

The Devil in Salem Village

EDMUND S. MORGAN

In 1630, the Puritans had founded the Massachusetts Bay colony and sought, under the leadership of their first governor, even-tempered John Winthrop, to create a model Christian commonwealth—"a city on a hill"—that would stand as a beacon of inspiration for others to emulate. Each town had its own congregation and its own minister, whose sermons rang with Calvinist precepts. The system of local congregations that selected their ministers and ran their own affairs became known as the Congregational church. In their wilderness Zion, ministers and government officials worked together to maintain holiness, purity, and order. Only church members—the elect—could vote and hold political office. The government, in turn, protected the church by levying taxes to support it on members and nonmembers alike and by making church attendance compulsory. The Puritans, as historian Edmund S. Morgan said, "not only endeavored themselves to live a 'smooth, honest, civil life,' but tried to force everyone within their power to do likewise."

On the surface, the Puritans appeared to be pious, sedate folk living in peaceful villages. But as the historian John Demos concludes, Puritan New England "also had its share of discordant change, of inner stress and turmoil, and even of deadly violence." The Puritans believed, for instance, that Satan could seize people, especially women, and force them to practice witchcraft, which was a capital crime: those found guilty were hanged. As for the Native Americans in New England, the Puritans practiced a policy of killing the Indians off or driving them west or into Canada, where they formed alliances with the French.

In the following selection, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Edmund S. Morgan contends that the witchcraft hysteria was merely symptomatic of the times, an age when people were plagued with superstitions and monstrous fears that spawned witch-hunts on both sides of the Atlantic. Morgan also maintains that the witch panic was a product of a community undergoing severe religious and cultural changes. By the 1680s, the Puritan movement had lost much of its zeal and sense of mission; the church itself had become exclusive and hereditary. Puritan youth had become disenchanted and alienated from the world of their parents, who wanted to establish a society free from the sins of the Church of England. Scores of other people had become increasingly preoccupied with material pleasures and comforts. In addition, the Puritans had lost the royal charter that had allowed them to govern their colony free from interference by the mother country. The result was that many anxious leaders and citizens began to see satanic conspiracies at work that eroded the cherished institutions of their already shaky society. Out of this spiral of fear and insecurity came the witch scare in Boston in the 1680s and the far more terrible outbreak in Salem Village in 1692, which shook Massachusetts Bay to its foundation.

According to Morgan, the witch trials have long excited our "imagination and curiosity" because they reveal a dark side of the human condition. Confessed witches avoided the gallows, but they were expected to name other co-conspirators. Thus, Morgan says, "the circle of the accused could widen

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rapidly" and their self-righteous antagonists, intoxicated with power, could ignore "any ground rules that society has developed for the peaceful or fair achievement of social objectives." When such events are set in motion, Morgan asserts, "It is the rare individual who will stand up and loudly say no." Most students of history will see a parallel between the witch-hunts of the seventeenth century and McCarthyism of the 1950s, when Americans, fearful of a communist conspiracy in this country, also looked for scapegoats. Morgan, however, finds a parallel between the Salem witch trials and a 1927 court case in Massachusetts. Here two Italian immigrants, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, "were convicted and executed after a trial that was as much a travesty of justice as those held at Salem in 1692." A selection in Volume 2 of *Portrait of America* tells the tragic story of Sacco and Vanzetti. Students who want to read ahead and examine their trial after perusing the selection on Salem might well ask themselves: Do the ghosts of Salem Village still haunt us in our troubled time?

GLOSSARY

ANDROS, EDMUND Andros was the imperious governor of the short-lived Dominion of New England. He was a capable but unpopular administrator. Unproven charges of dishonesty and favoritism forced his removal from the colonies.

CORY, GILES Cory was a respected member of the church and a prosperous farmer when, in April of 1692, a group of young girls called him "a dreadful wizard." The Puritans crushed him to death with stone weights in a futile effort to force a confession.

GLORIOUS REVOLUTION In 1689, Protestant monarchs William and Mary replaced James II on the English throne. This bloodless revolution, known as the Glorious Revolution, represented a victory for Parliament and a loss of power for the British monarchy.

JAMES II From 1685 to 1688, this Catholic king alienated Parliament by attempting to consolidate English institutions under royal control. The Glorious Revolution forced the unpopular king to flee to France.

MATHER, COTTON The son of Increase Mather, Cotton joined his father on the pulpit of Boston's Old North Church. Cotton, whose ego Morgan describes as "revolting," supported the witchcraft persecutions.

MATHER, INCREASE A prominent Puritan minister and prolific writer, Mather represented the colony at the courts of James II and William III during the renegotiation of the

governing charter. He served as a moderating voice during the witchcraft crisis and later was a founder of Yale College.

PHIPS, WILLIAM Phips served as the colony's governor during the witchcraft trials. He belatedly brought the crisis to an end only after the potential victims included the governor's wife and a number of other prominent individuals.

SEWALL, SAMUEL A judge at the witchcraft trials, Sewall later regretted and apologized for his involvement. Sewall was one of the first colonialists to speak out against slavery and join the abolitionist movement.

SPECTRAL TESTIMONY When people testified that an accused witch menaced them in a vision or dream, Puritans such as William Stoughton and Cotton Mather assumed that this was proof of guilt. The assumption was that the devil could not take the form of an innocent person.

STOUGHTON, WILLIAM Morgan describes Stoughton as "a veritable caricature of the unbending, self-righteous Puritan" who served as both judge and prosecutor during the witchcraft trials. Stoughton denied the accused the right to a defense counsel and used spectral evidence to convict suspected witches. He later became the acting governor of Massachusetts.

TITUBA Tituba, a Caribbean Indian slave woman in the family of the local minister, was accused by several young girls in Salem of bewitching them. She confessed and quickly implicated others in the community. Scholars debate as to whether Tituba was of African or Indian descent.

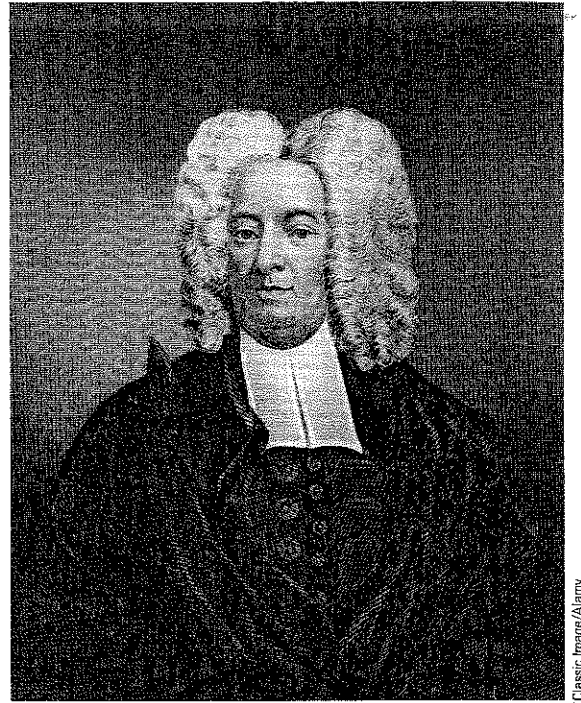
Salem has never been able to keep the story of the witch trials to itself. For nearly three centuries the story has excited the imagination and curiosity of men and women throughout the Western world. It somehow strikes a chord that we all respond to, whether with indignation or sorrow or sympathy. It opens a window not only on Salem, not only on Puritan New England, but on the human condition. . . .

The trials occurred at a time when the people of Massachusetts were passing through very difficult times. Cotton Mather, for whom those times were particularly difficult, called them “woeful”—and with reason. In 1685 Massachusetts had lost the royal charter that had given the colony virtual independence from England for fifty-five years, an independence that had made possible the Puritan experiment, an independence that had enabled Englishmen to create institutions that departed radically from those under which they had grown up in the mother country. In 1686 a Catholic king, James II, had sent Edmund Andros, a professional soldier, with absolute authority to govern Massachusetts and all the rest of New England, and without benefit of the representative assemblies that had hitherto been the supreme power of government in every New England colony.

Fortunately the people of England liked James II no better than the people of New England liked Andros. The people of Massachusetts sent Andros packing back to England in a bloodless revolution that accompanied the Glorious Revolution of 1688 in England. And they sent Cotton Mather’s distinguished father, Increase Mather, the minister of Boston’s Second Church, to recover the old charter and the freedom from English control that went with it.

In London, Mather was joined by William Phips, a Bostonian who had made a fortune by the very un-Puritan method of raising sunken treasure from a Spanish galleon in the West Indies. Phips was not what people at the time would have called a proper Bostonian, even

“The Courage of Giles Cory and Mary Easty,” from *American Heroes: Profiles of Men and Women Who Shaped Early America* by Edmund S. Morgan. Copyright © 2009 by Edmund S. Morgan. Used by permission of W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.



The Puritan minister Cotton Mather combined a belief in witchcraft with a modern interest in science. He viewed himself as God’s agent in the struggle against the devil and supported the trials that sent accused satanic worshipers to their death in Salem Village.

though he had attained a degree of respectability by marrying the widow of the town’s leading merchant. He was a rough-and-ready type, not very visibly a saint, and early in 1692 the people of Massachusetts learned that he and Mather had not succeeded in recovering the old charter. Instead, they had procured a new one, under which the king reserved to himself the appointment of the colony’s governor, and the first governor he appointed was William Phips.

The colony had been limping along under a provisional government of old-time leaders who had participated in the expulsion of Andros. The old-timers had followed the old-time ways, but now there was no telling what the character of the new government would be like. Everyone felt a sense of uneasiness and insecurity. To add to this feeling, the old ways seemed to be threatened also by new religious developments. Increase Mather and his aspiring son

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Cotton, who were the self-proclaimed defenders of everything the founding fathers had done, seemed to others to be moving away from New England's traditional Congregationalism toward Presbyterianism. . . .

At the same time the younger generation, as usual, was going to the proverbial dogs, frolicking in taverns instead of going to church. Women were wearing hoop skirts, which was shocking. Men were wearing wigs, which was equally shocking. Boston did not seem to be Boston any more. New England did not seem to be New England.

It was in this atmosphere that the Salem witch scare began.

In approaching it, we will do well to recall that New Englanders did not invent witchcraft or witch trials. In the seventeenth century virtually everyone in the Western world believed that the devil confederated with human beings and either enabled them to inflict harm by supernatural means or else did it for them. There were arguments about the extent of the powers that God allowed the devil. Some people held that the devil did not have much power beyond the ability to foresee events, so that he could get his witches to go through a lot of hocus-pocus just before, say, a big storm was coming. He could thus delude the witch—and everyone else—into thinking she had caused the storm. Others believed that both the devil and his witches could actually cause things like storms or sickness or fatal accidents. But virtually no one, whether learned or ignorant, doubted the existence of witchcraft, and very few doubted that it should be punished when detected.

How little unusual the New Englanders were in this respect can be seen from the fact that throughout the colonial period there were 32 executions for witchcraft in New England, including those at Salem, while in Europe and England during the same period the numbers ran into the thousands. For example, in Germany in the two cities of Wurzburg and Bamberg there were 1,500 executions in the eleven years between 1622 and 1633. The numbers involved in proportion to total population were probably higher than in New England. For example, in the town of Oppenau, in Germany's Black Forest, with a population of 650, 50 persons were executed in less than a

year and 170 more accused when the trials were stopped in June 1632. England did not have as much trouble with witches as Germany, but between 1563 and 1685 there were roughly 1,000 executions. The last execution in England was in 1685, the last in New England in 1692. But in England and on the Continent after formal executions stopped, popular lynchings of alleged witches continued until the nineteenth century. And I might add that during the height of the trials in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries popular demand for punishment of witches frequently outran official zeal everywhere. Even the high priests of the Inquisition in Spain often showed more compassion than the people at large.

The outbreak of a witchcraft scare in Salem in 1692 was by no means the first instance of the kind in the American colonies. There had been twelve executions before that time, the earliest at Hartford in 1646, and another at Charlestown in 1648. In 1656 Ann Hibbins, widow of William Hibbins, a former merchant and magistrate of Boston, who had himself sat as a judge in the 1648 case, was executed. In 1662 Goodman Greensmith of Hartford was executed. Witches were not always women.

None of these early cases, however, had caused any epidemic of witchcraft or any panic. And it is worth noting that in many of them, as in most of the later Salem cases, the accused persons confessed to their crimes. Some of the confessions were probably obtained under some kind of duress, either psychological or physical, but it is not unlikely that some of the persons executed actually thought that they were witches, thought that they did have supernatural powers obtained from the devil.

Witchcraft is an ancient and in some societies a relatively respectable profession. In England during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, witchcraft was widely used for benevolent as well as malevolent purposes. So-called white witches, sometimes called cunning women or cunning men, were to be found in nearly every community—there may have been as many of them as there were ministers—and people called upon them to cure diseases, both of human beings and of cattle, to recover lost property, to bring success in business or love, and for nearly every kind

of enterprise in which their aid was considered insufficient. Such was the attitude toward witchcraft by the authorities. Indeed, white witchcraft was a way of trying to control the industrial, prescientific world because it did conserve the authority of the church, but it was not likely to be used against those who practiced magic. The people turned to folk magic, different from the magic of the church, to assist them in legitimate enterprises.

There seems to have been a witchcraft scare probably in New England in 1648. Perhaps not even implicated in the Salem witchcraft were those accused at Salem because of diabolical power. Some of those who were searched, were accepted paraphernalia.

These paraphernalia were used where witchcraft occurred. Some of the things that are supposed to be used in witchcraft are dolls that are supposed to be bewitched. The dolls are supposed to be bewitched in the part of the body that the witch is supposed to be attacking. The persons convicted of witchcraft had dolls in their possession. It is supposed that in itself the dolls were used to bewitch them. But there was no way of knowing whether a person was bewitched.

Witches were thought to be some part of their bodies. Some were blue or in some other color. Furthermore, at some periods, it was thought that the witch would visit the witch. The witch might come in the form of a child, or a cat, dog, or a creature. The devil chose. So the usual practice of witchcraft was to use dolls, search his or

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of enterprise in which normal means had proved insufficient. Such white witchcraft was frowned on by the authorities but was seldom interfered with. Indeed, white witchcraft was a part of everyday life, a way of trying to control the environment in a preindustrial, prescientific society. It was frowned on because it did constitute a kind of rival force to that of the church, but only when it turned malevolent was it likely to bring prosecution, and the persons who practiced malevolent witchcraft were usually different from the cunning men and women whom people turned to for the charms and spells that might assist them in legitimate enterprises.

There seems to be no doubt that malevolent witchcraft was occasionally practiced in England and probably in New England. It is not impossible, perhaps not even improbable, that some of the persons accused at Salem believed themselves to be possessed of diabolical powers. Certainly some of them, upon being searched, were found to be in possession of the accepted paraphernalia of witchcraft.

These paraphernalia consisted, as they still do where witchcraft continues to be practiced, of dolls that are supposed to represent the victims. When the witch strokes the doll or sticks pins in it, the person bewitched is supposed to undergo excruciating pains in the part of the body corresponding to the part of the doll the witch is touching or pricking. Many of the persons convicted at Salem were found to have dolls in their possession, a piece of circumstantial evidence that in itself was almost sufficient to convict them. But there were other ways of determining whether a person was a witch or not.

Witches were thought to have witch-marks on some part of their bodies, an area of skin that was red or blue or in some way different from the rest. Furthermore, at some time during a twenty-four-hour period, it was thought, the devil or one of his imps would visit the witch and be visible to observers. He might come in the shape of a man or a woman or a child, or a cat, dog, rat, toad—indeed, any kind of creature. The devil could take nearly any shape he chose. So the usual procedure against a person accused of witchcraft was to search his or her belongings for dolls, search his or her body for witch-marks, and

then keep watch over the person in the middle of a room for twenty-four hours. God help anyone who had an old doll in his possession and in addition had some skin blemish. If there was that much evidence, it was easy enough in the middle of the night, after long hours of watching, to imagine that you saw some person or animal, perhaps a mouse, come near the witch.

But this procedure could and did result in acquittals. In England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the majority of the accused witches brought to trial were acquitted. It is interesting to notice, however, that in the English cases the attention of the court centered mainly on the question of the alleged harm done by the witch rather than on her confederation with the devil. And in England the trials were usually isolated affairs, as were the trials in New England before 1692. One trial did not generate another. The Salem trials seem to have resembled European continental witch trials more than English ones, and in several ways.

On the Continent the courts fastened their attention on the witch's alleged pact with the devil, which they made sufficient cause for execution whether the witch was believed to have done harm to anyone or not. And pacts with the devil generally involved attendance at a witches' Sabbath, where all the witches of a region gathered to perform rites prescribed by their Satanic master. Witches who confessed to their crimes accordingly were expected to name the other witches whom they saw at these gatherings. Thus the circle of the accused could widen rapidly, and a witch trial turn into a witch hunt. The same sort of thing happened at Salem. Here, too, the focus was on the pact with the devil. Here, too, the accusations multiplied with every confession. And there were other resemblances. In Salem as on the Continent, the accusers were frequently children or teenagers. On the Continent the great majority of trials resulted in convictions, and not infrequently one trial would generate another until a whole region broke out in a witch hunt like that which occurred at Salem in 1692.

The events leading up to the Salem episode are thought to have begun with the case of the Goodwin children in Boston. The four Goodwin children, the eldest of whom was thirteen, began in the fall of

1688 to show signs of being bewitched. Led by the eldest girl, they fell into fits and convulsions in which they would complain of agonizing pains, now here now there. Their tongues would hang out, and they would simulate blindness and deafness and dumbness for periods of a couple of hours. In between seizures they would behave normally. The oldest Goodwin girl accused an old Irish woman with whom she had had a quarrel of bewitching them. And the woman was accordingly brought to trial.

This pattern, incidentally, was common in witchcraft cases in England. The accused witch was usually someone with whom the accuser had had a quarrel, a quarrel in which the accuser was conscious of having in some way injured the accused. For example, a man might have turned away an old woman who came to his door begging a cup of milk. Later his cow would die, and he would accuse the old woman of having bewitched it in revenge for his failure to give her the milk. The accused person was usually poor and old, and since more women were poor and old than men, witches, at least in England, were most likely to be old and to be women.

In the Goodwin case in Boston, the accused was indeed a poor and old woman, and upon search she was found to have the proper dolls in her possession and confessed to her crime and made many dark references to the devil. She apparently believed that she actually had done the job. She was tried, found guilty, and executed, but she warned her executioners that the children's afflictions would continue, for there were others who would finish what she had begun. The children heard about this and perhaps decided that it would be a shame to give up their notoriety when the witch herself had suggested that they would continue to be attacked. Or perhaps the power of suggestion was itself sufficient to produce the seizures that they had been suffering. At any rate the convulsions continued.

It was at this point that Cotton Mather stepped into the breach. He took the oldest girl into his family in order to see whether his own superior piety would not be able to defeat the devil. For a while the girl apparently enjoyed the prestige of living with the

eminent minister, and her affliction continued for a few weeks. But living in the same house with Cotton Mather must have proved in itself something of a cross to bear, perhaps too high a price to pay for notoriety. Soon Mather was able to announce his triumph over the forces of darkness. And the girl, completely cured now, was able to escape the prayers of that pompous egotist.

Mather had actually done the colony a great service, for the girl, after the execution of the Irish woman, had named a number of other persons who she said were now tormenting her. Mather kept the names of these persons secret and fought the devil, as was his wont, single-handed. When he had won his victory, however, he could not refrain from giving way to his most conspicuous weakness: he had to write a book about it. Mather would frequently rush into print on much smaller provocation than this anyhow, and now he came out with a book entitled *Memorable Providences*, in which he gave a full account of the Goodwin case and of his own spectacular part in putting a stop to it. From this narrative he drew two important conclusions: first, that there definitely is such a thing as witchcraft, for he observed it in action on the victim under his care; and, second, that it can be defeated by the method that he followed with the Goodwin girl, which consisted mainly of isolating the victim and praying. . . .

The Salem episode actually began in much the same way as the Goodwin case in Boston. Perhaps Mather's pamphlet caused discussion of witchcraft and was a cause in that way, but there is no direct connection. Early in 1692 a group of girls between the ages of nine and nineteen began to have symptoms resembling those of the Goodwin children. They accused Tituba, a Caribbean Indian slave woman in the family of the local minister, of having bewitched them. The slave was beaten into a confession and accused two old women of being her confederates. These in turn confessed and accused others, apparently in hope of gaining lenient treatment. The circle widened rapidly; and by the time the new governor, Sir William Phips, arrived in Boston with his commission under the new charter, there were several

dozen persons aware that the devil had had his way. Mather had hesitated, uncertain of its special commission of eminent forms. Sewall, the diarist who proved to be unbending self-righteous.

When the court other judges appeared in a panic that had already begun. The devil seemed



A scene from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *Salem Village* to investigate them.

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Sewall, the diarist, and headed by William Stoughton,
who proved to be a veritable caricature of the
unbending self-righteous Puritan.

When the court proceeded to trial, he and the
other judges apparently became infected with the
panic that had already seized the Salem community.
The devil seemed to be at large, winning more and

more adherents, and the cause of God in New Eng-
land, already visibly threatened in so many other ways,
seemed to be at stake. The court, in the throes of this
panic, began deciding cases and rendering judgments
on the basis of a procedure that had long been recog-
nized as invalid in witchcraft cases. They convicted
accused persons on the ground of what was known as
spectral testimony, unsupported by other evidence.
Spectral testimony was testimony offered by the vic-
tim to the effect that he or she was being tormented
by a specter in the shape of the accused. The assump-
tion behind this form of evidence was that the devil



A scene from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's play Giles Cory of Salem Farms depicts Cotton Mather encountering Tituba on his way to Salem Village to investigate the witchcraft accusations. Several young girls had accused Tituba, a Caribbean Indian slave woman, of bewitching them.

could not adopt the form of an innocent person (which would thus be just about the only shape he could not take). The only human shape that the devil could take, according to this assumption, was the shape of a person who had confederated with him. If, therefore, a girl was tormented by someone who looked to her like, say, Goody Jones, then Goody Jones must have made a pact with the devil. Goody Jones, in short, must be a witch.

Now, if this sort of evidence was accepted as sufficient for conviction, it would be easy for anyone, either out of malice or because of hallucinations, to accuse and obtain the conviction of an innocent person. Even people who believed in the reality of witchcraft could see that there were great dangers in such an unregulated procedure, and it had been established for some time that spectral evidence was not to be regarded as conclusive. The Mathers and other ministers were aware of this and cautioned the members of the court privately against placing too great a reliance on this kind of evidence. For they knew it was a matter of controversy whether it should be relied on at all. There were some experts on the subject who believed that it *was* possible for the devil to adopt the shape of an innocent person, and if this was so, then of course spectral evidence had no validity whatever.

In any case, it was clear that some more objective evidence ought to be required for conviction, and the members of the court knew this perfectly well. If they had insisted on such evidence, if they had insisted that the regular, established procedures for trying witches be followed, they would have been able to prevent the Salem episode from turning into a general panic.

Unfortunately they did not insist on the regular, established procedures. They admitted spectral evidence and convicted men and women solely on the basis of such evidence, which was offered in many cases by hysterical teenage girls who were perhaps enjoying the notoriety they had suddenly attained and who doubtless persuaded themselves, as they persuaded the court, that their fantasies were reality. The judges, like other members of the community, were alarmed at the size of the danger that appeared to

face them. The devil with all his legions seemed to have invaded New England, and it was no time, they felt, to be nice about methods of dealing with him. Fight him ruthlessly with no holds barred. Better that a few individuals suffer than that the whole community be endangered.

Such a situation is all too familiar. When any group of people become sufficiently intent on attacking a particular evil, they are likely to discard as obsolete and ineffective any ground rules that society has developed for the peaceful or fair achievement of social objectives. When those on the right become exercised by the demons of anarchism, communism, or terrorism to the point where they feel themselves threatened, they call upon the government to ignore the normal procedures designed to protect the rights of individuals, or they resort to lynch law, kangaroo courts, or torture, or they persuade their legislatures to act as courts and in effect convict their enemies in wholesale fashion. Similarly, when those on the left come to feel that the duly elected officers of government have somehow betrayed them, the left also discards ordinary, orderly procedures and moves to direct action, to force, disdaining the old procedures except as they may be useful in hampering the establishment's efforts to defend itself. When any of these groups become large enough to be intoxicated by their own apparent size or power and infatuated with their own righteousness, it is the rare individual who will stand up and loudly say no.

In Salem it was not a party or faction but the whole local community that rose against the apparent legion of witches enlisted by the devil. God Himself, it seemed, surely approved of any methods used to stop them. Anyone who suggested otherwise was obviously a witch lover. Although procedures existed for trying witches, procedures that had been used in the past with seeming success, the situation appeared to call for extraordinary procedures against the devil's massive onslaught. The majority of people were either egging the court on or keeping their mouths shut.

Only after twenty persons had been executed in 1692 and hundreds more accused did a group of

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The Salem witch trials produced a circus environment of hysterical children, stern judges, and frightened neighbors. "The devil seemed to be at large," observes Morgan, "winning more and more adherents, and the cause of God in New England, already visibly threatened in so many ways, seemed to be at stake."

ministers, led by Increase Mather, have the courage to get together and point out firmly and unequivocally to Governor Phips what some of them had said privately and with reservations—namely, that the court was proceeding contrary to established practice. After they had done this, the terrible business came to an end. Phips, upon receipt of the memorial from the ministers, dissolved the special commission of oyer and terminer. The remaining cases were tried under the old, regular procedures by the newly appointed superior court. Spectral evidence was not admitted as a sufficient basis for conviction. And the

result was acquittal of all but three, whom the governor promptly reprieved. So far as I know, no more trials for witchcraft were ever held again in New England, though the last trial in England was in 1712 and isolated trials and executions continued on the Continent through the eighteenth century.

The New England ministers surely deserve credit for having spoken up to stop the trials, however belatedly. But if we look at the way the trials ended by comparison with the witch hunts that had afflicted German towns during the preceding century, it becomes apparent that the Salem trials were

reaching the point where the civil authorities would probably have called a halt to them within a short time anyhow. A study of German witchcraft in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries suggests that witch hunts had a natural history that repeated itself in each of them.

At the beginning we may expect the persons accused to have been generally poor and helpless, persons whose age and poverty and manner of living placed them outside the web of human relations that initially protected other members of a community against irresponsible charges. But as the confessions of the accused widened, the circle necessarily spread beyond the immediate neighborhood. The accused, pressed for more names, probably did not know the names of ordinary people outside their immediate neighborhood. The only names they could come up with would have been those of more prominent people, people known to them not by virtue of personal acquaintance but by social standing or political position in the province at large.

As the accusations thus spread upward as well as outward, two powerful motives for doubt began to work. First, it became more and more difficult for anyone to believe that the devil had actually succeeded in confederating with such a large proportion of the population. And second, it became particularly difficult for those in power to believe accusations that touched their wives and friends and even themselves. If the trials proceeded, the whole structure of society as well as their own place in it would be threatened. Up to this point most trials would end in convictions. As doubts began to seize the members of the tribunal, acquittals would become more frequent and then suddenly become universal. Accusations and confessions would cease, and society would return to normal and lick its wounds. No one would have stopped believing in the devil or in the reality of witchcraft, but the authorities would have come to doubt the validity of their own methods of coping with it.

The Salem horror came to an end in precisely this way, which again confirms the resemblance of the Salem trials to the continental rather than the English

model. The accusations were reaching way beyond Salem and were beginning to extend to men and women of some prominence in the colony. They even reached to the wife of Governor Phips himself. Huge numbers of people were under suspicion. When Phips got the signal from the ministers, it served to crystallize a conviction that must surely have come to him shortly in any case. The colony he was charged to govern would have destroyed itself if the trials had been allowed to continue much longer.

That a healthy skepticism had spread among other men in authority is evident from the way in which the Superior Court in Boston dealt out acquittals wholesale to those who were still awaiting trial when the special commission of oyer and terminer was dissolved. Not only Governor Phips but the whole colony had finally come to its senses, and the people, like those of so many German communities, could now lick their wounds. In a sense they have been doing it ever since, trying to place the blame for such horrendous events and trying to redeem them at least by learning from them. . . .

Some aspects of what happened at Salem remain . . . novel and cannot fail to arouse a certain admiration in those of us who dislike judicial murder, murder by order of court. We can take a little comfort, for example, in the fact that the trials were brought to an end when only twenty-odd people had been hanged. The people of Massachusetts did manage to get a grip on themselves, did manage to get over their hysteria before it had carried them beyond twenty murders.

One can admire much more the courage of those who refused to confess. There was an enormous pressure on the accused to confess, for those who did so and turned state's evidence by naming accomplices were almost invariably forgiven. The Puritan code always was very lenient on those who repented. If you read the records of New England courts throughout the seventeenth century, you will find that in nine cases out of ten in which a man was convicted of a crime, he had only to humble himself and say that he was sorry for what he had done in order to have his punishment remitted to a nominal fine. After

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all, the motive for punishing crime was mainly to tes-
tify to God that society did not approve. If a man
confessed that he had done wrong, this consideration
was already taken care of. Similarly with the witches,
anyone who confessed that she had conspired with
the devil, but was sorry for it, was willingly forgiven.
Usually, in order to convince the judges that her con-
fession was genuine, she would describe her confeder-
ates in the conspiracy. As we have seen, it was by
means of these phony confessions that the witch hunt
spread.

The remarkable thing is that a number of men and
women had the courage to deny the accusation at
the price of their lives. They took their religion seri-
ously enough to believe that if they confessed to a
crime they had not committed, God would hold
them guilty of the lie. One man, Giles Cory, was per-
haps as brave a man as any in American history. Cory,
accused of witchcraft, saw that he would be con-
victed by the unfair procedures of the court. When
his case came up for trial, he simply refused to plead,
that is, he refused to answer whether he was guilty or
not guilty. The means prescribed by English law at
that time for forcing a man to plead was that he
should be placed between two wooden planks or
platforms, while stones were piled on the upper one
until he was ready to speak. Giles Cory was given
this treatment and allowed himself to be pressed to
death without saying a word. If he had pleaded guilty,
confessed, and accused others, he would doubtless
have been set free. If he had pleaded not guilty, he
would surely have been found guilty and his property
would have been forfeited to the state, for witchcraft
was punished in Massachusetts not only by death but
by forfeiture of property to the state, even though
this was contrary to English law. By refusing to plead,
Cory made it impossible for the court to convict him
and thereby saved his property for his family. But he
did not take the easier course of pleading guilty. . . .

The courage of men . . . like Giles Cory . . . , who
stood up to their judges could probably be matched
today. But there was another kind of courage dis-
played in connection with the witchcraft trials that
would be hard to find a parallel for today. Five years

after the trials, in 1697, the General Court of Massa-
chusetts decided that the trials had sent innocent
people to their deaths. January 15, 1697, was
appointed as a day of public fasting in which the
people of the colony should ask forgiveness from
God for what they had done. And on that day Samuel
Sewall, one of the judges, stood up before the con-
gregation of the church to which he belonged, with
bowed head, while the minister read a statement that
Sewall had written, begging forgiveness of God and
man for the part that he had played in the witchcraft
trials, asking that "the blame and shame of it" be
placed on him. On the same day the jury that had sat
in the trials published a written expression of their
"deep sense of sorrow" for their decisions, "whereby
we fear we have been instrumental with others,
though ignorantly and unwillingly, to bring upon
ourselves the guilt of innocent blood."

All this did not bring anyone back to life, though
when the court reversed the sentences, the survivors
were able to recover some compensation for the
property that the state had seized and sold. But the
remarkable thing is that a people as a whole had
the courage to admit that they had been wrong.
Mind you, they had not ceased to believe in the real-
ity and danger of witchcraft; they had not suddenly
been converted to a belief that the devil does not
make compacts with human beings. They had simply
become convinced that the trials were unfair. Can
any modern people point to a similar willingness to
remedy injustice, even after the event?

Consider another trial, held in Massachusetts in
1927, in the midst of public hysteria over the red
menace. Two men were convicted and executed after
a trial that was as much a travesty of justice as those
held at Salem in 1692. The men may have been guilty,
just as some of the Salem witches may have been
guilty, but the trial did not prove their guilt by regu-
larly recognized procedures. In the 1690s it took the
people of Massachusetts five years to admit that they
had done wrong. It took fifty years for the governor
of Massachusetts to do the same in regard to Sacco
and Vanzetti. And when he did, the reaction of the
people of Massachusetts was rather less contrite than

that of their forebears. Members of the General Court this time made indignant protests against the governor's acknowledgment that the state could ever have done anything wrong. One wonders how long it will be before the people of New England will measure up to the stature of their ancestors.

And one wonders even more whether we as Americans will ever recognize and accept our share of responsibility for transforming modern warfare from armed combat to mass murder of civilian populations. The Salem witch trials may one day look like one of the prouder episodes in our history simply because the whole society was then willing to recognize its complicity. In spite of Samuel Sewall's desire to take the blame and shame on himself, it was the whole society that fasted and prayed in acknowledgment of guilt and did not seek to shuffle off the blame on the members of their duly constituted tribunal.

The Massachusetts fast day was a fitting close to the Puritan era. Although people still believed in witches in 1697, a century later they were not so sure. . . . But the currents were already stirring that have made our world so different from theirs. None of us, I hope, would wish to return to their superstitions, but I wonder whether we might not still have something to learn from them about the dangers of self-righteousness and the merits of contrition.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1 Why would the author state that the witch trials occurred at a period "when the people of Massachusetts were passing through very difficult times"?

Describe the political uncertainties associated with the loss of the royal charter. How did the activities of a younger generation of Puritans, who did not have the same devotion to the religion of their parents, also make the society vulnerable?

2 Why were witch trials a common occurrence in seventeenth-century Europe and America? Who were the so-called "white witches" found in many communities? Describe the positive impact that this very superstitious world felt that white witches could achieve.

3 What type of evidence might result in the conviction of a suspected witch? What circumstances produced an ever-widening web of accusations and victims? Speculate as to why many of the accusers were young and many of their victims were elderly women.

4 Why were innocent victims of the Salem witch-hunt vulnerable because of the use of spectral testimony? Explain the author's conclusion that, even today, people who are "intent on attacking a particular evil" often resort to unfair and misleading evidence of guilt.

5 Why does Morgan believe that Giles Cory "was perhaps as brave a man as any in American history"? Compare the Salem witch-hunt to the trial of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti. Why does Morgan give more credit to the Puritans who killed Cory than he does to twentieth-century Americans who sent those two Italian immigrants to their death?

6 How and why did the Salem witch trials end? Do you think that the accusations against the wealthier and more respected members of the community were a factor?