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The Captivity of Spectres: Dynamics of the Salem Witch-hunt

ABSTRACT

The Salem witch-hunt constitutes one microcosm of the tensions produced by an amalgamation of cultures and traditions that occurred during and in the years following colonial settlement in New England. European witch-hunting traditions, Puritan dogmatism and the unique concepts of diabolism and demonic possession developed in the colony interfaced with the colonising project of the New Englanders to produce the disastrous events at Salem in 1692.

BIOGRAPHY

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THE CAPTIVITY OF SPECTRES: DYNAMICS OF THE SALEM WITCH-HUNT

The Salem witch-hunt of 1692 constitutes one microcosm of the tensions produced by an amalgamation of cultures and traditions that occurred during and in the years following colonial settlement in New England. The events at Salem can be shown to incorporate the traditions of European witch-hunting as well as the intensity and dogmatism of Puritan religious beliefs as these legacies collided in the frontier landscape of the colonial settlement. As the witch-hunt unfolded in Salem, the fusion of European witch-hunting traditions, Puritan dogmatism and the unique concepts of diabolism and demonic possession developed in the colony allowed the trials to be conducted in a way that both functioned as an attempt to cleanse religious doubt and restore unity, and as a catalyst to the disastrous capacity of the hunt.

The interplay between Puritan beliefs and a perspective on the frontier landscape as the realm of the Devil, particularly as this was formulated during the Indian Wars, was a central factor in the rise and characterisation of notions of diabolism and demonic possession as these developed in Salem. The Puritan colonists saw themselves as God's chosen people, on par with the Israelites. The first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop, made this clear in 1630 when he declared, '... we shall be as a City upon the Hill,' and further quoting Moses in Deuteronomy 30, '... there is now set before us life, and good, death and evil in that we are commanded this day to love the Lord our God ...'.ⁱ Accordingly, Maxwell-Stuart argues, the settlers viewed native Americans as the 'Canaanites, Assyrians and Babylonians of biblical history.'ⁱⁱ From the beginning, European settlers closely associated native Americans with the European tradition of diabolical worship and characterised the New World as one over which the Devil reigned. This is clearly displayed in the words of a Virginian minister, writing as early as 1613. He said:

Let the miserable condition of these slaves of the divell move you to compassion toward them ... they serve the divell after the most base manner, sacrificing their own children to him ... Their priests ... are no other but such as our English witches are.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Indian Wars (1675–1678, 1688–1699) were a primary vehicle by which unity of purpose was strengthened in Puritan society.^{iv} Not only did the "Indian threat" position Puritan settlers in the role of redeemers but it also assisted in characterising the internal doubts and fears of the colonists. Demonic possession as it occurred in Salem village in 1692 has been seen as a way in which the afflicted girls engaged in behaviour that was explicitly denied them given the subordinate role of women in Puritan society.^v However, demonic possession in Salem also reflected Puritan visions of the "Demonic Indian." Parallels can be drawn between the primary source discussions of demonic possession and a narrative of captivity that grew out of conflict with native populations.^{vi} In 1692, the Puritan minister Cotton Mather was involved in the treatment of Mercy Short, who was believed to be suffering from demonic possession after an encounter with Sarah Good, one of the Salem witches, in a Boston jail.^{vii} Short had previously witnessed the massacre of her family during an Indian attack on Salmon Falls in 1690, after which she had been taken as a captive to Canada.^{viii} Mather's account of Short's captivity and his description of her possession bear striking resemblances. In terms of Short's possession, Mather relates that she is, '... being held by Barbarous Visitants ...' in a 'Captivity of Spectres.'^{ix} Further, Short's possessing demon is described as being of '... Tawny, or an Indian colour ... with straight Hair; and one Cloven-foot.'^x

However, at the same time as this interaction occurred and perhaps encouraged Puritan settlers to assimilate religious doubts into a wider concern with the frontier landscape, the correlation between diabolism and native Americans became a driving force of those self-same doubts. As Levack has pointed out, 'The identification of demonic power with the Indians ... only aggravated the fear of the Devil ... and made it more imperative to identify the Devil's confederates.'^{xi} Successive military setbacks at the turn of the decade, such as the Indian and French raids on Salmon Falls, Falmouth and Wells in 1690, were often interpreted as, to use the phrase of then governor Simon Bradstreet, '... the awful Frowne of God.'^{xii} Bradstreet's comment is indicative of a growing concern in the colony that some failing of the Puritan vision had invited divine wrath.

Salem, positioned as it was geographically, was a fertile breeding ground for such fears. Salem Town was the largest urban centre north of Boston. Its port was a major launching point for campaigns to the frontier.^{xiii} As such, it also supplied a large number of soldiers and was likely to have been the recipient of displaced persons fleeing villages such as Salmon Falls, Falmouth, Wells and York.^{xiv} With its ties to Salem Town, contentious though they were, Salem Village would have certainly been up-linked to the conduit of rumour, fear and doubt that proceeded through Salem Town in the form of refugees and militia.

The fact that the climate of uncertainty and fear aroused by military defeats developed concurrently to King Charles' revoking of the colony's Charter in the mid-1680s is salient. The sense that the "City upon the Hill" had somehow invited God's displeasure, evidenced by the military catastrophes of the Indian Wars and the establishment of an Anglican royal governor in the colony, certainly attributed to disunity in Puritan society, particularly contention that the religious foundations of the colony were being undermined by commercial capitalism and the growing power of the mercantile class. Erikson has proposed that, after the mid-seventeenth century, the Puritan polity steadily declined from attempted unanimity into 'something closely resembling party bickering.'^{xv} As early as 1670, the House of Deputies declared the following concern:

Declension from the primitive foundation work, innovation in doctrine and worship, opinion and practice, and the invasion of rights, liberties and privileges of churches ... [are the] ... corrupting gangrene, the infecting spreading plague ... which hath provoked divine wrath ...^{xvi}

Economic and social tensions resulted from the dual goals of establishing a religious state and building a colonising society. As Karlesen has indicated, the process was 'as much individual and secular as collective and spiritual.'^{xvii} Community tensions revolved around a rift between those who envisioned a mercantile colony and those who wished to preserve the agrarian traditions of New England.

Leading up to the witch-hunt in 1692, Salem Village was divided along this very fault line in a dispute relating to the ties Salem Village had to the mercantile seaport of Salem Town. The minister, Samuel Parris, whose daughter and niece were the first victims of demonic possession in 1691/1692, led the faction calling for independence from the town.^{xviii} An opposing faction supported embracing the commercial and secular influences of the seaport.^{xix} In 1691, not more than two months before Elizabeth Parris and Abigail Williams became "possessed," the pro-town faction triumphed and secured management of the village finances, including control of Parris' salary.^{xx} In the ensuing witch panic, members of the pro-town faction were frequently cried out as witches, including leaders such as Daniel Andrew.^{xxi} The events at Salem can be seen to have concentrated a wider fear that the economic forces directing the consolidation of a successful colonial settlement tied to the inherent mercantilism of the Atlantic world had corrupted the common purpose of the Puritan vision.^{xxii}

During the decades leading up to the Salem witch-hunt, in which factionalism and conflict had begun to take root in Puritan society, the image of the frontier began to be internalised. Even as the second Indian war progressed, contemporary commentaries signify a shift to a fear of the invisible world. As Cotton Mather writes in *Wonders of the Invisible World*:

Wherefore the Devil is now making one Attempt more upon us; an Attempt more difficult, more Surprising, more snarl'd with unintelligible Circumstances than any that we have hitherto Encountered ... An Army of Devils is horribly broke in upon the place which is the centre, and after a sort, the First-born of our English settlements.^{xxiii}

Disunity catalysed the shift in focus from the external enemy to one that nestled at the heart of Puritan society and engendered a perception that this new internal evil had to be found and rooted out. Given a tradition of fear of the Devil in the frontier landscape, as discussed above, the development of a belief in a diabolical conspiracy of witches in Salem should not be surprising. In this sense, Salem presented as an unusual, but not inexplicable, legacy of continental Europe rather than of England. While witchcraft both in England and New England was primarily a crime of *maleficium*, the notion of diabolism as inherent in the cumulative concept of witchcraft, as one can deduce from Puritan writings on native Americans and a legacy of European witch beliefs, found strong support on Puritan society.^{xxiv} The manner in which this belief was employed to disastrous ends in Salem is captured in another quote from Cotton Mather:

Now ... 'tis Agreed that the Devil has made a dreadful knot of Witches in the Country, and by the help of Witches has dreadfully increased that Knot: That these Witches have driven a Trade of Commissioning their Confederate Spirits to do all sorts of Mischiefs to the Neighbours ... That at prodigious Witch-Meetings the Wretches have proceeded so far as to Concert and Consult the Methods of Rooting out Christian Religion from this Country, and setting up instead of it, perhaps a more gross Diabolism than ever the World saw before.^{xxv}

Mather did not see it as a coincidence that a conspiracy of witches should take root in Salem, which he perceived as 'the First-born of our English settlements' and therefore the sensible location for the Devil to launch such an attack.^{xxvi} In this sense, the roles that both demonic possession and diabolism played in Salem were ones that enabled Salem's magistrates and ministers to undertake the cleansing of Puritan society.^{xxvii}

One of the most important implications of the unique way in which notions of diabolism developed in the climate of fear produced by wars in the frontier landscape was that it encouraged Salem's magistrates to interpret the crime of witchcraft almost exclusively in terms of a contract with the Devil.^{xxviii} The role of demonic possession, particularly as it functioned through the admission of spectral evidence, also played a pivotal role. Both constructions, that of the diabolic and that of its effect, enabled the settlers to engage physically with this fear. This engagement produced the dual effect that both constructions were exploited to achieve a sense of Puritan society being cleansed but also that the fear was increased to the point of hysteria, enabling the witch-hunt to occur on such a large scale.

The manner in which the Salem witch trials were conducted can be seen as the clearest evidence that the community's leaders were seeking a means to an end. That was, to defeat a diabolical conspiracy that had corrupted the Puritan vision in order to restore unity and purpose to Puritan society. Leading questions posed to the accused are evidence of this. In the examination of Goody Bishop, John Hathorne posed the following questions:

Hathorne: Goody Bishop, what contract have you made with the devil?

Bishop: I have made no contract with the devil ...

Hathorne: Have you given consent [to the Devil] that some evil spirit should do this [torment the afflicted] in your likeness?^{xxix}

In the examination of Rebecca Nurse, Hathorne, once again, formulated questions leading to an accusation of diabolism:

Hathorne: You do know whether you are guilty and have familiarity with the devil. And now when you are here present to see such a thing as these testify a black man whispering in your ear and birds about you, what do you say to it?^{xxx}

Godbeer points out that, whereas only four previous confessions to diabolical witchcraft had been made in the history of the colony, some forty-three people confessed to making a contract with the Devil during the Salem trials.^{xxxi}

The accusations of the afflicted were also saturated with references to diabolism through which the admission of spectral evidence functioned to heighten hysteria and reinforce the notion of diabolical witchcraft.^{xxxii} In commentary on the trials, Deodat Lawson gives an account of a fit experienced by Abigail Williams in which she cried out:

Do you not see her [Rebecca Nurse]? Why there she stands! ... I won't, I won't. I won't, take it, I do not know what book it is: I am sure it is none of God's book, it is the devil's book, for aught I know.^{xxxiii}

Even to some contemporaries, the admission of spectral evidence like this was not acceptable. Increase Mather was concerned that the hysteria produced by spectral evidence had led to the conviction of innocent people.^{xxxiv} One of his primary concerns was encapsulated in the belief that the Devil was able to impersonate the innocent. He asks, can 'Satan ... appear in the Shape of an Innocent and Pious, to Afflict such as suffer by Diabolical Molestations?'^{xxxv} In answer to his own query he says, 'The Answer to the Question must be Affirmative ...'^{xxxvi} What is interesting about the existence of contention over the use of spectral evidence is not a disbelief in the existence of diabolic forces rather that this contention was so clearly disregarded in the conduct of the Salem trials. This supports the case that, for Salem's magistrates, the admission of spectral evidence represented a considered utilitarian, and perhaps convenient, approach to reconstructing the unity and goodness of Puritan society.

Cotton Mather clearly held such a position. Although Mather conceded that the admission of spectral evidence had been questioned, his wider perspective was one of it being 'better to be safe than sorry'. He writes:

... there are very worthy Men, who are not a little dissatisfied at the Proceedings in the Prosecution of this witchcraft ... 'tis commendable Cautiousness, in those gracious Men, to be very shy lest the Devil ... as for the sake of many Truths which we find he tells us, we come at length to believe any Lyes, wherewith he would abuse us ... Have there been any faults on any side fallen into? Surely, they have at worst been but faults of a well-meaning Ignorance.^{xxxvii}

It is evident then that the employment of notions of diabolism and demonic possession had a dual function. By provoking fear, they engendered the continuation and expansion of the hunt. For the magistrates and ministers,

they functioned as a means to an end and allowed community leaders to undertake the purging of Puritan society.^{xxxviii}

Legacies of witch-hunting from continental Europe and, particularly, the associated notions of diabolism and demonic possession gained considerable ground in the wilderness landscape of Puritan colonial settlements. A climate of fear produced in Puritan society, firstly by fear of the Other and the power of the Devil in the frontier landscape and, later, by the suspicion that disunity and loss of the sense of common purpose demonstrated the presence of the Devil within the Puritan realm, was compressed in Salem village. Salem, as it has been shown, was situated both in time and space so as to be strongly influenced by the factors, such as the Indian Wars, particularly military defeats and political factionalism, that combined with distinctive and fluid Puritan notions of the Devil, to precipitate and escalate the witch-hunt that occurred in 1692. While the Salem witch-hunt is a unique event in terms of its vast scope and certainly coincidences of history that allowed pertinent causes, both latent and immediate, to manifest there, the events at Salem represent a microcosm of the cultural legacies that collided and shaped each other in the wider colonial settlement of New England.

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