

*Letter from Thomas Brattle to an
Unnamed Clergyman*

October 8, 1692

Reverend Sir,

Yours I received the other day, and [I] am very ready to serve you to my utmost . . .

First, as to the method which the Salem justices do take in their examinations, it is truly this. A warrant being issued out to apprehend the persons that are charged and complained of by the afflicted children (as they are called), said persons are brought before the justices (the afflicted being present). The justices ask the apprehended why they afflict those poor children, to which the apprehended answer [that] they do not afflict them. The justices order the apprehended to look upon the said children, which accordingly they do; and at the time of that look (I dare not say by that look, as the Salem gentlemen do), the afflicted are cast into a fit. The apprehended are then blind[fold]ed and ordered to touch the afflicted; and at that touch, though not by the touch (as above), the afflicted ordinarily do come out of their fits. The afflicted persons then declare and affirm that the apprehended have afflicted them, upon which the apprehended persons, though of never so good repute, are forthwith committed to prison on suspicion for witchcraft. . . .

I cannot but condemn this method of the justices, of making this touch of the hand a rule to discover witchcraft, because I am fully persuaded that it is sorcery and a superstitious method¹ and that which we have no rule for, either from reason or religion. The Salem justices, at least some of them, do assert that the cure of the afflicted persons is a natural effect of this touch; and they are so well instructed in the Cartesian

¹Brattle was referring to the similarity between this touch test and countermagic, which apparently undid a bewitchment by transmitting the occult harm back onto the witch responsible. Ministers argued that countermagic relied on a diabolical agency and so was morally equivalent to the original act of witchcraft.

philosophy and in the doctrine of *effluvia*² that they undertake to give a demonstration how this touch does cure the afflicted persons; and the account they give of it is this, that by this touch the venomous and malignant particles that were ejected from the eye do, by this means, return to the body whence they came and so leave the afflicted persons pure and whole. I must confess to you that I am no small admirer of the Cartesian philosophy; but yet I have not so learned it. Certainly this is a strain that it will by no means allow of.

I would fain know of these Salem gentlemen, but as yet could never know, how it comes about that if these apprehended persons are witches and by a look of the eye do cast the afflicted into their fits by poisoning them, how it comes about, I say, that by a look of their eye they do not cast others into fits and poison others by their looks, and in particular tender,³ fearful women who often are beheld by them and as likely as any in the whole world to receive an ill impression from them. This Salem philosophy some men may call the new philosophy, but I think it rather deserves the name of Salem superstition and sorcery, and it is not fit to be named in a land of such light as New England is. . . .

Secondly, with respect to the confessors (as they are improperly called), or such as confess themselves to be witches (the second thing you inquire into in your letter), there are now about fifty of them in prison, many of which I have again and again seen and heard; and I cannot but tell you that my faith is strong concerning them that they are deluded, imposed upon, and under the influence of some evil spirit, and therefore unfit to be evidences either against themselves or anyone else. I now speak of one sort of them, and of others afterward.

These confessors (as they are called) do very often contradict themselves, as inconsistently as is usual for any crazed, distempered person to do. This the Salem gentlemen do see and take notice of; and even the judges themselves have at some times taken these confessors in flat lies or contradictions, even in the courts, by reason of which one would have thought that the judges would have frowned upon the said confessors,

²A theory relating to the flow of invisible particles, developed by influential French thinker René Descartes. According to Cartesian physics, apparently empty space was actually filled with "effluvia," or "subtle matter," material particles that could not be perceived by touch or sight; these particles could be used to conduct energy from one body to another. Cotton Mather also reported that the magistrates "had some philosophical schemes of witchcraft, and of the method and manner wherein magical poisons operate, which further supported them in their opinion" (Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, ed. Kenneth B. Murdock [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977], 331).

³Frail and vulnerable.

discarded them, and not minded one tittle⁴ of anything that they said; but instead thereof (as sure as we are men), the judges vindicate these confessors and salve⁵ their contradictions by proclaiming that the Devil takes away their memory and imposes upon their brain. If this reflects anywhere, I am very sorry for it: I can but assure you that upon the word of an honest man it is the truth and that I can bring you many credible persons to witness it who have been eye and ear witnesses to these things. These confessors, then, at least some of them, even in the judges' own account, are under the influence of the Devil; and the brain of these confessors is imposed upon by the Devil, even in the judges' account. . . .

The indictment runs for sorcery and witchcraft, acted upon the body of such an one (say M[ary] Warren) at such a particular time (say April 14, 1692) and at divers other times before and after, whereby the said M[ary] W[arren] is wasted and consumed, pined, etc. Now for the proof of the said sorcery and witchcraft, the prisoner at the bar pleading not guilty,

1. The afflicted persons are brought into court and after much patience and pains taken with them do take their oaths that the prisoner at the bar did afflict them. And here I think it very observable that often, when the afflicted do mean and intend only the appearance and shape of such an one (say G[oodman] Proctor), yet they positively swear that G[oodman] Proctor did afflict them and they have been allowed so to do, as tho[ugh] there was no real difference between G[oodman] Proctor and the shape of G[oodman] Proctor. This, methinks, may readily prove a stumbling block to the jury, lead them into a very fundamental error, and occasion innocent blood, yea the innocentest blood imaginable, to be in great danger. Whom it belongs unto, to be eyes unto the blind and to remove such stumbling blocks, I know full well; and yet you and every one else do know as well as I who do not [do so].⁶
2. The confessors do declare what they know of the said prisoner and some of the confessors are allowed to give their oaths, a thing which I believe was never heard of in this world, that such as confess

⁴A minute amount.

⁵Smooth over.

⁶Brattle was referring to the magistrates presiding over the trials.

themselves to be witches, to have renounced God and Christ and all that is sacred, should yet be allowed and ordered to swear by the name of the great God! This indeed seemeth to me to be a gross taking of God's name in vain. I know the Salem gentlemen do say that there is hope that the said confessors have repented; I shall only say that if they have repented, it is well for themselves; but if they have not, it is very ill for you know who. But then,

3. Whoever can be an evidence against the prisoner at the bar is ordered to come into court; and here it scarce ever fails but that evidences of one nature and another are brought in, though, I think, all of them altogether alien to the matter of indictment; for they none of them do respect witchcraft upon the bodies of the afflicted, which is the lone matter of charge in the indictment.
4. They are searched by a jury and as to some of them the jury brought in that [on] such or such a place there was a preternatural excrescence.⁷ And I wonder what person there is, whether man or woman, of whom it cannot be said but that in some part of their body or other there is a preternatural excrescence. The term is a very general and inclusive term. . . .

The Salem gentlemen will by no means allow that any are brought in guilty and condemned by virtue of spectral evidence (as it is called), i.e. the evidence of these afflicted persons, who are said to have spectral eyes; but whether it is not purely by virtue of these spectral evidences that these persons are found guilty (considering what before has been said), I leave you and any man of sense to judge and determine. When any man is indicted for murdering the person of A.B. and all the direct evidence be that the said man pistoled the shadow of the said A.B., though there be never so many evidences that the said person murdered C.D., E.F., and ten more persons, yet all this will not amount to a legal proof that he murdered A.B.; and upon that indictment the person cannot be legally brought in guilty of the said indictment, [except] it must be upon this supposition, that the evidence of a man's pistoling the shadow of A.B. is a legal evidence to prove that the said man did murder the person of A.B. Now no man will be so much out of his wits as to make this a legal evidence; and yet this seems to be our case; and how to apply it is very easy and obvious. . . .

⁷The Devil's mark, a third teat from which demonic familiars sucked blood.

I do admire that some particular persons, and particularly Mrs. [Margaret] Thacher of Boston, should be much complained of by the afflicted persons, and yet that the justices should never issue out their warrants to apprehend them, when as upon the same account they issue out their warrants for the apprehending and imprisoning many others. This occasions much discourse and many hot words, and is a very great scandal and stumbling block to many good people; certainly distributive justice should have its course without respect to persons; and although the said Mrs. Thacher be mother-in-law to Mr. Corwin, who is one of the justices and judges, yet if justice and conscience do oblige them to apprehend others on the account of the afflicted's complaints, I cannot see how, without injustice and violence to conscience, Mrs. Thacher can escape, when it is well known how much she is, and has been, complained of. . .

I cannot but admire that any should go with their distempered friends and relations to the afflicted children to know what their distempered friends ail, whether they are not bewitched, who it is that afflicts them, and the like. It is true, I know no reason why these afflicted may not be consulted as well as any other, if so be that it was only their natural and ordinary knowledge that was had recourse to; but it is not on this notion that these afflicted children are sought unto, but as they have a supernatural knowledge, a knowledge which they obtain by their holding correspondence with specters or evil spirits, as they themselves grant. This consulting of these afflicted children, as above said, seems to me to be a very gross evil, a real abomination, not fit to be known in New England. . . . Good husbands who, having taken up that corrupt and highly pernicious opinion that whoever were accused by the afflicted were guilty, did break charity with their dear wives upon their being accused and urge them to confess their guilt; which so far prevailed with them [the accused wives] as to make them say, they were afraid of their being in the snare of the Devil; and which, through the rude and barbarous methods that were afterwards used at Salem, issued in somewhat plainer degrees of confession and was attended with imprisonment. [*The following sentence was added by Brattle in the margin of his letter.*] You may possibly think that my terms are too severe; but should I tell you what a kind of blade was employed in bringing these women to their confession, what methods from damnation were taken, with what violence urged, how unseasonably they were kept up [awake through the night], what buzzings and chuckings of the hand were used, and the like, I am sure that you would call them, as I do, rude and barbarous methods. . . .

But although the chief judge and some of the other judges be very zealous in these proceedings, yet this you may take for a truth, that there are several about the [Massachusetts] Bay, men for understanding, judgment, and piety inferior to few (if any) in New England, that do utterly condemn the said proceedings and do freely deliver their judgment in the case to be this, viz. that these methods will utterly ruin and undo poor New England. I shall nominate some of these to you, viz. the honorable Simon Bradstreet, Esq[ui]re⁸ (our late governor); the honorable Thomas Danforth, Esq[ui]re (our late deputy governor); the Reverend Mr. Increase Mather; and the Reverend Mr. Samuel Willard. Major N[athaniel] Saltonstall, Esq[ui]re, who was one of the judges, has left the court and is very much dissatisfied with the proceedings of it. Excepting Mr. Hale, Mr. Noyes, and Mr. Parris, the reverend elders⁹ almost throughout the whole country are very much dissatisfied. Several of the late justices, viz. Thomas Graves, Esq[ui]re, N[athaniel] Byfield, Esq[ui]re, [and] Francis Foxcroft, Esq[ui]re, are much dissatisfied; also several of the present justices; and in particular, some of the Boston justices were resolved rather to throw up their commissions than be active in disturbing the liberty of their Majesties' subjects merely on the accusations of these afflicted, possessed children. Finally, the principal gentlemen in Boston and thereabout are generally agreed that irregular and dangerous methods have been taken as to these matters. . . .

I am very sensible that it is irksome¹⁰ and disagreeable to go back when a man's doing so is an implication that he has been walking in a wrong path; however, nothing is more honorable than, upon due conviction, to retract and undo (so far as may be) what has been amiss and irregular. . . .

What will be the issue of these troubles, God only knows. I am afraid that ages will not wear off that reproach and those stains which these things will leave behind them upon our land. I pray God pity us, humble us, forgive us, and appear mercifully for us in this our mount¹¹ of distress. Herewith I conclude, and subscribe myself, reverend sir,

Your real friend and humble servant,

T[homas] B[rattle]

⁸The title *Esquire* was given to those regarded as gentlemen, including as a matter of course all magistrates.

⁹Ministers.

¹⁰Annoying or distressing.

¹¹Mountain.