



## The maid behind "The Handmaid's Tale": A tainted view of Half-hanged Mary

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Received: 28-SEP-2015

Accepted: 15-NOV-2015

Published Online: 15-DEC-2015

### Abstract

Although much has been debated about the role of syphilis in the witch hunting craze that swept across Europe in the 16th and 17th Century, the equally horrifying Witch Trials in the United States of America were all bracketed under the common heading of ergotism. Here, I focus on one specific case in particular, which is peculiar owing to many factors, not the least being the fact that the woman who was hanged after being accused of witchcraft, eventually lived!

**Keywords:** Witchcraft; Syphilis

The history of medieval Europe is littered with instances of superstitions and violent reprisals, not the least among them being the infamous witch trials. Though many "solutions" were tried to rid the earth of this problem, prime amongst them remained hanging and burning at stake. With the advent of Renaissance and humanitarianism in Europe, many reprehensible but State-sanctioned practices of the Church were increasingly questioned, and the advent of the

Republic (in France) signaled the beginning of the end, though the end in itself was bloody and long-drawn.[1]

It is interesting to note, that though the Protestants and the Catholics differed from each other in their theology, sometimes violently so, their interpretation of Demonology remained similar.[2] Therefore, the persecution of the "Other" - miss-fits looked at with fear and suspicion, women too free willed

Cite this article as: Chatterjee A. The maid behind "The Handmaid's Tale": A tainted view of Half-hanged Mary. RHiME. 2015;2:62-66.

for their generation - continued in both these traditions along similar lines. The most hapless of the lot were usually free thinking, educated, independent women who posed a threat to the patriarchal hegemony. One of the best known examples here would be that of Joan d'Arc.[3]

When the Puritans migrated to the New World, they went there with the objective of setting up a new order based on piety and worship of the one true God. In addition, the active persecution of their faith by the then Archbishop of Canterbury, had made it impossible for them to continue living in England. And with them, the Puritans took along their myths, superstitions, and fears to their new land.[4]

This background information is necessary, because early American history is a narrative of severity, starkness and cruelty as is also evinced by books written about that period.

Half-Hanged Mary is a ballad written by Margaret Atwood about the travails that beset one Mary Webster. At the time of this incident, Mary was an old woman who lived at the edges of a village, Hadley in Massachusetts with her husband, and was barely able to make ends meet. Life had dealt her a bad hand, and she was quite vocal about it, being known in her village for having a vicious tongue and a sour and spiteful disposition. It didn't help her cause, that she wasn't a regular church-goer.

The premise of the ballad, and of the incident, is a running feud between Mary, and one of the more prominent members of the parish, named Philip Smith. Mary had already been tried once, in Boston, for witchcraft in 1683; a trial in which she was eventually acquitted. As she marched into the town, triumphant, back

from the jaws of inevitability, she came back with vinegar on her tongue, and fire in her belly.

The winter after she was back from Boston, Philip Smith took ill. No one knew what the cause was. All that was known, was that he was in bad shape. He was having frequent delusional episodes, would speak out in "unknown foreign tongues", and in periods of lucidity, would claim that a woman was standing in the room. Obviously, the first person to be doubted was Mary Webster. As Smith's condition deteriorated, rumors spread about unearthly happenings in the sick-room where Smith was being interred. Finally, in desperation, a few men from the village went to the dwelling of Mary. On a cold snowy winter's evening, Mary was dragged out of her hut, and hung by her neck in the fields, until she was presumed to be dead and then buried in the snow.

Notwithstanding her hanging, Smith died. And to add insult to injury, it was discovered that Mary was alive after all! The consternation of the villagers turned to horror as they discovered that not only was Mary alive, but very much so. She lived for another decade, a symbol of the mindless cruelty that only mankind has devised to be wrought on fellow humans, branded onto the conscience of Hadley.

From a feminist point of view, the view that Atwood prescribes to in her ballad, Mary is a victor. Not only did she live life on her own terms, she died on her own terms. She did not prescribe to, or bow down to, the impositions of the society.

From a strictly medico-sociological point of view, the death of Smith, and not the hanging of Mary, holds a more immediate interest. The symptoms of what Smith suffered from, has been described in

somewhat detail by his friend, Cotton Mather in his book *Magnalia Christi Americana*,<sup>[5]</sup> where he says that:

“About the beginning of January, he began to be very valetudinarian, laboring under pains that seem’d Ischiatick.... He shew’d such weanedness from and weariness of the world, that he knew not (he said) whether he might pray for his continuance here: and such assurance he had of the Divine love unto him, that in raptures he would cry out, Lord, stay thy hand.....and afterwards became delirious; upon which he had a speech incessant and voluble and (as was judg’d) in various Languages. He cry’d out, not only of pains, but also of pins....” (Here, Cotton Mather mentions the discovery of one such specimen in his bed by the attendants).

We must, at the outset understand, that medicine was in its nascent stages in Europe at the time of the incident, and as such was even more underdeveloped as a science in the New World. Moreover, in their zeal to reject all that was “Ungodly”, the Puritans also ended up rejecting medical sciences and practices, relegating all health related phenomena to the realm of the supernatural: either the blessing or wrath of God, or more commonly, the work of the Devil. Mary, who had already been accused of consorting with the Devil and bearing His children, was an easy target for allaying the confusion of the common populace in the face of what they thought was an act of the Devil, Smith having already being established as a God-loving man.<sup>[5]</sup>

Another message which we must take away then from the paragraph above, is that the recording of symptoms of signs, owing to the relative infancy of scientific enquiry and rational thought, was sometimes heavily coloured by the influence of the perceived causal factor,

which in this particular case, was witchcraft. One must therefore, be careful as to the interpretation of the findings for the purpose of scientific evaluation, for it was not scientific evaluation, which was foremost in the mind of the recorder when we noted down what was perceived to be a manifestation of Demonic persecution.

Reverting back to the analysis of the symptoms that Smith was suffering from, Cotton goes on to write “In his distresses he exclaim’d much upon the woman aforesaid, and others as being seen by him in the room”. The list continues, but now consists primarily of preternatural recordings of fires being seen, bed being shaken, cats being perceived and so on and so forth. On his death, it was noted that the back of the corpse was riddled with holes, “that seem’d made with Awls”, there was a swelling over one of the breast, his was back full of bruises and that the body retained its warmth for a considerable amount of time after his death.

The symptoms of what Smith was suffering from, if we shorn off the supernatural allusions, boil down to neuralgias (pains) and neuropathy (pins), delirium (speech incessant and voluble), delusions (seeing the woman in the room) and mood disorders (raptures followed by agitation). The corpse, in addition, showed a lump in the chest, deep ulcers on the back with bruising, and was noticeably warm for a considerable amount of time.

From the *Classical Microbiology Reviews*, published in April 1999 by the American Society for Microbiology:

“Early in the disease the symptoms are similar to those of other forms of dementia, with gradual impairment of memory and cognitive functions, the

appearance of irritability, and a decline in personal appearance. As the disease continues, progressive dementia develops, with psychotic symptoms mimicking nearly every psychiatric illness”,[6] and

“Tabes Dorsalis....early manifestations are lightning pains and parasthesias...”

This list of symptoms, which closely tallies with that seen in Philip Smith, is that of neurosyphilis, a form of tertiary syphilis. The origins of syphilis remain debatable to date, with one school of thought suggesting that it was discovered by Columbus in 1492 and was subsequently brought back to Europe.[7] If that be the case, then early American Society was always exposed to the danger of contracting the disease, and in an Era when superstition held sway, the appearance of symptoms and signs which could not be explained by simple rational logic, was always thought to be the work of the Devil.

The introduction of syphilis in Europe in the 15th Century had coincided with a spasm of witchcraft hysteria and persecutions during the same period. Though witchcraft as an instrument of the Devil had been recognized and labeled as such (particularly in the notorious *Malleus Maleficarum* or the Hammer of Witches, which revealed a particularly virulent misogynist mindset of the writer) in as early as 1486, it wasn't until the 16th Century that active persecution of “witches” started in Europe.[8]

Though much has been postulated on the possible link of the rise of syphilis with the witch craze of 16th and 17th century Europe, nothing conclusive could be drawn owing to the conflicts in the secular trends of the two events. Few cases have been described by Andreski,[9] and although he argues for the case of

syphilis being the culprit behind the European witch-hunt craze, it has been strongly refuted by Jensen.[10]

In the American context, the more famous Salem Witch Trials in New England have been postulated to be a result of ergot poisoning and social and/or religious differences.[11] The singular case in Hadley has been mostly looked over, but it merits attention insofar as the symptoms and the socio-cultural conditions are to be considered, because even though the society was based on an idea of severity and chastity, there might have been more than what meets the eye.

Getting back to the patient at hand, the corpse thus discovered had bruising over his back (what is called post-mortem staining) and deep ulcers on his back. The deep ulcers could be explained by the occurrence of bed-sores, which can get very deep indeed if not cared for, and are notoriously difficult to heal. Arguably, to the untrained eye, deep narrow ulcers on the back of the deceased may look like they have been made artificially.

The explanation of the preternatural duration of the warmth of the body is also quite simple, though what appears simple to us today, was a matter of great mystery to people in those days; especially as the death occurred in the cold winter months of Massachusetts, when it becomes very difficult to remain warm for the living soul, leave aside a corpse. As we all must be knowing, bodies of patients who died following sepsis remain warm for a lot longer, owing to the fact that the bacteria in their body which caused the sepsis in the first place remain in the body and multiply, producing energy in the process which is dissipated as heat. The infection, in turn, would have been a

result of the bed sores on his back.

When one looks at such incidents, one has a feeling of horror, but also of pity and relief (in not having been a part of that Era). But, it would not be possible to reconstruct that social milieu today as many things have changed, primary amongst which is the importance that religion has in our lives. From a position of social and cultural hegemony, it is threatened today with the spectre of irrelevance, and as such is reduced from a time when it was sure that it was right

and that God is on its side, to an all encompassing, all forgiving, most benevolent Institution.

But the one thing that most compellingly grabs our imagination is the thought of the look on the faces of the inhabitants of Hadley, when they discovered that the woman they thought had died, was not dead after all.

Small wonder then, that no one was ever persecuted for witch-craft ever again in Hadley.

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