

Gendered Narratives: Retelling the Trial of Giles Corey in the 19th Century

Abstract: Both Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman chose to write detailed dramas on the trial and execution of Giles Corey, a Salem Village resident pressed to death for refusing to plead in the Salem Witch trials of 1692. Very little scholarly research has been dedicated to these plays, even though they are prime examples of the ways in which narratives of the Salem Witch trials were reclaimed and retold by 19th-century authors in order to express and respond to the changing needs and anxieties of American life. Given that 19th century authors were particularly concerned with issues of defining binary categories and critiquing the spaces in between them—the same issues of definition and identity that made people in the margins of 17th century society susceptible to accusations of witchcraft—it is unsurprising that these authors demonstrated a renewed interest in the New England witch trials as a metaphor. Through close readings and analysis of Longfellow's *Giles Corey of the Salem Farms* and Wilkins Freeman's *Giles Corey, Yeoman*, this project will examine the ways in which the use of the witch trials as a narrative theme or trope reflected the differing gendered experiences of 19th century authors.

Description: In 1692, Salem Village farmer Giles Corey was pressed to death with stones for refusing to plead in a trial of witchcraft. His motives for refusing to plead in spite of torture were practical: he had recently written a will ensuring that his estate would be passed to his adult children, rather than forfeited to the

local authorities, in the event of his death; a criminal plea would render this will invalid, leaving his family destitute. Whether Corey's death was also an act of protest against the witch trials themselves is unclear; however, one of the effects of his painful execution, whether intended or otherwise, was that many Salem residents grew critical of the witchcraft hysteria that would allow an 81-year-old member of their community to be charged on spectral evidence, publicly tortured, and inevitably killed. Accordingly, Corey became a popular character in fictionalized accounts of the witch trials, particularly in the 19th century, as historical fiction grew as a genre in the United States. Two such fictionalizations are the plays *Giles Corey of the Salem Farms*, by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and *Giles Corey, Yeoman*, by Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman.

In this thesis, I will focus on these plays as examples of the 19th-century urge to retell and restructure the Salem witch trials in American memory. By studying these plays and the scholarly conversation surrounding them, I will address a two-part question: what cultural work did retellings of the witchcraft trial and execution of Giles Corey do for the American public in the 19th century? And, drawing from this question, how did the gendered experiences of Longfellow and Wilkins Freeman affect how each author addressed cultural needs and anxieties using the motif of the Salem witch trials?

Previous Work: One of the main scholars of 19th century retellings of the Salem Witch Trials is Gretchen A. Adams, whose book *The Specter of Salem: Remembering the Witch Trials in Nineteenth-Century America* depicts the cultural

and literary drivers of the emergence of witch trial fiction as a genre in the 1800s, as well as its impact on later generations' understanding of the witch trials. The use of the Salem witch trials as a metaphor relied on the concept of a "call to reason," meaning that, in engaging with the trope of Salem, authors exerted their own right to use and define reason. This is particularly important in the consideration of gendered uses of the Salem witch trial trope in literature, as one of the main conversations of gender in the 19th century was women's ability to engage with reason. In addition, the cultural arena that gave rise to these fictional accounts affected the collective memory of the trials that emerged as a result. This idea of a pursuit of truth driven by the agenda of a specific cultural arena is reiterated in Robin DeRosa's book *The Making of Salem*, in which the author claims that historical fictions of the Salem witch trials have consistently engaged with the conflicts between binary definitions. Although DeRosa gives "language and truth, present and past, and speculation and evidence" as examples of these binaries, her argument also applies to the cultural gender binary, which was being redefined in the 19th century as Longfellow and Wilkins Freeman wrote their plays.

Giles Corey of the Salem Farms is one of Longfellow's least-examined works, although he thought highly enough of the play to present it as the finale to his collection *The New England Tragedies*, which in turn rounded out his prized *Christus* trilogy. In "References in Longfellow's Journals (1856-1882) to His Important Literary Works," Edward L. Tucker describes *Christus* as both Longfellow's crowning achievement, having taken over thirty years to plan,

research, write, revise, and finally publish, and his greatest failure, as it never gained public popularity. Tucker notes that the section of *Christus* containing *Giles Corey of the Salem Farms* was written last and appears to have taken up the least of Longfellow's time. It is both the shortest section, containing only two plays, and the one which Longfellow's journals reference the least. Given the lack of primary source material, it is unsurprising that little secondary source material on *Giles Corey of the Salem Farms* has been produced; aside from Tucker's 1994 description of the play, the most recent work that focuses on *Giles Corey of the Salem Farms* is Newton Arvin's *Longfellow: His Life and Works*, written in 1963, in which the author describes the play as, compared to the rest of *Christus*, "less impressive in every way" (273). This verdict seemingly condemned the play to obscurity in comparison with Longfellow's other works.

Yet it is no surprise that Longfellow was drawn to the literary theme of the witch trials, which, as noted in DeRosa's book, grew largely out of tensions and incongruence: Longfellow's writing often focused on the shared spaces between opposing definitions of identity. K.P. Von Anglen and John Morton both note aspects of Longfellow's life and writing, from the style of his poetry verse to the way he expressed celebrity, that align a New England folklore tradition and American independence with European scholarship and history, existing in a transatlantic space that is simultaneously both American and European. In his article "Mars in Petticoats: Longfellow and Sentimental Masculinity," Eric L. Haralson describes Longfellow's narrative poetry as an expression of crossing gender lines by validating a sentimental or domestic style of masculinity and

demonstrating a moderate middle ground between polarized gender roles.

Although these authors' arguments reference Longfellow's other works, the tensions between binary definitions, as outlined in this scholarship, relate directly to the gendered struggle of fictionalizing the witch trials, as Longfellow did in writing *Giles Corey of the Salem Farms*.

If finding scholarship on Longfellow's play is difficult, finding scholarship on Wilkins Freeman's is nearly impossible. However, in studies of Wilkins Freeman's other works, themes applicable to studying *Giles Corey*, *Yeoman* arise. Like Longfellow, Wilkins Freeman's writing seems particularly focused on the boundaries of society: in "Geographies of Intimacy in Mary Wilkins Freeman's Short Fiction," Jennifer Ansley notes that Wilkins Freeman's regional fiction "tends to feature characters who live on the boundaries of past and present, belonging and exclusion, indoors and outdoors, rural margins and city centers, and who define their relationships to space through their own storytelling practices" (443.) These contrasts, Ansley says, open up "a gap, and it in turn becomes a location from which to theorize the conditions from which it arose and to critique those dominant forms" (444.) It is from this perspective that a reader can address themes of societal boundaries and categories, such as gender, in *Giles Corey*, *Yeoman*. James Bucky Carter describes Wilkins Freeman as a "fairy tale revisionist" with strong "fairy and folk influence" (31). Carter notes that Wilkins Freeman attempts to revise tropes involving magic and gender by subverting expectations for masculinity and femininity (32), a lens through which one can also view her depiction of the Salem witch trials in *Giles Corey*, *Yeoman*.

Similarly, Nicole Diederich describes Wilkins Freeman as “a short story writer whose works question the power structures limiting the roles and choices of her female protagonists,” often doing so by aligning tropes of femininity with the abject or horrific (Diederich 21-23). This insight into Wilkins Freeman’s use of the horrific as a tool with which to subvert gendered power dynamics refers the reader back to the author’s use of witchcraft, both real and imagined, to demonstrate the power structures of Puritan Salem in her play.

Significance: Although the trope of witch hunts and witch trials has gone through several iterations in American literature and media, there has been little serious scholarly research into the fact that our collective memory of the Salem witch trials is largely rooted not in the trials themselves but in these retellings that largely emerged in the 19th century. This project is significant in that it will explore the point at which this collective memory was created, what purpose it served at the time, and how this 19th-century historical fiction lens through which we see the witch trials has affected our understanding of a real period of American history. These two plays are both underrepresented in collections of scholarship regarding Longfellow and Wilkins Freeman’s works, and, although they both cover the same brief period of time during which Giles Corey was convicted, imprisoned, and executed, they do so in different ways. The fact that both plays differ significantly in form from the authors’ other works, as well as the fact that Giles Corey’s trial was retold twice in play form within thirty years, suggests that there was significance to these authors’ choices to engage with the

event of Giles Corey's execution as well as the concept of Corey as a culturally significant figure. The idea that the authors' gendered experiences may have influenced these creative choices could give critical insight into the ways in which men and women perceived the reality and the tropes of colonial American identity in the 19th century. Two plays written by authors of different genders on the same topic are an ideal microcosm in which to explore this concept, and in doing so, fill a crucial gap in research surrounding these works.

Proposed Methodology: This project will involve several sections of research.

The first will involve research into the actual events of the Salem witch trials, specifically the trial of Giles Corey. This will involve research into archives and records of trial transcripts, letters, journals from contemporary figures. The next section of research will involve reading existing analysis of the witch trials as a collective or cultural memory that may not actually line up with the real events of 1692. Because this collective memory of the Salem witch trials emerged largely in the 19th century, this will involve reading and comparing several pieces of writing regarding the social function of these 19th-century retellings of the witch trials, including Gretchen A. Adams's *The Specter of Salem: Remembering the Witch Trials in Nineteenth-Century America*. This will lead into the next section of the project, which will be centered around a close reading of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's play *Giles Corey of the Salem Farms*, as well as reading and analyzing scholarship surrounding this play. Following this, I will move into a section of research on Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman's play *Giles Corey*,

Yeoman. Because there is even less scholarship on Wilkins Freeman's play than there is on Longfellow's, this will largely be comprised of research into scholarship on Wilkins Freeman's other work and biographical information in general. The patterns that emerge from this research will give more insight into Wilkins Freeman's writing that could be applied to the play. The majority of the scholarship that I will be focusing on is feminist scholarship on Wilkins Freeman's fiction writing, which will give insight into the themes of gender and femininity in Wilkins Freeman's work. The final phase of this research will involve analyzing these findings alongside one another with the goal of determining what social work these two plays were doing. In terms of gender, these close readings, against the backdrop of themes and patterns in Longfellow's and Wilkins Freeman's greater bodies of work, will give insight into the ways in which plays on the same subject written by authors of different genders overlap or differ, and what these areas of overlap and difference may say about gendered approaches to the topic of the Salem witch trials in 19th century historical fiction.

Proposed Timeline

November 15th — Complete reading, research; create an outline for each section.

January 1st — Complete section on primary sources.

February 1st — Complete section on existing literature.

March 1st — Complete close readings.

April 1st — Complete analysis section.

April 15th — Complete edits of the entire thesis.

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