising, at one point, that “evil is not to be done that good may come of it” – while Salem attempts to defend itself against Boston’s logical argument (13).

Regarding the physical appearance of this piece, there are several interesting points to note, especially regarding title. The word “observations” is printed in larger letters than any other word on the title page, overpowering even the word “witchcrafts”. This, perhaps, leads readers to believe that these are not opinions merely held by a small party; rather, it is being emphasized that Boston’s arguments are points that can be observed with the senses and are indisputably present, and therefore cannot be dismissed simply as an incorrect or unpopular opinion. The names printed on the page are curious, as well; as stated before, Salem and Boston are left anonymously as “S” and “B”. It seems strange to choose these two cities – rather than individuals – as the “speakers” of the piece; perhaps, by choosing places instead of people, the

Comment [GD1]: A bit too metaphorical and not quite clear. Does “witch epidemic” mean that there are a growing number of witches or that hysteria is growing? This, of course, becomes clear in the next few sentences, but you want to make sure each sentence says what you mean it to say.

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Comment [GD2]: Good.

author is attempting to give readers a sense of universality in the observations presented. Instead of being presented by a single individual, the observations are presented by an entire city. Salem and Boston are not, however, the only ones left anonymous – the authors, named as P.E. and J.A., are also left nameless, though Brown states that these men are Philip English and John Alden in the citation.

Interestingly, the printer, William Bradford, and the publisher, Hezekiah Usher, are named, unlike the others on the page. There is also a name hand-written near P.E and J.A; it reads “By S. Willard”. It is not clear why this name is scrawled on the title page, nor why there is seemingly another author introduced after printing, though it is stated in the citation that the dialogue is written by Samuel Willard, not English and Alden. Perhaps Alden and English acted as Boston and Salem, while Willard simply transcribed the conversation, or possibly Willard contributed to the creation of the piece in some other way. The word “sir” is also printed just before the dialogue actually begins; this could be either an address to the reader, or it could be the beginning of Salem’s introductory dialogue.

In the citation it is noted that, while Bradford is the named printer of this piece, and Philadelphia the place, neither of these are, in fact, true. According to David C. Brown, this piece was printed under Bradford’s name to hide who truly printed it and where it was actually printed – in other words, it is a false imprint. It is speculated in the citation that perhaps Boston is the piece’s true origin; perhaps printing in Boston would have been too close to the action of the Trials, making Philadelphia a safer choice to be “printed” in. Supposedly, a governor in the colonies had put a ban on the printing of anything regarding the Witch Trial controversy.

Perhaps this restriction was enacted because enough people were beginning to voice doubts in order to cause an end to the Trials; regardless of the reason, it is interesting to consider the

Comment [GD3]: I also think that including the town names as speakers is really curious. Might there be other implications?

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Comment [GD4]: The history of the authorship of this text seems really intriguing. I like that you are speculating about the multiple possibilities.

Comment [GD5]: So interesting.

implications of this information with the formation of freedom of the press later on in America.

Comment [GD6]: Yes.

At this moment, it was completely legal to put restrictions on what could and could not be printed – yet, people obviously still found ways around restrictions to print what they wanted to. This dialogue could be a shadow of the beginnings of people demanding the right to voice what they wish.

Comment [GD7]: Excellent.

While the physical aspects of this piece are intriguing, the actual content is even more so. Throughout the dialogue, Boston's argument is calm, collected, and logical; not once does it seem like an impassioned rant about the injustices of Salem's actions throughout the Trials. Rather, by going about it in such a cool and collected manner, Boston makes it seem as though there is no other way to look at the situation. It is never argued that witches do not exist, nor is it stated that Boston thinks that any witches in New England's midst should not be punished; rather, Boston explicitly states there is "no doubt" that witches exist, for "the Scripture is clear for it", and witches should be punished "without question" (2). However, Boston does argue that the methods by which Salem had been accusing and trying the possible witches was abhorrent and cruel, as well as unjustifiable. Though they believe witches should not be suffered to live, "they must first be so proved" – ergo, accusing innocent people of witchcraft without sufficient evidence was not what God intended nor wanted the people of Massachusetts to do. (2).

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By examining Boston's argument closely, it seems to be a possible base of America's justice system. Today, it seems clear that a person cannot be prosecuted without ample evidence, and that evidence must be able to be seen, touched, or heard. Visions, hearsay, or any other form of preternatural "evidence" would never be accepted in the current court of law as a basis for prosecution. However, during the Salem Witch Trials, this is mostly the evidence on which accusations were based. Victims were often spoken of as being touched by witchcraft, but there

Comment [GD8]: Not sure what you mean here.

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was very rarely any physical evidence of harm done; others claimed, while on the witness stand, that witchcraft was at that very moment being performed, though no one but them could see it. Accusations were purely based off of witness testimony that could never be proved, and it was nearly impossible for the accused to have an acceptable alibi.

Comment [GD9]: Is this part of the argument given by Boston in the document, or is this additional historical evidence that you are providing?

Boston argues that this form of prosecution had to stop; it was immoral, unjust, and completely disastrous to anyone involved. They ask Salem if there “ought...not to be good grounds of suspicioun before a person...be examined for such a Crime”, reminding Salem that a murder would surely need more evidence to be prosecuted than witchcraft currently did (2). Boston questions Salem’s morals in regard to the aftermath of an accusation, stating that “to put a man to death by bare Presumptions, is to do it by guess, and that is something hard” (4). Those that are accused and not put to death are also essentially ruined for life, and Boston argues that “the Rule of Charity bids [them] to think well of [the accused], till that appear which ought to remove this Charity” – or, in more modern terms, people are to be considered innocent until proven guilty (11). Towards the end of the dialogue, Boston directly tells Salem that “the use of [spectral evidence] as a Trail, is utterly unlawful, as will ere long be made to appear to the world” (14). Boston possesses an arsenal of reasons why Salem’s path is an immoral one, and these reasons are still legitimate and logical in today’s society.

There are several moments in the text that pointed directly to current givens in the American justice system; Boston states that “where there is no fact, there is no ground of accusation” (4). Boston also declares that “extorted confessions are not fair”, and therefore are not a viable form of evidence (6). There is discussion regarding possession and charming; Boston claims that the two are too closely linked to use one as a form of evidence, and that “while [the victims] have their spectral sight, [Boston] cannot suppose them to be clear from the

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Charm” – that evidence gained this way is from an individual potentially not in their right minds or completely in control of themselves, and is therefore invalid (9). These moments reflect pieces of America’s current justice system, such as legitimate witnesses, evidence needing to be physical, coerced confessions being invalid, and the need to have justifiable cause for suspicion to accuse and bring in an individual for examination and trial, that are viewed as givens – but at this time, they were not, and it is an important step towards modern justice that is being taken here.

Heinous, abhorrent acts were committed against many innocent people during the Witch Trials simply because of mass hysteria. People began realizing the injustice of the Trials; Boston mentions that they “believe, if it were [Salem’s] lot to be thus accused, [they] would think if hard to be censured...[they] would either repent of [their] rashness or turn atheist” (11). This document reflects the beginnings of the justice system separating from the church; supernatural evidence was starting to become unacceptable, legitimate witnesses began to be necessary, and benefit of the doubt was becoming the norm. These trials are a fascinatingly horrifying piece of American history, and this concocted dialogue reflects some of the larger pieces of uneasiness people were beginning to feel towards the justice system. At this point, religion is still very much present in the justice system, but it appears that this was the starting point for what would become a secularized justice system in modern America.

Comment [GD10]: Good.

Works Cited

Willard, Samuel. *Some Miscellany Observations on our Present Debates Respecting Witchcrafts*.

Philadelphia: Hezekiah Usher, 1692. *Early American Imprints, Series I*. Web. 4 March 2015.

Final Comment:

Good work here. I especially like your attention to the troubled authorship of the piece and the interesting history regarding freedom of the press. I also like that you are thinking about possible implications of the Salem witch trials in context of the modern US justice system. There were moments, however, where I wasn't sure of the sources of the historical background you were providing. I know that you've pulled some information from the citation page in the database, but on pages 3 and 4, for instance, I wasn't sure if this was information you were gleaning from the dialogue within the document or if you were pulling from an outside source. Be sure that your citations are clear. Also, I would have liked to see you dig a bit more into the archive to see if there were similar "false imprints" or documents specifically focused on the witch trials circulating around this time. This would have lent more support to your argument regarding freedom of the press.

Looking forward to seeing what you come up with for your final project! As always, let me know if you want to talk about anything I have written here.

Grade: B+

Best,
Gina