

The Visible and Invisible Worlds of Salem

Historians, we have seen, are in the business of reconstruction. Seventeenth-century Virginia, with its world of slaves, indentured servants, small planters, and tobacco barons, had to be built anew, not just lifted intact from the record. It follows, then, that if historians are builders, they must decide at the outset on the scale of their projects. How much ground should be covered? A year? Fifty years? Several centuries? How will the subject matter be defined or limited? The story of slavery's arrival in Virginia might be ranked as a moderately large topic. It spans some sixty years, involves thousands of immigrants and an entire colony. Furthermore, it is large as much because of its content as its reach over time and space. The genesis of slavery surely ranks as a central strand of the American experience; to understand it adequately requires more research and discipline than, for instance, the history of American hats over a similar time span. The lure of topics both broad and significant is undeniable, and there have always been historians willing to pull on their seven-league boots, from Edward Gibbon and his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, to Ariel and Will Durant with their *Story of Civilization*.

The great equalizer of such grand plans is the twenty-four hour day. Historians have only a limited amount of time, and the hours, they sadly discover, are not expandable. Obviously, the more years that are covered, the less time there is available to research the events in each one.

Conversely, the narrower the area of research, the more it is possible to become immersed in the details of a period. Relationships and connections can be explored that would have gone unnoticed without the benefit of a microscopic focus. Of course, small-scale history continually runs the risk of becoming obscure and pedantic. But a keen mind working on a small area will yield results whose implications go beyond the subject matter's original boundaries. By understanding what has taken place on a small patch of ground, the historian can begin to see more clearly the structure and dynamics of the larger world around it.

Salem Village in 1692 is a microcosm familiar to most students of American history. That was the place and the time witchcraft came to New England with a vengeance, dominating the life of the village for ten months. Because the witchcraft episode exhibited well-defined boundaries in both time and space, it provides an excellent illustration of the way a traditional and oft-told story may be transformed by the intensive research techniques of small-scale history. Traditionally, the outbreak of witchcraft at Salem has been viewed as an incident divorced from the cause-and-effect sequences of everyday village life. Even to label the events as an "outbreak" suggests that they are best viewed as an epidemic, alien to the normal functions of the community. The "germs" of bewitchment break out suddenly and inexplicably—imposed, as it were, by some invading disease pool. Only a few townspeople are first afflicted; then the contagion spreads through the village and runs its destructive course before subsiding.

Recently, however, historians have studied the traumatic experiences of 1692 in greater detail. In so doing they have created a more sophisticated model of the mental world behind the Salem outbreaks. They have also suggested ways in which the witchcraft episode was integrally connected with the more mundane events of village life. The techniques of small-scale history, in other words, have provided a compelling psychological and social context for the events of 1692.

BEWITCHMENT AT SALEM VILLAGE

Most accounts of the trouble at Salem begin with the kitchen of the village's minister, Samuel Parris. There in the early months of 1692, a group of adolescent girls gathered to attempt a bit of crystal-ball reading. The young women sought to discover what sort of men their future husbands might be, a subject of natural enough interest to them. Lacking a crystal ball, they used the next available substitute, the white of a raw

egg suspended in a glass of water. The young women were aided in their efforts by a West Indian slave then living with the Parrises, a woman named Tituba. At some point during the seances, things went sour. One of the women thought she detected "a specter in the likeness of a coffin" in the crystal ball—hardly an auspicious omen—and soon the more susceptible among them began behaving in a strange manner.

Detailed accounts of the earliest fits are scarce, but the "strange and unusual" actions noted did include "getting into Holes, and creeping under Chairs and Stools; [using] sundry odd Postures and Antick Gestures, uttering foolish ridiculous Speeches, which neither they themselves nor any others could make sense of." The Reverend Parris was at a loss to understand the afflictions, but not so Tituba. She and her husband John Indian baked a "witch cake" made of rye meal and urine given them by the possessed women. The cake was fed to a dog on the supposition that the charm would reveal whether any bewitchment was taking place (the theory confirmed, presumably, if the dog suffered torments similar to those of the afflicted women).

The charm never had a chance to achieve its result because Samuel Parris got wind of the experiment and at last discovered what had been going on for so long in his kitchen. He and other adults in the community had been greatly puzzled by the young women's strange behavior; now they began viewing the illnesses not as the result of disease, but of crime. For seventeenth-century New Englanders, witchcraft was conceived in criminal terms. If the adolescents were being tormented, it was necessary to discover who was responsible. The hunt for witches began.

The afflicted women were the keys to determining who was a witch. Although some of their behavior seemed merely eccentric (Abigail Williams came running through the house yelling "Whish! Whish! Whish!" arms apart as if she were flying), other incidents were more sinister. The possessed claimed to see specters, invisible to others, who pinched, kicked, and choked them. Victims writhed on the floor, screamed piteously, or carried on arguments with their invisible tormentors. Deodat Lawson, a former minister of the village who visited Salem during the crisis, was horrified to observe Mary Walcott convulsed before him—being biren, she claimed, by a specter. Lawson could not see the specter but noted with mounting astonishment the teethmarks that appeared on Mary Walcott's arm.

After village leaders pressed the tormented women to identify the specters, they at last provided three names: Sarah Good and Sarah Osbourne, two old women unpopular in the village, and Tituba herself. Village officials arrested all three for examination, and during the questioning Tituba confessed. There were four women and a man, she said,

who were causing the trouble. Good and Osbourne were among them. "They hurt the children," she testified. "And they lay all upon me and they tell me if I will not hurt the children, they will hurt me." The tale continued, complete with apparitions of black and red rats, a yellow dog with a head like a woman, "a thing all over hairy, all the face hairy, and a long nose," and midnight rides to witches' meetings where plans were being laid to attack Salem.

If a witch confessed, the matter of identification was simple enough. If he or she refused to admit guilt, as many of the accused did, magistrates had to look for corroborating proof. Physical evidence, such as voodoo dolls and pins found among the suspect's possessions, was the most convincing. There might be other signs, too. If the devil made a pact with someone, he supposedly required a physical mark of allegiance, and thus created a "witch's tit," where either he or his "familiar," a likeness in animal form, might suck.* Prisoners in the Salem trials were often examined to see if they had any abnormal marks on their bodies.

Aside from physical signs, villagers looked for evidence of a cause-and-effect relationship between a witch's act of malice and consequent suffering on the part of the victim. Sarah Gadge, for instance, testified that two years earlier she had refused Sarah Good lodging for the night. According to Gadge, Good "fell to muttering and scolding extremely and so told said Gadge if she would not let her in she should give her something . . . and the next morning after to said Deponents best remembrance one of the said Gadges Cowes Died in a Sudden terrible and Strange unusual manner. . . ." In an attempt to confirm the connection between malice and torment, the magistrates kept the afflicted women in the courtroom to observe their behavior. Sure enough, when an accused witch shifted position while on the witness stand, the young women would often be afflicted in the same way, as if tormented by the action. Rebecca Nurse, another accused witch, "held her neck on one side and Eliz. Hubbard (one of the sufferers) had her neck set in that posture whereupon another patient Abigail Williams, cried out, set up Goody Nursis head, the maid's neck will be broke. And when some set up Nurse's head Aaron Way observed that Betty Hubbards was immediately righted."**

*Hence the expression still used today, "Cold as a witch's tit." Tradition had it that the mark, formed of unnatural flesh, would be cold and lifeless.

**"Goody" was short for "Goodwife," a term used for most married women. Husbands were addressed as Goodman. The terms Mr. and Mrs. were reserved for those of higher social standing.

The magistrates also considered what they called "spectral evidence," at once the most damning and dangerous kind of proof. Spectral evidence involved the visions of specters—likenesses of the witches—that victims reported seeing during their torments. The problem was that spectral evidence could not be corroborated by others; generally only the victim saw the shape of her tormentor. Furthermore, some people argued that the devil might assume the shape of an innocent person. What better way for him to spread confusion among the faithful? All the same, the magistrates were inclined to believe that Satan could not use a shape without that person's permission—not very often, at any rate—so they tended to accept spectral evidence in their pretrial examinations.

During the first seventy years of settlement in New England, few witchcraft cases had come before the courts. Those that had were dispatched quickly, and calm soon returned. Salem proved different. In the first place, Tituba had described several other witches and a wizard, though she claimed she was unable to identify them personally. The villagers felt they could not rest while other witches remained at large. Furthermore, the young women continued to name names—and now not just outcasts but respectable church members from the community. The new suspects joined Tituba, Sarah Gadge, and Sarah Osbourne in jail. By the end of April the hunt had led to no less a personage than the Reverend George Burroughs, a former minister of the village living in Maine. Constables marched to Maine, fetched him back, and threw him in jail.

Throughout the spring of 1692, no trials of the accused had been held, for the simple reason that Massachusetts was without legal government. In 1684 the Crown had revoked the colony's original charter and set up his own arbitrary government, but in 1689, William of Orange forced James to flee England. In the years following, Massachusetts continually attempted to have its original charter restored. Until it succeeded, however, court cases had been brought to a standstill. Finally in May 1692 the new governor, Sir William Phips, arrived with a charter and promptly established a special court of Oyer and Terminer to deal with the witchcraft cases.

On June 2 the court heard its first case, that of tavernkeeper Bridget Bishop. Bishop was quickly convicted and eight days later, hung from a scaffold on a hill just outside Salem Town. The site came to be known as Witch's Hill—with good reason, since on June 29 the court again met and convicted five more women. One of them, Rebecca Nurse, had been found innocent, but the court's Chief Justice, William Stoughton, disap-

proved the verdict and convinced the jurors to change their minds. On July 19 Goody Nurse joined the other four women on the scaffold, staunch churchwoman that she was, praying for the judges' souls as well as her own. Sarah Good remained defiant to the end. "I am no more a witch than you are a wizard," she told the attending minister, "and if you take away my life, God will give you blood to drink."

Still the accusations continued; still the court sat. As the net was cast wider, more and more accused were forced to work out their response to the crisis. A few, most of them wealthy, went into hiding until the furor subsided. Giles Cory, a farmer whose wife Martha was executed as a witch, refused even to plead innocent or guilty, in effect denying the court's right to try him. The penalty for such a refusal was the *peine forte et dure*, in which the victim was placed between two boards and heavy stones placed on him until he agreed to plead. On September 19, Cory was slowly crushed to death, stubborn to the end. His last words were said to be, "More weight."

Some of the accused admitted guilt, the most satisfactory solution for the magistrates. Puritans could be a remarkably forgiving people. They were not interested in punishment for its own sake. If a lawbreaker gave evidence of sincere regret for his misdeeds, Puritan courts would often reduce or suspend his sentence. So it was in the witchcraft trials at Salem, but the policy had unforeseen consequences. Those who were wrongly accused quickly realized that if they did *not* confess, they were likely to be hanged. If they did confess, they could escape death, but would have to demonstrate their sincerity by providing details of their misdeeds and names of other participants. The temptation must have been great to confess and, in so doing, to implicate other innocent people.

Given such pressures, the web of accusations continued to grow. August produced six more trials and five hangings. Elizabeth Proctor, the wife of another tavernkeeper, received a reprieve because she was pregnant, the court being unwilling to sacrifice the life of an innocent child. Her husband John was not spared. September saw another eight victims hung with no end in sight. Over a hundred suspected witches remained in jail.

Pressure to stop the trials had been building, however. One member of the court, Nathaniel Saltonstall, resigned in protest after the first execution. More important, the ministers of the province were becoming uneasy. They had supported the trials publicly but in private had written letters cautioning the magistrates in their use of evidence. Finally in early October Increase Mather, one of the most respected divines in the

province, published a sermon signed by fourteen other pastors which strongly condemned the use of spectral evidence. Mather argued that to convict on the basis of a specter, which everyone agreed was the devil's creation, in effect took Satan at his own word. That, in Mather's view, risked disaster. "It were better that ten suspected witches should escape, than that one innocent person should be condemned," he concluded. Mather's sermon convinced Governor Phips that the trials had gone too far. He forbade any more arrests and dismissed the court of Oyer and Terminer. The following January a new court met to dispose of the remaining cases, but this time the great majority of defendants were acquitted. Phips immediately granted a reprieve to the three women who were convicted and in April released the remaining prisoners. Satan's controversy with Salem was finished.

That, in outline, is the witchcraft story as it has come down to us for so many years. Rightly or wrongly, it is a story that has become an indelible part of American history. The startling fits of possession, the drama of the court examinations, the eloquent pleas of the innocent condemned—all these make for a superb drama that casts into shadow the rest of Salem's more pedestrian history.

Indeed, the episode is unrepresentative. Witchcraft epidemics were not a serious problem in New England; even less of one in other American colonies. Such persecutions were much more common in old England and Europe, where they had reached frightening proportions. The death of 20 people at Salem is sobering, but the magnitude of the event diminishes considerably alongside the 900 witches burned in the city of Bamberg during the first half of the seventeenth century or the 5,000 over a similar period in the province of Alsace. Furthermore, it can be safely said that the witchcraft affair had no lasting effect on the political or religious history of America, or even of Massachusetts.

Now, a curious thing has resulted from this illumination of a single, isolated episode. Again and again, the story of Salem Village has been told, quite naturally, as a drama complete unto itself. The workaday history that preceded and followed the trials—the petty town bickerings, the arguments over land and ministers, the village's economic patterns—all this has been largely passed over. Yet the disturbances at Salem did not occur in a vacuum. They may indeed have constituted an epidemic but not the sort caused by some mysterious germ pool brought into the village over the rutted roads from Boston. So the historian's first task is to take the major strands of the witchcraft affair and see how they are woven into the larger fabric of Salem society. Salem Village is small enough so that virtually every one of its residents can be identified. We

can find out who owned what land, the amount of taxes each resident paid, what sermons people listened to on Sundays. In so doing, a richer, far more intriguing picture of Salem Village life begins to emerge.

THE INVISIBLE SALEM

Paradoxically, the most obvious facet of Salem life that the historian must recreate is also the most insubstantial: what ministers of the period would have called the "invisible world." Demons, familiars, and witches all shaped the world of seventeenth-century New England, just as they shaped the worlds of Britain and Europe. For Salem Villagers, Satan was a living, supernatural being who could and did appear to people, either in his own form or that of another. He could converse with mortals, bargain with them, even enter into agreements with them. The witches who submitted to such devilish compacts bargained their souls in return for special powers or favors: money and good fortune, perhaps, or the ability to revenge themselves on others.

The outlines of such beliefs are easily enough sketched, but they convey the emotions of witchcraft about as successfully as a recital of the Apostle's Creed conveys the fire of the Christian faith. Historians who do not believe in a personal, witch-covenanting devil are entering a psychological world in which they are outsiders. They may think it a simple matter to understand how a Salem Villager would behave, but people who hold beliefs foreign to our own do not often act the way that we think they should. Over the years, historians of the Salem incident have insufficiently appreciated that fact.

One of the first people to review Salem's troubles was Thomas Hutchinson, who in 1750 published a history of New England's early days. Hutchinson did not believe in witchcraft; fewer and fewer educated people did as the eighteenth century progressed. Therefore he faced an obvious historical question. If the devil was not behind the Salem witch trials, who or what was? The question centered on motivation. The possessed women claimed they were being afflicted by witches, as the historical record made clear. Yet, reasoned Hutchinson, if the devil never actually covenanted with anyone, how were the young women's actions to be explained? Some of Hutchinson's contemporaries argued that the bewitched were suffering from "bodily disorders which affected their imaginations." He disagreed. "A little attention must force conviction that the whole was a scene of fraud and imposture, begun by young girls, who at first perhaps thought of nothing more than being pitied and

indulged, and continued by adult persons who were afraid of being accused themselves." Charles Upham, a minister who published a two-volume study of the episode in 1867, was equally hard on the young women. "There has seldom been better acting in a theatre than displayed in the presence of the astonished and horror-stricken rulers," he concluded tartly.

The view that the possessed were shamming has persisted well into the twentieth century, and indeed, the historical record does supply some evidence to substantiate this hypothesis. Several defenders of the accused witches reported that on occasion the accusers seemed to be caught in their own jesting. One adolescent who cried out that she saw the specter of Elizabeth Proctor was immediately challenged by several spectators. The woman replied, "She [Elizabeth Proctor] did it for sport; they must have sport." Then in April Mary Warren, another of the young women, recovered from her fits and began to claim "that the afflicted persons did but dissemble"—that is, they were shamming. For the first time, the possessed began seeing Mary's specter, and the court quickly summoned her on suspicion of witchcraft. The tables had been turned.

On the witness stand, Mary again fell into a fit "that she did neither see nor hear nor speak." The examination record continues:

Afterwards she started up, and said I will speak and cryed out, Oh! I am sorry for it, I am sorry for it, and wringing her hands, and fell a little while into a fit again and then came to speak, but immediately her teeth were set, and then she fell into a violent fit and cryed out, Oh Lord help me! Oh Good Lord Save me!

And then afterwards cryed again, I will tell I will tell and then fell into a dead fit againe.

And afterwards cryed I will tell, they did, they did they did and then fell into a violent fit again.

After a little recovery she cryed I will tell they brought me to it and then fell into a fit again which fits continuene she was ordered to be had out

The scene is tantalizing. It appears as if Mary Warren is about to confess, when pressure from the other girls forces her back to her former role as one of the afflicted. In the following months the magistrates questioned Mary repeatedly, with the result that her fits returned and she again joined in the accusations. Such evidence suggests that the girls may well have been acting.

Yet such a theory leaves certain points unexplained. If the girls were only acting, what are we to make of the many other witnesses who

testified to devilry? One nearby villager, Richard Comans, reported seeing Bridget Bishop's specter in his bedroom. Bishop lay upon his breast, he reported, and "so oppressed" him that "he could not speak nor stir, noe not so much as to awake his wife" sleeping next to him. Comans and others who testified were not close friends of the girls; they were obviously not conspiring with each other. How does the historian explain their actions?

Even some of the afflicted women's behavior is difficult to explain as conscious fraud. It is easy enough to imagine counterfeiting certain fits: being flown through the room crying "whish, wish"; being struck dumb. Yet other behavior was truly sobering. Being pinched, pummeled, nearly choked to death; bodies being twisted into unnatural postures for long periods of time; tongues thrust upward until they almost touched the nose; fits so violent several grown men were required to restrain the victims. Is it conceivable that all this could be counterfeited—convincingly, realistically—day after day for five or six months?

Even innocent victims of the accusations were astounded by such behavior. Rebecca Nurse on the witness stand could only look in astonishment at the "lamentable fits" she was accused of causing. "Do you think these [women] suffer voluntary or involuntary?" asked John Hathorne, one of the examining magistrates. "I cannot tell," replied Goody Nurse hesitantly. Hathorne pressed his advantage. He knew the fits looked as genuine to Nurse as they did to everyone else. "That is strange," he replied. "Everyone can judge."

NURSE: I must be silent.

HATHORNE: They accuse you of hurting them, and if you think it is not unwillingly but by designe, you must look upon them as murderers.

NURSE: I cannot tell what to think of it.

Hathorne pressed others who were accused with similar results. What ails the girls, if not your torments? "I do not know." Do you think they are bewitched? "I cannot tell." What do you think *does* ail them? "There is more than ordinary. . . ."

More than ordinary. Modern historians may accept that supposition without necessarily supposing, with Hathorne, the presence of the preternatural. Psychiatric research has long established what we now take almost for granted: that people may act for reasons they themselves do not fully understand, from motives buried deep within the unconscious. Even more: that emotional problems may be the subconscious cause of apparently physical disorders. The rationalistic psychologies of Thomas

Hutchinson and Charles Upham led them to reject any middle-ground explanations of motivation. The Salem women had not really been tormented by witches, Hutchinson and Upham reasoned; therefore they must have been acting voluntarily, consciously. But if we fully appreciate the mental attitudes that accompanied the belief in devils and witches, it is possible to understand the Salem episode, not as a game of fraud gone out of control, but as a study in abnormal psychology on a community-wide scale.

To understand why, turn to the testimony taken by the magistrates in their preliminary hearings. Here are the affidavits, the warrants for arrest, the cross-examinations—all the alleged incidents of witchcraft. Significantly, the incidents are not clustered around the pivotal year of 1692; they range over a broad period of time. "About four years agoe," an affidavit will begin; or "about six or seven years past"; "about five years sence"; "about twenty fower years ago. . . ." The record book, in other words, has acted as a magnet, drawing out for the historian stories that normally would never have been included in the record. It demonstrates just how deeply superstition ran in Salem, not just in 1692, but day in, day out. People were always taking note of strange incidents, wondering at remarkable coincidences, and seeing ominous signs.

To modern eyes, the signs often seem inconsequential. Mary Easty complains to Sam Smith that his conversation is "rude" and that he may "rue it here after." As Smith is going home that night he receives "a little blow on my shoulder with I know not what and the stone wall rattled very much." Easty at work, he suspects. Martha Carrier argues with Benjamin Abbott about land he has bought, telling him he "should Repent of it afore seven years come to an end." Abbott is soon afflicted with an infected foot and running sores. His wife notes that some cattle die strangely, others "come out of the woods with their tongues hanging out of their mouthes in a strange and affrighting manner . . . which we can give noe account of the reason of, unless it should be the effects of Martha Carrier threatenings." There are the bedside visions like Richard Comans's ("sometime about eight years since") or demon dogs, black and white, chasing men along the road, then disappearing into the ground. Lights in the night. Unaccountable illnesses. The New England villager's world was filled with what he called "remarkable providences." Most of them, to be sure, were the workings of a just and almighty God, but some were accomplished at the behest of Satan.

Follow the consequences of this attitude a step further. If Salem villagers believed that the devil's magic really could bestow power, might not a few people try to make use of it? Such is the suggestion of historian

Chadwick Hansen, who argues that some villagers did practice witchcraft. We have already seen one instance of magical practice, the witch cake. Tiruba, who baked it, confessed to being a witch. Even if her dramatic tales of supernatural meetings were embellishments to please the magistrates, her habitual sessions with the girls and her acquaintance with West Indian voodoo demonstrate a definite involvement with magic. The examination records also place Bridget Bishop under suspicion. As early as 1680 she had been unsuccessfully taken to court on the charge of witchcraft. Ever since she carried that reputation. In 1692 her own husband accused her of using the black arts, and even more damaging, two laborers testified that when they dismantled a basement wall in her old house they found several rag puppets with headless pins stuck in them, telltales of a witch at work.

Other villagers appear to have toyed with witchcraft even if they did not embrace it outright. Questioning of George Burroughs, the village's former minister, revealed some unusual and disturbing facts. When pressed, Burroughs admitted that only one of his children was baptized, despite the common Puritan custom of having children baptized as soon as was practicable after birth. When asked for the date of the last time he had taken communion, Burroughs said it "was so long since he could not tell."

Burroughs was short, compact, and extremely strong for his size. So strong, in fact, that he was reputed to have hefted large barrels of molasses and held a heavy rifle at arm's length by inserting his fingers in the barrel. Since witches were said to possess preternatural strength, this was damning evidence indeed. The historian who examines the affidavits will quickly notice that virtually all of them report what Burroughs *said* he could do, not what witnesses actually saw. Yet the testimony suggests a good deal. Burroughs, being quite short, may have been sensitive about his height and used his reputation for strength to impress acquaintances. So too he may have used magic. Testimony reveals that the minister bragged of his uncanny mind-reading abilities, often startling his wife by telling her "he knew what [she and her friends] said when he was abroad"—that is, away from the house. Perhaps Burroughs was innocent of witchcraft. But in a world where people readily believed such claims, boasting of uncommon powers was a dangerous business. It apparently cost Burroughs his life.

If the climate of superstition encouraged some villagers to take up witchcraft, it affected the supposed victims of bewitchment in equally palpable ways. The fear that gripped susceptible subjects certainly must have been extraordinary. Here were specters of the devil, intent on

torment or even murder, and locked doors were no protection. One gauge of the magnitude of such fear may be found in cross-cultural comparisons. Anthropologists who have examined witchcraft in entirely different contexts note that bewitchment can be traumatic enough to lead to death. An Australian aborigine who discovers himself bewitched will

stand aghast. . . . His cheeks blanch and his eyes become glassy. . . . He attempts to shriek but usually the sound chokes in his throat, and all that one might see is froth at his mouth. His body begins to tremble and the muscles twist involuntarily. He sways backwards and falls to the ground, and after a short time appears to be in a swoon; but soon after he writhes as if in mortal agony. . . .

Afterwards the victim refuses to eat, loses all interest in life, and dies. As might be expected, attitude plays a paramount role in the bewitchment. One physician found that he could save similar victims of sorcery in Hawaii by giving them methylene blue tablets. The tablets colored the victims' urine and thus convinced them that a successful counter-charm had been administered. Although there are no well-documented cases of bewitchment death in Salem, the anthropological studies indicate the remarkable depth of reaction possible in a community that believes in its own magic.*

It is even more enlightening to compare the behavior of the bewitched with the neurotic syndrome psychologists refer to as conversion hysteria. A neurosis is a disorder of behavior that functions to avoid or deflect intolerable anxiety. Normally, an anxious person deals with his or her emotion through conscious action or thought. If the ordinary means of coping fail, however, the unconscious takes over. Hysterical patients will convert their mental worries into physical symptoms such as blindness, paralysis of various parts of the body, choking, fainting, or attacks of pain. These symptoms, it should be stressed, cannot be traced to organic causes. There is nothing wrong with the nervous system during an attack of paralysis, or with the optic nerve in a case of blindness. Physical disabilities are mentally induced. Such hysterical attacks often occur in patterns that bear striking resemblance to some of the Salem afflictions.

*The records hint that a few bewitchment deaths may have occurred, however. Daniel Wilkins apparently believed that John Willard was a witch and meant him no good. Wilkins sickened and some of the afflicted girls were summoned to his bedside where they claimed that they saw Willard's specter afflicting him. The doctor would not touch the case, claiming it "preternatural." Shortly after, Wilkins died.



A classical hysterial convulsion, the *arc de cercle*, took the form shown in this nineteenth-century drawing.

Pierre Janet, the French physician who wrote the classic *Major Symptoms of Hysteria* (1907), reported that a characteristic hysterical fit begins with a pain or strange sensation in some part of the body, often the lower abdomen. From there, he explained, it

seems to ascend and to spread to other organs. For instance, it often spreads to the epigastrium [the region lying over the stomach], to the breasts, then to the throat. There it assumes rather an interesting form, which was for a very long time considered as quite characteristic of hysteria. The patient has the sensation of too big an object as it were, a ball rising in her throat and choking her.

Most of us have probably experienced a mild form of the last symptom—a proverbial "lump in the throat" that comes in times of stress. The hysteric's lump, or *globus hystericus*, is more extreme, as are the accompanying convulsions: "the head is agitated in one direction or another, the eyes closed, or open with an expression of terror, the mouth distorted." Often the patient will form what was known as the *arc de cercle*, head thrown back, abdomen raised up, body arched in a backward arc.

Compare those symptoms with the ones manifested by the witching victims. Samuel Willard, a Boston minister, described with particular care the fit of Elizabeth Knapp, an adolescent who had come under his care in 1671:

In the evening, a little before she went to bed, sitting by the fire she cried out, "Oh! My legs!" and clapped her hand on them; immediately, "Oh! My breast!" and removed her hands thither; and forthwith, "Oh! I am strangled!" and put her hands on her throat.

The fits continued, Willard wrote, "violent in body motions, leaping, strainings and strange agitations, scarce to be held in bound by the strength of three or four." During the Salem trials Elizabeth Brown's fit was described in similar fashion:

When [the witch's specter] did come it was as birds pecking her legs or pricking her with the motion of thair wings and then it would rize up into her stamak with pricking pain as nayls and pins of which she did bitterly complain and cry out like a woman in travail and after that it would rise to her throat in a bunch like a pullets egg and then she would tern back her head and say witch you shant choak me.

Similar symptoms are reported throughout the trial records. Choking is unusually common; there are cases of *arc de cercle*; and the hysteric's ability to induce bruises or welts on the skin may well explain some of the "teeth" marks and other signs of tormentors that so astonished the Salem authorities.

The diagnosis of hysteria certainly helps resolve the historical debate over the afflicted girls' motivation. Adolescents, especially in the presence of Tituba, might very well have succumbed to the suggestion of bewitchment. The fits they experienced were very likely genuine, born of anxiety over a magic that threatened to overpower them. The diagnosis also explains many of the adult fits experienced by those who were convinced that their neighbors were conjuring against them. This is not to say that there was no acting at all; indeed, hysterics are notably suggestible, and no doubt the young women shaped their performances, at least instinctively, to the expectations of the community. "Differences between malingers and hysterics are not absolute," notes one modern psychiatry text, "and we often find many hysterical traits in malingers and some near-conscious play acting in the hysterical patient." We will probably never know for sure how much the behavior of the possessed was play acting, but it seems clear that in a world where witches were reputed to possess the powers of life and death and where preternatural occurrences were an everyday affair, Abigail Williams, Mary Warren, and the other girls suffered torments that were very real indeed.

THE VISIBLE SALEM

So far, our reconstruction has dealt with only one aspect of the microcosm that was Salem in 1692—its invisible world. The area is a natural one to examine because it helps answer the central question of why the actors in the drama behaved the way they did. It would be tempting, having made the diagnosis of conversion hysteria, to suppose



A hysterical convulsive attack of one of the patients in Salpêtrière Hospital during the nineteenth century. J. M. Charcot, the physician in charge of the clinic, spent much of his time studying the disorder. Note the crossed legs, similar to some of the Salem girls' fits.

that we had pretty well explained the Salem trials. There is the natural satisfaction of placing the symptoms of the twentieth-century hysteric next to those of the seventeenth-century bewitched and seeing them match. Further correlations obtained from the primary sources make the explanation a convincing one. Yet it takes only a moment's reflection to see that, by narrowing the inquiry to the motivations of the possessed, we have left many other facets of the Salem episode unexplored.

In the first place, hysteria as a cause deals with the Salem trials on a personal rather than a social level. Hysteria is, after all, a disorder that affects individuals. In Salem it spread far enough to be labelled mass hysteria, but even that is less a social explanation than a personal one writ large. Granting for the moment that the afflicted really did make their accusations out of hysterical delusion, there are the accused themselves to consider—some 150 of them all told. Why were those particular people singled out? A few may have been practicing witchcraft, but the majority were innocent. Is there any common bond among the 150 that would explain why they, and not others, were accused? Only after we have examined their social identities can we answer that question.

Another indication that we need to examine the social context of Salem Village is the nature of hysteria itself. Hysterics are notably susceptible: sensitive to the influence of their environment. Nineteenth-century patients who were kept in insane asylums along with epileptics, for example, began having seizures that mimicked those suffered by the epileptics. If hysterics, then, are especially influenced by the behavior of those around them, it seems logical to assume that the possessed at Salem might have been influenced by the expectations of the adult community. Scattered testimony in the court record suggests that sometimes when the young women saw spectators whom they could not identify, adults suggested names. "Was it Goody Cloyse? Was it Rebecca Nurse?" If such conditions were operating, they confirm the need to move beyond strictly personal motivations to the social setting of the community.

In doing so, a logical first step would be to look for correlations: characteristics common to groups that might explain their behavior. Are the accusers all church members and the accused non-church members? Are the accusers wealthy and respectable while the accused are poor and disreputable? The historian assembles the data, patiently shuffles them around, and looks for match-ups.

Take the two social characteristics already mentioned, church membership and wealth. Historians can compile lists from the trial records of both the accusers and the accused. With those lists in hand, they can begin checking the church records to discover which people on each list were church members. Or they will search tax records to see whose tax rates were highest and thus which villagers were wealthiest. Records of land transactions are recorded, indicating which villagers owned the most land. Inventories of personal property are made when a member of the community dies, so at least historians have some record of an individual's assets at his death, if not in 1692. Other records may mention a trade or occupation, which will give a clue to relative wealth or social status.

If you make such calculations for the Salem region, you will quickly find yourself at a dead end, a spot altogether too familiar to practicing historians. True, the first few accused witches were not church members, but soon enough the faithful found themselves in jail along with non-church members. A similar case holds for wealth: although Trubba, Sarah Good, and Sarah Osbourne were relatively poor, merchants and wealthy farmers were accused as the epidemic spread. The correlations fail to check.

This was roughly the point that had been reached by two historians, Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, when they were inspired, in effect, to take literally the advice about going back to the drawing board. More than a hundred years earlier Charles Upham had made a detailed map of Salem for his own study of the witchcraft episode. Upham examined the old town records, paged the actual sites of old houses, and established to the best of his knowledge the residences of a large majority of Salem Villagers. Boyer and Nissenbaum took their list of accuser and accused and noted the location of each village resident on the map.* The results were striking, as can be seen from the map, on the next page.

Of the fourteen accused witches living in the village, twelve lived in the eastern section. Of the thirty-two adult villagers who testified against the accused, thirty lived in the western section. "In other words," concluded Boyer and Nissenbaum, "the alleged witches and those who accused them resided on opposite sides of the Village." Furthermore, of

*Since many of the so-called witches and their accusers came from surrounding towns, only those from the village and from the area close by were included in the calculations. A few villagers' residences were also unknown.

twenty-nine residents who publicly defended the accused in some way (marked by a "D" on the map), twenty-four lived in the eastern half of the village. Often they were close neighbors of the accused. It is moments like these that make the historian want to behave, were it not for the staid air of research libraries, like Archimedes in his fabled bathtub.

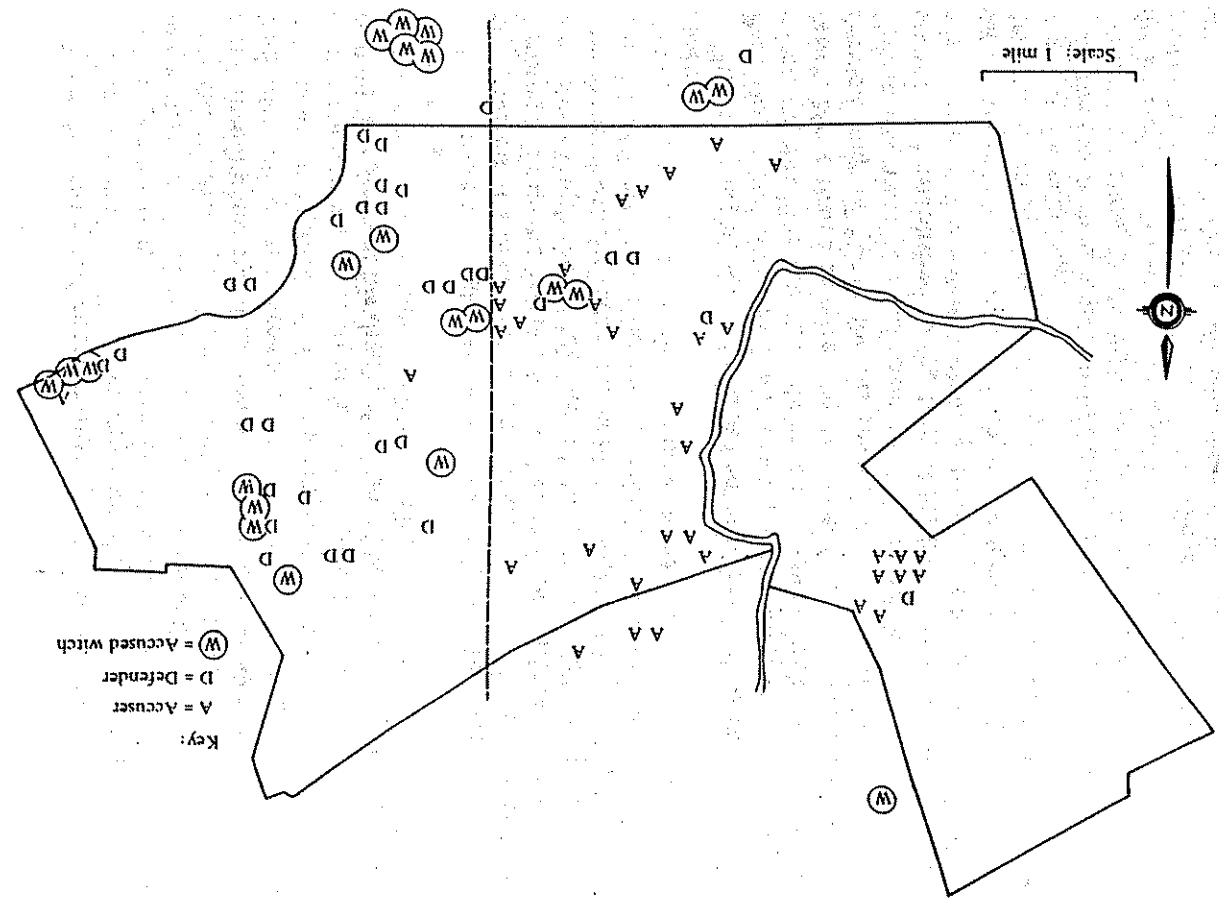
The discovery is only the beginning of the task. The geographic chart tells us more about what the trials were *not* than what they were. We can see, at least, that the controversy did not arise out of neighborhood quarrels in the narrow sense of the word—people thinking their next-door neighbors were witches and accusing them. What seems to be at work is a larger division. What that division is, other than a general "east-west" split, the map does not say. But it does provide a clue about where to begin.

Boyer and Nissenbaum began to explore the history of the village itself, expanding their microcosm of 1692 backward in time. They investigated a condition that historians had long recognized but had never associated with the Salem witch trials. That was Salem Village's anomalous relation to its social parent, Salem Town.

Salem Town's settlement followed the pattern of most coastal New England towns. Original settlers usually set up houses around a central location and carved their farmlands out of the surrounding countryside. As a settlement prospered, the land in its immediate vicinity came to be completely taken up. In many cases, a group of settlers would then move out and start a new settlement, like bees hiving off for a new home. Other times, the process was less deliberate. Houses were erected farther and farther away from the central meeting house. When enough outlying residents found it inconvenient to come to church or attend to other civic duties, they sought recognition as a separate village, with their own church, their own taxes, and their own elected officials.

Here the trouble started. The settlers who lived toward the center of town were reluctant to let their outlying neighbors break away. Everyone paid taxes to support a minister for the town church, to maintain the roads, and to care for the poor. If a chunk of the village split off, revenue would be lost. Furthermore, outlying settlers would no longer share the common burdens, such as guarding the town at night. So the centrally located settlers usually resisted any movement for autonomy by their more distant neighbors. Such disputes were a regular feature of New England life.

Salem Town had followed this pattern. Its first settlers located on a peninsula extending into Massachusetts Bay, where they might ply a



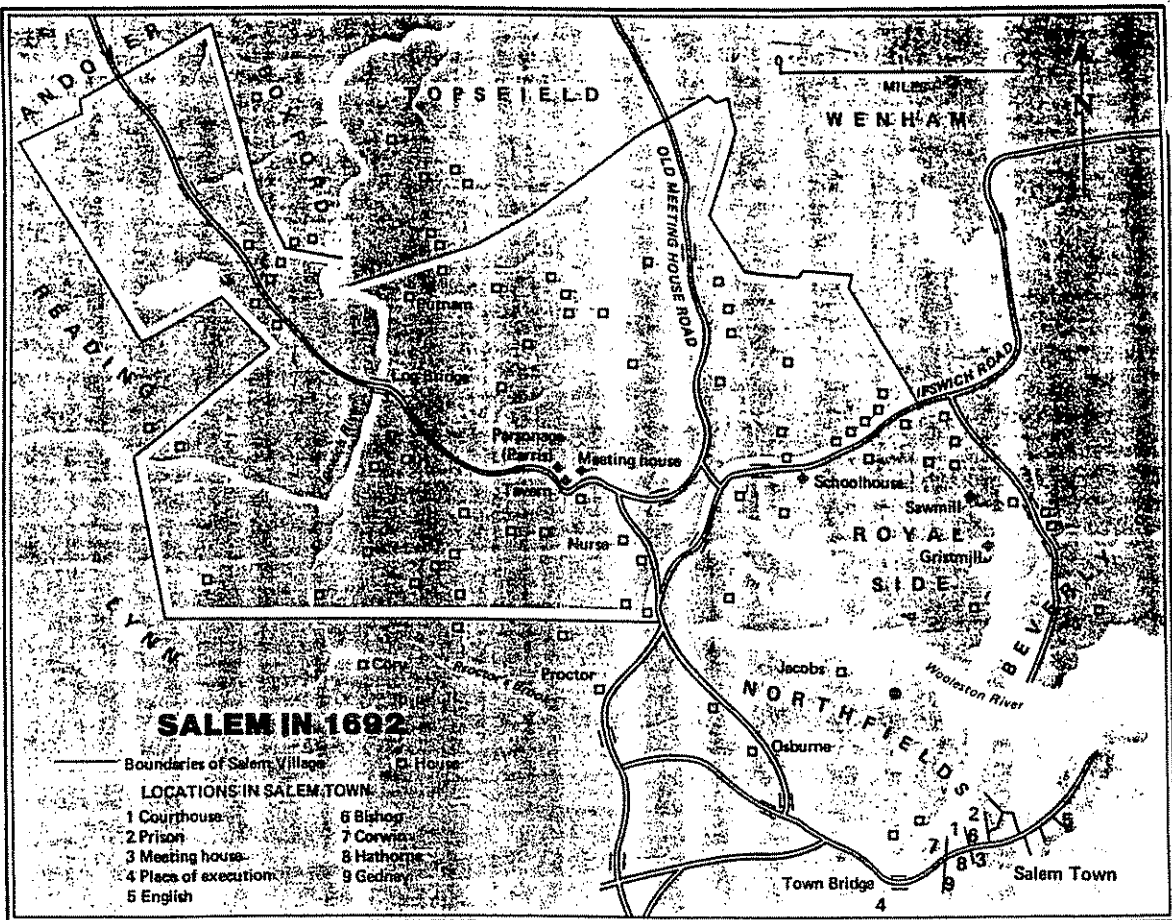
"The Geography of Witchcraft," in Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed* (Harvard University Press, 1974).

the General Court of Massachusetts, the colony's legislature, allowed Salem Village to build its own meeting house instead of forcing residents to worship in Salem Town. In other matters, however, the Court kept the village dependent. Salem Town still collected village taxes, chose village constables, arranged for village roads, established the prices at which certain grains could be sold, and continued to oversee village land grants. The General Court records include petition after petition from villagers, submitted to no avail, complaining about tax rates, patrol duties, boundary rulings. Admittedly, the village's semi-autonomous status was unusual. In most town disputes the General Court either allowed a new settlement to separate or it didn't. But for whatever unknown reasons, the Court granted autonomy only in 1752, sixty years after the witchcraft episode.

Here, then, is one definite "east-west" split. But it is important to remember that thus far, we have described a division between the village and the town. The line so graphically drawn on Boyer and Nissenbaum's map is within the village itself. What cause would the village have for division?

Many causes, the records indicate; chief among them the choice of a minister. Not long after the village received the right to build its own meeting house, it settled down to arguing over who ought to preach from its pulpit. Matters began well enough in 1673 with the selection of James Bayley, but then complaints began to be heard. Bayley didn't attend regularly to his private prayers. Church members had not been fully consulted before his selection. After a flurry of petitions and counter-petitions, Bayley left in 1680, and George Burroughs was hired. Three years later Burroughs left in another dispute. He was succeeded by Deodat Lawson, who lasted through four more years of quarrels. Finally Samuel Parris occupied the pulpit after 1688. His term was equally stormy, and in 1696 his opponents finally succeeded in starving him out of the job by refusing to collect taxes to pay his salary.

The maneuverings that went on during the years of bickering were intricate enough to discourage most historians from bothering with them. But Boyer and Nissenbaum recognized that the church records, the petitions and counter-petitions, the minutes of the Village Committee provided an invaluable key to local divisions. At bottom, it was not the piety of the ministers alone that was in dispute. Equally crucial was who had power in the village—power over piety or anything else. When the lists from the different quarrels were compared, Boyer and Nissenbaum found that the same names were being grouped together. The



"Salem in 1692," from *Freedom and Crisis* by R. Jackson Wilson and Allen Weinstein (Random House, 1974), p. 83.

prosperous colonial trade. By 1668 four outlying areas (Wenham, Manchester, Marblehead, and Beverly) had already become separate towns. Now the "Salem Farmers," living directly to the west, were petitioning for a similar settlement, and the "Townsmen" were resisting. In 1672

people who supported James Bayley usually supported George Burroughs and then opposed the second two ministers. Conversely, the supporters of Deodat Lawson and Samuel Parris had been the people who complained about Bayley and Burroughs. And—here is the connecting link—the two lists from those disputes coincide closely with the divisions in 1692 between accusers and accused.

Suddenly the Salem witch trials take on an entirely new appearance. Instead of being a dramatic disruption that appears out of nowhere in a village kitchen and then disappears equally suddenly at the end of ten months, it becomes an elaboration of a quarrel that has gone on for nearly twenty years!

What lay behind the divisions? One reading of the evidence suggests that the larger split between Salem Town and Salem Village was reflected in the village itself, with the villagers on the east retaining enough of a common bond with the town to continue their affiliation and the westerners favoring complete separation. Boyer and Nissenbaum argue that the division also went beyond the simple geographical one to a difference in outlook and lifestyle. Salem Town was entering into its own as one of the two major commercial centers of New England. It had a growing merchant class whose wealth would soon support the building of fine mansions and an opulent living style. By contrast the farmers in the western portion of Salem Village were tied more closely to traditional agrarian life: subsistence farming, spartan daily lives, a suspicion of the commercial habits of credit extension and speculative investment. What was worse, the Salem Farmers found themselves increasingly hard-pressed economically. The land available in the village was dwindling. What land there was proved less fertile than the broad plains on the eastern side of the village and along the northern flats of Salem Town.

Once again, the statistics of the social historian substantiate this portrait. Draw a map of Salem Village indicating land holdings, and you will find the eastern faction's property tending to enclose the village on all but its western borders. Make a list of the farmers and merchants who were elected town selectmen, and you will find that before 1665, twice as many farmers as merchants were chosen, but from 1665 to 1700 the ratio was six to one in favor of the merchants.

Look, too, at the occupations of the accused witches and their defenders. Many lived along the Ipswich Road, a route that passed by the village rather than through it, a main thoroughfare for travellers and for commerce. The tradesmen who had set up shop there included a carpenter, sawmill operator, shoemaker, miller. And of course there were the

taverns, mainstays of travellers, yet always slightly suspect to Puritans. The people along the Ipswich Road were not rich, most of them, but their commercial links were with Salem Town and with outsiders; they were small-scale entrepreneurs rather than farmers. Out of twenty-one villagers who lived along or near the road, only two signed petitions linking them with the western faction; thirteen signed petitions linking them with the eastern faction. Two tavernkeepers, John Proctor and Bridget Bishop, were hung as witches; Elizabeth Proctor barely escaped with her life; and Joshua Rea, another tavernkeeper on the road, signed a petition defending Goody Nurse.

Given Boyer and Nissenbaum's portrait of village factions, we can begin to suggest an alternate way of looking at the Salem trials. Traditional accounts place Samuel Parris, the examining magistrates, and their supporters as the protagonists, terrorizing innocent villagers and controlling the trials as undisputed leaders of the village. Certainly Parris's supporters had their day in 1692, but from the longer perspective they appear to have been fighting a losing battle. The Salem trials can be seen as an indirect yet anguished protest of a group of villagers whose agrarian way of life was being threatened by the rising commercialism of Salem Town. Similar conflicts were to be repeated, in different forms, throughout American history. Thomas Jefferson in his own day would contrast the corrupting influence of cities and manufacturers with the virtuous life of the independent yeoman farmer; western Populists a century later would arraign the "Money Power" of the East for its commercial sins. Salem's uniqueness lay, if Boyer and Nissenbaum's reconstruction proves correct, in the indirect means by which the conflict was expressed. Their reconstruction suggests that the Salem body politic was experiencing its own social analogue of conversion hysteria. When the political and religious institutions of town and village government were unable to resolve divisions on a conscious level, the conflict was converted into the camouflaged symptoms of an entirely different sort—a plague from the invisible world.

"WOMEN ALONE"

While Boyer and Nissenbaum have gone to ingenious lengths to tease out correlations based on the geography of witchcraft, there is another striking connection to be made. That is the link between witchcraft and gender.

By a large majority, the accused witches of Salem were women. As

historian Carol Karlsen has determined, out of 178 accused witches who can be identified by name, more than three out of four were female. And if the backgrounds of accused men are examined, it turns out that nearly half of them were husbands, sons, or other relatives of accused women. The gender gap widens further when witchcraft outside Salem is examined. Of 147 additional accused witches in seventeenth-century New England, 82 percent were women. In those cases which actually came to trial (41), thirty-four involved women and only seven involved men. Of the women tried, 53 percent were convicted. Of the men only two were convicted, or 29 percent. And of those who were not only convicted but executed, women outnumbered men 15 to 2.

When Karlsen examined the trial records in more detail, she found that the authorities tended to treat accused women differently from men. Magistrates and ministers often put pressure on women to confess their guilt. In New England cases (excluding Salem), when that pressure led a woman to confess a "familiarity with Satan," she was invariably executed, in accordance with the Biblical command, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." But when men were accused, pressure was seldom applied to make them confess. In fact, confessions from men were not always accepted. In 1652, one John Broadstreet of Rowley admitted having familiarity with Satan. The court ordered him whipped and fined twenty shillings "for telling a lie." In 1674, Christopher Brown confessed to "discouraging with . . . the devil," but the court rejected his statement as being "inconsistent with truth." Hugh Crovia admitted that he had "signed the Devils book and then seald it with his blood." A Hartford grand jury refused to indict him.

Such evidence suggests that, by and large, most seventeenth-century New Englanders *expected* women to be witches, whereas men who confessed were seldom believed. But why should women be singled out for such attention?

Part of the answer, Karlsen argues, lay in the cultural position of women. Women were traditionally subordinate to men and seen as the "weaker sex." In medieval Europe, this was made abundantly clear by the reigning folklore. One of the most widely read books on witchcraft was *Malleus Maleficarum*, issued in 1486 by Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger. "More women than men are ministers of the devil," Kramer and Sprenger explained, because "all witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable." On the other hand, continued Kramer and Sprenger, "Christ was willing to be born and to suffer" in his life on earth, in order to preserve "the male sex from so great a crime."

The Puritans of New England were by no means as explicit in their denunciation of women. Like Martin Luther and other Reformation theologians, they exalted the role of motherhood over the chaste life of the convent, seeing women as partners and helpmeets in marriage. For all that, though, Puritans retained a hierarchical conception of marriage. They viewed families as miniature commonwealths, with the husband as the ruler and his family willing subjects. "A true wife accounts her subjection [as] her honor and freedom," noted Governor John Winthrop of Massachusetts.

A wife's unequal status was reflected legally as well: she was known in law as a *feme covert*—one whose identity was "covered" by that of her husband. As such, she had no right to buy or sell property, sue or be sued, or make contracts. Similarly, the patterns of inheritance in New England were male dominated. A husband might leave his widow property—indeed, the law required him to leave her at least a third of his estate. But she was to "have and enjoy" that property only "during term of her natural life." She could not waste or squander it, for it was passed on to the family's heirs at her death. Similarly, daughters might inherit property, but if they were already married, it belonged to the husband. If a young woman had not yet married, property usually seems to have been held for her, "for improvement," until she married.

Thus the only sort of woman who held any substantial economic power was a widow who had not remarried. Such a woman was known as a *feme sole*, or "woman alone." She did have the right to sue, to make contracts, and to buy or sell property. Even when remarrying, a widow could sometimes protect her holdings by having her new husband sign an antenuptial contract, guaranteeing before marriage that the wife would keep certain property as her own. In male-dominated New England, these protections made the *feme sole* stand out as an anomaly—a "woman alone" who did not fit comfortably into the ordinary scheme of things.

Given that women in Puritan society were placed in decidedly subordinate roles, how does that help explain the preponderance of female witches? As it turns out, a significant number of accused witches were women who were *not* subordinate in some way. They did not fit accepted stereotypes of the way women were expected to behave. In refusing to conform, they threatened the traditional order of society. And standing out as they did, Karlsen argues, they were more likely to be perceived as the ultimate "subversives" of seventeenth-century soci-

ety: those who joined Satan in an attempt to subvert the heavenly order itself.

One way a woman might stand out was through a contentious, argumentative nature. If it was a woman's duty to submit quietly to the rule of men and glory in "subjection," then quite a few witches refused to conform to the accepted role. We have already seen how Martha Carrier's "threatenings" and Sarah Good's "muttering and scolding ex-treamly" was perceived by Salem Villagers to have caused the death of cattle. Trial records are filled with similar accusations. On the other hand, the behavior of accused witches was not always the spark which started a quarrel. In some cases, a town resident seems to have tried to take possession of a widow's lands. When the widow protested, or brought a countersuit, she was accused of witchcraft. In either situation, the women at risk were those who refused to bend submissively to the will of the accuser.

More than short tempers were at stake, however. A remarkably high percentage of accused women were "women alone" in an economic sense. Of the 124 witches whose inheritance patterns can be reconstructed from surviving records, as many as 71 (57 percent) lived or had lived in families with no male heirs. Another 14 accused witches were the daughters or granddaughters of witches who did not have brothers or sons to inherit their property. This is at least twice the number one would expect, given the usual percentage of "women alone" in the New England population. Furthermore, of the women executed at Salem, over half had inherited, or stood to inherit their own property. Such statistics indeed seem to indicate why witchcraft controversies so often centered on women.

Having reconstructed the social fabric of Salem—either in terms of "women alone" or a rising tide of commercialism—must we discard our earlier theories about conversion hysteria and the motivations of accusers? Not necessarily. The witchcraft controversy may well have started innocently enough in the kitchen of Samuel Parris. Tituba, Bridget Bishop, and others may well have been practicing magic. Certainly an agrarian faction in the village did not consciously "get up" the trials to punish their commercial neighbors. Nor was the male Puritan patriarchy launching a deliberate war against women. But as the accusations spread wider and controversy engulfed the town, it was only natural that longstanding quarrels and prejudices were drawn into the debate. The interconnections between a people's religious beliefs, their habits of commerce, even their dream and fantasy lives, are intri-

cate and fine, entwined with one another like the delicate root system of a growing plant. Historians who limit their examination to a small area of time and space are able to untangle, through persistent probing, the many strands of emotions, motivations, and social structures that provided the context for those slow processions to the gallows on Witch's Hill.