

Historiography: Witchcraft in Salem as a Case Study



"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)

HST 300
Fall 2009
Professor Lavender

Salem, Massachusetts -- 1692

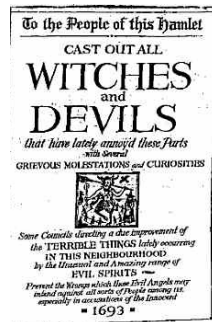
- Adolescent women accuse various members of the community -- mostly older women -- of engaging in witchcraft.
- For over a year, Salem community obsessed with finding devils and witches
 - 20 people executed
 - more than 140 tried
 - and over 200 accused and jailed
 - including 38 men (which is an anomaly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



ILLUSTRATION BY JAMES TAYLOR

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

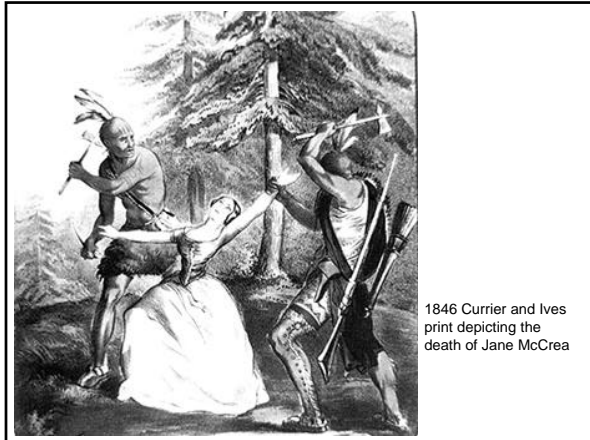
- Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (2002)
 - Puritans' conflicts with the Indians
 - Massacres and battles in Maine
 - King Phillip's War
 - Indians are real threats, but also Satan's helpers



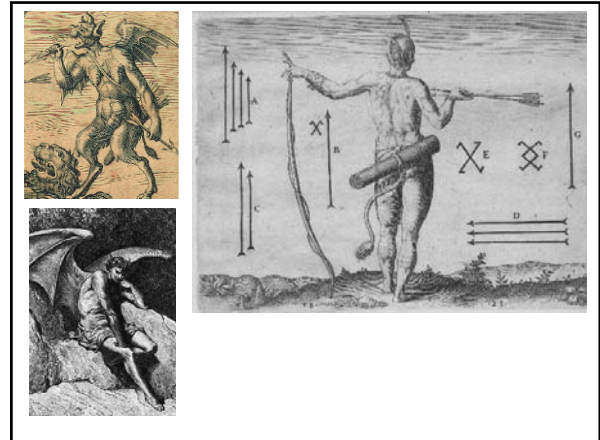
Deerfield Massacre



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



1846 Currier and Ives print depicting the death of Jane McCrea

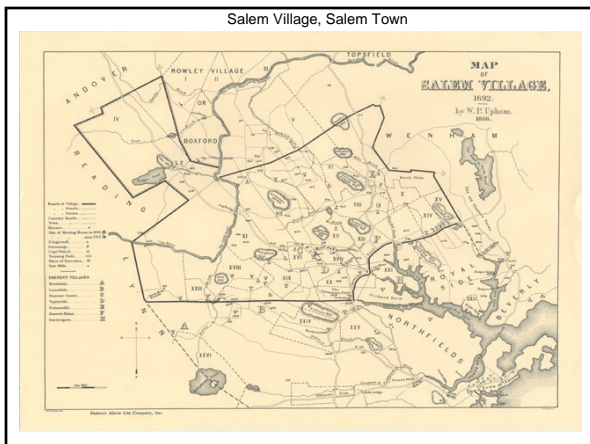


Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare*

- 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, but wheat was preferred
 - 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 humors



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.

Male || Female



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

Historiographical Trends

- Kai Erikson, *The Wayward Puritans: A Study in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: Wiley, 1966).
 - Thesis: Society under stress
 - Method: Socio-political
- Steven Boyer and Paul Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974).
 - Thesis: Salem Town vs. Salem Village
 - Method: Cliometric, Sociogeographical
- Linnda R. Caporael, "Ergotism: The Satan Loosed in Salem?" *Science* 192 (2 April 1976): 21-26.
 - Thesis: Ergot infection
 - Method: Biomedical
- Mary K. Matossian, "Ergot and the Salem Witchcraft Affair" *American Scientist* 70 (1982): 355-7.
 - Thesis: Ergot infection
 - Method: Biomedical and Socioeconomic
- John Demos, *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).
 - Thesis: Family under stress
 - Method: Psychohistory & *Mentalité*
- Carol Karslen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1987).
 - Thesis: Gender struggle
 - Method: Feminist & Sociopolitical
- Laurie Carlson, *A Fever In Salem: A New Interpretation of the New England Witch Trials* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1999).
 - Thesis: Encephalitis
 - Method: Biomedical
- Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York: Knopf, 2002).
 - Thesis: Conflict with Indians
 - Method: Socio-political