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# The Affliction of Mercy Short: Psychological Explanations for her Actions and Theological Interpretations of the Episodes

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## **The Affliction of Mercy Short: Psychological Explanations for her Actions and Theological Interpretations of the Episodes**

### ***Introduction***

A great deal of mystery still surrounds the Salem witchcraft crisis. Although the event took place over 300 years ago, many questions remain as to the cause of the tragic occurrence. When exploring the possible causes of the witchcraft crisis, multiple disciplines can be employed to attempt to provide insight into motives that may help explain the actions of people involved in the event.

One interesting approach is to consider psychological aspects of participants in the witchcraft episodes. The bizarre actions of those who experienced “affliction” may never be fully understood, but examining their symptoms from psychological perspectives can help make sense of the mysterious symptoms.

In addition, interpreting the events through a theological perspective can provide a great deal of insight because the Puritan religion fueled witchcraft beliefs. One cannot hope to understand the events of the witchcraft crisis without an understanding of the major role religion played in the lives of all involved.

Fortunately, primary documents still exist from the time of the trials and close examinations can provide insight into the period. “A Brand Pluck’d out of the Burning,” by Cotton Mather is a document of interest because it gives us a detailed look at individuals from 2 of the most interesting groups of people involved in the crisis: the afflicted and the clergy. Cotton Mather was a Puritan minister in New England, who had an influential presence in all aspects of the witchcraft crisis. In “A Brand Pluck’d out of the Burning,” Mather documents the affliction of Mercy Short, one of the “afflicted girls”

who contributed to the witchcraft panic that took place in Salem Massachusetts in 1692. The document provides a detailed account of Mercy Short's affliction and also provides a telling monologue spoken by Mercy during her affliction.<sup>1</sup>

Her actions can be examined from a psychological perspective to demonstrate how previous traumatic experiences caused psychological disturbances and furthermore led her to engage in a form of psychological projecting. In addition, theological motives based on religious uncertainties can be used to explain some of the actions of both Mercy Short and Cotton Mather. By using these two disciplines to examine "A Brand Pluck'd out of the Burning," a bit more of the mystery of the Salem witchcraft crisis can be unraveled.

### ***Psychological Approach***

#### *Trauma*

The experience of traumatic events may have led the afflicted to act out their feelings in the form of apparent episodes of affliction. Previous psychological interpretations of the witchcraft cases have drawn on the Freudian idea that early life experiences can shape events later in life. For example, John Demos argued that distressing events were typically experienced in the early years of life of a Puritan child living in seventeenth-century New England, and it could be these traumas that led to violent episodes of affliction.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cotton Mather, "A Brand Pluck'd out of the Burning," in *Narratives of Witchcraft Cases, 1648-1706*, ed. George Lincoln Burr (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1914), 259-271.

<sup>2</sup> John Demos, "Accusers, Bystanders: The Innerlife Dimension," *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 207.

A similar argument can be made in explaining the affliction of Mercy Short. Prior to her affliction, Mercy was the victim of a terribly traumatic series of events. In 1690, the Short home was raided by Native Americans, several family members were murdered in front of her, and she was taken captive.<sup>3</sup> Cotton Mather's account of Mercy Short's affliction began with a brief summary of the events. He explained in his words how, "Mercy Short had been taken Captive by our cruel and Bloody Indians to the East, who at the same time horribly Butchered her Father, her Mother, her Brother, her Sister and others of her Kindred."<sup>4</sup> Enduring such a brutal experience would no doubt have lasting effects. Mercy Short may have continued to be haunted by the ordeal years later.

The symptoms she endured during her affliction may have been a result of her reliving her terrifying captivity. Mather's account of her affliction described her "world of misery."<sup>5</sup> Mercy was allegedly tortured by various "cursed spectres."<sup>6</sup> They gave her "cruel pinches...stuck innumerable pins into her" and subjected her to "Extreme Fasting for many days together."<sup>7</sup> The specters were brought to her by a "Divel" who she described as being "not of a Negro, but of a Tawney, or an Indian colour."<sup>8</sup> Her interpretation of the devil as resembling an Indian indicated that her afflictions represented a recreation of her previous captivity. The Devil in Mercy Short's mind was emblematic of the type of person who had brought her prior trauma.

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<sup>3</sup> Slotkin, Richard, "Witchcraft: The Captivity to Spectres," in *Witches of the Atlantic World: A Historical Reader and Primary Sourcebook*, ed. Elaine G. Breslaw (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 277.

<sup>4</sup> Mather, 259

<sup>5</sup> Mather, 260

<sup>6</sup> Mather, 260

<sup>7</sup> Mather, 264-265

<sup>8</sup> Mather, 261

The pain and fasting that Mercy appeared to endure during her affliction would have been similar to situations she was subjected to during her captivity. Because the symptoms of Mercy's affliction bore a similarity to her captivity experience and because the figure responsible for her suffering closely resembled an Indian, it seems clear that her affliction was a direct result of her prior traumatic experience.

### *Projecting*

In addition to the traumatic experiences that may have led to the Mercy Short's afflicted state, her affliction may have also provided her with a way to externalize and displace feelings of anger through a psychological method called projection.

Previous psychological interpretations of witchcraft trials considered psychological projection.<sup>9</sup> These theories suggested that the afflicted accusers projected the anger or guilt that they felt toward certain community or family members onto those that they accused of witchcraft. Often, those who were actually accused were not the same people as those who the afflicted had a gripe with. Rather, the accusers often displaced their anger onto easier targets.<sup>10</sup>

In the case of Mercy Short, a different form of psychological projecting can be seen. Mercy Short may have experienced feelings of anger and betrayal toward God for allowing her to experience such tragedy. Acknowledging such feelings against God would have been too psychologically distressing for a girl raised in a Puritan community. As a result, Mercy appeared to project her feelings onto an imagined Devil. This manner of projection is demonstrated in Mercy Short's monologue. The monologue portrayed

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<sup>9</sup> Demos, 196-197.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Boyer & Stephen Nissenbaum, "Joseph and His Brothers," *Salem Possessed* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), 145.

one side of an argument she appeared to be having with her invisible tormentor. She argued with the tormentor over his true identity, saying “Are you God? No, bee gone You Divel!” Her account made it seem as though the Devil was tricking her into thinking he was God. Therefore, she was able to curse the Devil but at the same time swear at God, when she said things like, “If you are a Christ I am sure you are a very odious One” and “You, a Christ! No, You are a Beast.”<sup>11</sup> She used many offensive words against him, calling him a “horrid Wretch” and saying “That Hogs are the fittest company for you.”<sup>12</sup> Her outbursts appeared to be directed at the devil but they also allowed her to curse God without actually appearing blasphemous.

During the monologue she expressed anger about the tortures that the Devil/God had allowed her to endure during her affliction. However, she also could have been referring to the tortures experienced during her real captivity when she said, “You Pretend a precious deal of Love to mee indeed! If you Love me so much, pray, why do you Starve mee?” Her anger could be due to her feeling that God betrayed her by allowing her to be captured and suffer. Her accusation of her tormentor as a “Lying Wretch” provides further evidence that she felt betrayed. Because Mercy Short could not express her anger toward God outright, she projected it onto the Devil. Her affliction provided her with an acceptable medium to express her otherwise unacceptable emotions.

Psychological considerations of Mercy Short provide insight into the cause of her affliction and the specific symptoms she exhibited.

### **Theological Approach**

#### *Religious Uncertainty*

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<sup>11</sup> Mather, 268

<sup>12</sup> Mather, 268

Mercy Short appeared to be somewhat uncertain in her religious beliefs. Her traumatic capture caused her to question why a good and just God would allow such terrible things to occur. As demonstrated in her potentially blasphemous outbursts, Mercy appeared to be expressing anger toward God. She also engaged in other actions that indicate that she may have been struggling with the strict belief system of her Puritan religion. For example, while she was in church, she experienced an episode of affliction and “while that minister [Cotton Mather] was preaching...shee flew at upon him and shee tore a leaf of his Bible.”<sup>13</sup> Her action may have actually been caused by the anger she felt toward a religion that had not provided her with protection against misfortune. While such conduct would not have been permitted under normal circumstances, her affliction allowed her to engage in such behavior without blame.

Along with her expressions of religious doubt, Mercy also demonstrated evidence that she was trying to convince herself of her religious devotion. Throughout her monologue she seemed to be convincing herself of her commitment to God. In the monologue’s beginning she expressed, “I know a better Christ; and Him will I follow” and she concluded that she would “be gloriously delivered” and enjoy “Everlasting Salvation.”<sup>14</sup> Her repeated devotion toward God may have arisen from the uneasiness she felt over her wavering religious faith.

As Mercy Short grappled with her religious beliefs, Cotton Mather dealt with a different form of religious uneasiness. His uneasiness stemmed from a fear that religious beliefs were declining. With scientific and mechanical thought beginning to challenge Puritan cosmology, Cotton Mather, along with other ministers at the time, used the

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<sup>13</sup> Mather, 260

<sup>14</sup> Mather, 268-271

witchcraft cases as a forum for rejuvenating religious beliefs.<sup>15</sup> He used Mercy's painful experiences to provide incentive for piety. In one part of his narrative, he addressed the reader directly and wrote, "Reader, If though hadst a Desire to have seen a Picture of Hell, it was visible in the doleful Circumstances of Mercy Short! Here was one lying in Outer Darkness, haunted with the Divil and his Angels, deprived of all common Comforts, tortured with most cruciating Fires, Wounded with a thousand pains all over and cured immediately, that all the Pains of those Wounds might bee repeated."<sup>16</sup> Describing Mercy's affliction provided the minister with a way to urge others to repent. He pointed out "the very State of the Damned itself represented most visibly before our eyes" and cautioned, "Hard-hearted Wee, if wee do not Repent of the Things which may expose us to an Eternal Durance in such a State."<sup>17</sup> He presented the case of Mercy Short as an example of the kind of suffering others could endure if they did not repent.

His account of her tortures was especially graphic, especially in describing the burning she endured, which "seem'd the cruelest of all her Tortures." He detailed the apparent "Scalds" and "Blisters thereby raised upon her."<sup>18</sup> He may have used such explicit descriptions to provide greater motivation for religious devotion. Painting a terrifying picture of the power of evil could have encouraged morality and revived religious faith.

The theological uncertainties experienced by both Mercy Short and Cotton Mather are played out in "A Brand Pluck'd out of the Burning." Mercy Short's

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<sup>15</sup> Weisman, Richard, "Witchcraft and Puritan Beliefs," in *Witches of the Atlantic World: A Historical Reader and Primary Sourcebook*, ed. Elaine G. Breslaw (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 83.

<sup>16</sup> Mather, 267

<sup>17</sup> Mather, 267

<sup>18</sup> Mather, 267

uneasiness with her beliefs was demonstrated by both her blasphemous outbursts and her repeated expressions of her devotion. Cotton Mather's uneasiness over the future of religious beliefs can be seen in his apparent efforts to use Mercy's case to promote repentance and religious revival.

### **Conclusion**

Psychological considerations of Mercy Short provide possible explanations for her affliction. Her previous traumatic experiences likely caused lasting psychological disturbances. These disturbances manifested themselves in an outlet that was seen as appropriate in her society: affliction. During her affliction, she relived her captivity and suffered at the hands of a Devil that mirrored her previous tormentors.

In addition to the disturbances caused by her traumatic experiences, her actions during her affliction could be categorized as a form of psychological projecting. Her anger at God over her misfortunes was projected onto a Devil pretending to be God. Her projection allowed her to express her resentment and feelings of betrayal without appearing blasphemous.

The actions of the afflicted often seem irrational and unexplainable, but applying psychological methodologies to Mercy Short's case offers some understanding and rationalization for her behavior.

Her case also had a theological basis, which can lend further understanding to her actions. Her misfortunes caused her to question her faith in God but the strict Puritan culture would have made it impossible for Mercy to express her feelings outright. As a result, her affliction served as an acceptable forum for feelings. Her religious uncertainty

caused her to exhibit blasphemous outbursts one moment and vow religious devotion the next.

Cotton Mather's close documentation of Mercy's case also has a theological foundation. His uneasiness over weakening Puritan beliefs prompted him to use her case as an example of the need for repentance and conversion.

Psychological and theological interpretations of "A Brand Pluck'd out of the Burning" provide a bit more insight into the mysterious events of the Salem witch crisis.

## **Appendix on Methodology**

### *Psychological Analysis*

Considering “A Brand Pluck’d out of the Burning” from a psychological perspective is a natural choice because of the abundance of insight that Cotton Mather provided. He supplied us with great details of Mercy Short’s actions. These actions easily lend themselves to psychological analysis. Her behaviors appear almost logical when they are interpreted as a result of her traumatic capture. Her seemingly irrational behavior can be likened to our modern day understanding of the lasting effects of experiencing a traumatic event.

One of the main critiques of psychological analyses of the witchcraft cases is that there is a presentist bias in applying modern-day psychological explanations for events in the past. However, I feel that such analyses can still be beneficial if it allows us a greater appreciation for the events of the past. Too often we dismiss the actions of our predecessors as illogical and unsophisticated, without considering additional explanations. Applying psychological explanations provides us with a relatable link to people who seem to differ from us in so many other ways.

Although we may no longer believe in the Invisible World of the seventeenth-century Puritan’s, a psychological approach allows us to recognize a less fantastical component of witchcraft crisis.

### *Theological Analysis*

Analyzing a document written by a minister about an afflicted girl provided the opportunity to examine theological motives behind both Mercy Short and Cotton Mather.

Mercy Short demonstrated an extreme range of theological expressions, acting heretically at some moments and pledging piety at others. She perceived her traumatic Indian capture as a betrayal of God and played out her anger in the form of a monologue with an imagined Devil. In addition, she tried to convince herself of her continued religious faith by repeatedly mentioning her commitment to God.

Cotton Mather showed his uneasiness over the state of religious devotion by his use of Mercy Short's case to inspire repentance. He went to great lengths to detail the misery of Mercy's affliction and urged anyone reading the account to repent. He provided many examples of her suffering and frequently mentioned repentance and conversion.

The theological interpretations demonstrate that the Puritan religion contributed to the crisis in a variety of ways. Grappling with her own religious beliefs caused Mercy Short to express her conflict in the form of affliction. Cotton Mather's mission to preserve religious beliefs drove him to use cases of affliction to demonstrate the importance of repentance and conversion.

#### *The Methodologies Together*

Although I followed John Demos's model and used the methodologies separately, I think the explanations from both methodologies complement each other. The psychological reactions experienced by Mercy Short can be seen to stem partly from her Puritan beliefs. The religious pressures of the Puritan religion likely fueled the psychological distress Mercy experienced. Questioning belief in God would not have needed to take on such a violent psychological manifestation if the Puritan beliefs were

not so strict. Furthermore, we would likely not have such a detailed account to analyze using psychological methodology if Cotton Mather had not felt a theological need to document her affliction.

Each methodology has unique values, but the analysis of such a complex event is strengthened by the inevitable overlap of the methodologies.