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*Murderous Accusations:
Historical Approaches to the Salem Witch Trials (1692–1693)*

ABSTRACT: *This essay revisits the Salem witch trials of 1692–1693. On the basis of books, articles, and reviews published by historians from the late nineteenth to the early twenty-first centuries, it traces the debate regarding the accusations of witchcraft. It first discusses the impact of a puritanical worldview, and it then considers the effects of the Cold War, social history, gender studies, geography, physiology, culture, politics, and empiricism on the historical lens. It argues that women inheriting property were the most likely targets of the accusations and subsequent trials due to the perceived threat they posed in a patriarchal society.*

KEYWORDS: *modern history; American colonial history; Puritanism; Salem witch trials; Tituba; communism; Cold War; encephalitis lethargica; ergot; heiresses*

Introduction

The Salem witch trials have perplexed scholars for almost three and a half centuries. The nine-month-long hysteria from 1692 to 1693 led to over two hundred accusations of witchcraft and twenty executions. This is well documented in the historical field, but what remains a mystery is why society so willingly allowed twenty men and women to be hanged and pressed to death based on the accusations of young girls. Since the early eighteenth century, historical theories about the causes of Salem's witch hunts have ranged from the supernatural to scientific, psychosocial to political, and economic to geographic. Historical works on Salem before the 1950s are sparse, but after that, the controversial debate about the witch trials picked up speed and never slowed down. While they often disagree on the reality of witchcraft, scholars in the early twentieth century and in contemporary times believe that a Puritan worldview is to blame. During the mid-twentieth century, the global spread of communism and the Cold War shifted the historical focus to the effects of mass fear and fraudulent accusations. By the 1980s and 1990s, theories had expanded to include scientific, psychological, and cultural explanations for the trials.

I. A Puritanical Worldview

Justin Winsor was a prominent American writer, librarian, and historian, serving as the first president of the American Library Association, the third president of the American Historical Association, and the librarian at Harvard for twenty years. He specialized in early American geography and history and, in 1895, wrote an article, "The Literature of Witchcraft in New England," to analyze the historical debate up until that point. His work focused primarily on Cotton Mather, Thomas Hutchinson, Charles Upham, and George Moore, all of whom were critical figures in the development of groundbreaking theories about Salem that continue to be

cited by historians well into the twenty-first century.¹ Winsor believed Salem's witchcraft accusations were manifestations of a "belief in satanic agencies."² He also posited that the Salem trials were "exceptionally humane" in comparison to previous witch hunts, which downplays the atrocities of 1692-1693.³ Mary K. Matossian would contest this claim in 1982, arguing that Salem was "the worst outbreak of witch persecution in American history."⁴ Winsor's writing is well supported by primary documents, references to contemporary historians, and the acknowledgment that research on Salem is highly controversial.

Historians in the mid-twentieth century frequently argued that a strict Puritan worldview had led to the Salem witch trials. William Rowley, who earned his Ph.D. from Harvard and taught history at Amherst College and the State University of Albany, explained in a 1944 article, "The Puritan's Tragic Vision," that the harshness and uncertainty surrounding Puritanism resulted in severe reactions to what appeared to be witchcraft.⁵ The Puritans were Protestants who believed in predestination, which is the idea that life is fixed and that a group of elect individuals have been selected by God to go to Heaven. Salem had a culture of suspicion and uncertainty because anyone deemed evil or immoral threatened the collective standing of those destined for Heaven. This could explain why witches were targeted with such hostility. New England Puritans also adopted the medieval notion that the world was a place of sorrow and tragedy that was constantly threatened by the devil.⁶ When young girls in Salem began to have visions, the belief that "the devil could be blamed" resulted in accusations of witchcraft.⁷ Rowley argued that the majority of Salem realized their mistakes, but because they were too late to change anything, they justified their actions by claiming "the devil [had] led them to it."⁸ Ultimately, Rowley failed to explain why the witch hunts geographically happened in Salem and why those who were accused were targeted in particular.

Chadwick Hansen, an American literary critic, also believed that a Puritan worldview affected the trials by pressuring the girls into making accusations of witchcraft. In 1970, American history professor George Waller reviewed Hansen's 1969 publication, *Witchcraft at Salem*. Waller's review does not address any

¹ Justin Winsor, "The Literature of Witchcraft in New England," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 10, no. 2 (December 1896): 351-373.

² Winsor, "Literature of Witchcraft," 351.

³ Winsor, "Literature of Witchcraft," 353.

⁴ Mary K. Matossian, "Ergot and the Salem Witchcraft Affair," *American Scientist* 70, no. 4 (July-August 1982): 355-357, here 355.

⁵ William E. Rowley, "The Puritan's Tragic Vision," *The New England Quarterly* 17 no. 3 (September 1944): 394-417, here 415-417.

⁶ Rowley, "Puritan's Tragic Vision," 406.

⁷ Rowley, "Puritan's Tragic Vision," 401.

⁸ Rowley, "Puritan's Tragic Vision," 406.

psychosocial, political, feminist, and economic theories. Rather, Waller argued that Hansen was a revisionist whose book was imbued with controversy.⁹ While Hansen had supported the idea that the accused “were actually practicing witchcraft,” he, so Waller claimed, had intentionally left out facts that disputed his supernatural theory of black magic.¹⁰ By the later twentieth century, most historians would agree that witchcraft was not practiced, but they continued to disagree on the specific causes behind the accusations.

II. Communism and Social History

By the 1950s, the global spread of communism and the effects of the Cold War had impacted the historical view of the witch hunts. Edmund Morgan was a professor at Yale and Brown who specialized in early colonial American history. In 1950, he published a review of Marion Starkey’s 1949 monograph, *The Devil in Massachusetts: A Modern Inquiry into the Salem Witch Trials*. Starkey had blamed the “delusional” Puritan worldview on the witch hunts while praising the courage of those who had refused to confess.¹¹ Starkey’s arguments resembled Rowley’s claims of tragic Puritanism, demonstrating how mid-century historians were sympathizing with the accused witches rather than with the accusers. In his review, Morgan equated the public hysteria in Salem to the Second Red Scare in the United States.¹² The Second Red Scare resulted from a widespread fear of communism that led to hysteria, suspicion, and unfounded accusations. In his review, Morgan pointed to many parallels between Salem in 1692–1693 and America in the 1950s.¹³ Historians like Morgan, who were experiencing the global spread of communism, were sensitive to how the witch trials had threatened the concept of truth. This was especially alarming to Morgan because the “phony confessions...and admission of inadmissible evidence [had] such a modern ring.”¹⁴ Like in most publications of the 1950s, there is little analysis of the inner psyche or any scientific factors leading up to the witch hunts.

By the 1970s and 1980s, historians began to use interdisciplinary approaches to study Salem, which revealed many alternative causes. John Putnam Demos was an American historian who specialized in social history. Social history came into its own in the French *Annales* school of the 1930s and provided a lens to view the relations between various societal groups. In his 1970 article, “Underlying Themes in the Witchcraft of Seventeenth-Century New England,” Demos used a cross-disciplinary approach combining anthropology and psychology to analyze the

⁹ George M. Waller, review of *Witchcraft at Salem*, by Chadwick Hansen, *The Journal of American History* 56, no. 4 (March 1970): 894–895.

¹⁰ Waller, review of *Witchcraft at Salem*, 895.

¹¹ Edmund S. Morgan, review of *The Devil in Massachusetts: A Modern Inquiry into the Salem Witch Trials*, by Marion L. Starkey, *The American Historical Review* 55, no. 3 (April 1950): 616.

¹² Morgan, review of *Devil in Massachusetts*, 616–617.

¹³ Morgan, review of *Devil in Massachusetts*, 617.

¹⁴ Morgan, review of *Devil in Massachusetts*, 616.

individual and collective experiences of Salem.¹⁵ This methodology foreshadowed Carol Karlsen's 1987 compilation of "in depth biological profiles"¹⁶ (and Karlsen's work is addressed further below). Demos believed the best way to understand the actions of the accusers was through psychoanalysis, which is a method of investigating the unconscious mind. This reflects the late twentieth-century shift to a reliance on psychology to understand the witch hunts. Demos analyzed behaviors and demographics to illuminate the pattern of "accusations by adolescent girls against middle-aged women."¹⁷ Demos differed from most historians because he blamed the witch hunts on the tense relationship between mothers and daughters, arguing that the girls were displacing their aggression onto society.¹⁸ According to Demos's unique position, the attacks were a subconscious reaction to the repression of Puritanism, specifically its effect on young girls. Demos also supported the feminist belief that the position of women in a patriarchal society was a contributing factor behind the accusations.

Another eminent scholar in the emerging field of social history was Philip Greven Jr., an American historian and professor at Rutgers University whose work focused on early American families. Greven's 1984 review of John Demos's *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England* (1982) supported the importance of psychological inquiry in analyzing the trials. Demos had studied genealogical evidence, demographic studies, and biographies to create a very detailed image of the personal relationships in Salem.¹⁹ While Greven disagreed with Demos's ideas of witchcraft, he supported the methodology of combining multiple disciplines to assess the witch hunts. Like Morgan, Greven was affected by the Cold War. The tense relationship between the Soviet Union and the United States influenced Greven's belief that the modern world was still "filled with evil and with evidence of Satan's influence."²⁰ Greven argued that witchcraft was not gone, just "transformed...into violence and abuse, anger and aggression, and conflict."²¹ It is interesting to note that Greven believed witchcraft was still a part of society in the 1980s.

III. Spheres of Gender and Economics

Demos's study of mothers and daughters reflected how historians began to incorporate a feminist lens in analyzing the patriarchal structure of Salem. In her

¹⁵ John Putnam Demos, "Underlying Themes in the Witchcraft of Seventeenth-Century New England," *The American Historical Review* 75, no. 5 (June 1970): 1311-1326.

¹⁶ Carol F. Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987), 65-72.

¹⁷ Demos, "Underlying Themes," 1324.

¹⁸ Demos, "Underlying Themes," 1322-1326.

¹⁹ Demos, "Underlying Themes," 1311-1326.

²⁰ Philip Greven Jr., review of *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England*, by John Putnam Demos, *History and Theory* 23, no. 2 (May 1984): 236-251, here 249.

²¹ Greven Jr., review of *Entertaining Satan*, 250.

1987 publication, *The Devil in the Shape of A Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England*, Carol Karlsen, an American historian at the University of Michigan, analyzed how inheritance and biological determinism played a crucial role in the accusations of Salem.²² Biological determinism is the belief that a person's position in society is predestined from birth. This is derived from Darwinism and the ideas of Herbert Spencer. By analyzing biographical profiles, Karlsen demonstrated that the individuals who were most likely to be accused were heiresses who lacked legal protection and had no male heirs.²³ Her book is significant because it challenged the idea that witchcraft accusations were directed toward a certain social class. It also showed that accusations were political tools used to maintain the status quo. For instance, widows in seventeenth-century colonial America did not receive more than a third of their husband's wealth, so those who did inherit were "aberrations in a society with an inheritance system designed to keep property in the hands of men."²⁴ Thus, Karlsen's argument connected Puritan ideology and the economic implications of inheritance laws to the impact of a patriarchal society on women.

In *Salem Possessed: The Origins of Witchcraft* (1974), Paul Boyer and Steven Nissenbaum revealed a connection between economics and witch hunts. Boyer was a U.S. intellectual and cultural historian with a Ph.D. from Harvard who focused on the moral and religious history of America from the late seventeenth through the twentieth centuries. Nissenbaum had studied at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and focused on early American history. Neal Salisbury's 1974 review of *Salem Possessed* is significant because it emphasized the boldness of Boyer's and Nissenbaum's approach to the witch trials.²⁵ Boyer and Nissenbaum are often cited in studies about Salem because they developed the argument that socioeconomic and geographical factors affected the accusers.²⁶ At this point in time, the sympathy of most historians was shifting to the accusers, who now became viewed as the victims of "economic growth and social change."²⁷ The accusers, mainly from the village of Salem, had targeted the townspeople of Salem to redirect their misfortune and resentment. Boyer's and Nissenbaum's approach revealed the threat of the "other" and introduced the dichotomous concept of "us vs. them." While frequently ignored, the difference between Salem's village and town is significant. The village was "politically and religiously subordinate" to the town, and instead of a flourishing port, it was "isolated [and] increasingly

²² Karlsen, *Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 65–72.

²³ Karlsen, *Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 70–72.

²⁴ Karlsen, *Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 70.

²⁵ Neal Salisbury, review of *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft*, by Paul Boyer and Steven Nissenbaum, *The New England Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (September 1974): 472–475.

²⁶ Paul Boyer and Steven Nissenbaum, "'Salem Possessed' in Retrospect," *William and Mary Quarterly* 65, no. 3 (July 2008): 503–534, here 503–512.

²⁷ Salisbury, review of *Salem Possessed*, 474.

crowded.”²⁸ Salisbury’s review is a valuable source to compare to the arguments of mid-century historians, like Rowley, who had solely focused on Puritanism and supported the accused.

In 2008, Boyer and Nissenbaum reviewed their original publication to determine whether new evidence and historical theories would change or support their initial position. Revisiting *Salem Possessed* (1974) thirty-four years after its release, Boyer and Nissenbaum exemplified how historical perspectives on Salem continue to evolve, proving their credibility as historians by allowing outside scrutiny and a personal critique of their work. Throughout their 2008 article, they respond to the scholarly critiques of contemporaries like Benjamin Ray instead of ignoring them.²⁹ While they had originally believed that their 1974 book would be the last word on Salem, the witch trials continue to be a topic of debate. Their revised (2008) stance was that witchcraft in Salem was a complex psychological reaction to rival factions that developed because of socioeconomic factors.³⁰

IV. Science and Reason

Historians in the 1980s started to think that a scientific and rational approach to the witch trials would be key to understanding the events in Salem. By this point in time, a focus on the physiological factors behind the witchcraft accusations had developed. Mary K. Matossian, who received a Ph.D. from Stanford and specialized in mycology, argued that food poisoning—producing neurological reactions—had led to the Salem witch trials.³¹ In a 1982 article “Ergot and the Salem Witchcraft Affair,” she claimed that an outbreak of ergotism was the root of the accusations. Ergot is a fungus that grows best in cold climates and is most dangerous to those with low body weight. In addition, it grows on rye as “the source of [the hallucinogenic] LSD.”³² This would clarify why the only people exhibiting symptoms were young girls. Furthermore, the cold growing season in Salem during 1692–1693 would explain why an outbreak of ergotism happened at that time. Matossian examined court transcripts, studied the ecology of Salem, and researched the symptoms of ergotism to back up her claims.³³ Even though the ergot theory was harshly criticized and eventually refuted, its significance was that it focused on physical symptoms. Thus, Matossian proved the importance of focusing both on the origins of symptoms as well as the social reactions to them.

Michael Hall, an expert on Puritan New England, received his Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins University. In a 2001 review, he harshly criticized Laurie Winn Carlson’s book, *A Fever in Salem: A New Interpretation of the New England Witch*

²⁸ Salisbury, review of *Salem Possessed*, 473.

²⁹ Boyer and Nissenbaum, “‘Salem Possessed’ in Retrospect,” 513–534.

³⁰ Boyer and Nissenbaum, “‘Salem Possessed’ in Retrospect,” 530–534.

³¹ Matossian, “Ergot and the Salem Witchcraft Affair,” 355.

³² Matossian, “Ergot and the Salem Witchcraft Affair,” 356.

³³ Matossian, “Ergot and the Salem Witchcraft Affair,” 355–357.

Trials (1999). However, Hall conceded that Carlson may have come closest to discovering the cause of the witch trials because she had focused on physiological symptoms rather than the impact of a Puritan worldview.³⁴ Hall supported Carlson's argument that the accusing girls had been infected by an outbreak of the disease *encephalitis lethargica* (also known as the "sleeping sickness"). During World War I, *encephalitis lethargica* would result in an epidemic in Europe that Carlson called the "Forgotten Pandemic."³⁵ Hall, Carlson, and Matossian all agreed that a scientific explanation was the best way to explain the witch hunts.

V. Implications of Culture and Politics

Other historians in the late twentieth century focused on Salem's cultural background. Elaine Breslaw taught American history for over fifty years and studied early colonial America and witchcraft. In her 1997 article, "Tituba's Confession: The Multicultural Dimensions of the 1692 Salem Witch-Hunt," she argued that the multiethnic facets of the enslaved American Indian woman Tituba caused her to be the first of the accused to confess to witchcraft.³⁶ Breslaw believed that Tituba's background made her confession believable because her culture was already "associated with demonic power."³⁷ Thus, Breslaw's argument connected ethnicity and culture to the Puritan worldview. Tituba is a controversial figure in the debate on the witch trials and has usually been blamed for bewitching or tricking the girls into hysterics. Breslaw claimed that Tituba's confession "supplied the evidence of a satanic presence legally necessary to launch a witch hunt."³⁸ She utilized excerpts from historians like Karlsen and Nissenbaum to back up her hypothesis, mined court records and primary source testimonies, and analyzed the institution of Barbados slavery to create a well-rounded image of Tituba.³⁹ Although Barlow's article focuses on Tituba, it is a worthwhile contribution to this historiographical debate because Tituba's story is often sidelined. Historians who focus on the socio-political, economic, or feminist aspects of the witch trials often neglect the ethnic-cultural factors, which is why Breslaw's writing is so significant.

Just as Breslaw had proposed that culture had affected the outcome of the trials, Gretchen A. Adams, a professor of U.S. history at Texas Tech University, believed that America transformed the events of Salem into a universal metaphor for persecution. In a 2003 article "The Specter of Salem in American Culture," Adams described how the Salem witch trials are ingrained in the collective

³⁴ Michael G. Hall, review of *A Fever in Salem: A New Interpretation of the New England Witch Trials*, by Laurie Winn Carlson, *The American Historical Review* 92, no. 1 (2001): 172-173.

³⁵ Hall, review of *Fever in Salem*, 173.

³⁶ Elaine G. Breslaw, "Tituba's Confession: The Multicultural Dimensions of the 1692 Salem Witch-Hunt," *Ethnohistory* 44, no. 3 (1997): 535-556.

³⁷ Breslaw, "Tituba's Confession," 536.

³⁸ Breslaw, "Tituba's Confession," 536.

³⁹ Breslaw, "Tituba's Confession," 535-556.

memory of Americans as a warning against aggression and persecution.⁴⁰ Collective memory is a shared interpretation of events that is especially vulnerable to prejudice and stereotypes. Adams mentioned that historians like Edmund Morgan had shown parallels between the Red Scares of the 1920s and 1950s and the witch hunts of 1692–1693. Going further back, she explained that Salem had been used by Southerners in the 1850s sectional crisis to denounce the aggression of the North and in the Civil War by the Northern press to “marginalize the most radical factions of the abolition forces.”⁴¹ The use of the witch trials as a tool for political manipulation is like Jan Machielsen’s argument that a historian’s analysis of Salem is a “mirror” reflecting a person’s own worldview. Machielsen (whose perspective is addressed further below) considers each analysis of Salem as such a “mirror” because it reflects personal prejudices, worldviews, and fears.⁴² Adams argued that the Salem witch hunts have become a “universally familiar shorthand for the costs of sliding backward into a world of irrationality and superstition.”⁴³ Her warning against irrationality foreshadowed Sarah Rivett’s 2008 position that the analysis of the trials needs to be grounded in reason for historians to fully understand them.⁴⁴

In more recent years, historians have reverted to focusing on the centrality of Puritanism to the Salem witch trials. Tony Fels is a professor of religious history at the University of San Francisco, and Jan Machielsen is a historian of early modern history at Cardiff University. Machielsen’s area of expertise is witchcraft and its relationship to religion and intellectual movements. In 2018, Machielsen’s article “J’accuse” reviewed Tony Fels’s monograph, *Switching Sides: How a Generation of Historians Lost Sympathy for the Victims of the Salem Witch Hunt* (2018). In this work, Fels had denounced post-1960 historians who were adherents of the New Left movement because, according to Fels, they spent too much time trying to understand and sympathize with the accusers.⁴⁵ The New Left movement of the 1960s and 1970s had focused on social issues such as political rights and gender roles. It is interesting to note that Fels’s argument, namely, that the witch hunts were “rooted in a hateful Puritan ideology,” resembled the view of historians like Starkey in the 1950s.⁴⁶ Fels’s support of the accused also reflected the arguments of historians like Rowley.

⁴⁰ Gretchen A. Adams, “The Specter of Salem in American Culture,” *OAH Magazine of History* 17, no. 4 (July 2003): 24–27.

⁴¹ Adams, “Specter of Salem,” 26.

⁴² Jan Machielsen, “J’accuse,” *The Times Literary Supplement*, no. 6021 (August 2018): 42.

⁴³ Adams, “Specter of Salem,” 24.

⁴⁴ Sarah Rivett, “Our Salem, Our Selves,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 65, no. 3 (July 2008): 495–502.

⁴⁵ Machielsen, “J’accuse,” 42–43.

⁴⁶ Morgan, review of *Devil in Massachusetts*, 616–617.

For the most part, historians in the twenty-first century now seem to be focused on making the events of Salem as rational as possible. In a 2008 article, "Our Salem, Our Selves," Sarah Rivett, a professor of American Culture Studies at Washington University in St. Louis, uses an interdisciplinary approach to change the view of the Salem witch trials from an irrational event to a rational one.⁴⁷ Rivett predicts that future scholarship on Salem will continue to use a "pattern of redaction, rationalization, and explanation."⁴⁸ This reflects a very scientific view of history and closely resembles the scientific method. Her article is revealing because it explains the relationship between Lockean epistemology and the emergence of empiricism as it affected the witch hunts. Rivett explains that seventeenth-century philosophers like Bacon and Locke "ensconced their empirical model in uncertainty" and therefore tied together the visible and invisible realms.⁴⁹ Spectral evidence was legal during the Salem witch trials, and it is one of the most frustrating parts for historians who are studying Salem. Spectral evidence is no longer allowed in a court of law because it is testimony based on the visions of ghosts. However, Rivett claims that the allowance of spectral evidence in the trials was an attempt by empiricists to "bring evidence from the invisible world into the visible."⁵⁰ Despite its shortcomings, "the admission of spectral evidence started as a science."⁵¹ While 1692–1693 predated the Enlightenment, it appears that some of the ideas of seventeenth-century philosophers had already taken root in colonial America.

Conclusion

Historians have explored many theories to explain why the accusations of witchcraft in 1692–1693 resulted in the deaths of twenty individuals, and they have most commonly focused on the effects of Puritanism. I find it interesting that Rowley in 1944 and Fels in 2018 are almost seventy-five years apart, yet they both agree that Puritanism was the driving cause of the witch hunts. Whether it was the belief in the devil or the repressive Puritan worldview, I agree that religion and culture did influence the outcome. Historians have also searched for a scientific explanation of what happened in Salem. Although their respective attempts are well researched, I disagree that ergot or *encephalitis lethargica* was to blame. It seems to me that the best explanation to date is Carol Karlsen's position that women inheriting property were considered a threat to the status quo in colonial New England. Karlsen has shown why a patriarchal society built on strict Puritan beliefs reacted so severely to women who stepped outside of accepted inheritance laws. Not only does Karlsen's cross-disciplinary approach reveal why inheriting

⁴⁷ Rivett, "Our Salem, Our Selves," 495–502.

⁴⁸ Rivett, "Our Salem, Our Selves," 496.

⁴⁹ Rivett, "Our Salem, Our Selves," 497.

⁵⁰ Rivett, "Our Salem, Our Selves," 497.

⁵¹ Rivett, "Our Salem, Our Selves," 500.

women were targeted, it also provides a rationale how accusations of witchcraft served as political tools to control the status quo. Perhaps no one will ever know why the Salem witch trials happened, but the lens through which historians view 1692–1693 will continue to reflect how society is evolving.

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