

THE SALEM WITCH TRIALS OF 1692: AN OVERVIEW

For the casual observer of Colonial America, the Salem Witch Trials of 1692 appear to be an oddity of the distant past and perhaps something like ancient history with little relevance to the present and long forgotten. What awaits for those who dare to scratch beneath the surface and uncover Salem's complex treasure-store of bewildering events, though, is a multitude of possible interpretations of these bizarre events. But cautious examination of the data becomes all the more necessary, since the modern inquirer can be sucked easily into a vortex of seemingly endless possibilities. Social, religious, political, psychological, medical, and legal factors all play a part, so that a peeling away of tertiary and even secondary factors might uncover what remains as absolutely crucial to understand these bizarre events at Salem village during the last decade of the seventeenth century. The primary factors revolve precisely around the practice of witchery and its superstitions as well as its detection and prosecution by civil and ecclesiastical authorities. These were "witchcraft" trials, and any approach that is concerned about historical veracity must elucidate the phenomena associated with witchery as a priority.¹ Even if, in the thinking of many post-supernatural "believers," witchcraft is a metaphysical impossibility, the fact that most seventeenth-century Puritans believed and perceived it as a reality cannot be tossed aside so easily. In either case, existentially real or not, the witching phenomena rules the action at Salem

¹See John Fiske, *New France and New England* (1902), quoted in "A Traditional Interpretation of Witchcraft," Marc Mappen, ed., *Witches & Historians: Interpretations of Salem*, 2nd ed. (Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing Company, 1996), 6-10. Mappen's work is cited from here on as "Mappen, *WHIS*."

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and must be taken seriously on its own merits. This essay, therefore, will focus on the primary theme of witchery, its history, its role in the Salem outbreak, and its relationship to a few of the subsidiary factors by way of interpretation.

The practice of witchcraft, the use of supernatural or preternatural power usually for evil or anti-social purposes, spans a long history. Akkadian spells and incantations appeared in Sumerian and Canaanite religious literature as well as Greek and Roman sources. Such practices and sorcery and magical arts received sharp condemnation in biblical literature, both the Hebrew scriptures (see Exodus 22:18; Deuteronomy 18:10) and the Christian writings (see Galatians 5:20; cf. Acts 8:9ff.). King Saul, though, visited a witch in the Manesseh village of Endor who conjured up the prophet Samuel for ancient Israel's first monarch (see 1 Samuel 28:7-25). Yahweh ("the Lord") seemingly worked through the female medium to announce a message of judgment, a prediction of Saul's defeat and death, rather than encouragement to the king, as he expected, in his military campaign against the hostile Philistines. After Hellenistic ideas about the afterlife influenced Jewish thinking during the "period between the testaments," or the Intertestamental Period, Christian writers in the Gospels spoke freely about the devil and his efforts to thwart the kingdom of God with deceitful activity. In the patristic period, Tertullian (*Apology*, 22) and Augustine (*City of God*, 21:6) believed in the reality of witchcraft, but others

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like Chrysostom and Hippolytus opposed such a notion, although they did not reject the power of the devil and pagan rituals.²

During the early Middle Ages, Charlemagne punished the persecution of witches that had been allowed under old Roman law. Leaders of the Church, like Rabanus Maurus, the Abbot of Fulda (822-842) and later Archbishop of Mainz (847-856), and others during the tenth and eleventh centuries, followed the practice of Charlemagne. Pope Gregory VII (1073-1085) prohibited the killing of women for alleged evils such as causing epidemics or storms. But popular superstitions, bolstered by ancient pagan beliefs, strengthened when the Crusades brought Islamic and Jewish magic to Europe. The dualistic doctrines of several of the Cathari sects (from the Greek word *katharos* meaning “pure”) and their prominent emphasis on evil also had a negative impact. By the time of the Inquisition (beginning in the thirteenth century), prelates were allowed to prosecute witchcraft if it involved heresy, so that a distinction in the types of witches had developed by then. In Germany, the secular courts especially punished supposed sorcery with either exile or torture and burning.³

It was not until the fifteenth century that the Great European Witch Hunt began in earnest. Local incidents of witchery were met with prosecution in France in 1428 and Germany in 1474, and elsewhere the ecclesiastical “hammer” fell on witches as a result of Pope Innocent VIII’s

²See F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, eds., “Witchcraft,” *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1974), 1494.

³Ibid.

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stern measures against them in 1484 and the 1489 publication of *Malleus Maleficarum* by Jacob Spenger, the Dominican inquisitor for the Rhineland. Spenger's work, a veritable handbook on witchcraft, was reprinted in twenty-nine separate editions and became a major treatise in the West and was read by both Catholics and Protestants. The *Malleus* greatly increased suspicion of witches by exaggerating the evil and the effects of their various activities like the witches' sabbaths, intercourse with the devil, ritual child sacrifice, transformation into animals, and casting malicious spells. The secular courts got involved and were summoned to seek out and destroy these evil persons. Tests, such as difficult ordeals, strip searches, or swimming in water, were set up to tell whether or not a suspected individual was truly a witch. Religious reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin also stirred up the craze over witches in the sixteenth century, since they emphasized, and perhaps overemphasized, the power of the devil in their teachings. And religious wars likewise contributed to the hunts for and prosecution of witches by bringing about social instability and unrest.⁴

The peak of the Great European Witch Hunt lasted from 1580 to 1630, and for about 250 years, during the 1400s through the 1700s, over 10,000 cases were prosecuted, some 180,000 people were accused, and maybe as many as 80,000 were executed. Very few of these witch hunts involved more than ten persons, and the victims predominately were female who were poor, middle-aged, and usually aloof socially. Women in Europe, especially those who were

⁴Cross and Livingstone, eds., "Witchcraft," *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed., 1494; and James Williams, "Class Lectures," *Controversies in American History: The Salem Witch Trials* (Murfreesboro, TN: MTSU, 2000).

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single or widowed, placed an additional burden on society for their upkeep, so this made them vulnerable. With little security or means of protection, they faced a bleak, uncertain future. And this culturally-defined prejudice against unprotected women, no doubt, carried over into New England in the New World.⁵

In England, the government under James I, who ruled from 1603 to 1625, hanged large numbers of women for the practice of witchcraft. Nothing of this magnitude, though, occurred on the European Continent. By the beginning of the seventeenth century, civil and ecclesiastical actions against witches had started to decline. Voices of protest, with little success early on, had opposed the frenzied prosecution of witches as early as 1563, the publication date of J. Weyer's *De Praestigiis* (cf. F. von Spee's *Cautio Criminalis*, 1631). But by the time of the Enlightenment, the prosecution and execution of witches for the most part had come to an end. The last trials for witches took place in England in 1712, in Scotland in 1722, in Switzerland in 1782, and in Posen in 1793.⁶

This larger European context provides the background and even the *Weltanschauung* or world view, to some extent, for what took place in Salem village in 1692. Old World beliefs about witches, beliefs that had been transported to the New World, brought about the accusation of 156 people in twenty-four communities across eastern Massachusetts. Of the 156 persons

⁵Williams, "Class Lectures," *Controversies in American History: The Salem Witch Trials*, n.p.; and Carol F. Karlsen, "Witches as Sexual Threat," in Mappen, *WHIS*, 118-126.

⁶Cross and Livingstone, eds., "Witchcraft," *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed., 1495.

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involved, thirty-four confessed to the crime of witchery, thirty were convicted and then punished, and twenty-four died (nineteen were hanged, one was pressed to death, and four died in prison).

In New England, the number of witchcraft incidents overall was small by way of comparison with those in Europe. But the trials themselves present interpreters with an intense and complicated time in American colonial history that is difficult to understand. It is suggested here that any proper understanding of the events in Salem during 1692 must begin with, rest on, and end with the religious phenomena. After all, finding and rooting out witches was what these trials were all about. Medical, political, psychological, and sociological factors certainly all play their part in seventeenth-century Salem's ideology, or ideologies, about witchcraft and the proper response to it. The fact remains that people suffered (not in spite of, but) because of certain religious phenomena that appeared, and they were judged and punished as well on the basis of firm religious beliefs that were held about these religious phenomena.⁷

The priority of a religious explanation for the events at Salem highlights the power of perception and the varying ideas about witchery according to colonials in contrast to moderns. Subjectivity and vantage point in observing, describing, and synthesizing the data about witches causes these different opinions. For example, what were some of the common characteristics of witches according to the colonials? First, witches perform magic or acts that appear to contradict the normal or natural order of things that can be observed in the world. In this way, witches are

⁷See Richard Godbeer, "Diabolical Witchcraft and Maleficent Witchcraft," in Mappen, *WHIS*, 127-137.

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able to go beyond what is capable for ordinary humans, and they can extend their activities into the realm of the paranormal, an “area” or sphere that cannot be examined by the strictly empirical processes of seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting, or smelling. Magic is also to be contrasted with miracle, because miracle comes from a power that overrides or countermands the natural order at opportune times for beneficent purposes. This is why, secondly, witches are to be avoided, since they work their power wrongly or illegitimately. In other words, they cheat and do not play fairly. They trick fate or the deities or the divine power. They are deceitful, and due to their deceptions they are undesirable for society. These perceptions were true, to some extent, of all those who were accused of witchcraft at Salem.⁸

Another feature of the colonial perception of witchery involved the classification of witchcraft into four distinct types that were more or less a hierarchy from bad to worse. Each type had representatives at Salem.⁹ There were the neo-pagans or those non-Christian practitioners of unholy religion, but they were not necessarily devil worshipers. Included in this type would be the Indians. Next there were those involuntary witches who had innate evilness or an ascribed status (i.e., not by their own will) of being a witch. Such a witch might be able to control his or her tendency toward witchery with the help of medicines, Christian rites, and so forth, but the danger of witchery always was present. Tituba, the Indian slave, would belong to

⁸By way of contrast, see Lawrence Stone, “A New Interpretation of Witchcraft,” in Mappen, *WHIS*, 10-12.

⁹*Ibid.*, 13-15.

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this type. Then there were those voluntary witches who had achieved their powers of sorcery by purchase or by theft (i.e., by an act of their will). Bridget Bishop and John Willard possibly could be assigned to this type. The last type were those servants of the devil who had entered into a covenant relationship with him. Sarah Good, Sarah Osborne, and George Burroughs all would be categorized in this type.

There were as well certain general phenomena that belonged to all forms or types of witchery, and these would include superhuman feats, asocial acts, and nonhuman acts. The events at Salem were filled with such activities. There were fits of the young women, body marks, dead animals, feats of extraordinary strength, destructive weather, funny birds, black cats, and wild pigs. There were also opportune apparitions and spectral evidences, and these were elusive and impossible of verification by empirical means. All of these things seem strange to moderns, especially “evidence” that simply cannot be verified as credible or even happening, but the utility of phenomena like spectral evidence to produce a negative conclusion (e.g., the identification of an individual as a witch) cannot be dismissed offhand because of the highly-charged situation in Salem.

It must be considered that the mind set in late seventeenth-century Puritan New England allowed for a combination of strict biblical dogmas with an increasing dependency on old superstitions that filled a void brought about by the erosion of belief in Divine Providence as the

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colony's guiding force.¹⁰ In the case of Salem during 1692, this shift in religious perceptions led to the identification of the practices of witchcraft and the condemnation of its practitioners.

Negative events—other than but including religious ones—precipitated this shift that left the villagers in Salem groping for an overarching meaning to their lives individually and to the life of the community collectively. The ensuing shift in meaning, built on the natural association of bad occurrences with evil forces, validated the dictum that where goodness fails, Providence fails.

The people of Salem, though, had dealt with a bad shake of things before 1692, as they would do after 1692, with less than fanatic results. So why did the salvaging of Providence in the face of extreme adversity during other times not require the execution of over twenty souls as witches? Why did this happen in 1692? And why did the home of Reverend Samuel Parris become the pivot point, or beginning, of these events at this particular time?

That an impending crisis, whether due to political change or by Indian terror or from internal strife, threatened to undo the village adds nothing unique to the immediate context for the trials. Crises had happened before, and they certainly would happen again. There was nothing unusual or peculiar about the colony's loss of their charter, the internal administrative problems of the village, or the pending threat from the Tawny Indians that necessitated a witch

¹⁰See George Lyman Kittredge, "A Small Chapter in an Old Superstition," and Perry Miller, "The Puritans and the Witches," in Mappen, *WHIS*, 83-89, 89-91.

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hunt in Salem.¹¹ Even with careful consideration given to the ideologies of covenant theology and the imposition of moral absolutes on the Puritans (from which there were many deviations), this would not be sufficient cause for anti-witch fanaticism. Likewise, in Salem village proper, the land disputes, the class structure, the economic issues, and even the church factions do not, in and of themselves, provide sufficient cause beyond reasonable doubt for the witch hunt craze.¹² These political and social factors certainly established a context that was pregnant for trouble, but the results obviously could have been different.¹³ In other words, phenomena of witchery, not seemingly related social influences, gave rise to witch hunting, so a religious or cultural explanation of these events must stay at the forefront.

One concession, however, to the influence of political or sociological factors needs elaboration. The failure of the broad umbrella of colonial government and the erosion of any unified approach to the affairs of Salem village, something that was a result of a number of internal squabbles, left a dangerous vacuum that civil magistrates filled quickly when things turned sour. Only by such a vacuum could the imposition of external court authority be so sudden, decisive, and persuasive. That the void occurred at precisely the same time as the

¹¹Contra David Davis and Steven Mintz, ed., *The Boisterous Sea of Liberty: A Documentary History of American from Discovery through the Civil War* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1998), 75.

¹²For the primary data, see Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, eds., *Salem-Village Witchcraft: A Documentary Record of Local Conflict in Colonial New England* (Northeastern University Press, 1972).

¹³Kai T. Erikson, "Witchcraft and Social Disruption," in Mappen, *WHIS*, 107-114.

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outbreak of certain phenomena in the home of Samuel Parris and others remains inexplicable, unless this concurrence can be attributed to duplicity on the part of certain aggrieved parties.¹⁴

As stated previously, the strange witching phenomena were the focus in Salem in 1692, so where did these fits and fancies come from? As with most everything about the Salem trials, there are possibilities. First, there is the possibility that witchcraft really happened, and people really did suffer from demonic activity.¹⁵ The witches were caught, tried, and hanged. In this case (and tolerance can be made for errors in a few circumstances), the civil and religious authorities acted justly. But to moderns, this straightforward perspective or the read-it-like-it-is viewpoint comes across as much too simple. This “literal” perspective also fails to take into account the varying opinions on the matter by eyewitnesses who themselves could not agree on the interpretation of the phenomena.¹⁶ But if witches really were in Salem in 1692, should it not be supposed that there would be confusion and disagreement among the people who were there?

Second, there is the possibility that many people in Salem suffered from mental or psychological imbalance.¹⁷ Modern science does validate the connection between bizarre physical behaviors and deep psychological troubles. And to impose this recent or modern

¹⁴See Charles W. Upham, “The Afflicted Girls Were Lying,” in Mappen, *WHIS*, 36-43.

¹⁵So Chadwick Hansen, “Some of the Witches Were Guilty,” in Mappen, *WHIS*, 43-50.

¹⁶See Cotton Mather, “Satan’s Attack on New England,” Robert Calef, “An Attack on the Trials,” and John Hale, “The Lessons of Salem,” in Mappen, *WHIS*, 20-24, 25-27, 27-35.

¹⁷See Ernest Caulfield, “A Physician Diagnoses Hysteria,” Mappen, *WHIS*, 51-63.

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understanding (for example, mediumistic psychosis or mass psychogenic illness) on phenomena that occurred in the seventeenth century is not improper. The problem lies, though, with knowing (or not knowing) the precise nature of the psychological maladjustment, since no doctor at that time knew any of the modern facts. This lack of precise scientific data from the events at Salem weakens certain interpretations of the medical sort such as the ergot thesis.¹⁸ Still, individual psychology and group psychoses like collective delusion, mass hysteria, or social paranoia may have contributed to the events at Salem.

Third, there is the possibility that medical problems (i.e., disease and death) put dread in the hearts of the people of Salem, and they had a fear from which they could expect deliverance only by casting out the immediate cause (in their minds)—Satan and his followers. But medical knowledge and skills were limited severely at that time. Medical practitioners, who intricately linked illness and death with belief in supernatural forces and their control over nature, often resorted to non-medical diagnoses when faced with remarkable symptoms. The resulting abdication of their usual empirical methods to a easily adduced canon of dogma about witches thwarted the advancement and validation of a sound medical diagnosis from the very start. In the wake of this conflation of medicine and religion, it should be no surprise that severe difficulties arise for modern interpreters who wish to give the events at Salem a modern medical cause.

Fourth, there is the possibility that accusers like the Putnams, the Wilkins, and members of the Samuel Parris family targeted people whom they disliked for various reasons and blamed

¹⁸See Linnda R. Caporael, “A Biologist Diagnoses Disease,” in Mappen, *WHIS*, 63-71.

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them for witchcraft. And those who wanted to seek out and find the guilty ones had a ready stock of ideas about witchery with considerable latitude in assigning culpability to particular behaviors (especially with regard to specters). But these motives, like much of what was presented in the trials, rested on circumstantial evidence and hardly would be concrete proof. The characterization of Reverend Parris as vindictive, for example, does not follow all the facts. His fault, if any at all, came from worldly fears about his personal security rather than from vengeance. This possible motive of personal retribution—accusation and condemnation—does present, though, an attractive explanation for the Salem trials, since the intense events occurred over a brief span of only a few months and severely impacted a limited number of individuals.

Fifth, there is the possibility that legal matters in Salem went haywire. The legal issues strictly define the chronological period of the witch trials from beginning to end. This is why the witchcraft scare started, and this is why it stopped. When legal definitions of witchery, tightly connected with religious beliefs and theological assertions, became attached to the phenomena occurring in the home of Samuel Parris—this was the beginning. The action of Governor Phips to disestablish the Court of Oyer and Terminer—this put a halt to the proceedings. There is no doubt that legal matters drove the saga of the trials from beginning to end. And the magistrates either allowed, made available, or perpetrated certain things that, according to Lowell Streiker, caused the whole affair at Salem to evolve into a “cult of persecution.” They accommodated the uncertainty of the moment, sought a quick resolution for the crimes or mysteries perceived, allowed the use of scapegoats either intentionally or unintentionally, dovetailed evidence into

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readily accepted explanations, yielded to speculative testimony from expert witnesses, relied on a harsh mechanism for suppression of the crimes, and forced rituals of restoration.¹⁹ This legal understanding along with the perception or reality of bizarre religious phenomena seems to make the most sense toward explaining what happened in Salem in 1692.

To summarize, a few conclusions can be offered, but these statements present nothing new and only attempt to cut away extraneous explanations so as to get back to the basics. First, without the accusers pointing their fingers at the accused, none of these events could have happened. Certain individuals with definite beliefs, personalities, and social ties were involved in the drama. Second, without beliefs about witchcraft, none of these events could have occurred. Without credible phenomena that aligned closely, if not identically, with the practice of witchery, none of this could have happened. Third, without the legal apparatus to arrest, convict, and execute, none of these events could have happened. These things are certain, but the rest is a problem of history.

¹⁹Williams, "Class Lectures," *Controversies in American History: The Salem Witch Trials*, n.p.

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