Essay Review

WITCHCRAFT AND THE LIMITS OF INTERPRETATION

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THE great European witch-hunts rose and vanished in little more than three centuries. This cycle had nearly run its course by the time the colonists in New England undertook to find and punish witches. Belated though it was, witchcraft and witch-hunting in New England had the same structure as witchcraft in England and, taking due account of certain differences, as witchcraft on the Continent. The road that leads to Salem in 1692 originates in Europe. So too the road to an understanding of our native witches and witch-hunters originates in the historiography of their European counterparts.

A turning point in the historiography of European witchcraft came when it was realized that the "rational" or scientific historians had failed to make sense of the phenomenon.[1] According to Henry C. Lea and others of his persuasion, witchcraft was entirely irrational, a superstition that violated common sense. Lea blamed the witch-hunts on a clergy that wanted to enhance or maintain its power. Transforming witchcraft into heresy, clerics had encouraged the slaughtering of innocent victims, many of whom confessed under torture to crimes they had never committed. The alternative to this interpretation originated with social anthropologists who studied witchcraft in preliterate societies. In those communities, belief in witches was endemic, not sporadic, and "real" in meeting certain social needs. Witchcraft was functional, either because it affirmed village solidarity or because it relieved social strain. Accusations

[1] The historiography is reviewed and criticized by E. William Monter, in "The Historiography of European Witchcraft: Progress and Prospects," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 2 (1972): 435–51; H. C. Erik Midelfort, "Witchcraft, Magic, and the Occult," in *Reformation Europe: A Guide to Research*, ed. Steven Ozment (St. Louis: Center for Reformation Research, 1982), pp. 183–209; M. J. Kephart, "Rationalists vs. Romantics among Scholars of Witchcraft," in *Witchcraft and Sorcery*, ed. Max Marwick, 2d ed. (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1982), pp. 326–42; and Christina Larner, *Enemies of God: The Witch-hunt in Scotland* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1981), chap. 2.

were not random but patterned; that is, certain types of persons were singled out as "witches." The structure of witchcraft in preliterate societies provided the basis for reappraising witchcraft in the village communities of early modern Europe, and it was found that here too witchcraft was socially functional and "real," not some obscurantist belief that would vanish with the rise of science.[2]

Two historians, Keith Thomas and Alan Macfarlane, would apply anthropology to European witchcraft in the books each wrote, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* and *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England*. These books were closely linked; Thomas had supervised Macfarlane's thesis, and Macfarlane had read his mentor's work-in-progress. Using to advantage the anthropological literature on witchcraft in Africa, Macfarlane and Thomas argued that witchcraft in the form of maleficium (occult means of doing evil or harm) was endemic and arose from the very "roots of society." For those who were variously victims, accusers, and witches residing in the same close-knit community, witchcraft was a form of social interaction among neighbors. Macfarlane and Thomas suggested that accusations of witchcraft sprang from one particular mode of interaction: the accuser had angered someone else and then, expecting retribution, experienced a misfortune that he attributed to maleficium. Witchcraft was thus an outgrowth of conflict and its psychic consequences, including guilt. It was also, Thomas argued, a means of making sense out of misfortune for which there was no other obvious cause.[3]

Like other students of witchcraft in early modern Europe, Thomas and Macfarlane wanted to explain why accusations increased sharply during that period. Thomas linked the upsurge in cases to the Protestant Reformation, which, he argued, had discredited most of the countermagic that villagers had previously employed to protect themselves against maleficium. More important, however, was the social strain resulting from the onset of a market economy. The traditional economy of the village had sustained an ethic of charity to one's neighbors, but when the individualism of the

[2] Lucy Mair, *Witchcraft* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), pp. 199–200; Keith Thomas, "The Relevance of Social Anthropology to the Historical Study of English Witchcraft," in *Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations*, ed. Mary Douglas (London: Tavistock, 1970), pp. 47–79.

[3] Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), chap. 17, and Alan Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), pp. 111–12.

market economy undermined this obligation, every village became an arena of conflict between old values and new. This conflict emerged whenever someone rejected a neighbor's request for aid. Hence, said Thomas, the sequence of rejection, anger, guilt, and accusations of witchcraft. Guilt turned into accusations of maleficium when and if misfortune followed, for misfortune lent itself to interpretation as revenge by the offended party.[4]

Along the way, Thomas disposed of Margaret Murray's hypothesis that witchcraft was actually being practiced by a pagan cult that had survived the Christianization of Europe.[5] He also questioned Russell Hope Robbins's argument that "the theological concept of witchcraft" as heresy was "imposed" on the people. Thomas observed that "the great bulk of witchcraft accusations in England did not relate to any alleged heretical activities upon the part of the witch."[6] In this regard the prosecution of witches in England differed markedly from the prosecution of witches in Scotland and parts of continental Europe. Indeed there were other substantial differences. The actual incidence of witchcraft cases in England was much lower than in contemporary Scotland or southwestern Germany, where canon law sanctioned inquisitorial justice and the use of torture; in common-law England, torture was infrequent and witches were hanged, not burned as heretics. For the most part English witches did not confess to participating in sexual orgies or the witches' sabbat. Nor did they say that they had signed compacts with the devil. Only in the famous Essex witch-hunt of 1645 did the devil's pact become significant.[7]

The English materials were instructive in several other respects. English witches tended to be slightly poorer than most of their neighbors. This finding precluded any interpretation of witch-hunting as a form of social protest by the poor or an agrarian peasantry against their betters, as some historians had suggested was the case

[4] Thomas, *Religion and Magic*, pp. 490–98, 560, chap. 17, pp. 553–62.

[5] Thomas, *Religion and Magic*, pp. 514–16. Virtually every recent historian dismisses Margaret Murray. An important critique of her work that also takes in Montague Summers, Carlo Ginzburg, and others is Norman Cohn's *Europe's Inner Demons: An Enquiry Inspired by the Great Witch-Hunt* (1975; reprinted New York: New American Library, 1977), pp. 107–15, 119–21.

[6] Thomas, *Religion and Magic*, pp. 456–58, 450.

[7] Thomas, *Religion and Magic*, chap. 14; Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in England*, pp. 18, 20; Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, p. 254. On the Essex witch-hunt, see Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in England*, p. 139.

in France.[8] The English judicial system, like that of other regions, seemed able to differentiate between convincing and unconvincing evidence of witchcraft; many more than half of all the persons brought to trial were acquitted, a ratio that increased sharply after 1620. Like other historians before and after them, Thomas and Macfarlane found that the machinery of enforcement ceased to function long before accusations disappeared.[9]

The chapters on witchcraft in *Religion and the Decline of Magic* are masterful. Yet some readers found them wanting. One important critic was Norman Cohn, who felt that Thomas had not really explained the timing of the witch-hunts. Cohn pointed out that "a fund of popular suspicion," that is, maleficium, antedated the witch-hunts of the early modern period. Precisely for this reason, he insisted, maleficium in and of itself was insufficient to explain the rhythm of prosecutions on the Continent. The question that concerned him, therefore, was the transformation of maleficium into an ideology that allowed, or made necessary, the mass pursuit of witches. The answer lay in the emergence of a complex demonology that turned witches into heretics and magic into something understood as threatening to religion. Cohn sketched the convergence in the late middle ages of certain themes and fantasies—night-flying heretical sects, the witches' sabbat, compacts with the devil. Out of this potent combination came a new understanding of witches as engaged in a conspiracy against the Christian church. Contemporaries found ample proof of this conspiracy in the confessions that inquisitorial procedures drew out of hundreds of suspects. These inquisitors, Cohn declared, were an elite group, the bishops, magistrates, and lawyers who were set apart from the people by literacy and social rank. Using their powers to advantage, this elite conducted the great witch-hunts in order to eradicate real or imagined opposition to authority. Cohn stressed, therefore, the significance of a new demonology and of organized, political authority. "Left to themselves," he concluded, "peasants would never have created mass witch hunts—these occurred only where and when the authorities

[8] Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *The Peasants of Languedoc* (1966; reprinted, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), pt. 2, chap. 5.

[9] No single factor seems to explain the "decline" of witch-hunting, and interpretations vary from one historian to the next. Certainly a loss of confidence among the magistrates in trial procedures, and a corresponding reluctance to prosecute, was crucial. An outstanding study is Robert Mandrou's *Magistrats et Sorciers en France au xvii^e Siècle* (1968; reprinted, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1980).

had become convinced of the reality of the sabbat and of nocturnal flights to the sabbat."[10]

Christina Larner supported this interpretation in *Enemies of God*, a careful study of witchcraft and witch-hunting in Scotland. Witchcraft prosecutions in Scotland were of a different order of magnitude than those in England; in the same decades that saw some 300 English witches executed, the Scottish authorities put to death an estimated 1,300 persons out of a much smaller population. Witchcraft prosecutions on this scale deserved the title of "witch-hunt," the term she preferred. Larner had a second reason for referring to the Scottish experience as a witch-hunt. She linked the onset of prosecution in the late sixteenth century with the emergence of a new kind of civil state that was attempting to assert its legitimacy and extend its range of control. In her view, "witchcraft was an activity fostered by the ruling class; it was not a spontaneous movement on the part of the peasantry." A crucial factor in Scotland was the evolution of legal machinery in the direction of "abstract, rational bureaucratic justice with repressive sanctions." Legal rationality became the instrument of a national state bent on imposing ideological conformity.[11]

A political interpretation of witchcraft was not new, of course, for the "rationalist" or scientific historians of the late nineteenth century had also described ordinary people as victims of an elite-led crusade. Larner and Cohn departed from this frame of reference in several respects. For them there was no conspiracy, no backstage machinations by a priesthood. More important, no one had to invent the demonology that turned witches into heretics. A medley of fantasies and concepts, some originating in Scripture, others in pre-Christian myth or paganism, and still others vaguely folkloric, had converged in the late middle ages. Cohn and Larner discriminated between popular and learned culture but also—and in Larner's case quite strongly—argued for an intermingling. In doing so, they distanced themselves from an alternative political interpretation, the one much favored by some French historians of popular culture, that an urban bourgeoisie used witch-hunting as one weapon

[10] Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons*, pp. 154, 238–39, 246–78, 252.

[11] Larner, *Enemies of God*, pp. 1, 21–23. See also, Mair, *Witchcraft*, p. 198: "The elaboration of the ideology of witchcraft goes with the development of a tradition of scholastic learning such as was only possible in a literate society, and of religious and political institutions seeking to make effective a centralized authority over an area much wider than was ever covered by any African polity."

in a broader campaign to suppress the culture of the peasants.[12]

Larner filled out her interpretation with a critique of Thomas and Macfarlane. Like Cohn, she dissented from their functionalism because it did not seem to explain the increased incidence of witchcraft. If conflict were endemic in the peasant community before the late sixteenth century, as surely it had been, then its later presence did not account for the upsurge in prosecutions. Nor did Larner accept the argument that witchcraft was an outgrowth of "social strain." In her view there was no obvious way of demonstrating greater strain in one period or community than in another.[13] She and Cohn would have a surprising ally in Alan Macfarlane when, on further reflection, it seemed to him that the great transition from small-scale "peasant communities" to "individualism" had occurred several centuries earlier than at first he had supposed.[14] Historians of witchcraft on the Continent were critical of functionalism for other reasons. Erik Midelfort, reflecting on the functionalist assumption that witchcraft prosecutions helped to strengthen a society, concluded that in southwestern Germany they had made matters worse, not better. William Monter, writing on witchcraft in France and Switzerland, found other social dynamics in the villages he studied than those Thomas and Macfarlane had specified.[15]

[12] Larner, *Enemies of God,* p. 23, chap. 11; Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons,* passim. Larner (*Enemies of God,* p. 25) summarizes the interpretation of Jean Delumeau; see also, Robert Muchembled, "Sorcellerie, culture populaire et christianisme au xvi[e] siècle, principalement en Flandre et Artois," *Annales: ESC* 28 (1973): 271–84.

[13] Larner, *Enemies of God,* pp. 21–23. Marwick's argument for witchcraft as a "gauge" of social strain is included in his *Witchcraft and Sorcery,* pp. 300–313. Mary Douglas has observed that "The general proposition that an increase in witchcraft accusations occurs as a symptom of disorder and moral collapse was superbly untestable" ("Introduction: Thirty Years after *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic,*" in her *Witchcraft Confessions,* p. xx).

[14] Alan Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), pp. 1, 59–60.

[15] H. C. Erik Midelfort, *Witch Hunting in Southwestern Germany, 1562–1684: The Social and Intellectual Foundations* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1972), pp. 1–2; E. William Monter, *Witchcraft in France and Switzerland: The Borderlands during the Reformation* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1976). Here may be the place to mention H. R. Trevor-Roper, "The European Witch-craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," in *Religion, the Reformation and Social Change and other Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1967) and his famous argument that witchcraft accusations arose out of the antagonism between lowlands and highlands, the latter associated with heresy. Monter joins Macfarlane in criticizing this argument. Here may also be the place to point out that anthropologists are vigorously reexamining the uses they have made of functionalism. See, e.g., Douglas, "Introduction: Thirty Years after *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic,*" pp. xiii–xxxviii;

We should not take this conflict of opinion to mean that we must always prefer functionalism to the political interpretation or vice versa. Each is important. It is beyond doubt that witchcraft was heresy in the eyes of the church and persecuted accordingly in some regions. Everywhere, even in England by the middle of the seventeenth century, the notion of the devil's compact circulated widely, and everywhere this idea prepared the way for confessions that implicated large numbers of the innocent. It is also beyond doubt that Thomas, Macfarlane, and, before them, George Lyman Kittredge, were right to emphasize the role of maleficium. Jeffrey Burton Russell, in the course of elucidating the connections between witchcraft and heresy in the middle ages, has insisted that the majority of cases involved sorcery and "folk tradition" and relatively few the "formal definitions" laid down by "inquisitors and scholastics." The same often seems true of later centuries. Thomas was surely on firm ground, moreover, in assuming, like the anthropologists, that witchcraft accusations fell into patterns that revealed "ambiguous social relations" or "tensions between neighboring rivals [that] could not otherwise be resolved." As Mary Douglas has observed, in offering a tempered defense of functionalism, "People are trying to control one another, albeit with small success. The idea of witch is used to whip their own consciences or those of their friends."[16]

For Larner and Cohn, the significant process of control began with elites and not with villagers. But what really distanced Cohn from the functionalists was their assumption that witchcraft was normal and sane. In keeping with the anthropological literature, Macfarlane and Thomas argued that witchcraft was socially useful. Cohn disagreed. To him, the witch-hunts were a "vast holocaust," a "horrid picture." Witch-hunting was a form of social pathology, a process that lay quite outside the boundaries of the normal and was based, like that other dark vision of the Jew as conspirator, upon "fantasy." The less agitated tone of *Religion and the Decline of Magic* was linked with Thomas's assertion that large numbers of "cunning folk" were actually practicing magic and sorcery in sixteenth- and

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Marwick, introduction to his *Witchcraft and Sorcery*, and the essay by Kephart, "Rationalists vs. Romantics."

[16] George Lyman Kittredge, *Witchcraft in Old and New England* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1929); Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1972), pp. 18–19; Douglas, "Introduction: Thirty Years after *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic*," pp. xvii, xxv.

seventeenth-century England.[17] Though Cohn conceded that some sorcery was being practiced, he preferred to emphasize the slaughter of the innocent—which the cunning folk were not, or at least not entirely.

For some historians, the presence of these cunning folk had another significance. Their way of life betokened a widespread credulity in magic, a credulity that enabled the practice of magic to "work." The curse or blessing muttered by a village healer had real consequences because so many persons assumed, without thinking twice about it, that certain individuals possessed occult powers. The mental world that linked the cunning folk with their patrons and victims was a world that ignored the distinctions we have since imposed between the real and the imaginary, the natural and the supernatural.[18] As William Monter has pointedly remarked, twentieth-century historians of witchcraft must acknowledge "the relativism of their own concept of 'reality' " before they explain away what was seen and felt as real four hundred years ago.[19] The people of early modern Europe believed that matter and spirit were interchangeable. Nature was invested with occult or spiritual forces; any physical effect or symptom could result from something as intangible as a dream, a few spoken words, a lapse into sin, or the presence of a ghostly spirit. The world of man and nature was ultimately a moral order, with good contending against evil. Witchcraft and religion were but points along a spectrum, each dramatizing this great conflict.[20]

This line of interpretation carries us to the opposite extreme from

[17] Norman Cohn, "The Myth of Satan and His Human Servants," in Douglas, *Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations*, pp. 12–13; Thomas, *Religion and Magic*, chap. 8; Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in England*, chap. 8.

[18] Julio Caro Baroja, *The World of the Witches*, trans. O. N. V. Glendinning (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), pp. xxx, xi; Thomas, *Religion and Magic*, pp. 522–24, chap. 8.

[19] Monter, "The Historiography of European Witchcraft," p. 447. This point has prompted various sociologists and anthropologists to elaborate a "sociology of perception." A disappointing exercise of this kind is Dennis E. Owen's "Spectral Evidence: The Witchcraft Cosmology of Salem Village in 1692," in *Essays in the Sociology of Perception*, ed. Mary Douglas (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), pp. 275–301.

[20] The most sophisticated explication of this world view is Michael MacDonald's *Mystical Bedlam: Madness, Anxiety, and Healing in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), chap. 5 and passim. See also Thomas, *Religion and Magic*, chap. 8; Stuart Clark, "Inversion, Misrule and the Meaning of Witchcraft," *Past and Present* 87 (May 1980): 98–127; Sydney Anglo, ed., *The Damned Art: Essays in the Literature of Witchcraft* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977).

the rationalist historiography of the nineteenth century. One of the premises of that historiography, and a premise still worth recalling, was that witchcraft beliefs were not "universal" but intermittent and selectively distributed.[21] Indeed it is well established that certain contemporaries questioned the procedures for discovering witches and scoffed at popular beliefs. We may go further and assert that skepticism and credulity were intermixed, even in the mental world of those who readily accused others of the crime of witchcraft. Exactly how this intermixture functioned is not clear. Nor do we understand how "ideas that attract belief but are inactive in human affairs"—and witchcraft beliefs were very often inert or latent—become activated.[22] The contradictions that pervaded witchcraft certainly worked to inhibit the judicial system from pursuing every single person suspected of the practice. For its part, the medical community endeavored to distinguish "true" demonic possession from forms of mental illness.[23] Excluding phases of real panic, the history of witch-hunting in early modern Europe and America reveals a surprising capacity to suspend judgment and to discriminate. The more we explicate and make persuasive the functional and mental intelligibility of witchcraft, the more we also have to recognize that inconsistency and contradiction figure in the ideology that sustained both the witch-hunts and the cunning folk.

What then of witchcraft in New England? A century ago, no one could approach the subject without stumbling upon the twin issues of Puritanism and the role of the clergy. Charles Upham was but the most vehement of the antiquarians who insisted that Calvinism, or the Puritan version of it, perpetuated a literal belief in witchcraft that clergy such as Cotton Mather put to devastating use. The rebuttals were equally vehement and had the better of the evidence. The foremost rebutter, William L. Poole, contributed a chapter to *The Memorial History of Boston* summing up his point of view and narrating several of the most important cases to occur before Salem.

[21] George Lincoln Burr, "New England's Place in the History of Witchcraft," *American Antiquarian Society Proceedings*, n.s. 21 (1911): 185–217. As E. E. Evans-Pritchard remarks in his preface to Macfarlane's *Witchcraft in England*, "it is a problem why . . . some misfortunes are attributed to witches and others not" (p. xvi).

[22] Douglas, "Introduction: Thirty Years after *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic*," p. xxiv. Several of the essays in Anglo, *The Damned Art*, bear on the history of skepticism. See also Wallace Notestein, *A History of Witchcraft in England from 1558 to 1718* (1911; reprinted New York: Russell and Russell, 1965), chaps. 3, 10–12.

[23] Sanford J. Fox, Jr., *Science and Justice: The Massachusetts Witchcraft Trials* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968).

Half a century later, Kittredge was still caught up in these old battles. He would argue in his eccentric masterpiece, *Witchcraft in Old and New England,* that English and American demonology differed from continental theories and insist that Calvinism bore no responsibility for the witch-hunts in England and America. With him one great phase of interpretation came to a dead end. Sensing the exhaustion of these issues, Perry Miller would break with tradition by insisting that "the intellectual history of New England can be written as though no such thing [as Salem] ever happened. It had no effect on the ecclesiastical or political situation, it does not figure in the institutional or ideological development."[24]

Despite Kittredge and Poole, myth and error remain stubbornly embedded in "popular tradition," to borrow Chadwick Hansen's useful phrase. Hansen blames the nineteenth-century historian George Bancroft for perpetuating the story of a domineering clergy and a duped populace. Tracing the repetitions of this story down to the present, Hansen divides it into six separate propositions. Two of these propositions remain controversial: the behavior of the afflicted girls at Salem and the practice of witchcraft. The other four are utterly without substance, as Hansen demonstrates convincingly: the "afflicted persons were inspired, stimulated, and encouraged by the clergy"; the "clergy whipped the general populace into a state of 'mass hysteria' with their sermons and writings on witchcraft"; the "only significant opposition" to Salem "came from the merchant class"; and "the executions were unique . . . and attributable to some narrowness or fanaticism or repressiveness peculiar to Puritans."[25] I shall repeat: each of these propositions is wrong. Originating in the malice of Robert Calef or in a deep hostility to Puritanism, such notions are now the subject matter of the folklorist but no longer, thanks to Hansen, Kittredge, and Poole, the concern of the historian. To this general statement I must note one minor exception. Debate continues on the attitude and role of Cotton Mather, and

[24] Charles Upham, *Salem Witchcraft: With an Account of Salem Village and a History of Opinions on Witchcraft and Kindred Subjects,* 2 vols. (1867; reprinted New York: Frederick Ungar, 1966); William L. Poole, "Witchcraft in Boston," in *The Memorial History of Boston,* ed. Justin Winsor, 4 vols. (Boston: James R. Osgood, 1881), 2:131–72; Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1954), p. 191. Miller subsumed the Salem tragedy into his narrative of the rise and fall of the covenantal conception of New England's identity.

[25] Chadwick Hansen, *Witchcraft at Salem* (New York: George Braziller, 1969), pp. ix–x.

though none of his recent biographers is at all interested in making him responsible for Salem, David Levin and Kenneth Silverman disagree sharply, Levin interpreting the evidence in a liberal and forgiving manner, Silverman much more critical.[26]

Fifty years after Kittredge, the history of witchcraft in New England finally entered a new phase with the publication of *Salem Possessed*, by Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum.[27] This book escaped the stalemate of the 1920s by applying the procedures of the town study to Salem Village, an agricultural community that lay to the west of the seaport and the locale of the initial accusations in 1692. The stimulus behind *Salem Possessed* was not in any direct sense Macfarlane's work, though his interpretation shaped the final chapter of the book. Its authors were responsive, rather, to the wider vogue of social history, family reconstitution, and Kenneth Lockridge's provocative hypothesis of increasing (or portending) deprivation as communities outgrew their reserves of land.

The argument of *Salem Possessed* is too well known to need restating in detail. Boyer and Nissenbaum described a factionalism in Salem Village that erupted whenever one group pressed for ecclesiastical independence from Salem proper or brought in candidates for the ministry of a church that finally, after much dispute, was officially organized in 1688. This sort of factionalism was routine in colonial New England, yet Boyer and Nissenbaum perceived a deeper resonance to conflict in the Village. One group of residents was advancing economically even as another group faced the prospect or reality of decline. Boyer and Nissenbaum expanded this difference into one of attitude or consciousness: the prosperous were

[26] David Levin, *Cotton Mather: The Young Life of the Lord's Remembrancer* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978); Kenneth Silverman, *The Life and Times of Cotton Mather* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), pt. 2, chap. 4. See also Richard Werking, " 'Reformation Is Our Only Preservation': Cotton Mather and Salem Witchcraft," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser. 29 (1972): 281–90; Thomas G. Holmes, *Cotton Mather: A Bibliography of His Works*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1940), 3:1234–66; Robert Middlekauff, *The Mathers: Three Generations of Puritan Intellectuals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971). These are only the most recent contributions to a very extensive literature. Miller's account of Cotton Mather's role in *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* remains an impressive piece of analysis.

[27] Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974). Boyer and Nissenbaum also edited *The Salem Witchcraft Papers: Verbatim Transcripts of the Legal Documents of the Salem Witchcraft Outbreak of 1692*, 3 vols. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1977).

at ease with mercantile capitalism, the less prosperous hostile or, at best, extremely uneasy, envious, and critical at one and the same time. Village factionalism seemed to align with the clustering of victims, accusers, and witches. Six of the nineteen persons executed in 1692 were residents of Salem Village, and most of them were "outsiders" to the agrarian community in one manner or another. Looking one more time at their materials, Boyer and Nissenbaum turned to psychological language to explain what had occurred. The people who set out after witches were moved by guilt and rage; ambivalent in their own response to change, they sought to exorcise confusion and, in doing so, to express their anger at losing out in the pursuit of gain. Also suggesting that the young people of the Village were especially restless and disturbed, Boyer and Nissenbaum would liken the attacks of possession that some of them experienced to the religious enthusiasm of the 1740s.

This web of evidence and assumption continues to provoke critical response as well as strong approval. Elsewhere I have challenged the assumption, itself derived from other scholarship, that religion stood in opposition to emerging capitalism.[28] Boyer and Nissenbaum view Samuel Parris, the man who was minister as the crisis unfolded, as archetypal in his mixture of feelings; they argue, moreover, that he projected his anxieties onto witchcraft. But a recent study of all his extant sermons makes him out to be conventional and sincere in his evangelism.[29] Other critics have identified alternative patterns among victims, accusers, and witches. Christine Heyrman, in the course of challenging the premise that capitalists turned away from Puritanism, has pointed to religious dissent, and especially Quakerism, as a significant cause of tension between accusers and witches.[30] David Konig has argued that being designated "witches" had much to do with the "extralegal behavior" of certain persons. He perceives the early 1690s as a period when the colonists were ex-

[28] See my "Religion and Society: Problems and Reconsiderations," in *Colonial British America*, ed. Jack P. Greene and J. R. Pole (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), pp. 334–36.

[29] Larry P. Gregg, "Samuel Parris: Portrait of a Puritan Clergyman," *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 119 (1983): 209–37, an essay that, by failing to address the question of changes over time in the preaching of Samuel Parris, may not refute Boyer and Nissenbaum's contention.

[30] Christine L. Heyrman, "Spectres of Subversion, Societies of Friends: Dissent and the Devil in Provincial Essex County, Massachusetts," in *Saints and Revolutionaries: Essays on Early American History*, ed. David D. Hall et al. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), pp. 38–74. See also Mair, *Witchcraft*, p. 232.

tremely anxious to reaffirm "established authority patterns," especially the authority of the judicial system, in the aftermath of the Dominion of New England. Anyone who was openly defiant of the judges in 1692, Konig notes, was executed, and several other condemned witches had been involved in larceny, family conflicts, or incidents of trespass. Witchcraft, whether real or imagined, betokened contempt for established rules. Rejecting, therefore, the assumption that Salem Village was undergoing acute and sudden social strain, Konig concludes that "most of the charges brought to the Court . . . reflected long-term terrors, uncertainties, and fears."[31] One other critic, Chadwick Hansen, has repeatedly pointed out that the great majority of accusers, victims, and confessing witches came from communities other than Salem Village, a circumstance left unexplained in *Salem Possessed*.[32]

Also missing from the book was the anthropological perspective of Macfarlane and Thomas. *Salem Possessed* took its motif of deeply anxious, ambivalent Puritans more from Michael Walzer than from social anthropology. It is useful to return to Thomas's observation that cunning folk were active in the English village and apply it to New England. Were any cunning folk at work in Salem Village and its environs? Were any of the "witches" practitioners of "magic"? Chadwick Hansen insists, contrary to another proposition of the "traditional interpretation," that *real* witchcraft was being practiced in New England. His argument remains controversial, though certainly some of the accused in the Salem panic were fortune-tellers in the manner of the cunning folk.[33]

[31] David Thomas Konig, *Law and Society in Puritan Massachusetts: Essex County, 1629–1692* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), chap. 7.

[32] Chadwick Hansen, "Andover Witchcraft and the Causes of the Salem Witchcraft Trials," in *The Occult in America: New Historical Perspectives*, ed. Howard Kerr and Charles L. Crow (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), pp. 38–57. Richard P. Gildrie, studying Salem from its founding to the eve of the witchcraft panic, has argued that the mercantile and agrarian interests were not at odds. *Salem, Massachusetts, 1626–1683: A Covenant Community* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1975). A central premise of the Boyer-Nissenbaum interpretation, the crunch of diminishing resources, must be qualified in the light of more recent work demonstrating the colonists' capacity for adaptation.

[33] Hansen, *Witchcraft at Salem*, chap. 5. John Demos was briefly critical in "Underlying Themes in the Witchcraft of Seventeenth-Century New England," *American Historical Review* 76 (1971): 1312 n. 5, and repeats his skepticism in *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 80–84. Yet in both places (see "Underlying Themes," p. 1317 n. 18) he describes activities of accused witches that were characteristic of the cunning folk.

The English situation was duplicated in another respect. Some of the depositions by accusers and hostile witnesses at Salem indicate that accusations originated in petty conflicts, misfortune, and rejections of requests for help. *Salem Possessed* was akin to *Religion and the Decline of Magic* in depicting a community under stress from competing norms. But in giving the impression that stress induced extraordinary, out-of-bounds behavior, Boyer and Nissenbaum resisted the insight that witchcraft accusations were routine, even normal, in the village context. Theirs was not a history of maleficium; nor was it a political interpretation, save in the sense of linking witchcraft with village factionalism. No outside elite manipulated the system, as Cohn and Larner both had argued was the case in Europe.

In the wake of *Salem Possessed,* further progress lay in undertaking more community studies of witch-hunting. Alternatively, progress depended upon a search for patterns within the entire body of accusations, indictments, and executions. In 1965 Frederick S. Drake called attention to the cases that had occurred in the fifteen years between 1647 and 1662, the most active period of witch-hunting in New England before 1692.[34] Aside from his brief listing, the tasks of local study and broad survey were neglected until John Demos started down the path that led to *Entertaining Satan*. Demos included data from the Salem cases in an essay of 1971, "Underlying Themes in the Witchcraft of Seventeenth-Century New England." But in *Entertaining Satan,* limiting himself to the episodes that occurred before 1692, he allows data from Salem to intrude only in support of one crucial argument, the sex and age distribution of the witches. *Entertaining Satan* has three main objectives: to explore, à la Thomas and Macfarlane, the social relationships that engendered witchcraft accusations; to pursue the inner history of witchcraft, the "deeper levels of experience" that it drew on and made manifest; and to explain the rhythm of witch-hunting in relation to the ebb and flow of conflict. I want to pass by the last of these topics in order to focus on the two other questions he addresses.

Before Salem, sixteen persons were executed as witches in Connecticut and Massachusetts, another eighty-odd indicted or accused of the crime, and as in England, the majority of accusations that went to court resulted in acquittals of one kind or another. Recon-

[34] Frederick S. Drake, "Witchcraft in the American Colonies, 1647–1662," *American Quarterly* 20 (1968): 694–725.

structing the life histories of the accused, Demos finds that gender and age were significant factors affecting an individual's vulnerability to witch-hunting. Most witches were women, by a ratio of 4:1, and in age, these women clustered around "midlife." Other characteristics, none of them as consistent as these two, include a "domestic experience" that was "often marred by trouble and conflict" and a history of disputes that ended up in court. In social position, "witches were recruited, to a greatly disproportionate extent, among the most humble, least powerful of New England's citizens."[35] Demos's is a tale of the *menu peuple* of New England, with the magistrates and ministers often looking on askance.

In interpreting this data, Demos moves in two directions, the social and the psychological. He looks closely at two communities, Easthampton, Long Island, and Springfield, Massachusetts,[36] before summing up his conclusions in a separate chapter. Thomas and Macfarlane provide the essentials of the interpretative framework. Defending their functionalism, Demos argues that New England was but Old writ small—or large, if we assume, as he does, that the incidence of witchcraft accusations was greater in Massachusetts and Connecticut than in Essex County, England. Here, as in England, witchcraft was a phenomenon of one neighbor suspecting another. Here, as in England, it operated as a " 'conservative,' cohesive force," reinforcing social boundaries and the social norms of "kindness," "charity," and "harmony."[37] Here, as well, Demos argues, witchcraft exposed a fundamental contradiction. The ground or source of conflict in New England was the intermixture of order and disorder in the social experience of the colonists. On the one hand, people lived within the confines of the town or village. Quoting the opening sentence of John Winthrop's "Modell of Christian Charity," Demos evokes communalism and hierarchy as operative, dominant values in the making of the town. But these same communities were beset by "individualism" and "mobility." His case histories seem to demonstrate that many of the persons identified as witches had experienced "social dislocation," some of them descend-

[35] Demos, *Entertaining Satan*, chap. 3.

[36] See also Stephen Innes, *Labor in a New Land: Economy and Society in Seventeenth-Century Springfield* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 136–41.

[37] Demos, *Entertaining Satan*, pp. 276–78, 300–305. See also Kai T. Erikson, *Wayward Puritans: A Study in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: John Wiley, 1966), pp. 137–59.

ing in their social status, others becoming unusually "mobile" or "rootless." Yet these processes or, more generally, the incursion of "individualism" had affected all of the colonists. Demos echoes the authors of *Salem Possessed* as well as Thomas and Macfarlane in regarding the seventeenth-century village as caught between the old and the new. Unlike Thomas, he does not feel that the refusal to perform traditional acts of charity was where this conflict became manifest. Instead, the colonists quarrelled over the "transfer of goods, services, and information." All of these conflicts somehow came to embody "neighborliness" versus "individualism."[38]

Remarking that "the association of witchcraft and community" is "hardly a novel finding," Demos turns in the longest section of the book to psychology. Here he is on ground that is uniquely his own, for no one else has pursued the inner history of witchcraft with such care or with the same mastery of psychoanalytic theory. The behavior of the afflicted girls at Salem, and their role as witch-finders, has attracted much psychological interpretation. Marion Starkey keyed her interpretation of the Salem panic to a psychological theme, the "hysterical" behavior of these girls. Loosely used, the word "hysterical" lends itself to the final proposition of the traditional interpretation, that the girls faked their fits and were not really ill. To the contrary, Chadwick Hansen has insisted that certain of their symptoms, like convulsive fits, indicate the presence of a pathological hysteria. Were the girls at Salem sick or not? To this question, alas, *Entertaining Satan* contains no answer. But Demos asserts unequivocally of Elizabeth Knapp (of whom more in a moment) that she was "ill." Where he departs from the Starkey-Hansen debate is in his attitude toward the term "hysteria." He regards it as "too elastic" in meaning and therefore prefers other categories.[39]

Demos's interpretation unfolds in two case studies and a long chapter, "Accusers, Victims, Bystanders: The Innerlife Dimension." Elizabeth Knapp, the first of the case studies, was a girl of sixteen when she began having fits of demonic possession in 1671. The minister of Groton, Massachusetts, Samuel Willard, with whom she lived as a servant, took careful notes on and wrote out a narrative of her behavior. This extraordinary text provides Demos with his point of departure. No other case is quite so richly documented, so "inner"

[38] Demos, *Entertaining Satan*, pp. 298–300, 86, 266.

[39] Marion Starkey, *The Devil in Massachusetts* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1949), chap. 3; Hansen, *Witchcraft at Salem*, pp. ix, 34–45; Demos, *Entertaining Satan*, p. 441.

in its feeling. But in this as in every other instance, Demos has discovered many clues to the life histories of his people. The search for these clues in wills, genealogies, local histories, and court records is exemplary, as is the care with which they are interpreted. Intrinsic limitations on the data stand in the way, he tells us, of "formal causal connections." What he offers is a sequence of inferences, in which he always indicates the line between fact and hypothesis. [40] Any brief summary must oversimplify, but so be it.

Demos regards the behavior of Elizabeth Knapp as evidence of regression. In her fits she reenacted certain experiences of infancy and childhood. The first born in her family, she was displaced at the age of two "in the infant world of narcissistic indulgence" by a brother, whose death a few months later taught her that her "anger was too dangerous, too effectual—and must be entirely suppressed." Her parents led troubled lives, the father charged with but not convicted of adultery, the mother lapsing into insanity. These circumstances—the second of them an inference—may have prompted deep feelings of vulnerability in Elizabeth. There was no one she could idealize, not even Samuel Willard. Denied the ego satisfactions of power and recognition, Elizabeth expressed in her fits "all these threads of narcissistic imbalance: rage, archaic grandiosity and the demand for mirroring, attachment to a figure of eminence." Demonic possession became the means of manifesting the "deep, intrapsychic lesions" she had acquired in the earliest years of life. She blamed her fits on Satan in order to escape "personal responsibility" for feelings that society (or her own defense system) wished to keep repressed. [41]

The fantasies in other cases also rest on or express a core of rage and fear. But with Elizabeth Morse, the second case study, the source of anger shifts to menopause and its associations. Elizabeth Morse was at midlife herself when her house became bewitched. The persons she afflicted were also, for the most part, at midlife. [42] Demos reintroduces menopause, or midlife, in his collective portrait of suspected witches, most of them women between the ages of forty and sixty. Victims and accusers, on the other hand, tended to be young men or adolescent girls, all of them at other stages of development that left them feeling vulnerable. From these groups, and the

[40] Demos, *Entertaining Satan*, p. 124.

[41] Demos, *Entertaining Satan*, chap. 4.

[42] Demos, *Entertaining Satan*, chap. 5.

inner significance that witchcraft had for them, Demos turns to analyzing symptoms of witchcraft and fantasies about witches, here, as always, searching for the psychoanalytic basis of behavior and images. Moving on, he surveys his materials for how they display "affect" and finds that the most prevalent emotional experiences were fear, anger, and the wish to attack. Struggling to control unwelcome or forbidden feelings, the colonists engaged in denial and projection. Demos argues that the fantasy of witches thereby functioned as a "negative identity," a means of projecting and externalizing certain unconscious wishes. Concluding his interpretation, he returns once more to the theme of "attack-aggression-rage, which looms so large throughout the witchcraft material." He connects this theme to the development of the "self-system." Witchcraft, he suggests, was rooted in the profound ambivalence of the infant-mother relationship. Fantasies of witchcraft tapped into infantile experience of a powerful mother. Alternatively, these fantasies indicate regression to the age of two, a period of time when the self is achieving autonomy yet also undergoing sibling rivalry and the "breaking of the will." Generalizing beyond the group of witches and their victims, Demos asserts that the entire community of colonists shared in these processes, these areas of vulnerability: "every attack by witchcraft summoned deeply responsive echoes in a host of 'bystanders,' for the victim was acting out—although (sometimes) to an 'extremity'—pressure-points and vulnerabilities that were widely shared."[43]

Demos wants to persuade us that witchcraft and the inner structure of the self are as readily associated as witchcraft and community. In either instance, the historian is applying to the past a set of categories originating in a "wholly different social culture." E. P. Thompson, whom I have just quoted, has warned of the "danger" of this transfer of categories in his critical response to Thomas, Macfarlane, and their appropriation of social anthropology.[44] The same warning applies to Demos. We do not know whether structures of the self in the seventeenth century were the same as they are today. Categories such as narcissistic rage arise out of the practice of psychoanalysis in the second half of the twentieth century. While they may very well suit the colonists, there is also a good chance that they do not.[45] Demos asserts from time to time that the structure of the

[43] Demos, *Entertaining Satan*, chap. 6.

[44] E. P. Thompson, "Anthropology and the Discipline of Historical Context," *Midland History* 1 (1972): 43.

[45] Demos had relied on the developmental psychology of Erik Erikson in his earlier

self is unchanging: psychology (or psychoanalysis) elucidates "universal" laws. Such was Freud's position. Demos speaks of a "virtually universal 'antagonism to women,' a misogynous substrate of transcultural dimensions," and in his preface refers to witchcraft as a problem of "transcultural significance." On the other hand, he is explicitly historical in his analysis of New England witchcraft, especially when he ties the development of the self-system to one particular mode of child-rearing, the "breaking of the will" that he described some years ago in *A Little Commonwealth*. In *this* particular society, moreover, children were "mother-raised."[46] The more Demos moves in the direction of historical context, the less appropriate it is for him to invoke categories imported from another time and place. The opposite is also true. Demos can defend himself by asserting that "theory" has driven him to ferret out new information, as in the case of Elizabeth Knapp; in other words, theory works because it fits the data. Most readers would agree up to a point, though another reviewer has noted that the themes of the "maternal function" and of malice toward children are not borne out by the data on ages of victims.[47]

Let me turn to the relationship between the normal and the pathological. I have already noted that Demos regards Elizabeth Knapp as pathologically "ill." The critical task of *Entertaining Satan* is to negotiate the transition from Elizabeth to the colonists at large. The bridging category is "vulnerable": the colonists become furious, they go on the attack because they feel so endangered. I cannot avoid feeling that this proposition is tautological, or self-evident: people become angry because they feel vulnerable. But why were these people so angry, and why did their anger take the form of witch-hunting? Demos reverts to social history and to a relatively commonsense psychology in answering the first of these questions. It was the push and pull of community versus individualism or, more

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study of the Puritan family, *A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth County* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), and the question I raise here had previously been asked in reviews of that book. The analysis in *Entertaining Satan* depends substantially upon the work of Heinz Kohut, as Demos makes explicit in his text and footnotes. Demos follows Kohut and other revisionists of classical theory in deemphasizing the role of sexual instinct. But he leaves unquestioned the premise that experiences of infancy and the earliest years of childhood exert a determining influence on the development of the self.

[46] Demos, *Entertaining Satan*, pp. 204–5, vii, 207–8.

[47] Michael MacDonald, "New England's Inner Demons," *Reviews in American History* 11 (1983): 323.

particularly, the prevailing experience of "dislocation," that made the colonists feel vulnerable and angry. A second explanation lies in the child-rearing practices of the colonists. In the end, *Entertaining Satan* comes to rest upon two straightforward propositions, that the colonists experienced a social "rootlessness" that chafed against the norm of community, and that a mother-centered family structure led to a certain type of self-system and its attendant (repressed) anger.

One of these arguments is quite widely shared among historians of seventeenth-century New England; the other, at least in any precise form, has much less of a following. I must profess myself a radical skeptic on both counts. I do not think that the colonists were especially rootless, mobile, or dislocated. I have the same suspicion of these words that Demos has of hysteria and that Mary Douglas has of social strain: they are too general, too connotative, to be of real use to the social historian. Rootlessness implies a state of fundamental disorientation. Mobility, or changing place, was, we know, a very widespread process in seventeenth-century England and New England; the immigrants were not unique in this regard and, like many other persons of their century, had become adapted to change. Adaptation, not deep psychological disturbance—is this not a better way of understanding the social experience of the people who moved readily about within England and, for that matter, within New England? As for communalism, no twentieth-century historian has any means of measuring the quality of the colonists' commitment to this ideal, provided, of course, we assume that it was at the center of their system of social values. Two different lines of thinking converge in *Entertaining Satan*, an older social history of uprooted Americans, and a newer one of stability and communalism. I regard the first as discredited, and the second as severely overstated.

I am skeptical about the second point for reasons that apply directly to the thesis of *Entertaining Satan*. Puritanism, which is invoked in several instances, is taken to be the key to communalism and the family structure that prevailed among the colonists. There is a wonderful irony to this emphasis on Puritanism, given that the main thrust of social history has been to limit sharply the significance of the term, whatever it may represent, and to discredit the hegemony of the church or ministry. But in *Entertaining Satan* the Puritan sermon makes its return as evidence for the social func-

tions of witchcraft and the experience of communalism; sermons also provide key evidence for the "breaking of the will."[48] Any considered reflection on cause and effect relationships seems lacking as well as reflection on what weight the sermon or the category "Puritan" will bear. The fact that witch-hunting and witchcraft flourished in very different religious cultures should make us wary of imputing great significance to any one set of beliefs. It seems far from obvious, moreover, that Puritanism inspired a particular mode of child-rearing or family structure that, in turn, became responsible for a disproportionate share of victims, accusers, and witches.[49] Certainly the evidence from Scotland is equivocal. Larner's measured assessment of Calvinism and its significance strikes a very different tone than does *Entertaining Satan*.[50]

To what point, then, does Demos take us in our understanding of witchcraft? He provides us with a detailed portrait of the persons labeled "witches." He catalogues the types of conflict between witches and their victims. He demonstrates the intricacy of neighborhood relationships and their bearing on some cases. His is a story of conflict and anger in social relations; a worthy sequel would be a history of anger-making and anger-releasing processes in early modern Europe and America. *Entertaining Satan* explicates difficult and confusing material, like the fits of a young girl and the depositions of enraged witnesses. It insists on the importance of the age-clustering of the witches as well as their gender. Finally, it offers us a careful, systematic reading of age, gender, and verbal themes from the standpoint of psychoanalytic theory. Many readers will admire, as I do, the intelligence and clarity of this analysis, yet many readers may also prefer a commonsense psychology of guilt and projection and, in the end, the social history Demos offers us. Speaking of the "rites of violence" in sixteenth-century France, Natalie Z. Davis has written, "The violence is explained not in terms of how crazy, hungry, or sexually frustrated the violent people are (though they may sometimes have such characteristics), but in terms of the goals of their actions and in terms of the roles and patterns of behavior allowed by

[48] Demos, *Entertaining Satan*, p. 466 nn. 225–27. On other occasions Demos has been among the first to insist that ordinary people paid little heed to the church and did not share the world view of the ministers.

[49] Compare Keith Wrightson, *English Society, 1580–1680* (London: Hutchinson, 1982), pp. 106–18.

[50] Larner, *Enemies of God*, chap. 12. See also, Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in England*, pp. 186–88; Thomas, *Religion and Magic*, pp. 499–500.

their culture." This statement is equally suited to fits of possession and other witch-related behavior.[51]

Three other issues in the history of New England witchcraft deserve brief comment: gender, the relationship between learned and popular belief, and the role of religion.

Witches were women. Gender is the most reliable of all predictors of who would be singled out and labeled "witch." Explanations vary for this pattern, which holds for preliterate societies as well as for early modern Europe and America. The "traditional misogyny" of European culture is a factor,[52] including the long-held belief that women possessed dangerous (sexual) powers. Historians have learned that suspicion fell most readily on women who were older or deviant in some respect—poorer, and perhaps not unwilling to play on rumors of their occult powers. The data in *Entertaining Satan* support these patterns. In keeping with his social and economic analysis, Keith Thomas has argued that older women were more vulnerable because they were "the most dependent members of the community," the persons most likely to invoke "the old tradition of mutual charity and help" and therefore to provoke the "guilt" and "tensions" that found release in accusations of witchcraft.[53] Disagreeing, Christina Larner believes that witch-hunting was "women hunting," an explicit effort to enforce a patriarchical ideal that was threatened by the changing status of women newly empowered by the Reformation with responsibility for their souls.[54] What then of the fact, duly noted by Thomas and Macfarlane, that so many women participated as victims and accusers? Any alignment of men versus women, or hypothesis of women-hating, would seem to oversimplify. Demos is reluctant as well to equate witch-hunting with women-hating; "no single line in the extant materials," he remarks,

[51] Natalie Z. Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1975), p. 186. See also I. M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion: An Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism* (New York: Penguin Books, 1971) for a social interpretation of the role of the possessed. The wider cultural tradition that sustained this role is described in D. P. Walker's *Unclean Spirits: Possession and Exorcism in France and England in the Late Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981). See also, Thomas, *Religion and Magic*, pp. 480–81.

[52] Monter, "The Historiography of European Witchcraft," p. 450. A brief but illuminating survey is Clarke Garrett, "Women and Witches: Patterns of Analysis," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 3 (1977): 461–70.

[53] Thomas, *Religion and Magic*, pp. 562–69; Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in England*, pp. 160–61.

[54] Larner, *Enemies of God*, pp. 3, 100–102.

"raises the issue of sex-defined patterns of authority." His interpretation omits the politics of domination and is keyed, instead, to menopause and reverberations in the role of mother.[55]

Two historians nonetheless insist on viewing witchcraft as related to the politics of domination, Lyle Koehler in *A Search for Power: The "Weaker Sex" in Seventeenth-Century New England*, and Carol Karlsen in her forthcoming book, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*.[56] Karlsen's is the more convincing of the two interpretations. She demonstrates anew two familiar facts: most witches were women, and most male witches were close relatives of female suspects. Witchcraft was a family affair, or so the colonists assumed. Karlsen questions the statistical basis of the psychoanalytic interpretation, that is, the tight age clustering around "midlife." She denies, as Demos does also, that religious dissent was particularly significant in the lives of the witches. Where she breaks new ground is in her discovery that a "remarkable proportion" of the suspects were lacking brothers or sons to share in an inheritance. Not poverty or wealth considered in the abstract but access to property via inheritance differentiated certain women from others and made those so distinguished extraordinarily vulnerable. Anomalies within the patriarchal system, these women were frequently drawn into lawsuits aimed at depriving them of their estates—or into a web of witchcraft accusations that in certain cases had the same effect. Eunice Cole, Katherine Harrison, and Rachel Clinton, three persons whose life histories are narrated in *Entertaining Satan*, were victims of this process. As for the apparent silence on women's issues in the records, Karlsen declares that silence is deceptive. Using Mary Douglas's concept of "implicit meaning" to advantage, Karlsen insists on the presence of gender-based conflict. To explain the timing of the witch-hunts, she argues that a number of circumstances specific to seventeenth-century New England, among them a new role for women as spiritual leaders of the household, intersected with old myths to give the illusion that women were threatening male dominance. Witchcraft, she concludes, was women-hating in the context of shifting values and uncertain property relationships.

Karlsen suggests in passing that the Salem panic was distinctive because the idea of the devil's compact, a "learned" idea reiterated

[55] Demos, *Entertaining Satan*, pp. 63–64.

[56] Lyle Koehler, *A Search for Power: The "Weaker Sex" in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980). For Carol Karlsen's argument, I refer to her Ph.D. diss. (Yale University, 1981).

by the clergy, had finally passed over into popular belief. Here and elsewhere in some recent interpretations,[57] the distinction between learned and popular belief serves to renew debate on the clergy and their relationship to witch-hunting. The influence of the clergy, or of religion (and the two were not exactly synonymous), was large, as I will suggest in a moment. But I also believe that the distinction between popular and learned belief does not serve us well in understanding New England witchcraft. According to conventional wisdom, belief in maleficium was "popular" and in diabolism, or the idea of the devil's compact, "learned." Keith Thomas, who borrowed the distinction from earlier interpretations, used it to support his general proposition that witchcraft in England arose out of village politics, where maleficium was plausible, and not out of an elite-led crusade against heresy. His evidence was of two sorts: the court records, which overwhelmingly indicated that the basis of conviction was maleficium (or, if the devil's compact, almost always in association with maleficium), and statute law, where diabolism became specified very late, long after the idea had taken hold among witch-hunters in Germany.[58] Thomas notes, however, that by 1600 or thereabouts, English treatises or commentaries on witchcraft ordinarily mention or describe diabolism. By the 1640s, the theme had gained sufficient currency to support the witch-hunting of Matthew Hopkins in Essex in 1645. We are dealing, therefore, with a theme or belief that circulated relatively widely by the second quarter of the seventeenth century, reiterated not only in sermons (of which we have little direct evidence) but also in statute law, broadsides, ballads, and treatises on witchcraft.[59] This chronology gives reason to assume that the two traditions, which *may* have been sharply differentiated in the late middle ages, had begun to converge. Indeed, Larner argues that the Scottish documents indicate a "mutual

[57] Richard Weisman, *Witchcraft, Magic, and Religion in Seventeenth-Century Massachusetts* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984).

[58] The distinction is drawn—for medieval witch trials—in Richard Kieckhefer, *European Witch Trials: Their Foundations in Popular and Learned Culture, 1300–1500* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976). See also, Thomas, *Religion and Magic*, pp. 438–49.

[59] James VI of Scotland had included the idea of the devil's compact in his *Demonology* of 1597. The English statute of 1604 embodied "the full continental doctrine," though Thomas discounts the significance of this law (*Religion and Magic*, p. 443). A vast, amorphous lore circulated in popular modes of print in the seventeenth century, as many of the references in *Religion and Magic* indicate. It seems wiser to assume that the colonists were familiar with most of this lore, including the idea of the devil's compact, than to assume their ignorance.

influence," not strict separation. Accordingly, she prefers to speak of a "new popular demonic" that included the compact—which figures in the Scottish trials of the 1590s—and that by the *early seventeenth* century had replaced previous traditions.[60] Other historians who have studied the evolution of witch beliefs remark repeatedly on the syncretism of European culture. As I have previously noted, Cohn and Russell indicate that elite fantasies of the witches' sabbat, devil's compact, and night-flying demons drew on folk and popular sources. Clarke Garrett has characterized the mental world of the cunning folk as a "conglomeration of Roman Catholic doctrine, magical practices, animism, paganism, and common sense," a mixture that does not yield to rapid labeling as either popular or learned.[61] Bearing this rich jumble of beliefs in mind, it should not surprise us that Mary Johnson of Hartford confessed in 1648 to "familiarity with the Devil." Half a century before Salem, something resembling Larner's "new popular demonic" was being echoed in New England.[62]

The role of the clergy in transmitting belief is not easy to separate from the role of printed sources, some of them distinctly "popular." What seems clear is that, like George Gifford, William Perkins, and Richard Bernard, all three of whom wrote treatises on which the colonists relied, the clergy in New England wished to clarify the grounds for distinguishing between real and pretended witchcraft. The outcome of this effort was a distinct narrowing of acceptable criteria. The clergy in New England were at one and the same time critics of received wisdom (whether popular or learned) and defenders of the concept of witchcraft, the alternative to which, in their view, was atheism. In any event their concern with the devil was closely allied with their understanding of the spiritual dynamics of conversion, or of resistance to conversion. It was this relationship that so many of the colonists absorbed and that played so critical a part in the mentality of the confessing witches.

The testimony of the confessing witches is deeply expressive of

[60] Larner, *Enemies of God,* pp. 138, 145.

[61] Clarke Garrett, "Witches and Cunning Folk in the Old Regime," in *The Wolf and the Lamb: Popular Culture in France from the Old Regime to the Twentieth Century,* ed. Jacques Beauroy, Marc Bertrand, and Edward T. Gargan, Stanford French and Italian Studies, no. 3 (Saratoga, Calif.: Anma Libri, 1977), p. 57.

[62] Demos, *Entertaining Satan,* p. 346. Mary Parsons of Springfield confessed c. 1650 to entering into covenant with the devil. In his ideal law code, prepared in the mid-1630s, John Cotton defined witchcraft as "fellowship by covenant with a familiare spirit." *The Hutchinson Papers,* 2 vols. (Boston: Prince Society, 1865), 1:196.

religious belief and spiritual needs.[63] One great need is for relief from the burden of spiritual distress: feelings of inadequacy, guilt, or melancholy. The devil had promised Elizabeth Johnson "all glory and happiness and joy" and to her daughter "that she should be saved." He had promised Mary Barker "to pardon her sins" and to her father that "all his people should live bravely that all persons should be equal; that there should be no day of resurrection or of judgment, and neither punishment nor shame for sin." The fantasy of compacting with the devil became an instrument of self-assertion against the pressures of the cultural system. These confessions also bespeak a commitment to the idea of secret sins and to the kindred idea that such sins, unless brought to light, will result in damnation. The persons who confessed at Salem or in other trials somehow felt extraordinarily guilty. Why this should be so remains a mystery. Only in one or two instances did they confess to committing real crimes that had gone undetected; for most, it was a matter of acknowledging an indifference to the ordinances or to the Sabbath or simply their wish to have more material success.[64] Confession became a means of reconciliation with the church (or dominant culture) and of reconciliation within themselves between competing voices. This dialogue of voices is singularly evident in Elizabeth Knapp. Speaking repeatedly to Willard of her sense of guilt at not being a good Christian, she complained "against herself of many sins, disobedience to parents, neglect of attendance upon ordinances, attempts to murder herself and others." In effect, Elizabeth was on the

[63] The religious dimensions of witchcraft demand much fuller explication than I can give them here, especially in view of the reductionism that prevails in most psychological and sociological interpretations. Thomas has written perceptively on the relationship between religious need and fantasies of witchcraft in *Religion and Magic*, chap. 15. Alan Macfarlane is enlightening on the religious understanding of misfortune in "A Tudor Anthropologist: George Gifford's *Discourse* and *Dialogue*," in *The Damned Art*, pp. 140–55; in passing, Macfarlane notes that Puritanism is not a useful term of analysis. The religious mentality that accepted witchcraft as real and incorporated it within the framework of divine providence was a mentality that also accorded prophetic significance to dreams, voices, visions, and other "wonders." Thomas has described this mentality at length in *Religion and Magic*. I describe it from a different vantage point in "A World of Wonders: The Mentality of the Supernatural in Seventeenth-Century New England," in *Seventeenth-Century New England*, ed. David D. Hall and David Grayson Allen (Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1985), pp. 239–74. An interesting but speculative essay on the relationship between conceptions of the devil and conceptions of God is Ann Kibbey, "Mutations of the Supernatural: Witchcraft, Remarkable Providences, and the Power of Puritan Men," *American Quarterly* 34 (1982): 125–48.

[64] Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Witchcraft Papers*, 2:501, 1:59, 66.

threshold of conversion, but first she had to confess her sins and confess them fully, to the point of fantasizing that she had committed that most horrible of acts, covenanting with the devil. Resisting even as she confessed, she acted out her resistance in the form of her alter-ego, the devil-voice that saucily defied the minister.[65] It may be said in general of the lay colonists that they sought some psychological and social middle ground between resistance and submission. In seeking that ground, some experienced more stress than others. We may speculate that confessions of covenanting with the devil grew out of this search. They express, as well, the importance of confession and repentance within this religious culture, an importance that is elsewhere evident in the procedures of the civil courts.[66] Confession brought immense benefits even though it also jeopardized one's future. Poor Martha Tyler faced this dilemma in 1692 as she listened to her minister plead with her to confess: "Well I see you will not confess! Well, I will now leave you, and then you are undone, body and soul, for ever."[67]

Enough. Let me draw together the major strands of interpretation by way of summary, beginning with those interpretations on which there is consensus. We may safely conclude that witchcraft accusations originated in local conflict and personal misfortune. No modern historian has surpassed the Rev. John Hale, a contemporary witness of the Salem panic, in articulating the relationships among conflict, misfortune, and witch-naming: "In many of these cases," Hale remarked of Salem, "there had been antecedent personal quarrels, and so occasions of revenge; for some of those condemned, had been suspected by their neighbours several years, because after quarreling with their neighbours, evils had befallen those neighbours."[68] Victims, accusers, and "witches" lived in close proximity. Witches were predominantly older women, many of them marginal

[65] John Demos, ed., *Remarkable Providences, 1600–1760* (New York: George Braziller, 1972), pp. 358–71.

[66] The role of confession in court procedures is described in Gail Sussman Marcus, " 'Due Execution of the Generall Rules of Righteousnesse': Criminal Procedure in New Haven Town and Colony," in *Saints and Revolutionaries*, pp. 99–137. The European materials contain the same structure of guilt, confession, and repentance, a circumstance that should make us wary once again of overemphasizing Puritanism. See Etienne Delcambre, "The Psychology of Lourraine Witchcraft Suspects," in *European Witchcraft*, ed. E. William Monter (New York: John Wiley, 1969), pp. 95–109.

[67] Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Witchcraft Papers*, 3:777.

[68] John Hale, *A Modest Enquiry into the Nature of Witchcraft* (Boston, 1702),

or deviant in some respect: in social or economic position, sexual behavior, or possibly religious attitude. Anyone who practiced folk healing or fortune-telling became vulnerable to accusations of witchcraft.

Beneath these points lie certain deeper truths. Anthropology has furnished several of the most important: belief in witchcraft is not "irrational"; accusations are a function of misfortune; witch-naming reflects social relationships. To speak more abstractly, "certain social structures will focus tension between certain categories of persons."[69] Thanks to the anthropologists, moreover, historians of early modern Europe have realized that accusations of witchcraft were a constant feature of the village community. In drawing attention to endemic circumstances, these historians minimize the significance of the mass panics that loom so large in the literary evidence. Similarly, in drawing attention to a popular culture that nourished many sorts of occult beliefs, these historians minimize the significance of ideas circulating within learned culture or animating the elite. Assuming, as we do, that New England towns replicated English village life and that English (or European) popular culture crossed the Atlantic with the immigrants, we must therefore assume that these discoveries and assumptions apply to witchcraft in New England. Indeed, *Entertaining Satan* and *Salem Possessed* derive in broad measure from the European historiography. They make witchcraft and witch-hunting credible as functions and processes of a world very different from our own; they make us realize the *otherness* of life in the seventeenth century. But they do not see witchcraft and witch-hunting as political save in the context of the village. It bears repeating, therefore, that witch-hunting is open to interpretation as the politics of patriarchy or the politics of cultural domination.

If the fundamental choice in witchcraft studies lies between a history of witchcraft as witch-hunting or a history of conflict and consensus in the village community, other issues seem nearly as

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p. 37. As Hale indicates, some of the persons named as witches at Salem and elsewhere had been suspected of the crime for a long time. Susannah Martin, executed at Salem in 1692, had been accused of witchcraft as early as 1669, and suspicion accumulated around Bridget Bishop for twenty years before she fell victim to the Salem panic. (Demos, *Entertaining Satan*, provides many other examples.) Such life histories imply that objective patterns of behavior, and not simply fantasy or projection on the part of witch-hunters, may have been at issue. See also, Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in England*, p. 159.

[69] Marwick, *Witchcraft and Sorcery*, p. 331.

significant. The religious factor, and for New England in particular, the role of Puritanism, continues to provoke debate. The relationship between religion and "magic" may not be fully understood, in part because it is difficult to describe a relationship that was not fixed but fluid and shifting, as I have elsewhere tried to demonstrate. We do not know whether to credit the cunning folk with a world view of their own[70] or how seriously to take the themes and motifs deemed "occult" that circulated widely in the seventeenth century. Is Larner correct in identifying a "new popular demonic," and can we trace its passage to these shores? Last, but far from least, is the task of understanding the collective fantasies and experiences of possession that figure in the witchcraft materials. Where can we draw the line between the pathological and the normal, that is, if any line can be drawn at all? How do these fantasies reflect or make manifest the structure of the self?

Mystery remains, and will never vanish altogether. What is satisfying about the recent flood of books on witchcraft is that they do not simplify. As in the historiography of chattel slavery and master-slave relations in the antebellum South, they reimagine and re-create a world made up out of multiple and overlapping realms of meaning and behavior. This world was rife with contradiction. It requires of us, therefore, a tolerance of alternatives, an awareness of our finite understanding, even as it summons us to press against the limits of interpretation.

[70] Hildred Geertz, "An Anthropology of Religion and Magic, I," and Keith Thomas, "An Anthropology of Religion and Magic, II," both in *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 6 (1975): 71–109.

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