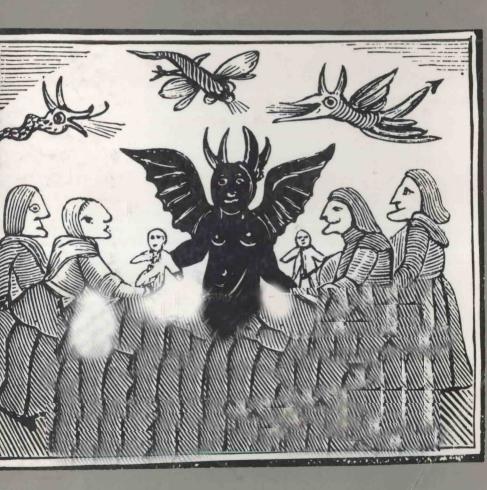
Witchcraft at Salem



CHADWICK HANSEN



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THOMAS MANN, Doctor Faustus

Preface

The purpose of this book is to try to set straight the record of the witchcraft phenomena at Salem, Massachusetts, in the year 1692, about which much has been written and much misunderstood. The more I studied the documents of what actually took place in the community, and what was actually said and written by the participants, the more I found myself in opposition to the traditional interpretation of these events. It seemed to me that a serious reconsideration of them was in order. But I could see no point in employing the common revisionist technique of quarreling with my predecessors item by item and person by person, for to do so would be to bury the account of what did happen in an immense and tedious analysis of what did not. What was needed was a fresh and objective review of the entire matter.

The traditional interpretation of what happened at Salem is as much the product of casual journalism and imaginative literature as it is of historical scholarship. It might be summarized as follows: (1) no witchcraft was practiced in Massachusetts; (2) the behavior of the "afflicted" persons, including their convulsive fits, was fraudulent and designed chiefly to call attention to themselves; (3) the afflicted persons were inspired, stimulated, and encouraged by the clergy (especially Cotton Mather), who used the fear of witchcraft as a means of bolstering their flagging power in the community; (4) the clergy whipped the general populace into a state of "mass hysteria" with their sermons and writings on witchcraft; (5) the only significant opposition to the proceedings at Salem came from the merchant class, specifically from Thomas Brattle and

Robert Calef; and (6) the executions were unique in Western civilization, and therefore monstrous, and attributable to some narrowness or fanaticism or repressiveness peculiar to Puritans.

Yet the facts are quite contrary to these common assumptions. To begin with, witchcraft actually did exist and was widely practiced in seventeenth-century New England, as it was in Europe at that time (and still is, for that matter, among the unlearned majority of mankind). It worked then as it works now in witchcraft societies like those of the West Indies, through psychogenic rather than occult means, commonly producing hysterical symptoms as a result of the victim's fear, and sometimes, when fear was succeeded by a profound sense of hopelessness, even producing death.

The behavior of the afflicted persons was not fraudulent but pathological. They were hysterics, and in the clinical rather than the popular sense of that term. These people were not merely overexcited; they were mentally ill. Furthermore, they were ill long before any clergyman got to them.

The general populace did reach that state of public excitement inaccurately called "mass hysteria," but this was due to the popular fear of witchcraft rather than to the preachings of the clergy. The public excitement continued well after the leadership, both clerical and secular, had called a halt to the witchcraft proceedings. In fact the clergy were, from beginning to end, the chief opponents to the events at Salem. In particular, Cotton Mather was anything but the wild-eyed fanatic of tradition. Throughout most of the proceedings he was a model of restraint and caution, and at one point he went further than any of his colleagues dared go in proposing a method to protect the innocent.

The writings of Brattle and Calef came too late to have any significant influence on the course of events in Massachusetts.

Finally, the executions at Salem were by no means unique. Belief in witchcraft was quite as common among seventeenth-century Anglicans, Quakers, Lutherans, and Catholics as it was among Puritans. Executions for witchcraft reached their

height in Western civilization during the seventeenth century and continued in Europe until the end of the following century, more than a hundred years after the outbreak at Salem.

Thomas Hutchinson was the first historian to conclude that the events at Salem had been nothing but "fraud and imposture." Yet he also recorded that at the time his history was published—1750—there were "a great number of persons" who thought the afflicted girls had "been under bodily disorders which affected their imaginations," and some, "perhaps but few," who believed them to have been possessed. Hutchinson was aware that there was nothing unusual about outbreaks of witchcraft in the seventeenth century, and aware as well of the force of popular credulity; his account is much more balanced than those of most of his successors.

Very nearly the least balanced of those successors was the Reverend Charles Wentworth Upham, who published his Lectures on Witchcraft in 1831, and followed this with his twovolume Salem Witchcraft, which has remained the standard history, in 1867. Upham had been a minister of Salem and then its mayor. He was as interested in genealogy and local history as in witchcraft, and therefore he outlined in considerable detail the village quarrels he thought to be one cause of the events. (He did this as he seems to have done everything, with much inaccuracy; the history of petty malice in Essex County remains to be written.) In his rambling tomes—so nearly incoherent that they could not be divided into chapters-Upham suggested a great many other causes for the witchcraft, many of them conflicting. But the overall impression he leaves is that the entire affair was a monstrous conspiracy, in which the ministers and magistrates took advantage of the fraudulent behavior of the afflicted girls to exercise a mindless and irresponsible power at the expense of the suffering community. His particular villain was Cotton Mather. Taking his cue from Robert Calef, he represented Mather as the man who "got up" Salem witchcraft.

W. F. Poole challenged Upham's view in a long article in the

North American Review (April, 1869). Some of Poole's arguments were cogent enough, but unfortunately his strongest appeals were to ancestral piety and clerical solidarity—he was shocked that Upham had attacked a fellow-clergyman. Therefore it was relatively easy for Upham to demolish Poole in a rebuttal published in The Historical Magazine (September, 1869). In the process he gave an abundant display of the paranoia that made a conspiratorial theory of history so attractive to him. Yet it was the consensus of the historical profession that he had won the argument, and George Bancroft adopted the conspiratorial thesis in his monumental History of the United States of America.

According to John Fiske, Bancroft's account was nothing but secondhand Upham "embellished with cheap rhetoric." This is not entirely fair, since Bancroft did bring narrative coherence to Upham's view, and this was no mean achievement. But he also introduced a series of errors of his own invention and simplified the issues in the interest of a melodramatic style that fully deserves Fiske's criticism. Since Upham was virtually unreadable Bancroft's account became the main, and often the only, source for innumerable lesser histories, including almost all school histories. His influence extended far beyond the schoolbooks; Lecky's account of the Salem trials is based on Bancroft, and he is also the model for such twentieth-century anti-Puritan historians as Beard, Parrington, and James Truslow Adams. The central line of erroneous interpretation, then, decends from Robert Calef to Upham to Bancroft, and from Bancroft through innumerable channels to the current popular view.

Many writers have taken exception to one point or another in the traditional interpretation. The point raised most often has been that witchcraft trials were not at all unusual in the seventeenth century; that they were in fact typical of Western civilization at that time. George Lyman Kittredge has put it best:

The Salem outbreak was not due to Puritanism; it is not assignable to any peculiar temper on the part of our New England ancestors; it

is no sign of exceptional bigotry or abnormal superstition. Our forefathers believed in witchcraft, not because they were Puritans, not because they were Colonials, not because they were New Englanders,—but because they were men of their time. They shared the feelings and beliefs of the best hearts and wisest heads of the seventeenth century. What more can be asked of them?

And he added that

it is hard to satisfy modern writers on witchcraft, who insist on censuring the sixteenth and seventeenth century on a basis of modern rationalism. It is quite certain that if some of those who now sit in judgment on the witch-prosecutors had been witch judges, no defendant would ever have escaped.²

The same issue has been raised, with varying degrees of incisiveness, by John Fiske, Edward Eggleston, W. F. Poole, Kenneth B. Murdock, Samuel Eliot Morison, and many others, including Perry Miller,⁸ who protested that on this point further refutation had become a bore. But boring or not, the refutation has not taken hold. The common scholar as well as the common man has continued to believe that there was something peculiarly puritanical about the Salem trials.

A second exception has been that Cotton Mather was not, as Calef put it, "very forward" in carrying on witchcraft examinations, that in fact he counseled moderation throughout the trials. W. F. Poole saw this. So, among others, did Longfellow, Barrett Wendell, Samuel Eliot Morison, and Marion L. Starkey. But none of them seems to have recognized how very far the younger Mather went in attempting to protect the innocent, nor how thoroughly Calef lied about Mather's treatment of Margaret Rule. Starkey, for one, accepts Calef's lies at face value and consequently makes Mather out to be little better than a fool.

A third departure from the traditional interpretation has been to call the behavior of the afflicted persons hysterical. George M. Beard was the first to do so, and he has been followed by John Fiske, Winfield S. Nevins, Perry Miller, and Marion L. Starkey, among others. Yet no one who has used the word "hysterical" seems to have fully realized its implica-

tions. The difficulty lies in the fact that the word has different meanings in common usage from those it has in medical usage. In the former it means little more than a state of excitement in which the subject may temporarily lose self-control. The afflicted persons at Salem were in a far worse state than that. Their condition was pathological, and much more serious than has previously been supposed. Marion L. Starkey makes a diagnosis of hysteria the very basis of The Devil in Massachusetts. Yet because she confuses the popular and the medical meanings of the term she regards the Salem girls' behavior as more fraudulent than pathological, and in the long run her interpretation differs only in detail from that of Upham. In her case and in others this popular usage has led finally to little more than inaccurate talk about "mass hysteria."

Finally, and most significantly, a few persons have recognized that image magic was actually employed in Massachusetts, and at least two have wondered whether there might not have been something behind the charges of witchcraft after all. Poole tells us that Longfellow examined some of the seventeenth-century narratives before composing his play on the Salem trials, Giles Corey of the Salem Farms. Longfellow was learned enough to recognize that Cotton Mather's suspicions had been aroused by concrete evidence of image magic. He also recognized that Mather had counseled judicial caution. That was as far as he got, but it was much farther than most. Giles Corey is a bad play, but it is much better history than most of the historians have written. Barrett Wendell also knew there had been image magic at Salem and was startled to discover that nineteenth-century spiritualists were believers in the possibility of accomplishing harm through such means. He went so far as to compare the Salem trial evidence to his own experiences with spiritualism; this comparison is the central substance of his article, "Were the Salem Witches Guiltless?"6 and of his handling of witchcraft in his biography of Cotton Mather. But spiritualism was a blind alley, and Wendell never got further than wondering whether there might not have been something to the charges after all.

David R. Proper, formerly librarian of Essex Institute, tells me that Kittredge suspected there might have been witchcraft practiced at Salem. However, he did not pursue his suspicions; at least I have not been able to discover any further evidence that would lead me to believe otherwise. Finally, the late dean of twentieth-century New England studies, Perry Miller, knew there had been image magic in the Glover case of 1688 at Boston, yet he was unable to take seriously a practice he found so contemptible. But it has to be taken seriously. One cannot fully understand any aspect of the events at Salem without a recognition of the genuine power of witchcraft in a society that believes in it. The failure to appreciate this fact has vitiated all previous accounts of witchcraft at Salem.

Since previous historians have been of relatively minor use to me I have depended very heavily upon both trial documents and contemporary narratives. At first I hoped to preserve the spelling and punctuation of the originals, but some of the trial documents employ spelling and punctuation so very deviant as to be incomprehensible to the literate nonspecialist. Therefore I have modernized the texts of the trial documents and, for the sake of consistency, the contemporary narratives as well. I have not, of course, modernized the diction, but where a word or a phrase seemed to me to present unusual difficulties to the common reader I have offered an explanation in brackets. It is true that in the process of modernization much of the rhetorical quality of a writer like Cotton Mather is lost, but perhaps in the present case the gain in clarity will be sufficient compensation.

Because I have depended so heavily on trial documents and because the majority of them are dated, I have not modernized dates, preserving the Old Style in order to simplify the task of anyone who wishes to consult the originals. I have, however, begun the year at January 1 because the documents generally do offer that alternative (e.g., 1691/2).

Like others working in this period I am deeply indebted to the American Antiquarian Society microprint edition of works

in Evans' American Bibliography and to the University Microfilms edition of works in the Short-Title Catalogue. I am also particularly indebted to the staff of the Essex County Court House for permission to use the WPA transcript of witchcraft documents and to the staffs of the Essex County Court House, the Essex Institute, the Massachusetts Historical Society, and the New York Public Library for permission to check the transcript with original documents in their possession. For access to other materials I wish to thank the staffs of the Massachusetts Historical Society (especially Malcolm Freiberg, Editor of Publications), the Essex Institute (especially David R. Proper, former librarian), the American Antiquarian Society (especially James E. Mooney, Editor), the New York Public Library, the Library of Congress, and the libraries of Columbia University, Cornell University, Harvard University, Haverford College, the University of Pennsylvania, the Philadelphia College of Physicians, and the Pennsylvania State University (especially Charles W. Mann, Jr., Chief of Special Collections).

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My first attempt at formulating my early findings appeared under the title "Salem Witchcraft and DeForest's Witching Times" in Essex Institute Historical Collections, and I thank David B. Little, Director and Editor, for permission to reprint portions of that article here.

A number of my colleagues have offered suggestions at various stages of my project—on talks which I gave on the subject as well as on portions of the manuscript. For such suggestions I am grateful to Professors Philip Young, Alan Trachtenberg, Harrison T. Meserole, and to Professor Alan Heimert of Harvard University.

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Finally, I am much indebted to my family, and most particularly to my wife, who has been helpful in very many ways. Not the least of these was her happy recognition that there were no ulterior motives in my dedicating a book on witchcraft to her.

C. H.

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Witchcraft

Early in the year 1692 several girls of Salem Village (now Danvers), Massachusetts, began to sicken and display alarming symptoms. The most disturbing and most frequent of these symptoms was convulsive fits: fits so grotesque and so violent that eyewitnesses agreed the girls could not possibly be acting. "Their motions in their fits," wrote the Reverend Deodat Lawson, "are preternatural, both as to the manner, which is so strange as a well person could not screw their body into; and as to the violence also it is preternatural, being much beyond the ordinary force of the same person when they are in their right mind." The Reverend John Hale of Beverly confirmed Lawson's description. "Their arms, necks, and backs," he wrote, "were turned this way and that way, and returned back again, so as it was impossible for them to do of themselves, and beyond the power of any epileptic fits, or natural disease to effect."

There were other symptoms almost equally alarming: temporary loss of hearing, speech, and sight; loss of memory, so that some of the girls could not recall what had happened to them in their fits; a choking sensation in the throat; loss of appetite. Later there were terrifying hallucinations; they saw specters who tormented them in a variety of ingenious and cruel ways. They felt themselves pinched and bitten, and often there were actual marks upon the skin.

These symptoms are readily recognizable. The most cursory examination of the classic studies of hysteria—of Charcot, of Janet, of Breuer and Freud—will demonstrate that the afflicted girls of Salem were hysterical in the scientific sense of that term.⁸ It has, of course, been customary to call these girls

hysterical, but only in the loosest and most popular sense of the word. Thus the same historians who have called them hysterical have also called them liars, although the terms are mutually exclusive so far as conscious motivation is concerned. With minor exceptions the girls' behavior belongs to the history of pathology rather than the history of fraud.

In any case, their behavior was both conspicuous and distressing. Two of them, Elizabeth Parris and Abigail Williams, were the daughter and niece of the Reverend Samuel Parris of Salem Village, and the Reverend Mr. Parris treated their affliction with those universal remedies of seventeenth-century Massachusetts, prayer and fasting. But he also did what you or I would do if our children began behaving in that fashion: he took them to the doctor—to a series of doctors, in fact—and he persuaded other parents and guardians to do the same. For some time the physicians were puzzled, but eventually one of them—tradition says it was Dr. William Griggs of Salem Village—produced a diagnosis. "The evil hand," he announced, "is upon them"; the girls were victims of malefic witchcraft.

The diagnosis was in no way unusual. The overwhelming majority of seventeenth-century physicians, like other learned men, believed in witchcraft and considered it the cause of some diseases. An instructive parallel to Doctor Griggs's opinion is that of Sir Thomas Browne, the celebrated author of Religio Medici, who was called as expert witness by an English witchcraft court convened at Bury St. Edmunds in 1664. He gave as his opinion:

that these swooning fits were natural, and nothing else but what they call the mother, but only heightened to a great excess by the subtlety of the Devil, co-operating with the malice of these which we term witches, at whose instance he doth these villainies.⁴

"The mother" was the common abbreviation for "the suffocation of the mother," one of the seventeenth-century English terms for hysteria; it referred to the choking sensation in the throat that was one of the commoner symptoms. Thus, Sir Thomas Browne was entirely correct in his identification of the illness, and it is quite possible that Dr. Griggs, too, was right in whatever identification he made of the Salem symptoms.

What is more surprising is that Dr. Griggs was probably also correct in his identification of the cause. It does seem to have been witchcraft that was responsible for the girls' afflictions.

Witchcraft is not easy to define, because it is not, like the major formal religions, a coherent body of belief. But in Western civilization since prehistoric times there has been a loosely grouped body of magical lore—charms, spells, and so forth having to do primarily with fertility and infertility, and with health and sickness, as well as a series of more marginal concerns, including the foretelling of the future. Such lore has obvious, if tenuous, connections with pre-Christian fertility worship, whose tutelary deity was a fertility god. Probably the commonest of such gods has been the deified sun, but the next most common was the deified herd animal, the cow, or, more often (because of his reputation for lechery) the goat. Half human and half bestial, with horns and cloven hooves, he appeared as Dionysus or Bacchus, the chief fertility god of the classical world, and was also to be found in the pantheons of northern Europe.⁵ Apparently the early Christians thought him the most abominable of all the pagan deities; they gave his attributes, his horns and cloven hooves, to the Devil, adding to these the wings of the fallen angel.

That he was once an extraordinarily powerful god cannot be doubted; there are instances of his survival in pre-Christian form as late as the twentieth century. A traveler in southern Ireland during the thirties reported seeing villagers dance in a ring around a goat whose horns and hooves had been painted gold. They informed him that on the coming Sunday they would roast and eat it, because "they had done it always." I myself have seen one survival of the horned god: the Austrian Krampus. He has now degenerated into a bogeyman for children. Black and furry, with horns and a contorted face, he is the companion of St. Nicholas, and attends to bad children