

The Rhetorical Constructions of the Symbolic Figures in the Salem Witch

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The Salem witch examinations of the late 1600s represent one of the most significant moments of rhetorical, theological, and judicial collapse in early American history. The trials depended not on empirical evidence but on symbolic interpretation. This interpretive method transformed adolescent girls into authoritative figures whose bodily reactions and spectral visions were treated as revelatory truths. Although the afflicted girls' experiences may have emerged from psychosocial stress, involuntary symptoms, trauma, or deliberate performance, the community's interpretive frameworks elevated these experiences beyond their subjective origins. Political officials and religious officials employed rhetorical strategies that transformed adolescent distress into legally actionable conclusions.

The rhetorical constructions embedded in the examinations erroneously transformed the afflicted girls into symbolic figures embodying the community's anxieties regarding spiritual corruption, social instability of power, and threats to established authority. Through exploratory questioning, metaphoric interpretation, and institutional validation, authority figures shifted the afflicted girls from the realm of perception to that of divine or diabolical revelation. Their bodies became semiotic surfaces upon which Salem projected collective fears, a transformation enabled by the permeable boundaries between visible and invisible evidence in Puritan knowledge, limits, and overall validity. By examining these rhetorical constructions, it is evident that the rhetorical constructions of the Salem witch examinations erroneously display "the afflicted girls" as symbolic figures through invisible or "spectral" evidence. The trials conflated metaphor with literal truth, weaponizing symbolic interpretation against the most vulnerable members of the community.

Central to the Salem examinations was the examiner's ability to guide testimony toward predetermined conclusions. Rhetorical construction expanded through the very structure of the questions posed to the accused. Examiners began with seemingly open-ended inquiries, only to narrow their wording in ways that implied guilt or demanded confirmation of the examiner's assumptions. These questions did not merely solicit information—they shaped it. The accused often found themselves responding not to their own experiences but to the rhetorical scenarios constructed by political and religious officials. For example, examiners frequently framed questions to suggest that supernatural forces were already at work. Rather than asking *whether* the accused had afflicted the girls, they asked *how* or *why* such afflictions had occurred. When an accused woman hesitated to answer or contradicted the implied narrative, their silence or uncertainty was reinterpreted as spectral evidence. Thus, the rhetorical pattern functioned as a trap: the accused either validated the court's presuppositions or provided material that could be reframed as diabolical deception. The afflicted girls' testimonies were positioned within this investigative framework. Their claims were not tested but ratified by the rhetorical design of the examinations. When a girl cried out in pain or reported seeing a specter, the examiners' follow-up questions presupposed the reality of the vision. Instead of evaluating the legitimacy of the girls' perceptions, examiners treated their utterances as disclosures of hidden spiritual truths. Within these obscure religious beliefs camouflaged as truths, the afflicted girls were rhetorically constructed as oracular figures whose statements carried metaphysical weight greater than that of adult witnesses.

The afflicted girls' roles were further cemented through the performative aspects of the trials. Their bodies—writhing, choking, contorting, falling into fits—became sites of meaning-making. These performances were interpreted as spiritual reactions to the presence or

actions of the accused. When Bridget Bishop moved her hands, and the girls collapsed or screamed, the political and religious officials construed the synchronicity as divine confirmation of guilt. The rhetorical logic was circular: the girls' symptoms proved the accused's witchcraft, and the accused's demeanor triggered the girls' symptoms. This interpretive process relied on institutional validation. Ministers and political officials served as legitimizing authorities who accepted symbolic gestures as factual indicators of diabolical activity. Their endorsements transformed the girls' experiences from subjective expressions into objective proofs. The afflicted thus gained unintended rhetorical power—not through inherent authority but through the interpretive frameworks imposed upon them. Their humanity was overshadowed by the symbolic meaning ascribed to their bodies. Puritan theology provided fertile ground for symbolic misinterpretation through its insistence that invisible spiritual forces could manifest in the visible world. This worldview blurred the boundary between perception and revelation. If physical sensations or unusual events could signify invisible causes, then the girls' bodily reactions could be interpreted as direct encounters with the supernatural. This theological premise created an absent form of evidentiary logic. Events that lacked material explanation—fits, visions, sudden pains—were treated as spiritual signs. Because the Puritan epistemology already assumed that the invisible world actively interacted with the visible one, the afflicted girls' symptoms required no empirical corroboration. Their reactions were accepted as meaningful in and of themselves. Thus, rhetorical interpretation replaced empirical investigation. Language, perception, and spiritual symbolism converged to form a system in which the symbolic was treated as literal. The afflicted girls' bodies were no longer indicators of psychological distress or social pressure; they were divine barometers revealing the operations of Satan. Spectral evidence, the claim that a person's spirit or specter could appear in dreams or visions to torment victims, depended entirely

on rhetorical constructs. No physical proof of these encounters existed. Yet political and religious officials accepted spectral testimony due to a theological loophole: if the devil could assume the shape of any person, then merely appearing in such a form implicated that person in diabolical activity. This logic inverts the burden of proof. Instead of requiring evidence of guilt, the political and religious officials presumed guilt from the girls' symbolic visions. Spectral evidence thus provided a bridge between subjective fear and judicial action. It functioned as a rhetorical mechanism that converted metaphor into a literal accusation. The afflicted girls' visions ascended from personal experiences to socially validated symbols. Their testimonies were treated as indicators of a broader cosmic war between good and evil. Their bodies became texts to be read, not individuals to be understood. This dehumanizing process transformed them into emblematic figures of spiritual vulnerability, despite their youth and limited comprehension of the forces acting upon them.

Historical analysis illustrates that moral panics increase during periods of upheaval, uncertainty, or transition. Reed notes that moral panics are typically tied to major shifts within a society, producing anxieties that become "channeled" into hostile emotions directed toward a "folk devil" (67). Salem was no exception. The colony faced economic instability, political conflict with England, and religious factionalism. These pressures created a collective unease that sought manifestation in identifiable threats. Mezzatesta similarly argues that the witchcraft accusations were "a manifestation of the anxiety and panic of the collective psyche of Salem village" (99). The afflicted girls and the women they accused became symbols through which the community externalized its insecurities. The cases of Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne demonstrate how social anxieties shaped symbolic interpretation. Both women occupied marginal positions within the community—poverty, nonconformity, and perceived moral failings

marked them as deviants. As supporters of Anne Hutchinson's controversial teachings and as women who defied Puritan ideals, they became ready targets for projection. When Good and Osborne took the stand, the community interpreted them not simply as individuals but as archetypes of disorder. Their lives symbolized the colony's fear of social and religious deviation. The examiners capitalized on these associations. By structuring questions designed to highlight the women's nonconformity, examiners used rhetorical techniques to conflate deviation with diabolical influence. Thus, the afflicted girls' reactions to Good and Osborne were framed not as personal perceptions but as symbolic enactments of the community's anxiety. Their bodies became instruments for projecting collective fears onto socially vulnerable women. With this mindset, the afflicted girls were not merely witnesses—they were symbolic conduits through which Salem articulated its own insecurity.

The symbolic association between afflicted girls and misappropriated power cannot be understood without contextualizing the legacy of Anne Hutchinson. Hutchinson's trial in the 1630s established a rhetorical template for interpreting female dissent as spiritual subversion. When Hutchinson questioned church doctrines and led religious meetings in her home, Governor Winthrop accused her not merely of unorthodoxy but of wielding unauthorized power. His interrogation was structured to turn Hutchinson's questions back on herself, twisting her words into evidence of rebellion. When Winthrop admonished, "We do not call you to teach the court but to lay open yourself" (Hall 315), he strategically framed Hutchinson's actions as an attempt to usurp male authority. This rhetorical pattern persisted throughout the Salem trials. Women who displayed confidence, defiance, or influence were interpreted as subversive. Spectral evidence became an extension of this logic, allowing examiners to "prove" that women's spiritual or social power derived from diabolical influence. Reed argues that "metanarratives are

thus tools in a game of rhetorical power” (72). The narratives constructed during the Salem trials served precisely this function. Ministers, whose authority had been declining since 1660 (Reed 76), seized the opportunity to reassert spiritual governance by controlling the interpretation of the girls’ symptoms. Their rhetorical dominance allowed them to define the girls’ experiences, transforming adolescent distress into divine or diabolical communication. The afflicted girls were thus incorporated into a larger power struggle. Their testimonies became evidence not merely in individual cases but in a metanarrative of threatened religious authority. The girls’ symbolic role as vessels of divine revelation reinforced ministerial power, while their capacity to name witches positioned them as instruments of theocratic stability.

The rhetorical construction of the afflicted girls as a collective when described as “the afflicted cried out...they fell into fits,” further amplified their symbolic status. Their unified voices evoked a chorus speaking on behalf of the community. This collective identity obscured individual differences, psychological states, or motivations. Instead, the girls became a single symbolic entity representing communal suffering. Their testimonies also served as cautionary tales about the dangers of subversion. As Messatesta notes, the witch figure symbolizes both protection and evil (20), embodying tensions between security and immorality. The afflicted girls’ accusations targeted individuals who challenged or deviated from Puritan norms, reinforcing the authority of the existing social order. Their symbolic function was therefore twofold: they revealed invisible threats and reaffirmed the legitimacy of the institutions that interpreted those threats.

The most devastating rhetorical failure of the Salem witch trials lies in the collapse of metaphor into empirical reality. The afflicted girls’ symptoms—whether psychosomatic, performative, or socially conditioned—were metaphorically expressive of community fears.

They reflected anxiety about political instability, religious uncertainty, gender roles, and power dynamics. Yet the examinations treated these metaphoric expressions as literal evidence of supernatural crime. This collapse transformed symbolic actions into legal grounds for execution. The community mistook the signs of its own psychological unrest for external enemies. The afflicted girls' bodies became canvases onto which Salem projected guilt, fear, and moral panic. Their testimonies, which should have been interpreted as expressions of social distress, were instead weaponized through rhetorical manipulation. The result of this judicial catastrophe was consummated when innocent neighbors were condemned based on symbolic rather than factual evidence. The afflicted girls, children, and adolescents were thrust into roles that distorted their humanity and agency. They were compelled, consciously or unconsciously, to embody the collective fears of their community.

The Salem witch examinations were less a legal inquiry into wrongdoing than a rhetorical performance that converted adolescent experiences into symbolic markers of spiritual and social crisis. The afflicted girls were elevated into pivotal symbols through a combination of theological assumptions, rhetorical strategies, and institutional validation. Political and religious officials constructed a system of interpretation in which the girls' bodies and voices functioned as instruments for reading invisible evidence. The Salem trial analysis demonstrates that the true error of the trials lay not simply in the acceptance of spectral evidence, but in the underlying rhetorical frameworks that made such evidence intelligible. The interpretive system privileged symbolic meaning over empirical verification, leading the community to confuse metaphor with reality. The afflicted girls, stripped of autonomy and individuality, became symbolic figures of anxiety, power, and subversion. Their humanity was sacrificed to their symbolism. An examination of these rhetorical constructions reveals that Salem's tragedy emerged from a

profound misreading, an interpretive failure that transformed fear into accusation, symbolism into guilt, and metaphor into death.

Works Cited

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