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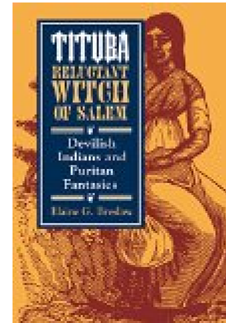
Elaine G. Breslaw. *Tituba, Reluctant Witch of Salem: Devilish Indians and Puritan Fantasies.* New York: New York University Press, 1996. xxv + 243 pp. $24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-1227-6.



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During the spring and summer of 1692, the lives of the residents of Salem and surrounding area were thrown into upheaval. This was the time of the infamous Salem witchhunts. Between March and October, over a hundred and fifty people were arrested on suspicion of witchcraft. When Governor Phips called for a stop to the executions in early October, twenty-four people had died: nineteen were hanged, one was pressed to death, and four died of other causes while in prison. The effects of the witchhunts were far-reaching. As Elaine Breslaw notes, "[h]undreds of lives [were] disrupted by jailings, the loss of property, and the absence of needed labor on the farm and in the household. Ties between children and parents, between husbands and wives, among siblings and neighbors, were frayed by accusations and counteraccusations. Some would never recover from the trauma" (p. 171). The witchhunts rocked Puritan society to its core. At their heart stands the confession of one woman: Tituba, Amerindian slave of Samuel Parris.

Breslaw's recent book is a fascinating re-examination of the Salem witchhunts and the woman whose confession initiated them. On one level, this is a biography of Tituba and the circumstances surrounding her confession and subsequent recantation. On another level, however, Breslaw's work is an example of how biography can be used successfully to tell a story much larger than the story of one life. Historians, especially social historians, have a nasty habit of looking askance at biography as a tool of political historians used to tell the story of influential men and occasionally famous women. But skilfully done, biography can offer a window through which we can peer into the past and gain an appreciation of events through the life of an individual and the people with whom she had contact.[1] The drawback, of course, is that biography is tied to the specific: a specific individual, kinship network, community, worldview. Many biographies could be written about the people who took part in this event. Yet, by offering insights into the use of the confession as a defence mechanism, the biography of Tituba sheds light on yet another facet of the Salem witch craze.

Methodologically, Elaine Breslaw's examination of Tituba provides an important contribution to both women's history and the history of witchcraft. Its importance lies primarily in her reappraisal of the confession and the woman at the centre of the Salem witch trials. Breslaw's purpose is not simply to revisit and reconstruct the life of Tituba. She seeks to discern how a woman who remained outside the Salem Puritan community, because of her identity as an Indian, was able, through her confessions, to initiate a witch scare, the likes of which the British colonial world never again witnessed. Breslaw painstakingly reconstructs Tituba's pre-trial life from minimal information and tiny clues buried in Barbadian plantation records. She then reexamines the witchcraft narratives, in light of her conclusions on Tituba's worldview. From this, Breslaw determines that Tituba's 1692 confession was not an act of submission. Rather, by manipulating the fears of Salem's Puritan leaders, Tituba's confession can be seen as an act of slave resistance against the abusive treatment of her master Samuel Parris, Salem's Puritan minister. Moreover, Breslaw contends that the ensuing frenzy that swept through the village demonstrates the existence of a syncretic culture in Puritan New England in which the Puritan worldview and print culture was shaded by other distinct worldviews and folklore. Tituba's confession of visitations by the Devil, women flying on sticks, satanic

pacts, and a book containing nine names was so fantastic that it was necessary to keep her alive for further questioning. Similar testimonies by those subsequently accused opened the door between high and popular culture, between the common folk and the educated elite. The meeting of these two cultures created "a violent moment in early New England history, but one that ultimately redirected Puritanism into less turbulent paths" (p. 181).

The biography is presented in two parts: the first explores Tituba's life in Barbados following her capture and enslavement; the second examines her experiences in Massachusetts to the end of the trials and Tituba's recantation of her confession. Presented in this manner, Breslaw is able to illustrate how the two worlds, although very distinct, were inextricably linked. Tituba's experiences in South America, Barbados, and Massachusetts meant that she crossed over many worlds and cultures: Amerindian, African, English, and Puritan. In one way, Tituba herself represents the successful syncretism of language and culture in the British colonial world. Her experiences among her own people, the Arawak, her interactions with the African and Creole worlds on Barbados, her contact with Elizabeth Pearsehouse, her white mistress in Barbados, and her years in the household of Samuel Parris meant that by the winter of 1691-92 Tituba had absorbed many aspects of all these cultures as well as the ability to communicate abstract ideas in competently-spoken English. Yet, as acculturated as Tituba had become to Puritan society in terms of her deportment and actions, she was never accepted completely by the community and consequently remained an outsider. This was a result of Tituba's Amerindian identity and the equation of that identity in the Puritan mind with "the presence of evil" (p. 98).

Ironically, it was the very identity which kept Tituba outside the community that lent credence to her confession. Puritans assumed that Indians had closer ties to the spirit world (pp. 99-100). Tituba's "Indianness," combined with her own knowledge of the beliefs, practices, and fears of the spirit world of her own and other cultures, added legitimacy to her confession of witch craft. After all, Tituba had participated in a magic ritual. In her efforts to relieve the suffering of Betty Parris, Tituba agreed to cooperate with Parrises' neighbour, Mary Sibley, in countermagic by making a witchcake. The witchcake, a mixture of rye meal and the girl's urine baked in ashes and fed to a dog that, as the familiar of the witch, would disclose the source of Betty Parris's suffering. The attempt at countermagic was unsuccessful. Betty Parris did not improve; in fact, she got worse and her symptoms spread to three other girls who had been involved in the experiment. By this point, Samuel Parris and other community leaders had decided that the girls' sufferings were the result of satanic influence. Asked to identify their tormentors, the four girls accused Sarah Goode, Sarah Osborne and Tituba.

Confronted with her actions by her master, Tituba denied being a witch because, in her worldview, a witch was one who used magic with the intent to harm, similar to the Arawak kenaima, who used occult power solely for evil ends. But Tituba's beliefs were not shared by her persecutors who believed that all occult practices were tools of the Devil. Tituba was arrested, along with the other women, for alleged witchcraft activities used with the intent to injure the four girls. At what point Tituba decided to "confess" to witchcraft is unknown. What we do know is that by the time of her initial hearing on 1 March 1692, Tituba reluctantly at first, and then more forcefully confessed to familiarity with the Devil. The confession did not end here. What followed was the unfolding of a concocted story so fantastic that it set off a witchhunt based on panic and hysteria in which no one was safe from accusations of witchcraft.

What set the Salem witchhunts apart from previous witchcraft cases was the panic that ensued when Tituba introduced the beliefs of the common folk into the courtroom of Salem's educated elite. As Breslaw points out, witchcraft was not foreign to the worldview of Puritans. Magic and religion were very much intertwined. The supernatural world was not one known only to Africans and Indians, but was an integral part of Puritan belief. Accusations of witchcraft were not uncommon. In fact, as Keith Thomas has argued, these accusations could function as a method of social control, deterring undesirable behaviour and encouraging community solidarity.[2] But the circumstances and results of these accusations were very different. Tituba's confession, delivered in an environment where social tension and factional conflict were at their peak, set the stage for the witchhunts that followed. Tituba's confession fuelled rather than dampened the elite's worst fears about what was happening in their village.

An important aspect of re-examining the trial narratives and Tituba's confession is the connection of her testimony to a larger group of people, both strangers and acquaintances from within and without the community. Tituba's implication of men and women of high status challenged traditional notions of hierarchy and allowed for witchcraft accusations to extend beyond the social

misfits normally accused. Therefore, although women, especially women whose situation or behaviour placed them outside conventional Puritan opinion,[3] constituted the majority of those accused of witchcraft, Tituba's confession increased the vulnerability of men and people of high status to accusation. With nothing more than two transcriptions of the narratives, it is impossible to know whether Tituba deliberately issued this challenge to established tenets of gender and status. For, as Breslaw points out, in so many cases, Tituba's testimony was given in one context–that of the syncretic worldview of the common folk–and was interpreted in another–that of the Puritan theological elite. For instance, the trance into which Tituba was drawn on her first day of testimony was in the contemporary African and Indian rituals of Barbados "a familiar part of magico-religious healing ceremonies" (p. 122). Thomas Putnam interpreted the trance as Tituba's bewitchment by other witches. Although this particular even added to Tituba's credibility, it also spurred on the witchhunt.

The lack of a legitimate government and the suspension of courts until the arrival of a new governor meant that the witch scare could not immediately be resolved. This allowed a period of time whereby there was a negotiation of folklore and theological beliefs within the public sphere. Ultimately, it would lead to an altered Puritan notion of the cosmic order. This was not so much a result of Tituba's confession directly but of subsequent testimonies which borrowed from those concepts she introduced but incorporated elements, such as mock sacraments which fit readily into the framework of Puritan folk beliefs of Devil worship. The confessions helped to feed the frenzy; people were convicted on weak spectral evidence. By the summer, unable to live with the possibility of eternal damnation for lying, the convicted began to retract their confessions. Tituba also recanted, saying she had lied to protect herself from a master who had essentially beaten a confession out of her. In October, when Governor Phips's wife was accused, the threats became too personal and Phips took immediate steps to end the witchhunts. Prisoners were released as their family and friends paid their jail fees. Tituba did not return to the Parris family. An unknown individual paid her jail fees in April of 1693, allowing for her release; from that point Tituba disappears from the public record.

A re-examination of the events in Salem during this period using a worldview approach illustrates the clashing cultural contexts in which people were moving and demonstrates how events and circumstances could be (mis)interpreted in vastly different ways by the historical actors. But Breslaw's interpretation is at times too speculative to yield the conclusions she asserts. For instance, in her testimony, Tituba maintained that the Devil first appeared to her one night as she was going to sleep. Breslaw's connection of this statement to the Indian identification of dreams as omens could be solidly supported. Her further claim, however, that Tituba was attempting to warn the people of Salem of Parris's evil ways, a "suggestion" that was ignored, is speculation that cannot be supported. In the instance of the Tituba's trance, also interpreted in the syncretic Indian/Creole worldview, Breslaw insists that "it was not necessarily [Tituba's] intent to claim to be a victim" (p. 122). How do we know this? Further examples could be cited. To attribute intent or to assume knowledge of a person's or persons' individual thoughts based only on court transcripts is suppositLLitious. Yet, even though some of the specific detail is speculative, the larger premise of colliding and adaptive worldviews is well argued and recounted through this biography of Tituba, reluctant witch of Salem.

Notes

[1]. Probably the best example of this to date is Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc, 1990).

[2]. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), 531.

[3]. See for instance, John Putnam Demos, *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and Culture in Early New England*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982) and Carol Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1987).

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