

WITCH TRIAL AT MOUNT HOLLY

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Burlington, Oct. 12. Saturday last at Mount Holly, about either miles from this place, near 300 people were gathered together to see an experiment or two tried on some persons accused of witchcraft. It seems the accused had been charged with making their neighbors sheep dance in an uncommon manner, and with causing hogs to speak, and sing psalms, etc. to the great terror and amazement of the king's good and peaceable subjects in this province. The accusers were positive that if the accused were weighed in scales against a Bible, the Bible would prove too heavy for them, or if they were bound and put into the river, they would swim. The two accused were desirous to prove their innocence and voluntarily offered to undergo the said trials if two of the most violent of their accusers would be tried with them.

Accordingly the time and place was agreed on, and advertised about the country. The accusers were one man and one woman, and the accused were the same. The parties being met, and the people got together, a grand consultation was held, before they proceeded to trial. It was agreed to use the scales first. A committee of men were appointed to search the men, and a committee of women to search the women, to see if they had anything of weight about them, particularly pins. After the scrutiny was over, a huge great Bible belonging to the justice of the place was provided, and a lane through the populace was made from the justice's house to the scales, which were fixed on a gallows. The gallows were erected for that purpose opposite to the house, that the justice's wife and the rest of the ladies might see the trial, without coming amongst the mob.

Then came out of the house a grave tall man carrying the Bible before the supposed wizard, and witch (as solemnly as the sword-bearer of London before the lord mayor). The wizard was first put in the scale, and over him was read a chapter out of the books of Moses, and then the Bible was put in the other scale, (which being kept down before) was immediately let go. But to the great surprise of the spectators, flesh and bones came down plump, and outweighed that great good book by abundance. After the same manner, the others were served, and their lumps of mortality were too heavy for Moses and all the prophets and apostles.

This being over, the accusers and the rest of the mob, not satisfied with this experiment, continued to the trial by water. A most solemn procession was made to the mill-pond, where both accused and accusers being stripped (saving only to the women their shifts) were bound hand and foot, and severally placed in the water, lengthways, from the side of a barge or flat, having for security only a rope about the middle of each, which was held by some in the flat. The accuser man being thin and spare, with some difficulty began to sink at last, but the rest of them floated very light upon the water. A sailor in the boat jumped out upon the back of the man accused, thinking to drive him down to the bottom, but the person bound, without any help, came up some time before the other. The woman accuser, being told that she did not sink, requested to be dunked a second time. But she floated again as light as before. Upon which she declared, that she believed either the witch or the wizard had bewitched her to make her so

light, and that she would be dunked again a hundred times, so that she would dunk the devil out of her. The accused man, being surprised at his own floating, was not so confident of his innocence as before, but said, "If I am a witch, it is more than I know."

The more thinking part of the spectators were of opinion that any person so bound and placed in the water (unless they were mere skin and bones) would float till their breath was gone, and their lungs filled with water. But it was the general belief of the populace, that the women's shifts, and the garters with which they were bound helped to support them. It is said they are to be tried again the next warm weather, naked.

COMMENTARY: "Witch Trial at Mount Holly" is an example of an early hoax, a story printed as true but in reality false. It was printed in 1730, and the last known witch trials occurred in Salem during 1692. The author of this article is assumed to be Benjamin Franklin, who worked in the newspaper business in Philadelphia. Franklin had a very sly wit and was critical of Puritan beliefs. The satirical tone of the article fits with his writing style.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What clues are there that this article is parodying or making fun of witch trials?
2. What are some humorous parts of the article?
3. If Benjamin Franklin did write this article, what does this tell you about him?