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A FURIOUS MASTER AND HIS BLOOD-SUCKING  
SERVANT: A CAMBRIDGE TRAGEDY, 1652–1653

ROGER THOMPSON

SERVANTS are among the shadowiest figures in early New England. Living in a state of dependency, the servant was required to obey master and dame unquestioningly and to work long and hard for meager wages. Nonetheless, good employers could impart useful skills, Christian values, and social advantages, and, in return for loyal service, good employees could be cherished and rewarded by grateful “governors.” That, at least, was the theory.<sup>1</sup>

Almost from the start of settlement in New England, landowners bemoaned the shortage of laborers. By the 1650s it had become clear that New England would not be able to compete with other colonies for the modest supply of indentured servants from the Old World. The few hireable hands were often of poor quality, and they lacked the incentive and the loyalty young family members brought to their chores. Many servants did as little work as possible, pilfered or damaged employers’ or neighbors’ property, lied, swore, ran away, answered back, fornicated, broke the curfew, and generally subverted the Puritan culture of discipline. Unemployed young craftsmen were forced to do farm work they despised. Some employers were driven close to distraction by the disobedience, negligence, and faithlessness of their servants. Said one: “No one took [a] servant’s part except the scum of the country.”<sup>2</sup>

Employers’ responses to servants’ provocations ranged from resignation to savagery. Violence was more widespread in general than it is today, with schoolmasters terrorizing their scholars with the birch, bloody public beatings for criminals or religious dissenters, and brutal

<sup>1</sup>See my *Divided We Stand: Watertown, 1630–1680* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), pp. 102–3, and *Sex in Middlesex: Popular Mores in a Massachusetts County, 1649–1699* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), pp. 107–9; and Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Family: Religion and Domestic Relations in Seventeenth-Century New England* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), pp. 109–32.

<sup>2</sup>Quotation from Mary Tufts, Tufts testimony, Documents and Orders, microfilm reel 1: docs. 1528, 1529 (quotation), Middlesex County Court, Massachusetts Archives, Boston. For examples of misdemeanors by servants, see Nathaniel Shurtleff, ed., *Records of the Governor and Company of Massachusetts Bay*, 6 vols. (Boston: White, 1853–54), 1:100, 132, and John Noble and John T. Cronin, eds., *Records of the Court of*

fights breaking out over vandalizing swine, personal accusations, and contested property. Those with authority, either official or unofficial, hoped that harsh disciplinary measures would reduce unruly behavior, but these measures may actually have intensified anger and aggression.<sup>3</sup> In the case of John Betts and Robert Knight, violence failed to improve matters, and the relation between employer and servant bore little resemblance to the ideal.



John Betts (1596–1663) was described by his next-door neighbor as “a furious man.” What particularly infuriated Betts in the spring of 1652 were the shortcomings of his two servants, Robert Knight and Thomas Abbot. Betts and his wife, Elizabeth, probably the sister of Deacon John Bridge, had come to Cambridge (then Newtown) from Ipswich, Suffolk, aboard the *Francis* in 1634. They settled across the street from Bridge on the southwest corner of Holyoke and Winthrop Streets and acquired land by purchase and grant, including two acres in what is now the Old Yard of Harvard. Elizabeth was admitted to church membership, but her husband was not. Nor was he ever elected to any office. He must have been an average member of the town, however, for he received a medium-sized land grant when the

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*Assistants of the Colony of the Massachusetts Bay, 1630–1692*, 3 vols. (Boston: County of Suffolk, 1901–18), 2:12, 78–79, 108, 122, 131 (hereafter *Assistants*). For secondary works on servants in early New England, see Lawrence Towner, “‘A Fondness for Freedom’: Servant Protest in Puritan Society,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 19 (1962): 201–19, and Daniel Vickers, “Working the Fields in a Developing Economy,” in *Work and Labor in Early America*, ed. Steven Innes (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), pp. 49–69.

<sup>3</sup>There are several accounts of violence against servants. In 1630, one Austen Bracher died after being beaten by Walter Palmer of Charlestown (*Records of the Governor and Company of Massachusetts Bay*, 1:77–79, 81). In the same year, Sir Richard Saltonstall was fined five pounds for flogging two servants without another magistrate in attendance (see my *Divided We Stand*, p. 41). Rev. John Eliot described William Franklin’s “acts of rigour and cruelty to a boy his servant who died under his hand” in 1644 (“Roxbury Land and Church Records,” *Boston Record Commission Reports* 6 [Boston: Rockwell & Churchill, 1881], pp. 85–86, and my *Sex in Middlesex*, pp. 158–62). On Puritanism and aggression, see John Demos, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 137–39. For English precedents, see Michael J. Braddick and John Walter, “Grids of Power,” in *Negotiating Power in Early Modern Society: Order, Hierarchy, and Subordination in Britain and Ireland*, ed. Braddick and Walter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 24.

Shawsheen tract (later to become the town of Billerica) was portioned out among Cambridge inhabitants in 1652.<sup>4</sup>

The Bettses were childless. In early Massachusetts, childlessness was seen as a judgment of God against a couple, and it deprived them of the extra hands that provided crucial help in the fields and barn, the house and farmyard. Unless the chores were to be left undone, the Bettses had to hire servants. Two of John Betts's brushes with authority can be blamed on a shortage of hands. In 1642 he was fined the large sum of nineteen shillings and six pence for "his haystacks and his cowhouses and his dunghills that he annoyed the street before his door with and though often warned to clear the street yet denied to do it." "Denial" implies an insolent refusal, probably born of desperation. Eight years later, five of Betts's cattle strayed and were impounded. Had there been children in the household, they would have been minding the stock.<sup>5</sup>

The tragedy of 1652–53 began as just another such mundane difficulty. Trouble began in late February or early March when Betts's servant Robert Knight was working in the barn.

He went up the ladder and when he was up nine or ten staves [rungs] the tenth staff broke and he fell between the ladder sides and slipped down till he rested upon the middle of his body, and then fell backward that so his shoulders first pitched on the ground or barn floor . . . he thought he had broken two of his ribs and that he had hurt his shoulder. . . . When he sat down he would sit stooping, and when his dame spoke to him he would then complain of his side.

For the following two months, Knight "could not perform his labour." He and fellow servant Thomas Abbot "were spreading of dung together [before plowing] and [Abbot] asked Knight how it was that he [Abbot] could spread two or three hills of muck [compared] to his one, and Knight said that he had such a pain in his side." Having a

<sup>4</sup>Robert Charles Anderson, George F. Sanborn Jr., and Melinde Lutz Sanborn, *The Great Migration: Immigrants to New England, 1634–1635* (Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 1999), 1:273–78. The Bettses probably came from North Essex, where the name was common (see F. G. Emmison, ed., *Essex Wills*, vols. 1–7 [Washington, D.C.: National Genealogical Society, 1982–90], and Emmison, ed., "Wills at Chelmsford," *British Record Society* 82 [1966], 86 [1973], 92 [1981]. Abbot was aged twenty (testimony of Thomas Abbot, *Assistants*), but I have found no other information about his background; Knight's age is unknown.

<sup>5</sup>*Records of the Town of Cambridge, 1630–1703* (Cambridge: City Council, 1901), pp. 48, 87.

field hand disabled at the most frantic time of the farming year was bad enough, but Goodwife Betts was also ill. Dr. John Alcock of Roxbury paid her at least four expensive visits.<sup>6</sup>

On 16 April 1652 John Betts was plowing with Knight and Abbot. Betts was steering the plow while Knight drove the oxen. The operation was not going well. According to Abbot, Betts “put forth his hand to strike” Abbot, who “escaped out of his reach.” Betts then “with the plough staff with a swinging blow (not a full upright stroke) did strike Knight upon the hips or lower part of his back.” This assault was “but slight.” The master then “took up the goad [of] green walnut and with the smallest end did strike Knight three or four blows.” At this point Abbot was sent off to fetch a shovel, and another witness described further attacks on Knight. Betts “out of his rash anger [used] the great end of the plough staff and the goad” upon Knight’s back. With a “good big stick . . . held in both hands he [struck] him with all his force as hard as he could . . . at least six blows so that Robert began to cry out.” When the victim was bent over, “lifting a stone, his master [did] strike with his fist upon the middle of his back down to the ground and when he arose he struck him again [so] that he had much ado to recover falling the second time.” Betts then stormed off.<sup>7</sup>

Knight thought that his back was broken. When he “stooped down, he could [only] rise with his hands on his knees and so rose by degrees.” That night he “complained to his dame . . . and desired her to look on it [with Abbot and Mistress Sarah Symmes, who happened to be in the house]. They saw a small kibe [swelling] but no blueness or redness or anything that would betoken any stroke or bruise.” Nonetheless, a physician, John Clarke, was summoned from Boston and may have applied a plaster. He also apparently advised that the servant should get back on his feet as soon as possible. Knight stayed in bed for a week.<sup>8</sup>

Insisting that Knight return to work in the last week of April, the overstretched Betts made him push a wheelbarrow three miles to the

<sup>6</sup>Documents relating to this case are printed in *Assistants*, 2:24–34. Quotations in this paragraph are from the testimony of Thomas Abbot, pp. 30–31.

<sup>7</sup>Testimonies of Thomas Abbot and Thomas Pearce, age sixty; Indictment (*Assistants*, pp. 30, 27, 24).

<sup>8</sup>John Clarke (c. 1590–1664) was Sir Richard Saltonstall’s brother-in-law; he had recently moved his practice from Newbury to Boston. Sarah Symmes was the wife of the minister of Charlestown and sister-in-law of another witness, Lt. William French of Cambridge. Alcock reported that Knight was unable to remember later whether a

mill and bring back two bushels of corn. He seems to have believed that Knight had recovered. His wife was less sanguine. Dr. Alcock recalled that when he went to treat her, "she desired me to see a sick man of hers." He diagnosed "an imperfect dislocation of one of the upper vertebrae or spondells [joints] of the back bone." He thought that "with good attendance and means [Knight] might have lived some years although utterly disenabled . . . to do himself or others any good." The doctor specifically "advised him to beware of all violent exercise or motion of his body or straining of it." Not long after, Betts ordered Knight "to pitch peas into a cart." Knight grew "much worse."<sup>9</sup>

Because Knight had misbehaved in the past, Betts was convinced that his man was malingering. He told William Manning that he knew Knight "in the time of his health to speak often times very false." For instance, he did "with many bitter and dreadful wishes upon himself deny the taking a knife [out of a neighbor's] house, [such] as, if he had it, that it were [stuck] in his belly and that he might never speak word more." Only when threatened with interrogation before a magistrate did he finally confess. He had stolen a pair of gloves from the meetinghouse during a service "and yet said that they were given to him." Abbot confirmed that Knight was "such a liar, his master could not trust him." He would often claim to have given "the cattle meat [feed] when he had not given them any meat at all." Knight and Abbot "did plot by all means they could to get away and be freed from their master and [his] passion." Knight "was resolved that he would never learn to do husbandry [because] he had a mind to his trade vizt. a weaver."<sup>10</sup>

As Knight's infirmity persisted and Betts's skepticism deepened, the neighbors were growing worried. Gilbert Crackbone "with divers others" heard Knight bemoan his lack of wages because of his injury. After inspecting the swelling and seeing his evident disability, they "wished him to complain to the magistrate." Although Betts berated Crackbone for siding with a servant, he showed more restraint for a while, especially after Cambridge magistrate Captain Daniel Cookin

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plaster had been applied and lost, or worn out, or anointed, or thought not material (testimony of John Alcock, *Assistants*, p. 26).

<sup>9</sup>The wheelbarrow episode is from the testimony of Thomas Abbot, *Assistants*, p. 30; other quotations are from the testimony of John Alcock, *Assistants*, p. 26. Alcock's account was sworn after the tragic outcome was known.

<sup>10</sup>Testimonies of William Manning and Thomas Abbot, *Assistants*, pp. 27, 31.

warned Goody Betts "that in case the man should die and any negligence proved it would go hard with her husband."<sup>11</sup>

By harvest time, however, as Knight continued to "refuse to labour and was worse in his work and Betts [complained to Crackbone] that he was the worse by £40" for expenses and lost work, the master became even more convinced that his man was trying to trick him. He called Knight "dissembling rascal, counterfeit, wretch and blood sucker." He tried various stratagems to force Knight off his filthy bed in a dank pantry. "He would take Knight by the chin and hold up his head and sometimes give him a box of the ears and sometimes when he lay upon the ground he would give him a kick with his foot." He threatened to "get leave of the magistrate to whip him with a rod till he made him run about the house," and neighbor William French testified that Betts did beat him twice. Betts told Richard French that "he had devised a way to scare his man [out of bed] and make him to run by putting a light into a dog's head [skull] and conveying it secretly into his sight." Betts had other ways to rouse his servant, too. Driven to distraction by Knight's persistent "lying on the bed [Betts] took hold of the sheet and dragged him off the bed by the sheet and about the house and there left him." He also "made a place between two rails as high as [Knight's] arms wherein he did set him . . . and let him so stand fast tied [for hours on end] until he felt he had no flesh he was so benumbed." Sometimes Goody Betts or Abbot would let him down. One Sunday morning Betts found that Knight had "fouled his bed and the house by his excrements and did take some of his excrement and put the same into [Knight's] mouth."<sup>12</sup>

By early October 1652, Knight's clothing was in a shocking state. When sixteen-year-old Anne Williamson was dispatched by her mistress to help the ailing Goody Betts with her laundry, "she was not willing to let her wash Robert Knight's clothes they smelt so strong." Betts decreed that Knight do his own washing, a humiliating task for a man; he "bade Thomas Abbot set the keeler [shallow tub] to him . . . and he did the best he could."<sup>13</sup>

Betts was so certain that his servant was faking and leeching his fi-

<sup>11</sup>Testimonies of Gilbert Crackbone and John Alcock (Gookin warning), *Assistants*, pp. 27, 26.

<sup>12</sup>Testimonies of Gilbert Crackbone, William French, Richard French (apparently no relation to William), and Thomas Abbot, *Assistants*, pp. 27, 33, 29, 30.

<sup>13</sup>Testimony of Anne Williamson, servant to Reana Andrews, *Assistants*, p. 29.

nances that worried neighbors again investigated. Mistress Reana Andrews, a sixty-year-old widow, "desired Robert privately to tell the truth whether he did dissemble and told him if he did God would find him out and plague and punish him." Knight denied counterfeiting his suffering and lamented, "I wish I were dead." "He said he was a poor miserable creature and wept," reported Andrews. After many such examinations she was convinced that his pains were genuine. Betts then began asserting that the initial fall from the ladder had caused Knight's injuries. Several other townspeople, led by Captain Daniel Gookin and Lieutenant William French, visited Knight. They "solemnly enjoined him carefully and conscientiously to declare . . . whether his master's blows [or something else] hurt his back." Knight steadfastly averred that Betts's assaults had done the damage.<sup>14</sup>

Knight's condition worsened. In early fall Dr. Alcock again examined Goody Betts and took the opportunity to check up on the bedridden servant. "He put forth his foot and it quavered exceedingly, his body [was] pale and wan and much maciated and decayed, strength in the inferior [lower] limbs much decayed and somewhat paralytic." In the first week of October Abbot "saw that [Knight's] secret members were much mortified." The sufferer's wish was coming true; he was dying.<sup>15</sup>

On 26 October 1652 Gookin and French returned to Knight's bedside along with Deacon Bridge. They heard his confession of previous misdeeds and repeated their question about what had caused his injury, instructing him to reply "as he would answer before the Lord." He reiterated that Betts had inflicted his injuries, "yet said that he freely forgave his master." Two days later, as Betts adamantly continued "to affirm that his servant did dissemble," Robert Knight died.<sup>16</sup>

John Betts, indicted by the Middlesex Grand Jury, was tried for the murder of Robert Knight before the Court of Assistants in March 1653, but the trial jury's verdict was not accepted by the bench. Although that verdict has not been preserved, the jury probably found him guilty. The case then proceeded to the General Court, which, on 28 May 1653, judged Betts not legally guilty of murder. However, the judges did find "strong presumptions and great probabilities of his

<sup>14</sup>Testimonies of Reana Andrews and William French, *Assistants*, pp. 28–29, 33. Mrs. Andrews's husband William, a wealthy sea captain, had died earlier that year. Gookin had become an assistant, or magistrate, in 1652.

<sup>15</sup>Testimonies of John Alcock and Thomas Abbot, *Assistants*, pp. 26, 32.

<sup>16</sup>Testimonies of William French and Thomas Abbot, *Assistants*, pp. 33, 32.



guilt . . . and that he hath exercised and multiplied inhuman cruelties." The court may have been swayed by evidence that Betts had been following Dr. Clarke's orders when he insisted that Knight get out of bed. They also noted that Knight's bad reputation had been endorsed by his fellow servant Abbot, and they may have been influenced by a general employers' bias against servants. Although Betts escaped the worst, he did receive a harsh sentence for his brutal behavior. Before the next weekly church lecture in Boston (when the town would be especially crowded), Betts was to be taken in a cart from prison with the hangman's noose round his neck and "made to stand on the gallows ladder one hour by the [hour]glass with the end of the rope thrown over the gallows." Back at jail, he would be severely whipped before being released. He had to pay two shillings per day witness costs and fifteen pounds court charges and "stand bound to good behaviour for one year in the sum of £20." As Gookin had predicted, it had certainly "gone hard" with Betts.<sup>17</sup>



This shocking episode dramatizes the complex relationships between master and servant. With endless tasks of fencing, clearing, manuring, plowing, driving, planting, hilling, milling, loading, carting, harvesting, stacking, winnowing, and herding, masters were desperate for helping hands. Betts's dire need for labor may have contributed to his attempts to make Knight return to work and his suspicion that his servant was malingering. The court's finding that Betts acted cruelly, however, indicates that his behavior went beyond culturally accepted limits. Knight himself is hard to see as an innocent victim, given his apparent tendencies toward deceitfulness and thievery. And where we might expect solidarity, we find that fellow servant Thomas Abbot's 10 December 1652 testimony was uniformly hostile to Knight and minimized the harm done by Betts. In additional testimony on 1 March 1653, however, Abbot exposed his master's cold-hearted cruelty and Knight's sufferings. These starkly contrasting affidavits suggest that Abbot was under Betts's sway in December but had somehow escaped by March. It is possible that by then Betts was in prison.

<sup>17</sup>For indictment and first verdict, see *Assistants*, pp. 24–25; for General Court Proceedings, p. 25. Ten witnesses were sworn, so Betts's costs would have been at least two pounds and probably twice that amount.

Abbot himself seems to have taken advantage of his position once his master had been punished. Within a week of Betts's conviction, on 1 June 1653, Goody Betts "between eight and nine of the clock in the morning went into the kitchen where I saw [laundress] Anne Williamson's clothes up [about] her waist and Thomas Abbot with his body working and in motion towards her body with his arms encompassing her hips and her arms encompassing Abbot's shoulders." This was not their first act of intimacy. If anyone in this tale deserves our sympathy, it must be the ailing, childless, and impoverished Elizabeth Betts, with a vengeful, humiliated husband, one servant dead, and another busy fathering a bastard.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup>Documents and Orders, Middlesex County Court, file 7 (see my *Sex in Middlesex*, pp. 20, 30, 39). Elizabeth Betts died on 21 January 1664, ten months after her husband; her will is in Robert H. Rodgers, *Middlesex County Records of Probate and Administration, 1649-70*, 2 vols. (Boston: New England Historic Genealogical Society, 1999, 2001), 2:199-207. Her inventory totaled seventy-two pounds, as compared with her husband's sixty-seven pounds (2:143-45).

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