

History Took Hold of My Throat

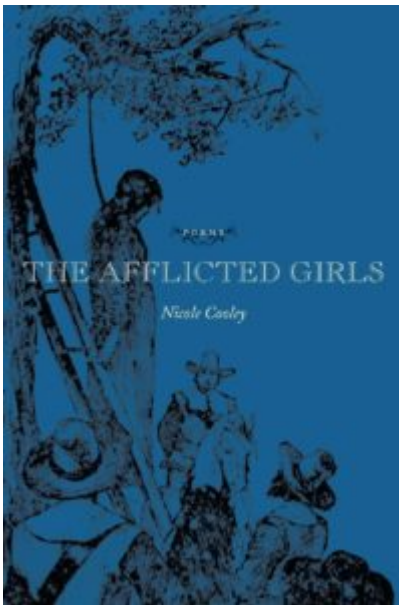


POEMS

THE AFFLICTED GIRLS

Nicole Cooley

Historians and aficionados of Salem can add another book to their groaning Witch Trial bookshelves, perhaps making room next to Arthur Miller's 1953 play *The Crucible*. But this time it is a slender book of poetry, by Nicole Cooley, that seeks to bring to life the emotions, psychology, and misogyny at the heart of a three-hundred-year-old incident that continues to reverberate in our culture. Blending documentary fact, the found language of historical texts like sermons and court records, imagined "testimony" by participants, and contemporary reflections on the meaning of Salem and the process of interpreting history, Cooley weaves together a variety of viewpoints in an attempt to "set the past in motion" (33).



The Afflicted Girls

To that end, Cooley writes poems from the perspective of both accused and accusers, both Tituba the slave and Cotton Mather, which are juxtaposed with portrayals of the contemporary poet ages hence, rummaging in the archive or at a reenactment of a trial in late twentieth-century Salem. At the book's center is a self-conscious recovery project: the poet wishes to summon up the lost voices of Salem, its "afflicted girls" and women in particular, "give each girl her lines," and ultimately,

fling

my voice out into the fields down history's corridor
crowded with everything that has already been said (33).

This well-researched, ambitious book of poems reminds us once again of the enduring power of one of the stranger episodes in American history, which continues to trouble us so many centuries later. At its best, the book finds a kind of poetry in the act of diving into the wreck of the archive, the dark

grottoes of history where competing narratives jostle, where myth and “truth” hopelessly blur.

Coming upon another extended foray into this well-trod site in American history, however, the reader is compelled to wonder: what is it that draws Cooley to the story of Salem, that so haunts her about this episode? What does she hope to add to our understanding of the crisis? In Arthur Miller’s *Crucible*, the answers to such questions were painfully, powerfully clear: the “living connection” Miller later described “between myself and Salem, and Salem and Washington”—at the nadir of Cold War hysteria—is palpable in the play. Miller rather brilliantly saw that reviving the Salem story could be a wake-up call to his own culture at a particularly perilous moment in its history, that it could serve as a horrifying analogy for the repression, hyper-conformity, paranoia, and compelled, ritualized confession of the McCarthy hearings. By dramatizing the tale’s profound ambiguities and moral conflicts, he revealed the presence of a black, sickening undertow troubling the American waters from the seventeenth century all the way to the twentieth.

In contrast, Cooley’s attraction to Salem seems to have almost entirely to do with gender, with how the violent coercion of women by men in the name of religion undergirded the belief system that gave rise to the terrifying rash of accusations, confessions, and executions. In poem after poem, Cooley lays bare the latent misogyny, the fear of the feminine, lurking in the crevices of the historical record, a subject Miller’s play broaches as well, if less directly. In one striking poem, “An Alphabet of Lessons for Girls,” she uses the form of an early American primer to expose the repressive ideology at the very core of the Puritan worldview, the pernicious linkage of wayward *woman* and *witch*. Thus, the girls of the Massachusetts Bay Colony are force-fed axioms like “Disagree with no man for men know the best and truest path,” “Obedience is a good wife’s finest virtue,” and “Your name is blotted out of God’s Book because you are a witch” (3). The title poem even suggests that the young girls initially claim to be afflicted by witches *because* they have been repressed and silenced, in a tragic bid for power and posterity:

No girls in Salem Village are allowed to go to school . . .

No girls hope for a place

in memory

Who said vengeance? We know what they want:

to speak in unison

to have a single voice

to inhabit this one body all the way to the future (9).

While Cooley’s evocation of an oppressive culture that proclaims, “Lock your

wife in the house," can be powerful at times, one problem with her single-minded stress on the misogynistic basis of the Salem hysteria is that it is not quite an earth-shattering revelation, especially for students of the Salem case and readers of Miller's play (2). Another problem is that it is hammered home so repeatedly and unsubtly that the poems often seem more didactic than suggestive. Further, in contrast to Miller, we are left wondering what Cooley is urging us to recognize about the contemporary relevance of the Salem Witch Trials, beyond a vague insinuation that the fear of the feminine driving the persecution in Salem still plagues us today. This point is most clearly, and didactically, made in the poem "The People vs. Bridget Bishop, July 1999," which is about a dramatization in modern-day Salem that the speaker witnesses. The poem recounts, with heavy tones and little irony, the kitschy mock-trial proceedings, in which an audience of tourists deems Bishop guilty of witchery. Cooley closes by telling us exactly what moral conclusions we must draw from this incident, as well as from the Salem case in general: "*How do we defeat the devil? We don't. But we will name him in the body of a woman again and again*" (37).

In almost equal proportion to the lessons about gender, much-too much-of the book tracks the contemporary poet's attempt to recapture and make sense of the past, an attempt we are repeatedly told is destined to fail. Dotting the book are a series of poems entitled "Archive" ("Archive: Silence," "Archive: Fantasy," "Archival: In the Reading Room") that portray the poet sifting through dusty pages in a hushed modern reading room trying to dredge up the vanished traces of Salem. These poems, which frame the collection, create a running metacommentary on the act of writing history that may be of interest to professional historians.

However, historians, as well as history buffs and readers of poetry, are probably well aware of the problems involved in recovering and making sense of history and do not need to be told about them so baldly and simply. Cooley constantly informs us that what she is doing is "opening / the page to another version of history" and attempting "to drag the narrative out of that century" (34, 44). "I'm nothing /but a collection of evidence," the first poem warns us,

stories splintered in all

directions voices I can't fasten
to the page history

disappearing before I write it down (1).

The last poem repeats the theme ("I want to carry this world with me / but the story keeps dissolving in my hands") while another reminds us that "any telling / of this story is a lie" (44, 24).

While these metahistorical poems are often more vital than the testimony poems, such recurring, clichéd warnings about the slipperiness of historical truth

come across as labored and portentous rather than revealing or verbally stimulating. They feel as if someone keeps bursting in the door only to urgently repeat old news. In our postmodernist, poststructuralist, posteverything world, it is no longer a surprise to be told in such straightforward fashion that “fiction spins into fact,” that history is a collection of debatable evidence and unreliable voices, that it is hard to arrive at any definitive version of past events (15). Reading poems that keep telling us that “the past comes back” and that

History choked me History took hold
of my throat

also seems a bit like watching a performer who spends so much time saying, “Look, I’m playing the piano now, I’m hitting the keys with my fingers” that she forgets to actually play much music (43, 1).

For a book so preoccupied with recovering the silenced voices of the past—“So on the last day invent your own museum,” she tells herself, “Then add the voices and the tape loops backward / to hold the girls’ lost speech”—there is a surprising lack of variety in the voices of the poems (33). Cooley does not really ventriloquize a range of different characters, nor does she aim to approximate the odd, stilted poetry of seventeenth-century speech, as Miller does so successfully in *The Crucible*. The four-year-old girl accused of being a witch, the aggrieved husband of one of the accused, Cotton Mather: they all sound almost exactly the same, with the same pared-down speech, somber tone, and strained urgency. For example, why should the voice of the Indian slave Tituba be virtually indistinguishable from the white men and women of Salem? This sameness means that unlike, for example, the dramatic monologists of Robert Browning, Cooley’s speakers do not reveal their own idiosyncratic psychological fingerprints, foibles, and motives through the language the poet uses to convey their thoughts.

As a result, there is less color, vibrancy, and variety here than in Cooley’s first book, *Resurrection* (Baton Rouge, 1995), which also tried on a series of voices and personae. A rather plain style and gloomy tone prevails, largely drained of striking, fresh images, metaphors, or wordplay. This may be due to a conscious process—Cooley explains her self-effacing effort to become a neutral poet-archivist in the poem “The Waste Book”:

She is ready

to erase her own story, cross out
her voice, blur her words to nothing
but stiff ink . . .
as if only the voices hold her own speech
together, as if the voices cancel out her own (34).

But since the poems do not really channel the distinctive, individual voices of the past either, this canceling out of the poet’s own voice leaves the reader a

bit hungry for something more in its place.

The Afflicted Girls offers an intriguing tête-à-tête between the literary and the historic impulses, and insists that there should be commerce between the two. Simultaneously declaring the ultimate unknowability of the past *and* history's acute importance, Cooley grapples with the historian's conflict, and assures us it is the poet's as well. As a kind of feminist séance, her book demonstrates the dire consequences of forcing women to submit, to be silent, and to be scapegoats for self-righteous men. While it may not be entirely successful in carving out its own space in "history's corridor / crowded with everything that has already been said," this book is another stirring example of the way Salem continues to echo down the halls of time, and of the way history is forever turning into art (33).

Further Reading:

Arthur Miller's comment about the "living connection" can be found in the introduction to *The Crucible* (Penguin, 1995).

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