

Women's Historiography: The Case of Witchcraft

HST/WMS 286
Spring 2009
Professor Lavender



"The Black Man of the Forest with His Familiar," Illustration from *Chap-Book of the 18th Century* by John Ashton (L. Chatto and Windus, 1882) (courtesy of Peabody Essex Museum)

Why Study Witchcraft?

- History is what we make of it
 - subjective matter of interpretation more than of objective reality or absolute truth
- The case of witchcraft in Salem is one example of this
 - more on this than any topic in American women's history, and less agreement.

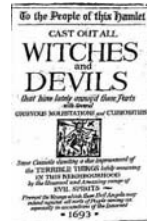
Salem, Massachusetts -- 1692

- Adolescent women accuse various members of the community -- mostly older women -- of engaging in witchcraft.
- For over a year, Salem community obsessed with finding devils and witches
 - more than 140 tried
 - 20 people executed
 - and over 200 accused and jailed
 - including 38 men (which is an anomaly in witchhunts – distinctive characteristic of Salem 1692)



Witchcraft in the Colonies

- Consistent concern in New England
- Witchcraft was capital crime in all New England colonies (and England).
- Crime defined:
 - "solemn compaction or conversing with the Devil"
 - "fellowship by covenant with a familiar spirit"
 - "giving entertainment to Satan"
- Before Salem outbreak, more than 100 court cases dealing with allegations of witchcraft in New England



Why is Salem "the" case study?

- Historians have debated the causes and nature of the outbreak for a long time
- Large body of literature has emerged about the topic
- Historians find many causes and significances:
 - religious, biological, social, economic, psychological, etc.



"Examination of a Witch," Thompkins H. Matteson, 1853.

Historians' Assessments of the Causes of the Salem Witch Crisis

- Traditional Interpretations:
 - Community Tensions
 - "Loss of Mission"
 - Wars
 - Economic Crises
 - Medical Epidemics
 - Ergotism
 - Encephalitis
- New Interpretations: The Role of Gender

Community Tensions – “Loss of Mission”

- Kai Erikson, The Wayward Puritans (1966)

- Witchhunts happen in societies under stress.
- Salem is a society under stress.

Engraving of a Puritan woman



Erikson, Wayward Puritans

- Sources for stress in Salem?
 - 1: Mass. Bay colonists had lost their sense of mission.
 - They had lost touch with England; who in England is seeing their “City on a Hill”?
 - 2: Political order of Mass. Bay was disrupted.
 - Charles II imposed a Royal Governor over them

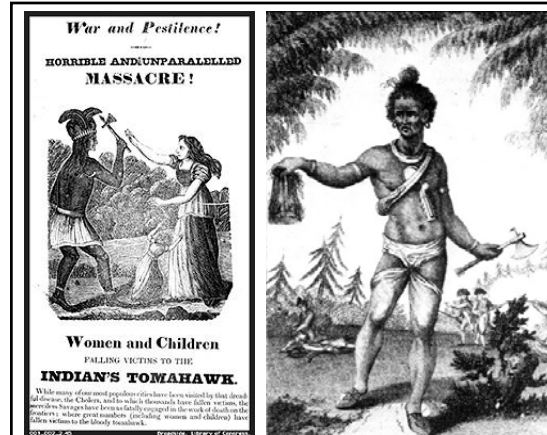
Erikson, Wayward Puritans

- Sources for stress in Salem?
 - 3: Puritans had lost a sense of their individual identity as well as this sense of their cultural purpose.
 - They, not God, had settled the wilderness, where Satan lived
 - If the wilderness was no longer Satan’s place, then he must live within their community
 - And maybe within themselves!



Community Tensions – Wars

- Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil’s Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (2002)
 - Puritans’ conflicts with the Indians
 - Massacres and battles in Maine
 - King Phillip’s War
 - Indians are real threats, but also Satan’s helpers

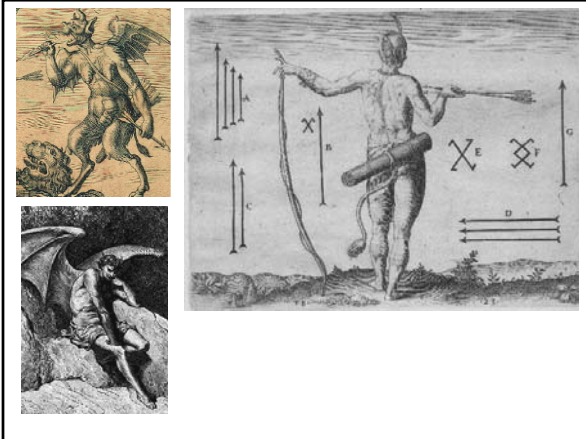




"Death of Jane McCrea," painted by John Vanderlyn in 1804



1846 Currier and Ives print depicting the death of Jane McCrea

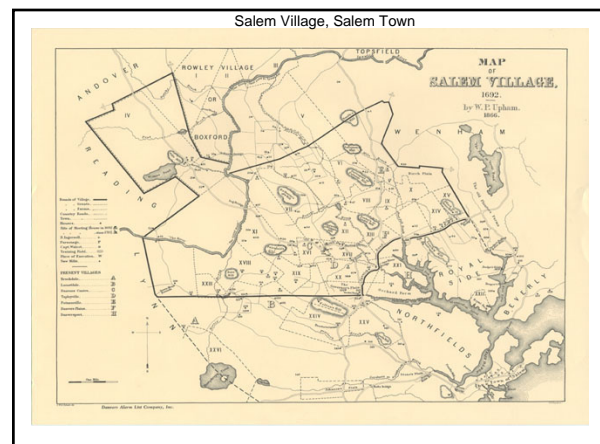


Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare*

- One accused witch had lost son in Indian fighting in Maine
 - Seen as God's punishment for her being a witch
 - "though human judges may be bought, God's vengeance neither turns aside nor slumbers."
- "Unredeemed captives"
 - evidence that New England was "in the devil's snare"

Community Tensions – Economic Crises

- Steven Boyer and Paul Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed* (1976)
 - Factionalism within the adult community
 - Stresses of economic, political, and religious modernization
 - These forces resulted in violence and murder.
 - GEOGRAPHICAL link: Salem Town versus Salem Village



Salem Town versus Salem Village

- Salem Town is a newer development than original Salem Village
- B & N examine geographical patterns in cases: accused versus accusers
 - 12 of 14 accused lived on the east side of the Village
 - with geographic, commercial, personal, and political ties to Salem Town;
 - while 30 of 32 accusers lived on the west side of the Village
 - -and were closely identified with Salem Village economic, political, and religious life.



Salem Town versus Salem Village

- B & N argue that what was at stake in the Salem witch crisis was the future direction and control of the Village
- Village and Town are developing at different rates and going in different directions

Town vs. Village Arguments

- Arguments over religious autonomy
 - Would Salem Town have its own church?
 - If so, would it still pay taxes to the Salem Village church?
 - Who would choose the minister for the Salem Town church – Salem Village? Or Salem Town?
- Arguments over political autonomy
 - Could Salem Town become an autonomous incorporated town?

Town vs. Village Arguments: Economic jealousy and difference

- Salem Town was a port
 - part of the trans-Atlantic trade route.
 - prosperous, adventurous, cosmopolitan, and rapidly growing.
 - experienced a burst of economic activity with the emergence of commercial capitalism.

Town vs. Village Arguments

- But Salem Village economy was rooted in traditional agriculture.
 - Many villagers, particularly those with large families, worried:
 - There was no longer enough land within the Village boundaries to sustain the population.
 - The next generation would have to leave, to live with less, or to adopt a different occupation.

Boyer & Nissenbaum

- The witchhunts were about a struggle between tradition and innovation
- The accusers represented tradition (the Village) and the accused represented innovation (the Town)
- But why was it almost entirely the women who were accused, and the accusers?
- If this is a community struggle, why did the women carry it out?

The Medical Arguments: Ergot

- Linnda R. Caporael, "Ergotism: The Satan Loosed in Salem?" Science (1976).
 - Symptoms are result of ergotism (ergot poisoning)
 - Looks at climactic conditions during outbreak(s), finds cold wet conditions ideal for ergot growth
 - Ergotism most attacks the poor (who eat rye) and the young, especially young women.



Ergot on Rye (*Claviceps purpurea*)

The Medical Arguments: Ergot

- Mary K. Matossian, American Scientist (1982)
 - Symptoms indicate a poisonous fungus like lysergic acid diethylamide, LSD
 - Present in ergot
 - Examined court transcripts, climate indicators, diaries and other records in Salem and several other witch crisis outbreaks

The Medical Arguments: Ergot

- Symptoms of severe ergotism:
 - "Formication" (feeling ants are crawling under skin)
 - Coldness of the extremities and spasms of limbs, tongue and facial muscles
 - Hallucinations of flame and fire; delusions
 - Spontaneous abortion
 - In the most severe cases, epileptic seizures, partial paralysis and coma are followed by death.
- Matossian finds that 24 of 30 purported victims suffered from convulsions and the sensations of being pinched, pricked, or bitten.

The Medical Arguments: Ergot

- These symptoms especially affect female animals
 - Might stop lactating or abort
 - Many reports of horses, sheep, and cows aborting or "birthing monsters"
 - Reports that cows' milk "goes sour" or "dries up"
 - Several cows and three people did die during the 1692 outbreak.
- Presence of these animal victims tells Matossian that afflicted girls were not faking symptoms or role-playing in the face of social cues from their parents and ministers.

Matossian and Ergot

- Rye bread was a dietary staple in colony
 - rye was cheaper
 - so those under economic stress would be those eating it
 - Salem Village, rather than Salem Town.
- From the widths of tree rings formed during the period, Matossian found that the growing season in eastern New England was abnormally cool in 1690, 1691, and 1692.
- Diaries kept in Boston during the intervening winters showed that the weather was very cold.
- Households stricken by "bewitchment" were those living closest to marshy land.

The Medical Arguments: Encephalitis

- Laurie Carlson, A Fever In Salem (1999)
 - Witchhunts resulted from an unrecognized epidemic of *encephalitis lethargica* ("sleeping sickness")
 - Symptoms of the afflicted -- sensations of pinching and pricking, fits, and hallucinations – are also symptoms of *encephalitis lethargica*.
 - Encephalitis can also affect livestock.
 - Spread by mosquitoes
 - so marshes would be likely sites for presence of vectors

New Interpretations: The Role of Gender

- What about the gender issues in witchcraft crises, and particularly in Salem conflict?
 - Why are overwhelming majority of accused witches women?
- Women's historians propose new frameworks to explain in early New England:
 - They ask "Why witches were assumed to be women"
 - And "Why women were accused of being witches"

John Demos, Entertaining Satan (1982)

- Uses psychological analysis
- Demos is struck by the fact that
 - the accusers were mostly the same
 - primarily young, single girls aged 11-20.
 - the accused were mostly the same
 - predominantly married or widowed women, aged 41-60
 - the exceptions being family members of such women who get caught up in the "net" of accusation as accomplices to witches
 - Or family members of accusers

John Demos, Entertaining Satan (1982)

- To Demos, these facts suggest generational conflict in Salem
 - And this led him to look at the organization of the family in Puritan New England
 - and the inner dynamics of the Puritan personality.
- Uses Freudian psychology to examine records and as key to understanding the Salem psyche
 - (family and gender patterns especially)
 - Freud's stages of development: oral, anal, phallic

John Demos, Entertaining Satan (1982)

- Demos sees witchcraft as largely "oral"
 - bites, screams, speaking in tongues, gnashing of teeth, etc.
- Salem was a culture without ways of dealing with anger, strongly repressed hostility in families with emphasis on harmony and order.
- Court records support this:
 - high level of hostility between neighbors
 - and toward crabby, eccentric, or strange people in their midst.
- He notes that many of the accused witches were contentious, argumentative people.
- Demos argues that witchhunts were a form of social control.
 - possibility of being charged with witchcraft is a strong inducement to self-restraint and control.

John Demos, Entertaining Satan (1982)

- Childrearing as key to this pattern of neurosis
 - Early and **traumatic weaning**
 - aged 12-15 months.
 - **Harsh discipline** intended to humble and break child
 - introduced in second year, after year of indulgence, so transition abrupt and traumatic.
 - Children **apprenticed** out, and not raised by natural parents in years 5-10.
 - About 1/3 of children raised by others
 - believed good for child as natural parents might be overly fond of and spoil children.



"Mary Hirst," painted by the Pepperrell Limner, 1710



"Isaac Royall and His Family," by Robert Feke, 1741

John Demos, Entertaining Satan (1982)

- Childrearing as key to this pattern of neurosis, cont.
 - Insisted upon parental **obedience** even as adults.
 - Property inheritance tied to obedience
 - Adult children live with parents until marriage
 - Even cases of adults sent to prison for disobedience against parents.
 - No **privacy** in the households
 - lived in same room, often slept in same bed
 - and certainly slept in same room with parents.



John Demos, Entertaining Satan (1982)

- So why is hostility directed towards “mothers”?
- Mothers were the disciplinarians (fathers often absent, hunting, trading, or at sea)
- Women who are not your own mother are even harsher sources of discipline
 - And you can attack them without being disobedient to your parents
 - Other women are the source of apprenticeship without affection
 - Witchcraft accusations are the labor revolts of apprenticed women

The “Disorderly Woman”

- Carol Karlsen, The Devil in the Shape of a Woman (1987)
 - Cultural assumptions about women led to them being labeled dangerous and witches.
 - “Disorderliness” was either a pose or a reality, and sometimes tolerated



“Arresting a Witch,” Howard Pyle, in Harpers New Monthly Magazine, 1883.

The Disorderly Woman

- Natalie Davis, Society and Culture in Early Modern France (1987)
 - Disorderly woman
 - one who generally unhappy in her role and expressed herself in two ways:
 - the practice of witchcraft
 - or public preaching.
 - » Generally her speaking involved some denunciation of male hierarchy.
 - » Generally these women were frowned upon and society sought to restrain them.
 - » But some tolerance because they believed women “couldn’t help it” – BUILT disorderly
 - » Women controlled by disorderly humours



Male || Female

Galen's Four Humours:

Clockwise from upper left:

- blood** - passionate and sanguine
- phlegm** - sluggish and dull
- black bile** - melancholic and depressed
- yellow bile** - choleric and quick to anger.



Bartholomaeus Anglicus (Bartholomew the Englishman), On the Properties of Things, France, 1400s

Male humors

Blood: hot

Yellow Bile: dry

“Healthy” humors of the young and active

Female humors

Phlegm: wet

Black Bile: cold

“Sickly” humors of the elderly and passive

Karlsen, The Devil in the Shape of a Woman (1987)

- Women were naturally in the “Shape of the Devil” so the Devil could pass as a woman
- Women more likely to turn to covert ways to get power
 - Because overt ways were cut off by patriarchy
- Witches would attack “more godly” women as way to attack the society that had thwarted witches’ ambition and pride
- Witches turned to Satan as a way to get the power that rightly belonged to men and fathers



Case Study of a Disorderly Woman: Anne Hutchinson

Anne Hutchinson stands trial

Anne Hutchinson

- Anne Hutchinson was the daughter of a clergyman, one of 13 children.
 - She was independent minded, assertive, and well trained in religious discourse by her father.
 - At age 21, she married William Hutchinson.
 - She was a good Puritan woman
 - 16 pregnancies in all.
 - She was a good homemaker and housekeeper.
 - Practiced folk medicine and acted as a midwife when called upon.
- In 1634, she and her husband came to America in a group led by the Reverend John Cotton, one of the primary Puritan divines.
- Opened her home to post-church discussions.

Anne Hutchinson

- Hutchinson brought to trial 1637
- Banished for “disorderlyness”; she then appealed
- Imprisoned for a year and brought to trial in church a second time in 1638, convicted and banished.
 - 58 Bostonians took up arms in support of her.
 - She left colony with small group supporters, followed by husband and children.
 - Later she and her children killed by Indians; husband had already died.
- At these meetings 60 men and women discussed theology
- Hutchinson became a leader and teacher on the newer ideas of the “Puritan Divines” led by John Cotton
- Local authorities told her to stop – Cotton was the enemy of the current governor, John Winthrop.

Gender in Anne Hutchinson’s Case


- Anne Hutchinson believed that women should teach and preach because they were as likely as men to have a true covenant of grace with God.
- John Winthrop felt that too much reading and studying would drive a woman mad.
 - He found Hutchinson haughty, aggressive, disorderly, unfeminine, and suspected her of practicing free love and witchcraft.
 - John Winthrop feared this woman, and particularly her influence over other women.
 - Women were too weak and unintelligent to resist her message
 - weak women would, like Eve, lead their husbands to evil.

Gender in Anne Hutchinson’s Case

- At her second religious trial, Hutchinson was told that her problem was that she would “rather be a Husband than a Wife and a Preacher than a Hearer; and a Magistrate than a Subject.”
 - In other words, she lacked submissive spirit and dependent demeanor of a true Puritan woman.
 - The charge of witchcraft raised at the end of the second trial.
 - Told story of a deformed baby that Hutchinson had delivered as a midwife as evidence of her being a witch.

Gender in Anne Hutchinson's Case

- Winthrop continued to harass Hutchinson in exile.
 - When Hutchinson left Boston, it was dead of winter
- She delivered prematurely, the child died.
 - Winthrop sent for details and published,
 - » "that she had produced 30 monstrous births, or thereabouts."



Case Study of a Disorderly Woman: Ann Hibbins

"Execution of Mrs. Ann Hibbins, 1657," by F. T. Merrill, 1886

Ann Hibbins

- In 1656, two years after the death of her influential husband,
 - Ann Hibbins indicted on a charge of witchcraft.
 - She pled innocent, but the church found her guilty
 - Governor sentenced her to hang.
 - Five weeks later, June 19, 1656, she was executed.
- Hibbins had been excommunicated for her stubborn challenge of religious, secular and familial authority
 - and for her negative influence on other members of the congregation.
- To the governor of the colony, the town's ministers, and the leading men of the church, Hibbins embodied those characteristics that distinguished the devil's handmaidens.
 - She was formally accused by her neighbors of supernatural activity,
 - specifically of knowing that other people were talking about her
 - and specific malevolent acts.
- Hibbins was executed because her neighbors feared for their well-being because they believed she had made a pact with Satan.

Ann Hibbins – Why?

- There was a lot of ambivalence about her hanging
- She was a woman of property, and so not the "typical" unhappy disorderly woman
- She was her husband's heir (widow), and watched over his sons from previous marriage and her own children.
- So, even though she was wealthy, why was she cast as a witch?
- How is Hibbins representative of another demographic pattern concerning the accused – and which is the center of Karlsen's thesis?

Widows and Witchcraft

- It was not unusual for women in families without male heirs to be accused of witchcraft shortly after the deaths of fathers, husbands, brothers, or sons.
- Hibbins had three children from her first marriage,
 - all of whom lived in England.
- She had no children by William Hibbins.
 - When he died in 1654, he left her with a substantial portion of his property.
 - When she wrote her own will shortly before her execution, she left most of her legacy from Mr. Hibbins to her sons (not his).

Why Ann Hibbins?

- Ann Hibbins had broken the hold of female economic dependency
 - by inheriting her husband's legacy.
- She had attacked the broader web of linked dependency relationships and power arrangements of society in her first trial
 - (those of husband and wife,
 - of male and female,
 - of church member and leader,
 - of employer and employee).
- She was seen by her community to be
 - proud,
 - discontented,
 - angry,
 - envious,
 - obstinate, and
 - unrepentant.
- Hibbins raised the specter of female rebellion against both God and man. The combination killed her.

Conclusions

- Why were witches women?
- Why were women witches?

Witch giving the ritual kiss to Satan. From R. P. Gaucius' *Compendium Maleficarum*, Milan, 1626



Conclusions – Women's "Weakness"

- New England culture presumed women more susceptible to devilish temptation,
 - "the weaker sex."
- They attributed to female character flaws such as
 - impatience,
 - superstitiousness,
 - a desire to command,
 - maliciousness,
 - and vengefulness.

Conclusions – Women's Vulnerability

- Women without husbands were vulnerable to attack
 - because widows more susceptible to temptation and more suspicious to others.
 - And because of misogyny
 - whether based on rejection by mother in Puritan family
 - or jealousy over and distrust of women's biological creativity.
- Women who attracted attention in a community
 - as eccentric
 - or difficult
 - or even as victims of some family or social wrong for which others felt some guilt (like rape or molestation)
- were easy targets for charges of witchcraft through projection of the envy, anger, fear, and/or guilt of others

Conclusions – Anxieties over Gender

- Anxieties in the society helped brand women as witches
 - in a society in which women's primary role was childbearing,
 - Older, menopausal women whose function was "over" were "idle,"
 - thus open to temptation, and subject to suspicion for envy of younger women.
 - These were often accused of bringing harm to young children or young mothers.

Conclusions – Anxieties over Gender

- Marital friction brought a woman before her community as suspect
 - a woman was to be subordinate and those who were fractious in the home were regarded poorly -- male or female.
 - But if other behaviors or circumstances brought suspicion on a woman, this would clinch her condemnation.

Conclusions – Anxieties over Gender

- Midwives were particularly suspect,
 - especially if something went wrong with the birth or if the child died young.
 - It was assumed that it was the female role to bear and nurture children
 - and to bring harm instead was deemed resisting the maternal function and doing the work of the devil.
 - This suspicion also due to fact that midwives were often lay healers and used cures, potions, and herbs with skill
 - assumed that this power for good could be corrupted.

Conclusions – Anxieties over Gender

And what do to about women who inherited property and had no sons to endow (or who got in the way of powerful sons' inheriting from their fathers), thereby interrupting male control over property, and thus becoming independent women?

