
THE GREAT EUROPEAN WITCH-HUNT

The period of the religious wars witnessed a startling increase in the phenomenon of witch-hunting, whose prior history was long but sporadic. "A witch," according to Chief Justice Coke of England, "was a person who hath conference with the Devil to consult with him or to do some act." This definition by the highest legal authority in England demonstrates that educated people, as well as the ignorant, believed in witches. Belief in witches – individuals who could mysteriously injure other people, for instance by causing them to become blind or impotent, and who could harm animals, for example by preventing cows from giving milk – dates back to the dawn of time. For centuries tales had circulated about old women who made nocturnal travels on greased broomsticks to "sabbats," or assemblies of witches, where they participated in sexual orgies and feasted on the flesh of infants. In the popular imagination witches had definite characteristics: the vast majority were married women or widows between fifty and seventy years old, crippled or bent with age, with pockmarked skin; they often practiced midwifery or folk medicine, and most had sharp tongues and were quick to scold.

In the sixteenth century religious reformers' extreme notions of the devil's powers, and the insecurity created by the religious wars, contributed to the growth of belief in witches. The idea developed that witches made pacts with the devil in return

for the power to work mischief on their enemies. Since pacts with the devil meant the renunciation of God, witchcraft was considered heresy, and all religions persecuted it.

Fear of witches took a terrible toll of innocent lives in parts of Europe. In southwestern Germany 3,229 witches were executed between 1561 and 1670, most by burning. The communities of the Swiss Confederation tried 8,888 persons between 1470 and 1700 and ex-

ecuted 5,417 of them as witches. In all the centuries before 1500 witches in England had been suspected of causing perhaps "three deaths, a broken leg, several destructive storms and some bewitched genitals." Yet between 1559 and 1736 witches were thought to have caused thousands of deaths, and in that period almost 1,000 witches were executed in England.¹⁵

Historians and anthropologists have offered a variety of explanations for the great European witch-hunt. Some scholars maintain that charges of witchcraft were a means of accounting for inexplicable misfortunes. Just as the English in the fifteenth century had blamed their military failures in France on Joan of Arc's sorcery, so in the seventeenth century the English Royal College of Physicians attributed undiagnosable illnesses to witchcraft. Some scholars hold that in small communities, which typically insisted on strict social conformity, charges of witchcraft were a means of attacking and eliminating the nonconformist; witches, in other words, served the collective need for scapegoats. The evidence of witches' trials, some writers suggest, shows that women were not accused because they harmed or threatened their neighbors; rather, their communities believed such women worshiped the devil, engaged in wild sexual activities with him, and ate infants. Other scholars argue the exact opposite:

that people were tried and executed as witches because their neighbors feared their evil powers. Finally, there is the theory that the unbridled sexuality of which witches were accused was a psychological projection on the part of their accusers, resulting from Christianity's repression of sexuality. The reasons for the persecution of witches probably varied from place to place. Perhaps witches, symbolizing unacceptable ideas or practices, were "victims of society's constant pressure towards intellectual conformity."¹⁶

The Lesson of Salem

After 300 years, people are still fascinated by the notorious Puritan witch hunts—maybe because history keeps repeating itself

girls was seized with fits. Their families were bewildered: the girls raved and fell into convulsions; one of them ran around on all fours and barked. Dr. William Griggs was called in and made his diagnosis: the "evil hand" was upon them.

Fits identified as satanic possession had broken out among adolescent girls at earlier times in New England. Often their distress was traced to local women who, it was said, had entered into a compact with the Devil and were now recruiting new witches by tormenting the innocent until they suc-

Jacobs, an old man whose servant girl one of the afflicted, thought the whole lot of them were "bitch witches" and said so was hanged in August. Susannah Mason was named, but that surprised nobody; people had been calling her a witch for years. Six or seven years earlier, Barnard Peabody testified, he had been lying in bed at night when Martin appeared at his window and jumped into his room; she then lay down upon him and prevented him from moving for nearly two hours. Others had similar tales; Martin was hanged in July. Nor was there much doubt about Dorcas Good, who was arrested soon after her mother, Sarah, was jailed. The afflicted girls cried out that Dorcas was biting and pinching them, although the attacks were invisible to everyone else, the girls had the bite marks to prove it. Dorcas was jailed with the others and a special set of chains was made for her. She was only 5, and the regular shackles were too big.

All along, there were townspeople who had misgivings about what was happening. Several came to the defense of some of the accused citizens, and others testified that they had heard an afflicted girl saying she had made at least one accusation "for sport." But the machinery seemed unstoppable. If a prisoner was released or a jury decided to acquit someone, the girls went into such shrieking torments that the court quickly reversed itself.

Spectral evidence: Finally, in October, the governor of Massachusetts stepped in. To many citizens "of good reputation" had been accused, he wrote, including his own wife. What's more, clergy in both Boston and New York were expressing dismay over the witch trials, especially the reliance on "spectral" evidence, such as the sight of the Devil whispering in Martha Carrier's ear—otherworldly evidence invisible to everyone but the person testifying. The governor ruled out the use of spectral evidence, making it virtually impossible to convict any more of the accused. That fall the witch craze effectively ended and by spring the last prisoners had been acquitted.

What really happened in Salem? Scholars have been trying to understand the events of 1692 for three centuries. Even while the witch hunt was in progress, Deodat Lawson, a former minister at Salem Village, made a visit to his old parish and published the equivalent of a quickie paperback describing "the Mysterious Assaults from Hell" he had witnessed there. Like everyone else in Salem—in fact, like everyone else in colonial New England—he believed in witches, though he was powerless to understand why or whether they were truly on the loose in Salem.

Today many scholars believe it was clinical hysteria that set off the girls in Tituba's kitchen. Fits, convulsions, vocal outbursts,

A Modest Enquiry
Into the Nature of
Witchcraft,

AND

How Persons Guilty of that Crime
may be *Convicted*: And the means
used for their Discovery Discussed,
both *Negatively* and *Affirmatively*,
according to *SCRIPTURE* and
EXPERIENCE.

By **John Hale,**
Pastor of the Church of Christ in *Beverly,*
Anno Domini 1697.

*When they say unto you, seek unto them that have Familiar Spirits and unto Wizards, that prophesy, To the Law and to the Testimony; if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them, Isaiah VIII. 19, 20.
That which I see not teach thou me, Job 34 32.*

BOSTON in N. E.
Printed by B. Green, and J. Allen, for
Benjamin Elliot under the Town House: 1702

PHOTOS COURTESY ESSEX INSTITUTE, SALEM

cumbed. So the adults in Salem Village began pressing the girls with questions: "Who torments you? Who torments you?" Finally they named three women—Tituba, Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne—all of them easily recognizable as Satan's handmaidens. Tituba was seen as a shameless pagan, Good was a poor beggar given to muttering angrily as she went from house to house and Osborne was known to have lived with her second husband before they were married. The three were arrested and jailed, but the girls' torments did not cease. On the contrary, fits were spreading like smallpox; dozens more girls and young women went into violent contortions, flailing, kicking and uttering names.

And the names! Rebecca Nurse was 71, the pious and beloved matriarch of a large family; she was hanged in July. George

feelings of being pinched and bitten—all of these symptoms have been witnessed and described, most often in young women, for centuries. Sometimes the seizures have been attributed to Satan, other times to God, but ever since Freud weighed in, hysteria has been traced to the unconscious. As Dr. Richard Pohl, of Salem Hospital, told a Tercentenary symposium, hysteria "can mimic all the physical diseases known to man," and occurs when repressed thoughts and emotions burst forth and take over the

body. Life could be dreary for girls in 17th-century Salem: their place was home and their duty was obedience; many were illiterate, and there were few outlets for a youthful imagination except in the grim lessons of Puritan theology. Dabbling in magic in the reverend's own kitchen would have been wonderfully scary, perhaps enough to release psychic demons lurking since childhood.

Despite the fact that young girls made the accusations, it was the adults who

lodged formal charges against their neighbors and provided most of the testimony. Historians have long believed that local feuds and property disputes were behind many of the accusations, and in "Salem Possessed" (1974), Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum uncovered patterns of social and civic antagonism that made the community fertile ground for a witch hunt. One of the young ringleaders was 12-year-old Ann Putnam, whose older male relatives lodged many of the complaints. The Put-

nams, Salem Village landowners whose wealth and power were in decline, pursued witches with vigor, apparently in an effort to muster new political strength. Working quietly in opposition to the witch trials were the Porters, who represented the more sophisticated merchant class that would soon reign in Salem Town. When 39 courageous townspeople signed a petition in support of Rebecca Nurse, the pious old woman accused by Ann Putnam and her mother, the name Porter was at the top of the list. The petition failed, but in 1706 Ann Putnam stood up in church on a hot August day and begged to be forgiven. She had suffered, she said, "a great delusion of Satan."

Old scolds: More recently, scholars have begun to investigate the most obvious fact of all about the Salem witches: most were women. Historian Carol Karlsen analyzed New England witchery in "The Devil in the Shape of a Woman" (1987) and found that many of the accused women had indeed committed crimes—against femininity. Some engaged in business; some did not attend church; some were nasty old scolds. Even more important, they tended to be over 40 and without sons or brothers. Hence they stood to inherit property, either from their husbands or fathers. Puritan custom tended to discourage such legacies, since the very notion of an independently wealthy woman was an affront to the social order. Susannah Martin had been to court numerous times trying to

overturn her father's will, which all but disinherited her and seemed a blatant forgery. Dated 20 years before his death, the will was witnessed by a woman who would have been a child at the time, and who signed her future married name. The court consistently ruled against Martin. A year after her father's death, she faced her first arrest warrant for witchcraft.

Susannah Martin and women like her scared people, so much so that the fear was almost impossible to dislodge. Perhaps the best way to identify a witch hunt, today or 300 years ago, is to look for fear, because fear spawns witches. For every Salem citizen who was imprisoned in chains, another witch was unmasked, then another and another, or so their terrified and bewildered neighbors believed. Nothing could stop the infestation—except, finally, the will to see clearly, beyond prejudice. Late in the fall of 1692, as the witch craze was fading, several of the afflicted girls were traveling through nearby Ipswich when they encountered an old woman on a bridge. A witch! Instantly they fell into fits. But Ipswich was not on the lookout for witches; it didn't want them. Nobody begged the girls for names or particulars, so they picked themselves up and continued on their way. The witch hunt was over—until another time, and another Salem.

Laura Shapiro

They Called It Witchcraft

By Mary Beth Norton

In 17th-century New England, almost everyone believed in witches. Struggling to survive in a vast and sometimes unforgiving land, America's earliest settlers understood themselves to be surrounded by an inscrutable universe filled with invisible spirits — both benevolent and evil — that affected their lives. They often attributed the sudden illness of a child, a household disaster or a financial setback to a witch's curse. The belief in witchcraft was, at bottom, an attempt to make sense of the unknown.

While witchcraft was often feared, it was punished only infrequently. In the first 70 years of the New England settlements, about 100 people were formally charged with being witches; fewer than two dozen were convicted and fewer still were executed.

Then came 1692. In January of that year, two young girls living in the household of the Rev. Samuel Parris of Salem Village began experiencing strange fits. The doctor identified witchcraft as the cause. After weeks of questioning, the girls named Tituba, Parris's female Indian slave, and two local women as the witches who were tormenting them.

Judging by previous incidents, one would have expected the episode to end there. But it didn't. Other young Salem women began to suffer fits as well. Before the crisis ended, 19 people formally accused others of afflicting them, 54 residents of Essex County confessed to being witches and nearly 150 people were charged with consorting with the Devil. What led to this remarkable outcome?

Traditionally, historians have argued that the witchcraft crisis resulted from factionalism in Salem Village, deliberate faking, or possibly the ingestion of hallucinogens by the afflicted. I believe another force was at work. The events in Salem were precipitated by a conflict with the Indians on the northeastern frontier, the most

significant surge of violence in the region in nearly 40 years.

In two little-known wars, fought largely in Maine between 1675-1678 and 1688-1699, English settlers suffered devastating losses at the hands of the Wabanaki Indians and their French allies. Most of Maine was abandoned twice, in 1676 and 1690, not to be resettled thereafter for decades.

The key afflicted accusers in the Salem crisis were frontier refugees whose families had been wiped out in the wars. These young women said they saw the Devil in the shape of an

Were the Salem trials a response to the trauma of war?

Indian. In testimony, they accused the witches' reputed ringleader — the Rev. George Burroughs, formerly pastor of Salem Village and of several Maine parishes — of bewitching the soldiers sent to fight the Wabanakis.

It is worth noting that while Tituba, one of the first people accused of witchcraft, has traditionally been portrayed as a black or mulatto woman from Barbados, that was not the case. All evidence points to her being an American Indian. Her contemporaries uniformly referred to her as Indian. In addition, most slaves in Massachusetts at the time were indigenous to North America — transported from Spanish missions in Florida and the Georgia sea islands.

To the Puritan settlers, who believed themselves to be God's chosen people, witchcraft explained why they were losing the war so badly. Their Indian enemies had the Devil on their side. His diabolical assistance allowed them to lay waste to frontier settlements — and then disappear.

In late summer, some prominent New Englanders began to criticize the witch prosecutions. In response to the dissent, Gov. William Phips of Massachusetts in October dissolved the special court he had established to handle the trials. But before he stopped the legal process, 19 people (14 women, five men) had been hanged. Another

man was crushed to death by stones for refusing to enter a plea and thereby acknowledge the court's authority over him. Eight more of the accused had been convicted but not yet hanged; they survived because Phips reprieved them several months later.

The governor still believed in witches, but he concluded that much of the spectral evidence presented at the trials had been "the Devil's testimony" and so could not be trusted. Visions of witches had diabolical, not divine, origins. That made the identification of the spectral torturers suspect, for the Devil could appear in the shapes of innocent men and women. Accordingly, when the trials resumed in 1693 in the regular Massachusetts courts, the judges no longer accepted spectral evidence. Yet juries still convicted three more of the accused. Phips reprieved them, too.

The war with the Indians continued for six more years, though sporadically. Slowly, northern New Englanders began to feel more secure. And they soon regretted the events of 1692. Within five years, one judge and 12 jurors formally apologized as the colony declared a day of fasting and prayer to atone for the injustices that had been committed. In 1711, the state compensated the families of the victims. And last year, more than three centuries after early Americans reacted to an external threat by lashing out irrationally, the convicted were cleared by name in a Massachusetts statute. It's a story worth remembering — and not just on Halloween. □

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