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Shifting Perspectives on the Salem Witches

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IT MAY well be that we have expended more ink on the witchcraft episode in tiny Salem Village in 1692 than on any other single event in early American history. But scholars and students alike continue to be intrigued by the Salem witches, especially in this time of enthusiasm for the occult. As a result a number of new and imaginative interpretations have appeared in the last decade in which historians have borrowed theories from other disciplines. Anthropologists in particular have made considerable headway in their studies of belief in witches as a psycho-social factor among Africans, American Indians, and other twentieth-century societies, and their findings have been applied profitably to the study of witchcraft in earlier societies. Historians of early modern European witchcraft, for example, have made significant progress recently using this approach.¹ Similarly,

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¹Three excellent studies of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European witchcraft have appeared recently: Alan Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England: A Regional and Comparative Study* (New York, 1970); Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York, 1971); H. C. Erik Midelfort, *Witch Hunting in Southwestern Germany, 1562-1684: The Social and Intellectual Foundations* (Stanford, 1972).

recent histories of the witch frenzy at Salem have drawn upon anthropological and psychological concepts to portray witchcraft as a factor of social behavior in seventeenth-century Massachusetts.

Thus, for both teachers and researchers, it may be useful to review what has been written about the Salem witches and to summarize some of the findings and theories about witchcraft in other societies that can be related to the study of the Salem witch episode.

The facts of the episode are simple enough.² In Salem Village, a "suburb" about two miles outside Salem, several girls gathered regularly to listen to tales of the supernatural from a West Indian Negress, Tituba. In the spring of 1691 two of the girls began to behave oddly and the local doctor was called. Unable to explain their behavior, he suggested they were afflicted by "an evil hand." It was assumed they were bewitched, and the Bible was quite clear on how to deal with witches: "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live."³ Magistrates were summoned to examine the afflicted and in the public hearing that followed the girls screamed and went through contortions as they pointed out their tormentors among the townspeople. A number of other girls quickly joined the original group and all accused various persons from the surrounding area of bewitching them. A sense of hysteria soon gripped the entire region. As the witch craze spread a special court was established to deal with the accused. Before the court adjourned and the hysteria died down in the autumn of 1692, nineteen persons and two dogs had been hanged and one old man, Giles Corey, had been pressed to death with rocks in an attempt to make him answer his felony indictment. Eight others were under sentence of death, fifty awaited sentence, and 150 were in jail waiting trial.

This was the most important outbreak of witchcraft in British America, and scholars ever since have been attempting to establish who to blame for it. The first observers, of course, put the blame on the devil. Fear had spread through troubled Massachusetts that the end of the world would come with the end of the seventeenth century. Cotton Mather, respected Puritan cleric and the first historian of Salem witchcraft, echoed the common belief in his *Wonders of the Invisible World* in 1692. He maintained that an "army of devils is horribly broke

²The facts of the Salem witchcraft accusations and trials are rather fully developed in Charles W. Upham's two-volume study, *Salem Witchcraft*, which was originally published at Boston in 1867 (New York, 1969). A more recent account that offers an insightful interpretation as well as a summary of the essential facts is Chadwick Hansen, *Witchcraft at Salem* (New York, 1969). Many of the original documents regarding the Salem witch episode are available in *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases, 1648-1706*, edited by George Lincoln Burr (New York, 1914) and *Records of Salem Witchcraft* (2 vols.; Roxbury, Massachusetts, 1864).

³Exodus, xxii, 18.

in upon the place which is the centre . . . of our English settlements.”⁴ For Mather, as for most people in Massachusetts, the powers of the devil were real enough, and they fully believed that he had broken into their holy community with the aid of possessed mortals.

Robert Calef, a contemporary who disliked Mather, insisted that Mather and his fellow ministers had encouraged the witch mania as part of an effort to drive the people of Massachusetts back to the church.⁵ This view that the witchcraft outbreak was the work of misguided Puritan ministers caught on, and for more than two and a half centuries Cotton Mather and the clergy bore the guilt of the Salem witch frenzy. For example, in 1867 Charles W. Upham wrote that Mather labored to bring about the witch craze in order to “increase his own influence over an infatuated people” by convincing them that he could “vanquish evil spirits” and “hold Satan himself in chains by his prayers and piety.”⁶ But in 1956 Samuel Eliot Morison rescued Mather and the other ministers from these charges. Morison found that Mather had kept a cool head in dealing with the witches and spoke out against excesses during the trials, but Robert Calef, who “had it in for” Mather, “tied a tin can to him after the frenzy was over; and it has rattled and banged” through the pages of history ever since.⁷

Vernon L. Parrington judged the witchcraft episode in 1927 and laid the blame not on the Puritan clergy but on Puritanism. He saw Massachusetts as a stifling environment “with every unfamiliar idea likely to be seized upon as evidence of the devil’s wiles.” The witch mania at Salem “was only a dramatic aftermath of a generation of repressions and inhibitions,” according to Parrington, “the logical outcome of the long policy of repression, that had hanged Quakers and destroyed independent thought, in its attempt to imprison the natural man in a straitjacket of Puritan righteousness.”⁸

Others have blamed the pubescent girls who made the charges of witchcraft. Julian Franklyn suggests that the children engaged in a conscious fraud and the overzealous ministers must share the blame for encouraging the children by taking them seriously. The girls “found themselves mistresses of a gratifying situation whereby they held the

⁴ Cotton Mather, *Wonders of the Invisible World* (Boston, 1692), 15.

⁵ Robert Calef, *More Wonders of the Invisible World*, originally published in London, 1700, reprinted in Samuel G. Drake (ed.), *The Witchcraft Delusion in New England* (Roxbury, 1866), vols. II, III.

⁶ Upham, *Salem Witchcraft*, II, 367-69.

⁷ Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Intellectual Life of Colonial New England* (New York, 1956), 259. More recently Chadwick Hansen has also seen Mather as a restraining influence in the trials who has been mistreated by Calef and other historians. Hansen, *Witchcraft at Salem*, 168-85.

⁸ Vernon L. Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought: The Colonial Mind, 1620-1800* (New York, 1927), 86.

whole adult world of their environment at their mercy." And the children who were the center of attention at the special court, according to Franklyn, were "only too glad to wield the power thus conferred upon them."⁹ Rossell Hope Robbins agrees that the vicious girls "knew exactly what they were doing." Their testimony was given in "a state of utter delinquency, causing death without rhyme or reason, for sport."¹⁰ Similarly, Ronald Seth's study of witchcraft in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England also found that the children, who were the regular accusers of witches, were engaged in a conscious fraud. Having fantastic imaginations, they faked their attacks, according to Seth, and the most incredible thing is that men "could accept the charades of naughty boys and girls, and taking the figments of their childish fantasy worlds as acceptable truths, could send old women and men to their deaths on the gallows."¹¹

Morison, too, puts a good deal of the blame on the afflicted girls. "Finding themselves the object of unusual attention, and with the exhibitionism natural to young girls," he argues, they "persisted in their accusations for fear of being found out; and a state of neurosis developed similar to that of the shell-shocked soldier torn between fear of death and fear of disgrace." He thinks that "a good spanking administered to the younger girls, and lovers provided for the older ones" might have brought a quick end to the whole affair.¹²

Recently one scholar has taken an entirely new approach to the Salem witch affair. Most historians since Cotton Mather's day have maintained that no witchcraft was practiced in Massachusetts and that the Salem witch trials were brought about by a group of attention-seeking girls or a clergy that stirred the populace into a state of hysteria in order to regain their former power. But Chadwick Hansen takes a fresh approach in his 1969 study of *Witchcraft at Salem*. In contrast to his predecessors, he holds that witchcraft *was* practiced in Massachusetts and that there were people who thought themselves witches and who applied their craft, among them Bridget Bishop, "Mammy" Redd, and the slave Candy.¹³

Hansen is not arguing that the devil was actually operating through his possessed human instruments in Salem, but that the people

⁹ Julian Franklyn, *Death by Enchantment: An Examination of Ancient and Modern Witchcraft* (New York, 1971), 60, 62.

¹⁰ Rossell Hope Robbins, *The Encyclopedia of Witchcraft and Demonology* (New York, 1959), 435.

¹¹ Ronald Seth, *Children Against Witches* (New York, 1969), 180.

¹² Morison, *The Intellectual Life of Colonial New England*, 259-60.

¹³ Hansen, *Witchcraft at Salem*, 64-86. H. C. Erik Midelfort has summarized the evidence regarding "practicing" witches in Europe in his essay, "Were There Really Witches," in Robert M. Kingdon (ed.), *Transition and Revolution: Problems and Issues of European Renaissance and Reformation History* (Minneapolis, 1974), 189-205.

believed he was and that amounted to the same thing for them. Thus the “possessed” girls were afflicted because of their belief in the devil and his powers. In explaining the girls’ odd behavior, Hansen relies on twentieth-century medical and psychiatric knowledge and concludes that the fits and contortions were genuine and that the “afflicted” were suffering from hysteria. He cites numerous examples of symptoms that today would lead to a diagnosis of hysteria but that in the seventeenth century led to a diagnosis of demonic possession. He concludes that the behavior of the victims was not fraudulent but pathological. The girls were hysterical, and in the clinical rather than the popular sense of that term.¹⁴

Hansen notes that the general populace of Massachusetts did reach a state of excitement, inaccurately called “mass hysteria,” but argues that this was due to the popular fear of witchcraft rather than to the preachings of the clergy. In fact, from beginning to end, the clergy were the chief opponents of the events at Salem, especially of the excesses of the special court. Hansen agrees with Morison that Cotton Mather in particular was anything but the wild-eyed fanatic of tradition.¹⁵

Thus one cannot fully understand any aspect of the events at Salem, Hansen maintains, without recognizing the genuine power of witchcraft in a society that believes in it. “The failure to appreciate this fact,” he concludes, “has vitiated all previous accounts of witchcraft at Salem.”¹⁶

Then who was to blame for the witch craze? The devil? Cotton Mather and the ministers? Repressive Puritanism? The accusing girls engaged in a conscious fraud? Or were there practicing witches who caused a stir among the people of Salem? Perhaps more than one of these views is correct. But what seems more important than establishing who was responsible for the witch hunt at Salem is establishing why the Massachusetts community listened to the accusations of witchcraft and reacted to them so vigorously. The charges of witchcraft among a people who believed in the power of witches seem less important than the fact that the accusations were unusually strong in 1691-92 and that they brought an unprecedented reaction from the community. Why? Was there something that made Massachusetts ripe for a witch hunt in the early 1690’s?

Why are accusations of witchcraft more intense at one time than another? What social functions are performed by witchcraft? Scholars have asked these questions, especially anthropologists in their work on witchcraft beliefs among Africans, American Indians, and other twentieth-century people. But until recently historians have been

¹⁴Hansen, *Witchcraft at Salem*, x, 15-17, 66-70, 81, 90-92, 112, 173.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 168-85.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, xv.

reluctant to accept colonial American witchcraft as anything but a hoax, a twisted fraud that must be blamed on someone. The historians of Salem witchcraft have been satisfied with judging who was "guilty" for the frenzy, rather than studying the outbreak of witch accusations and prosecutions as a reflection of the New England mind and a function of society.

When the historian does accept belief in witchcraft as reality for the people of Massachusetts, however, the field of study is broadened and becomes more rewarding in terms of understanding their society. A good deal of imagination is needed, since few scholars today personally believe in witchery, but Salem witchcraft can be examined in the ways that anthropologists have studied present-day societies where witchcraft beliefs are held. In these societies witchcraft cannot be dismissed as illogical or nonsensical. It is one of a series of theories of causation and of what is "real," and it is just as logical and consistent for them as our own concepts of reality are for us.

There are a number of theories that anthropologists have used in their studies of witchcraft which can be helpful to the student of Salem witchcraft. These theories fall into three general models: (a) witchcraft serves as a way to explain life's misfortunes; (b) witchcraft operates as a form of social control; and (c) witchcraft functions as a release of social tension.¹⁷

In every society the misfortunes of life must be explained. In some societies disturbing events that cannot be explained in more conventional ways can be rationalized as the work of witches. Thus, belief in witches can be a functional element in the total system of thought that gives coherent, logical explanations for unpleasant experiences, explanations that satisfy the believer or bring at least partial relief.

This approach was pioneered by anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard in his 1937 study of the Azande of Central Africa. He found that witchcraft is an integral part of the Azande thought system which serves an important function in explaining death and other misfortunes.¹⁸ Keith H. Basso has found the same to be true of the Western Apache of the American Southwest for whom witchcraft gives a satisfying reason for sudden sickness or death without any visible cause.¹⁹

¹⁷ Summaries of current anthropological approaches to the study of witchcraft appear in Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*, 240-52, and Keith H. Basso, *Western Apache Witchcraft*, Anthropological Papers of the University of Arizona, No. 15 (Tucson, 1969), 59-60.

¹⁸ E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic Among the Azande* (Oxford, 1937), chaps. iv and vi.

¹⁹ Basso, *Western Apache Witchcraft*, 60.

Another anthropologist, T. O. Beidelman, has found that the Kaguru of East Africa believe witches cause misfortunes, including "most illness, death, miscarriages, sterility, difficult childbirths, poor crops, sickly livestock and poultry, loss of articles, bad luck in hunting, and sometimes even lack of rain."²⁰ Similarly, for the Gisu of Uganda witchcraft is an acceptable excuse for failure,²¹ while among the Gusii of Kenya death, disease and economic disaster are explained as the work of witches.²² And in his study of the troubled Cewa of northern Rhodesia, M. G. Marwick learned that sorcery is blamed for more than half of all deaths in the society.²³

Hence, witchcraft can serve as an adjustive vehicle for coping with the unpleasant fortunes of life, a means to explain the causes of events that provoke anxiety and grief. These findings by anthropologists may also be helpful in understanding how people in past societies explained unpleasant events in their lives. Keith Thomas, for example, has recently established that witchcraft functioned as an explanation for sickness, death, poverty, and even military failure in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England,²⁴ and it may have had a similar function in New England. For example, additional study may reveal more on the role of Massachusetts witchcraft as an extension of medical diagnosis and treatment.

Anthropologists have also found that witchcraft often functions as a check on anti-social behavior. That is, both the fear of becoming witches and the fear of being accused of being a witch can encourage adherence to cultural norms. Basso found that the Western Apache, for example, refrain from outward displays of hostility, extreme accumulations of wealth, and unsanctioned sexual liaisons out of fear of being accused of practicing witchcraft. Young people care for the aged for the same reason.²⁵ Beidelman found that the Kaguru of Tanganyika seek constant approval by their relatives and neighbors to avoid accusations of witchcraft,²⁶ and Jean La Fontaine draws similar conclusions about the function of witch beliefs among the Gisu:

In Bugisu the eccentric is branded as a witch, and fear of being thought a witch is the sanction which enforces conformity. Children grow up with the realization that the stigma of nonconformity is dangerous. . . . The successful

²⁰ T. O. Beidelman, "Witchcraft in Ukaguru," in John Middleton and E. H. Winter (eds.), *Witchcraft and Sorcery in East Africa* (New York, 1963), 63.

²¹ Jean La Fontaine, "Witchcraft in Bugisu," in *ibid.*, 216.

²² Robert A. Levine, "Witchcraft and Sorcery in a Gusii Community," in *ibid.*, 224.

²³ M. G. Marwick, "The Sociology of Sorcery in a Central African Tribe," *African Studies*, XXII (1963), 1-21.

²⁴ Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 535-41.

²⁵ Basso, *Western Apache Witchcraft*, 62-64.

²⁶ Beidelman, "Witchcraft in Ukaguru," 96-97.

man must be particularly careful to be generous in fulfilling his obligations lest he provoke the envy and jealousy of others or be suspected of having used witchcraft to attain his position. The fear of witchcraft . . . is a warning to individuals to maintain the proper behavior.²⁷

John Beattie has identified the same adjustive social function of witchcraft in Bunyoro,²⁸ and Clyde Kluckhohn has found that both the fear of being bewitched and the fear of being thought a witch tend to enforce conformity among the Navaho.²⁹ J. R. Crawford's study of witchcraft in Rhodesia shows that fear of an accusation of being a witch serves as a sanction against anti-social behavior. He argues that such fear can be manipulated "in much the same manner as allegations of heresy in mediaeval Europe or Communism in modern America."³⁰

Fear of witches may also have functioned to preserve certain social conditions in early modern England. The traditions of charity and poor relief prevalent under the manorial system were breaking down during the Tudor and Stuart period due to rising prices, commercial and agricultural expansion, and population pressures. But, according to Thomas, belief in witchcraft helped to maintain "the traditional obligations of charity and neighbourliness" during this time when other forces were working to weaken them. "The fear of retaliation by witchcraft was a powerful deterrent against breaking the old moral code" which required that one be generous to his neighbors.³¹ Thomas suggests that New England witchcraft may fit this same model; that is, it may have functioned to preserve traditional moral standards among a people fearful of being attacked by witches or of being called witches themselves if they deviated too far from accepted behavior patterns.³²

In his recent examination of witch hunts in southwestern Germany in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, H. C. Erik Midelfort has concluded that some witch trials may have served a social function by "delineating the social thresholds of eccentricity tolerable to society, and registering fear of a socially indigestible group, unmarried women."³³ There appears to have been a significant shift in family patterns in sixteenth-century Germany which saw a marked increase in the number of unmarried women. Midelfort suggests that as the society

²⁷ La Fontaine, "Witchcraft in Bugisu," 217.

²⁸ John Beattie, "Sorcery in Bunyoro," in Middleton and Winter (eds.), *Witchcraft and Sorcery in East Africa*, 49-52.

²⁹ Clyde Kluckhohn, *Navaho Witchcraft* (Boston, 1944), 112-13. Similarly, Donald E. Walker, Jr. has found that sorcery functions as a mechanism of social control in the Nez Perce society. Donald E. Walker, Jr., "Nez Perce Sorcery," *Ethnology*, VI (1967), 94.

³⁰ J. R. Crawford, *Witchcraft and Sorcery in Rhodesia* (London, 1967), 280.

³¹ Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 562-66.

³² *Ibid.*, 567.

³³ Midelfort, *Witch Hunting in Southwestern Germany*, 195.

adjusted to these new patterns the unmarried women were particularly susceptible to charges of witchcraft: "widows and spinsters were most commonly accused of witchcraft, far out of proportion to their numbers in society."³⁴

Interestingly, John Demos, who has recently offered some of the most insightful suggestions regarding the Salem witch trials as a reflection of family and social organization in seventeenth-century Massachusetts, has noted that most of the accused at Salem were middle-aged women who were charged by teen-aged girls, suggesting the possibility of structural conflict and tension resulting from the way lives were arranged within the community. He notes, too, that those accused of being witches at Salem were often known for their anti-social or eccentric behavior.³⁵ The witch trials, therefore, may have been attempts to control social behavior and insure conformity along lines similar to those identified in modern African and American Indian communities and in early modern Europe. A good deal of work remains to be done regarding the dynamics of sex roles in early American society, but there is the possibility that the high percentage of women accused of witchcraft at Salem reflects an adjustive attitude regarding the place of women and a demand for their conformity to traditional norms.

Anthropologists have learned that witchcraft can function not only as a mechanism of social control, but also as an outlet for frustrations, anxiety, and aggressive impulses. By projecting his aggressive impulses onto witches one achieves a degree of relief from his mental stresses.³⁶ More importantly, witchcraft may have a similar adjustive function for an entire community under tension. Accusations of witches may serve to offset conditions of disorganization and restore equilibrium in a society undergoing rapid change. Margaret Mead, for example, argues that it is common for people to project their fear and rage onto human agents if they are shaken by "a period of very deep culture change when the foundations of the universe as they know it appear to be crumbling."³⁷

In his study of modern Rhodesia, Crawford suggests that witchcraft accusations appear to increase during times of insecurity. Thus the increased incidence of allegations of witchcraft in the late 1940's may

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 179-87.

³⁵ John Demos, "Underlying Themes in the Witchcraft of Seventeenth-Century New England," *American Historical Review*, LXXV (1970), 1319.

³⁶ For an outline of this concept see Max Gluckman, *Politics, Law and Ritual in Tribal Society* (Chicago, 1965), chap. vi; M. G. Marwick, *Sorcery in Its Social Setting: A Study of the Northern Rhodesian Cewa* (Manchester, Eng., 1965), 295-96; Kluckhohn, *Navaho Witchcraft*, 76-110.

³⁷ Margaret Mead, "Why We Fear Witches," *Redbook*, CXXXVII (1971), 54.

have been a reflection of the stir caused by the return of Africans who served abroad in the armed forces and came home filled with new ideas. A similar rise in wizardry allegations in 1962 may have been "a reflection of the disturbed state of the country," characterized by political and racial upheaval.³⁸

Kluckhohn has reached the same conclusion regarding the Navaho. By 1875 the forces of the United States had brought the Navaho under total military control at Fort Sumner, and according to Kluckhohn:

Fort Sumner was a major trauma, the full calamity of which is difficult to convey to white readers. A people who had been like a scourge to the Spanish and to other Indians alike was for the first time subjugated. A people who did not understand group captivity and who had been accustomed to move about freely over great spaces was taken captive and held close together within a limited area. . . . A people who had raised and hunted their own food had to depend upon others. . . . Probably no people has ever had a greater shock.³⁹

In this troubled time, destroyed by war, the Navaho society had to undergo complete readjustment. And during the period roughly 1875 to 1890 the Navaho "reached a maximum of suspicion of witchcraft, witchcraft trials and executions, probably also of actual witchcraft practice."⁴⁰ Kenneth M. Stewart reports a similar increase in the incidence of witchcraft among the militaristic Mohave Indians following their defeat by the United States army in 1859,⁴¹ and Keith Basso's work with the Western Apache also suggests that witchcraft functions as a means of adaptation to rapid, disruptive social change.⁴²

Recently a number of historians have drawn upon such findings and have suggested similar conclusions regarding the allegations of witchcraft and trials at Salem. They have begun to ask why, among a people who believed in the powers of witches all along, there was a major outbreak of accusations in 1691-92. Was the date merely accidental or did it reflect a particular time of trauma? Clarence L. Ver Steeg has emphasized the general instability that characterized virtually all of colonial America in the late seventeenth century. He sees evidence of this instability in Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia, Leisler's Rebellion in New York, and the Protestant revolt in Maryland, all coming at roughly the same time, with the equilibrium of society in a

³⁸ Crawford, *Witchcraft and Sorcery in Rhodesia*, 278. Similarly, Richard W. Lieban has speculated on the incidence of sorcery as it relates to the impact of "modernizing" influences in a rural Filipino community in *Cebuano Sorcery: Malign Magic in the Philippines* (Berkeley, 1967), 149-50.

³⁹ Kluckhohn, *Navaho Witchcraft*, 114.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Kenneth M. Stewart, "Witchcraft Among the Mohave Indians," *Ethnology*, XII (1973), 322-23.

⁴² Basso, *Western Apache Witchcraft*, 64.

state of readjustment. And he sees the Salem witch trials as a reflection of this same social tension.⁴³

Massachusetts in particular was in a state of general unrest in the late 1680's and 1690's. The society was fully aware that Puritanism was declining and this religious decay was cause for alarm. People feared God's wrath and the possibility of inroads by the devil's agents. Moreover, in 1684 the Crown revoked the charter of Massachusetts and in 1686 the whole of New England was thrown together under one government in the Dominion of New England. Massachusetts lost much of its traditional self-determination. A royal governor, Sir Edmund Andros, was sent to the colony armed with near dictatorial powers. He challenged the land titles of citizens, recognized the rights of non-Puritan dissenters, and generally reworked the political-religious structure of the colony with a heavy hand. Because of the lost charter, as Ver Steeg notes, "former institutions could not be depended on, either the church or school, or judicial or political systems. Even the protection of individual liberties as experienced in earlier decades was uncertain." With the outbreak of civil war in England in 1688, the people of Massachusetts packed Andros off to the mother country in chains and in 1691 the colony received a new charter. But through this entire period "an air of indecision, of tentativeness, surrounded political affairs," according to Ver Steeg, and the witch mania of 1691-92 was "a symbol of profound changes in the structure and evolution of Massachusetts society."⁴⁴ Other scholars agree that the underlying causes of the witch episode at Salem are to be found in the unusual social tension in Massachusetts. Besides the political and religious unrest, the colony in 1691-92 was torn by factional disputes, the threat of Indian attack, war with the French, high taxes, a severe winter, threats of smallpox, and local squabbles over land claims.⁴⁵

Some of the most imaginative work done so far on the Salem affair is built on theories borrowed from psychologists. Marion L. Starkey, for example, attempted a psychological reconstruction of the Salem witch trials in her 1949 analysis, *The Devil in Massachusetts*. Starkey maintains that the group of accusing girls—the seventeenth-century equivalent to twentieth-century "bobby-soxers"—suffered from hysteria brought on by the tensions of Calvinism and the absence of legitimate outlets for their "natural high spirits." She describes one of the accusers, Mercy Lewis, as a "young paranoid."⁴⁶ These adolescent girls were releasing their aggressions, mainly against older women.

⁴³ Clarence L. Ver Steeg, *The Formative Years, 1607-1763* (New York, 1964), 129-49.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁴⁵ Robbins, *The Encyclopedia of Witchcraft and Demonology*, 429; Morison, *The Intellectual Life of Colonial New England*, 259.

⁴⁶ Marion L. Starkey, *The Devil in Massachusetts: A Modern Enquiry into the Salem Witch Trials* (New York, 1949), 14, 127.

Stress within the Massachusetts society aided the inflation of the girls' accusations until the entire colony was engulfed in hysteria.

Rossell Robbins agrees that the girls engaged in a psychological revolt against the restraints of the older generation. He maintains that they engaged in "defiance of the whole adult world, showing lawlessness, disobedience, flouting of authority, delinquency, to an extent no one in the twentieth century can envision." For example, Elizabeth Parris, "brought up by the strictest of fathers," had the audacity to fling a copy of the Bible across the room in defiance, a highly rebellious act for the daughter of a minister.⁴⁷

The most significant analysis of the Salem witch episode using psychological tools was presented by John Demos in 1970 as an article in the *American Historical Review*. Demos agrees that the young girls may have resented the tight controls of the older generation, especially older women. He found that most of those accused as witches were married or widowed women between the ages of forty-one and sixty. Note that this is in contrast to Midelfort's findings in Germany where mostly unmarried women were accused. Demos suggests that the girls who charged the Salem witches were expressing aggressions spawned by hostilities they harbored from early childhood against their mothers and other women like them.⁴⁸

Demos also found evidence of a generalized oral fixation among the accusers, which brought him to conclude that the children may have suffered some trauma in their early childhood. Their emphasis on oral themes—sucking, biting, eating, breasts, and so on—suggests to Demos "that many New England children were faced with some unspecified but extremely difficult psychic tasks in the first year of life." Repressed in infancy, the children developed aggressive impulses "tied especially closely to the oral mode, and driven underground," only to surface later in the form of aggression toward middle-aged women.⁴⁹ Demos' assertion is reinforced by Margaret Mead's view that the source of witchcraft accusations is to be found "in the very early mutual relationship of the mother and the infant." The "experience of the very little child wholly dependent for its survival on an all-powerful mother," Mead asserts, causes the helpless child to fear the mother "who appears to be so powerful and who incomprehensibly thwarts the child's unformulated wishes and needs."⁵⁰

One point regularly developed in recent studies is that accusations of witchcraft are virtually always made against individuals with whom

⁴⁷ Robbins, *The Encyclopedia of Witchcraft and Demonology*, 430.

⁴⁸ Demos, "Underlying Themes in the Witchcraft of Seventeenth-Century New England," 1318-19.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 1325.

⁵⁰ Mead, "Why We Fear Witches," 54-55.

the accuser has a close relationship. Several studies suggest that allegations of witchcraft grow out of local squabbles, jealousies, and rivalries of people living in close-knit communities that hold witchcraft beliefs. For example, in his comparison of European and African witchcraft, Geoffrey Parrinder emphasizes kinship stresses and family jealousies as a base for many accusations: "It is a remarkable fact that witchcraft accusations occur among known, and often related, people. The sufferer may accuse people who he thinks have good reason to dislike him, or whom he himself distrusts."⁵¹ Similarly, Alan Macfarlane's excellent study of *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* attributes witch accusations primarily to local antagonisms among persons living in close proximity. Macfarlane found that in 410 out of 460 Essex County cases both the witch and victim came from the same village. Quarrels over refusals of charity by village neighbors were the starting point for most of these witch accusations. For example, one woman asked a neighbor for some yeast, which was denied. After she left, the neighbor's child became quite ill and it was assumed the woman had bewitched the child.⁵² Keith Thomas agrees that most English witch accusations occurred after "a breach of charity or neighbourliness, by turning away an old woman who had come to the door to beg or borrow some food or drink, or the loan of some household utensil." When some misfortune followed, the woman was likely to be accused as a witch. Thus, soon after Robert Wayts refused a pot of beer to Mother Palmer he found that he could not make beer that would keep fresh, and the woman was thought a witch.⁵³ Both Macfarlane and Thomas conclude that most English witchcraft was the product of such local antagonisms.

John Demos notes that "neighborhood antagonism was usually an aggravating factor" in allegations of witchcraft at Salem,⁵⁴ but the significance of local quarrels and rivalries remains to be developed for most Massachusetts witch cases. What we can learn from the recent studies of witchcraft in early modern Europe and certain present-day

⁵¹ Geoffrey Parrinder, *Witchcraft: European and African* (London, 1958), 193. Robert A. Levine has observed that social friction among persons in close proximity leads to witchcraft accusations. His study of "Witchcraft and Co-Wife Proximity in Southwestern Kenya," *Ethnology*, I (1962), 43-44, shows that the nearer a man's co-wives live to each other physically the greater the incidence of witch accusations.

⁵² Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*, 83, 167-68.

⁵³ Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 553-54. Like Macfarlane and Thomas in their studies of English witchcraft, E. William Monter suggests that witchcraft in the Jura Mountains region of western Europe must be studied with a close examination of "variables like physical proximity, kinship relationships, clan reputations, and other approaches to social conflict at the village level." E. William Monter, "Patterns of Witchcraft in the Jura," *Journal of Social History*, V (1972), 22.

⁵⁴ Demos, "Underlying Themes in the Witchcraft of Seventeenth-Century New England," 1318.

societies, however, suggests that Arthur Miller may not have been far from the mark in his classic play about the Salem witch trials, *The Crucible*, which dramatizes the willingness of neighbors to accuse those whom they envy or dislike for personal reasons.⁵⁵ Of course, Miller's play is meant to portray human behavior during any "witch hunt" and not to plumb the depths of the Salem episode. Nonetheless the very types of local antagonisms and jealousies that he sees developing from the witch hunt atmosphere at Salem may have been instrumental in bringing about that atmosphere in the first place.

Indeed, the most recent study of Salem witchcraft, skillfully executed by Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum,⁵⁶ traces the origins of the witchcraft accusations directly to local struggles and personal antagonisms in Salem Village. In a painstaking reconstruction of the tiny community, Boyer and Nissenbaum have laid bare long-standing disputes that raged among the townspeople over land claims, village boundaries, commercial development, and the establishment of a local ministry. By the 1680's rival groups were firmly established and, according to these scholars, the witchcraft accusations of 1692 "moved in channels which were determined by years of factional strife" in the village. By pinpointing the residence of many of the villagers, they have learned that the accused witches and their defenders tended to come from the southeast section of the town, whereas the accusers were based in the northwest. This geographical pattern relates closely to the distribution of rival groups that had been locked in long-standing conflicts, and Boyer and Nissenbaum have made a reasonable case that the Salem witchcraft episode reflects the dynamics of village tensions and factionalism.⁵⁷

For generations historians of the Salem witch affair concentrated on establishing who was at fault for this "pernicious delusion." At one time or another they managed to fix blame upon virtually every possible group. Encouragingly, recent analyses have abandoned the task of fixing blame and have attempted to understand the belief in witchcraft in its psycho-social setting. In the past decade scholars have begun to assume that witchcraft was an integral part of the Massachusetts culture and may have performed various social functions. Borrowing theories from anthropology, psychology, and other disciplines, these scholars, especially Chadwick Hansen, John Demos, and Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, have advanced interpretations that view the Salem witch affair as a reflection of the structure and tensions in New England society. They have suggested,

⁵⁵ Arthur Miller, *The Crucible* (New York, 1959; first produced in 1953).

⁵⁶ Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1974).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 181-209.

for example, that New England beliefs in witches may have helped to enforce social conformity and to release personal or group tensions much as they do in twentieth-century African or American Indian communities and as they appear to have done in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe.

There are numerous possibilities for more study. Comparisons between the role of witchcraft beliefs in Massachusetts and the studies already available for other societies may prove profitable. And we may be able to achieve new insights by testing the relationship, if any, between the Salem witch outbreaks and changes in population and land-holding patterns, economic shifts, pressures of religious and ethnic diversity, adjustments in the perceived role of women in society, local disputes and village antagonisms, and so on. But the important point is that the history teacher is now provided with a vehicle to explain the strains of Puritan society as revealed by belief in witchcraft in colonial Massachusetts and the scholar has the beginning of a more rewarding approach for exploring this aspect of colonial New England.