



Making the Intangible Tangible:
Material Objects in the New England Witchcraft Trials
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On a day in April 1692, a woman called Mary Black by her neighbours was under examination by a court in Salem Village. Mary, an enslaved African woman in the household of Nathaniel Putnam, had been accused of witchcraft. Two men, judges John Hathorne and Jonathan Corwin, questioned her. Beside them stood a group of girls and young women, all of whom had demonstrated they were suffering the spectral torments of witches. Villagers watching the scene spilled out into the streets, craning their necks to catch glimpses of the latest supernatural drama unfolding in front of them. Mary was adamant about her innocence in the face of questioning. Even as the tormented young women testified to the examiners that Mary was a witch, she reiterated, “I do not hurt them,” fiddling anxiously with her neckcloth. Highly attuned to the possible mischiefs of witches, the examiners ordered Mary to re-pin her neckcloth, lest she be using it for magical harm. As she did so, several of the possessed young women began to cry out. An 11-year-old girl named Abigail Williams clutched at her stomach, where she felt the pin of Mary’s neckcloth prick her. Mercy Lewis, from Maine, bent forward, feeling the sharp pains in her foot. A teenager named Mary Walcott surpassed them all. On her arm, the spectral recreation of Mary Black’s pinning of her neckcloth had wrought sufficient injury as to draw blood.¹

In New England witchcraft events of the seventeenth century, material objects served as conduits for the otherworldly, a locus of collective experience, and a means of demonstrating

¹ “84. Examination of Mary Black, and Clearing by Proclamation. Massachusetts Archives Collection, vol. 135, no. 20. Massachusetts State Archives. Boston, MA” (April 22, 1692), in *Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt*, ed. Bernard Rosenthal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 206.

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spiritual power. Objects were brought into examinations, depositions, and official trials. They were used or reacted to by various parties to these events. Perhaps the largest group who interacted with objects during the trials were “the possessed”. Broadly, these were individuals—usually young women, the poor, and sometimes racialized people—whose bodies were understood to be under spectral attack by witches and the devil. Possessed people provided a kind of embodied evidence of the spectral realm during trials. They would, as in the instance above, be asked to or would spontaneously respond to the actions of supposed witches. They also frequently brought testimony of these tortures that had taken place outside of the trials; and sometimes performed this in concert with instantaneous possession. Another group who interacted frequently with objects were those who were accused of witchcraft—both those who ultimately confessed, or those who, like Mary Black, maintained their innocence. Their often helpless, unconscious use of objects was interpreted by others—even if they didn’t experience it as such themselves—as touching the otherworldly. In this article I will give a brief overview of the use of objects by these players in the witch trials using the example of Salem, Massachusetts (1692). The comprehensive extant documents from parts of the Salem trials illuminate some of the material features in the more obscure witchcraft events across early modern New England. Examples from Salem can demonstrate the possible meaning created during witch trials, in the moment of a sense-making body interacting with objects.

The use of material objects was a specifically feminine way to interact with the otherworldly. Throughout historical and geographic contexts across the Atlantic world, women’s inferior access to both education and textual knowledge foregrounded the role of objects in attempts to perceive and interact with the spiritual. Though Puritan cultures—such as seventeenth-

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century New England—did not attribute sacred power to objects in and of themselves, objects did not have to be endowed with otherworldly power to facilitate the process of otherworldly connection. Heather Miyano Kopelson has persuasively demonstrated that the process of sensory bodies using objects, and spiritual meaning being created in the interaction, was as ingrained into Puritan societies as other Christian denominations.² Material objects allowed women both to “read” and to “write” their experiences, creating spiritual meaning in the mundane.³ Additionally, Nancy E. van Deusen describes a kind of “interrelationality” between women interacting with objects and their audiences.⁴ Just as holy women might experience their spirituality through the delicate handling of a holy object, and in doing so communicate to their audience about the invisible world, so too did women during witch trials. I shall demonstrate here how objects used in the witch trials, no matter how ordinary, sometimes existed in, and thus enabled tangible connection to and experience of, the overworldly; how they facilitated connection between the women involved in the trials; and how they enabled an interrelationality between user and audience.

² Heather Miyano Kopelson, *Faithful Bodies: Performing Religion and Race in the Puritan Atlantic*, (New York: New York University Press, 2018).

³ Nancy E. van Deusen, *Embodying the Sacred: Women Mystics in Seventeenth-Century Lima* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 3.

⁴ van Deusen, *Embodying the Sacred*, 15.

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(A poppet, Jonathan Corwin House, Salem, MA. This historical site is the former home of the same Corwin who was an examiner of Mary Black, as well as many others. Photograph author's own.)

During the witch trials, the people of New England lived not just in a visible world but also an invisible one. Appropriately, the interactions with objects as described in the documentary evidence is as replete with invisible objects as visible ones. Pictured above is a seventeenth-century poppet. Poppets frequently featured in early modern witch trials as representations of intended victims. Some individuals were accused of harming people by means of poppets, and others confessed to having done so. No poppets ever appeared in physical form at court, but rather evidence was given of having used and interacted with them whilst in spectral form. Abigail Hobbs, a teenager who had confessed to witchcraft, said that the minister George Burroughs (who was later executed) had given her poppets, but she could not show them as he had taken them away again. Abigail explained that she had taken some thorns and stuck them into the body of the doll. The examiner asked where she stuck the thorns, and in his phrasing acknowledged his belief that

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the poppet was tantamount to the very body of Abigail's intended victim: was it "about the middle of *her body*?" "Yes," replied Abigail, "and I stuck it right in."⁵ For Abigail, this moment of committing violence in the invisible world validated her spectral power as a witch. Whether physical or otherwise, she believed herself to be holding a doll like the one pictured above, feeling its soft, comforting, human-like form. Perhaps Abigail's poppets had a face like the doll pictured, a crude but effective attempt at suggesting animacy. Elsewhere in the trials, poppets were described as being made of "cloth," another just a "piece [sic] of Stick" that nonetheless "was like to Mary Walcott." Another was described as "an image which looked yellow & I believe [sic] it was for Abigail Williams being like hir."⁶ Recognizing the poppet as having human traits and resemblances, Abigail then committed violence against it, sticking her thorn "right in." Objects from the invisible world allowed supposed witches to garner power by *causing*, instead of just experiencing, pain. But more importantly, the act of committing violence created a thread tethering their experience of the invisible world to their experience of the visible world. Abigail's sensorial body could touch the invisible and create both change and harm in doing so. The act of touching the doll affirmed her supernatural power, not just in the magical violence committed but also by demonstrating her access to a spectral sensorium.

The trials at Salem were full of what we might term sympathetic magic: magic carried out against one body or object by manipulating another representative body or object. For instance,

⁵ "77. Examinations of Abigail Hobbs in Prison. Essex County Court Archives, vol. 1, no. 155, Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, Judicial Archives, on deposit James Duncan Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, MA" (April 20, 1692), in *Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt*, ed. Bernard Rosenthal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 199. Emphasis mine.

⁶ "145. Examination of Mary Warren. Essex County Court Archives, vol. 1, no. 116, Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, Judicial Archives, on deposit James Duncan Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, MA." (May 12, 1692), in *Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt*, ed. Bernard Rosenthal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 263.

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Mary Black's motion of pinning her necktie caused the sensation of pricking in the bodies of possessed women, and Abigail Hobbs stuck thorns in her poppets believing it to cause harm in the corresponding part of her victim's body. This sympathetic magic required a collective buy-in to the experience by both the spectral attacker and their victim. For instance, at the tavern in Salem Village, two young men named Benjamin Hutchinson and Ely Putnam stabbed the spectre of Deliverance Hobbs (step-mother of Abigail) with their rapiers. Two girls, Abigail Williams and Mary Walcott, had told the men of Deliverance's spectre before them and the harm she intended to cause - indeed, she had just bitten Mary on the foot!⁷ Benjamin and Ely didn't succeed in killing Deliverance as intended, but when she was examined the following day it appeared she had not survived his attack unscathed. Deliverance claimed she had received the previous day a "hurt" in her side "like a Prick, & that is was very sore, & done when she was in a Trance."⁸ In testifying to having felt the other end of Benjamin and Ely's rapiers, Deliverance was testifying to the reality of Abigail and Mary's visions. The two men were blind to the goings-on in the invisible world, but they provided the physical objects that served as a conduit between Abigail and Mary's experience and that of Deliverance. Spiritual connection was thus made between women through the sympathetic magic carried out on and by objects.

⁷ "85. Statement of Benjamin Hutchinson v. George Burroughs. Essex County Court Archives, vol. 2, no. 35, Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, Judicial Archives, on deposit James Duncan Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, MA" (April 22, 1692), in *Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt*, ed. Bernard Rosenthal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 207.

⁸ "89. Examination of Deliverance Hobbs. Essex County Court Archives, vol. 1, no. 101, Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, Judicial Archives, on deposit James Duncan Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, MA" (April 22, 1692), in *Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt*, ed. Bernard Rosenthal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 213.

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(Pins, English, 1620-35, Given by R. J. Andrews, Accession number 123D-1900, Victoria & Albert Museum, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O11107/pin-unknown/>.)

Objects in the visible world had the power to inform meaning not just in the bodies of those touching them but also in the audience observing that interaction. Probably the most persistent physical object to appear in the trials at Salem was the pin. It is surely no coincidence that this most feminine and mundane object, so prevalent in the lives of early modern women, also served as such a frequent conduit in their spiritual experience. In the example I gave at the beginning of this paper, Mary Black's innocuous motion made with a pin elicited a visible response in the torments of the possessed, and a visceral one in the blood that appeared on Mary Walcott's arm. Just as interacting physically with these objects allowed participants to interact with the invisible world, so too could their audiences in observing the interaction. During the examination of accused witch Abigail Soames, Mary Warren found herself tormented by Abigail's spectre. She revealed she had been bitten horribly, showing off her bite to the examiners, who were quite stunned. Shortly into the examination, Abigail's spectre drove two pins into Mary's side: Mary was



checked, and such pins were found, and when pulled out of her, they dripped blood.⁹ Blood constituted a physically demonstrable proof of the otherwise invisible source. The pins, likewise, were physical objects in the hands of the (unnamed) individuals who pulled them out of Mary, their sharpness real to the touch. These were objects supposedly from the invisible world, made manifest and tangible through the mediating object of the possessed body. The audience could then touch this physical proof of the invisible world and thus attest to its reality. In their injury by material objects, the vulnerable bodies of the possessed and confessing were powerful, straddling the border between two worlds.

As the largest and best-documented witch trial in early modern New England, Salem provides a model by which we can understand the dynamics of these events more widely. Most of these events are rightly recognized for the social and judicial violence they wrought against innocent people, mostly women. But they were also expressive, sensorial moments where communities built and shared knowledge. Examining the role of material objects in these trials demonstrates the transformative role they played in connecting the invisible and visible worlds.

⁹ "150. Examination of Abigail Soames. Suffolk Court Files, vol. 32, docket 2703, p.26, Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, Judicial Archives, Massachusetts State Archives. Boston, MA." (May 13, 1692), in *Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt*, ed. Bernard Rosenthal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 268.