

THE
NEW YORKER

THE WITCHES OF SALEM

Diabolical doings in a Puritan village.

By Stacy Schiff August 31, 2015

In 1692, the Massachusetts Bay Colony executed fourteen women, five men, and two dogs for witchcraft. The sorcery materialized in January. The first hanging took place in June, the last in September; a stark, stunned silence followed. Although we will never know the exact number of those formally charged with having “wickedly, maliciously, and feloniously” engaged in sorcery, somewhere between a hundred and forty-four and a hundred and eighty-five witches and wizards were named in twenty-five villages and towns. The youngest was five; the eldest nearly eighty. Husbands implicated wives; nephews their aunts; daughters their mothers; siblings each other. One minister discovered that he was related to no fewer than twenty witches.

The population of New England at that time would fit into Yankee Stadium today. Nearly to a person, they were Puritans. Having suffered for their faith, they had sailed to North America to worship “with more purity and less peril than they could do in the country where they were,” as a clergyman at the center of the crisis later explained. On a providential mission, they hoped to begin history anew; they had the advantage of building a civilization from scratch. Like any oppressed people, they defined themselves by what offended them, which would give New England its gritty flavor and, it has been argued, America its independence.

New England delivered greater purity but also introduced fresh perils. Stretching from Martha’s Vineyard to Nova Scotia and incorporating parts of present-day Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Hampshire, and Maine, it perched on the edge of a wilderness. That was a precarious position well before 1692, when the colony teetered between governments, or, more exactly, as a Boston merchant put it, “between government and no government.” The settlers unseated their royal governor in a deft 1689 military coup. They had endured without a charter for eight years.

From the start, the colonists tangled with that American staple, the swarthy terrorist in the back yard. Without a knock or a greeting, four armed Indians might appear in your parlor to warm themselves by the fire, propositioning you, while you cowered in the corner with your knitting. You could return from a trip to Boston to find your house in ashes and your family taken captive. The Indians skulked, they lurked, they flitted, they committed atrocities—and they vanished. “Our men could see no enemy to shoot at,” a Cambridge major general lamented.

King Philip’s War, a fifteen-month contest between the settlers and the Native Americans, had ended in 1676. It obliterated a third of New England’s towns, pulverized its economy, and claimed ten per cent of the adult male population. Every Bay Colony resident lost a friend or a relative; all knew of a dismemberment or an abduction. By 1692, another Indian war had begun to take shape, with a series of grisly raids by the Wabanaki and their French allies. The frontier had recently moved to within fifty miles of Salem.

From the pulpit came reminders of New England’s many depredations. The wilderness qualified as a sort of “devil’s den”; since the time of Moses, the prince of darkness had thrived there. He was hardly pleased to be displaced by a convoy of Puritans. He was in fact stark raving mad about it, preached Cotton Mather, the brilliant twenty-nine-year-old Boston minister. What, exactly, did an army of devils look like? Imagine “vast regiments of cruel and bloody French dragoons,” Mather instructed his North Church parishioners, and they would understand. He routinely muddied the zoological waters: Indians comported themselves like roaring lions or savage bears, Quakers like “grievous wolves.” The French, “dragons of the wilderness,” completed the diabolical menagerie. Given the symbiotic relationship of an oppressed people and an inhospitable landscape, it was from there but a short step to a colluding axis of evil.

The men who catalogued those dangers—who could discern a line of Revelation in a hailstorm—protected against them, spiritually and politically. They assisted in coups and installed regimes. Where witches were concerned, they deferred to the Biblical injunction: “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live,” Exodus commands. The most literate men in Massachusetts in 1692 were also the most literal. Among them, few probed the subject of witchcraft as intently as did the lanky, light-haired Mather, who

had entered Harvard at eleven and preached his first sermon at sixteen. He knew that the hidden world was there somewhere. He would relinquish no tool to exhibit it.

Mather shared the North Church pulpit with his illustrious father, Increase Mather. The president of Harvard, Increase was New England's best-known and most prolific minister. (His son would eventually eclipse him on both counts, publishing four hundred and thirty-seven books, twenty-six of them in the next four years.) The elder Mather was returning from England that spring with a new charter. The fruit of three years' negotiation, it promised at last to deliver Massachusetts from chaos. The colonists awaited it in jittery suspense; all manner of rumor circulated as to its terms. So unreliable was the news that a monarch could be dead one minute and alive the next.

VIDEO FROM THE NEW YORKER

Crossword Puzzles with a Side of Millennial Socialism

In isolated settlements, in smoky, fire-lit homes, New Englanders lived very much in the dark, where one listens more acutely, feels most passionately, and imagines most vividly, where the sacred and the occult thrive. The seventeenth-century sky was crow black, pitch-black, Bible black, so black that it could be difficult at night to keep to the path, so black that a line of trees might freely migrate to another location, or that you

might find yourself pursued by a rabid black hog, leaving you to crawl home on all fours, bloody and disoriented. Even the colony's less isolated outposts felt their fragility. A tempest blew the roof off one of the finest homes in Salem as its ten occupants slept. A church went flying, with its congregation inside.

A visitor exaggerated when he reported that New Englanders could “neither drive a bargain, nor make a jest, without a text of Scripture at the end on it,” but he was not far off. If there was a book in the house, it was the Bible. The early modern American thought, breathed, dreamed, disciplined, bartered, and hallucinated in Biblical texts and imagery. St. John the Baptist might well turn up in a land dispute. A prisoner cited Deuteronomy 19:19 in his own defense. When a killer cat came flying in your window—taking hold of your throat and crushing your chest as you lay defenseless in your bed—you scared it away by invoking the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. You also concluded that your irascible neighbor had paid a call, in feline form.

Human frailty was understood to account for inclement weather: teeth chattering, toes numb, the Massachusetts Puritan had every reason to believe that he sinned flamboyantly. He did so especially during the arctic winter of 1691, when bread froze on Communion plates, ink in pens, sap in the fireplace. In tiny Salem village, the Reverend Samuel Parris preached to a chorus of rattling coughs and sniffles, to the shuffling of cruelly frostbitten feet. For everyone's comfort, he curtailed his afternoon sermon of January 3, 1692. It was too cold to go on.

Weeks later, word got out that something was grievously wrong in the Parris household. The minister's eleven-year-old niece and nine-year-old daughter complained of bites and pinches by “invisible agents.” Abigail and Betty launched into “foolish, ridiculous speeches.” Their bodies shuddered and spun. They went limp or spasmodically rigid. They interrupted sermons and fell into trances. Neither appeared to have time for prayer, though until January both had been perfectly well behaved and well mannered. At night they slept like babies.

In 1641, when the colonists established a legal code, the first capital crime was idolatry. The second was witchcraft. “If any man or woman be a witch, that is, has or consults with a familiar spirit, they shall be put to death,” read the Massachusetts body of laws. Blasphemy came next, followed by murder, poisoning, and bestiality. In the years since, New England had indicted more than a hundred witches, about a quarter

of them men. The first person to confess to having entered into a pact with Satan, a Connecticut servant, had prayed for his help with her chores. An assistant materialized to clear the ashes from the hearth and the hogs from the fields. The servant was indicted in 1648 for “familiarity with the devil.” Unable to resist a calamity, preternatural or otherwise, Cotton Mather disseminated an instructive account of her compact.

In 1688, four exemplary Boston children, the sons and daughters of a devout Boston stonemason named John Goodwin, suffered from a baffling disorder. “They would bark at one another like dogs, and again purr like so many cats,” noted Mather, who observed Goodwin’s family and wrote of their afflictions in “Memorable Providences, Relating to Witchcraft and Possessions” the following year. (The 1689 volume was a salute to his father’s “Illustrious Providences,” a grab bag of apparitions and portents, published five years earlier.) The Goodwin children flew like geese, on one occasion for twenty feet. They recoiled from blows of invisible sticks, shrieked that they were sliced by knives or wrapped in chains. Jaws, wrists, necks flew out of joint. Parental reproof sent the children into agonies. Chores defied them. But “nothing in the world would so discompose them as a religious exercise,” Mather reported. Thirteen-year-old Martha could read an Oxford compendium of humor, although she seized up when handed a volume he deemed “profitable and edifying,” or one with the name Mather on the cover.

To observe her symptoms more closely, Mather that summer took Martha Goodwin into his home. She cantered, trotted, and galloped about the household on her “aerial steed,” whistling through family prayer and pummeling anyone who attempted it in her presence—the worst house guest in history. She hurled books at Mather’s head. She read and reread his pages on her case, lampooning their author. The sauciness astonished him. “And she particularly told me,” Mather sputtered, four years before the Salem trials, “that I should quickly come to disgrace by that history.”

The cause of Martha’s afflictions was identified soon enough. The witch was the mother of a neighborhood laundress. On the stand, the defendant was unable adequately to recite the Lord’s Prayer, understood to be proof of guilt. She was hanged in November, 1688, on Boston Common.

Samuel Parris, the Salem minister, would have known every detail of the Goodwin family's trials from Mather's much reprinted "Memorable Providences." The book included the pages Martha wildly ridiculed. The "agitations, writhings, tumblings, tossings, wallowings, foamings" in the parsonage were the same, only more acute. The girls cried that they were being stabbed with fine needles. Their skin burned. One disappeared halfway down a well. Their shrieks could be heard from a distance.

Through February, Parris fasted and prayed. He consulted with fellow-clergymen. With cider and cakes, he and his wife entertained the well-wishers who crowded their home. They prayed ardently, gooseflesh rising on their arms. They sang Psalms. But when the minister had had enough of the "odd postures and antic gestures," the deranged speeches, when it became clear that Scripture would not relieve the girls' preternatural symptoms, Parris called in the doctors.

In 1692, a basic medical kit looked little different from an ancient Greek one, consisting as it did of beetle's blood, fox lung, and dried dolphin heart. In plasters or powders, snails figured in many remedies. Salem village had one practicing physician that winter. He owned nine medical texts; he could likely read but not write. His surgical arsenal consisted of lances, razors, and saws. The doctor who had examined a seizing Groton girl a generation earlier initially diagnosed a stomach disorder. On a second visit, he refused to administer to her further. The distemper was diabolical in origin.

Whoever examined Abigail and Betty arrived at the same conclusion. "The evil hand" came as no surprise; the supernatural explanation was already the one on the street. The diagnosis likely terrified the girls, whose symptoms deteriorated. It may have gratified Reverend Parris. Witchcraft was portentous, a Puritan favorite. Never before had it broken out in a parsonage. The Devil's appearance was nearly a badge of honor, further proof that New Englanders were the chosen people. No wonder Massachusetts was troubled by witches, Cotton Mather exulted: "Where will the Devil show most malice but where he is hated, and hateth most?" The New England ministry had long been on the lookout for the apocalypse, imminent since the sixteen-fifties. The Book of Revelation predicted that the Devil would descend accompanied by "infernal fiends." If they were about, God could not be far behind.

Soon the twelve-year-old daughter of a close friend of Parris's began to shudder and choke. So did the village doctor's teen-age niece. A creature had followed her home from an errand, through the snow; she now realized that it had not been a wolf at all. The girls named names. They could see the culprits clearly. Not one but three witches were loose in Salem.

From Martha's Vineyard to Nova Scotia, New England perched on the edge of a wilderness. Courtesy Debra Lill

What exactly was a witch? Any seventeenth-century New Englander could have told you. As workers of magic, witches and wizards extend as far back as recorded history. The witch as Salem conceived her materialized in the thirteenth century, when sorcery and heresy moved closer together. She came into her own with the Inquisition, as a popular myth yielded to a popular madness. The western Alps introduced her to lurid orgies. Germany launched her into the air. As the magician molted into the witch, she also became predominately female, inherently more wicked and more susceptible to satanic overtures. An influential fifteenth-century text compressed a shelf of classical sources to make its point: "When a woman thinks alone, she thinks evil." As is often the case with questions of women and power, elucidations here verged on the paranormal. Though weak willed, women could emerge as dangerously, insatiably commanding.

The English witch made the trip to North America largely intact. She signed her agreement with the Devil in blood, bore a mark on her body for her compact, and enchanted by way of charms, ointments, and poppets, doll-like effigies. Continental witches had more fun. They walked on their hands. They made pregnancies last for three years. They rode hyenas to bacchanals deep in the forest. They stole babies and penises. The Massachusetts witch disordered the barn and the kitchen. She seldom flew to illicit meetings, more common in Scandinavia and Scotland. Instead, she divined the contents of an unopened letter, spun suspiciously fine linen, survived falls down stairs, tipped hay from wagons, enchanted beer, or caused cattle to leap four feet off the ground. Witches could be muttering, contentious malcontents or inexplicably strong and unaccountably smart. They could commit the capital offense of having more wit than their neighbors, as a minister said of the third Massachusetts woman hanged for witchcraft, in 1656.

Matters were murkier when it came to the wily figure with six thousand years of experience, the master of disguise who could cause things to appear and disappear, who knew your secrets and could make you believe things of yourself that were not true. He turned up in New England as a hybrid monkey, man, and rooster, or as a fast-moving turtle. Even Cotton Mather was unsure what language he spoke. He was a pervasive presence, however: the air pulsed with his minions. Typically in Massachusetts, he wore a high-crowned hat, as he had in an earlier Swedish invasion, which Mather documented in his 1689 book. Mather did not mention the brightly colored scarf that the Devil wound around his hat. Like the Swedish devil's gartered stockings or red beard, it never turned up in New England.

By May, 1692, eight Salem girls had claimed to be enchanted by individuals whom most of them had never met. Several served as visionaries; relatives of the ailing made pilgrimages to consult with them. They might be only eleven or twelve, but under adult supervision they could explain how several head of cattle had frozen to death, several communities away, six years earlier. In the courtroom, they provided prophetic direction, cautioning that a suspect would soon topple a child, or cause a woman to levitate. Minutes later, the victim's feet rose from the floor. With their help, at least sixty witches had been deposed and jailed by the end of the month, more than the Massachusetts prisons had ever accommodated. Those who had frozen through the winter began to roast in the sweltering spring.

On May 27th, the new Massachusetts governor, Sir William Phips, established a special court to try the witchcraft cases. He assembled on the bench nine of the "people of the best prudence and figure that could be pitched upon." At its head he installed his lieutenant governor, sixty-year-old William Stoughton. A political shape-shifter, Stoughton had served in five prior Massachusetts regimes. He had helped to unseat the reviled royal governor, on whose council he sat and whose courts he headed. He possessed one of the finest legal minds in the colony.

The court met in early June, and sentenced the first witch to hang on the tenth. It also requested a bit of guidance. During the next days, twelve ministers conferred. Cotton Mather drafted their reply, a circumspect, eight-paragraph document, delivered mid-month. Acknowledging the enormity of the crisis, he issued a paean to good

government. He urged “exquisite caution.” He warned of the dangers posed to those “formerly of an unblemished reputation.”

In the lines that surely received the greatest scrutiny, Mather reminded the justices that convictions should not rest purely on spectral evidence—evidence visible only to the enchanted, who conversed with the Devil or with his confederates. Mather would insist on the point throughout the summer. Other considerations must weigh against the suspected witch, “inasmuch as ’tis an undoubted and a notorious thing” that a devil might impersonate an innocent, even virtuous, man. Mather wondered whether the entire calamity might be resolved if the court discounted those testimonies. With a sweeping “nevertheless”—a word that figured in every 1692 Mather statement on witchcraft—he then executed an about-face. Having advised “exquisite caution,” he endorsed a “speedy and vigorous prosecution.”

A month later, Ann Foster, a seventy-two-year-old widow from neighboring Andover, submitted to the first of several Salem interrogations. Initially, she denied all involvement with sorcery. Soon enough, she began to unspool a fantastical tale. The Devil had appeared to her as an exotic bird. He promised prosperity, along with the gift of afflicting at a glance. She had not seen him in six months, but her ill-tempered neighbor, Martha Carrier, had been in touch on his behalf.

At Carrier’s direction, Foster had bewitched several children and a hog. She worked her sorcery with poppets. Carrier had announced a Devil’s Sabbath in May, arranging their trip by air. There were twenty-five people in the meadow, where a former Salem village minister officiated. Three days later, from jail, Foster added a malfunctioning pole and a mishap to her account. The pole had snapped as the women flew, causing them to crash, Foster’s leg crumpling beneath her.

She appeared entirely coöperative, both in a jail interview with a minister and before her interrogators. The justices soon learned that Foster had failed to come clean, however. It seemed that she and Carrier had neither flown nor crashed alone on that Salem-bound pole: a third rider had travelled silently behind Foster. So divulged forty-year-old Mary Lacey, a newly arrested suspect, on July 20th. Foster had also withheld the details of a chilling ceremony. The Devil had baptized his recruits, dipping their heads in water, six at a time. He performed the sacrament in a nearby river, to which he had carried Lacey in his arms. On July 21st, Ann Foster appeared before the

magistrates for the fourth time. That hearing was particularly sensational: Mary Lacey, who supplied the details missing from Foster's account, was her daughter.

"Did not you know your daughter to be a witch?" one justice asked Foster. She did not, and seemed taken aback. Mary Warren, a pretty, twenty-year-old servant, helpfully chimed in, a less dramatic witness at Foster's hearing than she appeared on other occasions, when blood trickled from her mouth or spread across her bonnet. Warren shared with the court what a spectre had confided in her: Foster had recruited her own daughter. The authorities understood that she had done so about thirteen years earlier. Was that correct? "No, and I know no more of my daughter's being a witch than what day I shall die upon," Foster replied, sounding as unequivocal as she had been on the details of the misbegotten Salem flight. A magistrate coaxed her: "You cannot expect peace of conscience without a free confession." Foster swore that if she knew anything more she would reveal it.

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At this, Mary Lacey was called. She berated her mother: "We have forsaken Jesus Christ, and the Devil hath got hold of us. How shall we get clear of this evil one?" Under her breath, Foster began to pray. "What God do witches pray to?" a justice needed. "I cannot tell, the Lord help me," the befuddled old woman replied, as her daughter delivered fresh details of their flight to the village green and of the satanic baptism. Her mother, Lacey revealed, rode first on the stick.

Court officers removed the two older women and escorted Lacey's seventeen-year-old daughter, Mary Lacey, Jr., into the room. Mary Warren fell at once into fits. At first, the

younger Lacey was unhelpful. "Where is my mother that made me a witch and I knew it not?" she cried, a yet more disturbing question than the one posed in June, when a suspect wondered whether she might be a witch and not know it. Asked to smile at Warren without hurting her, Mary Lacey failed. Warren collapsed to the floor. "Do you acknowledge now that you are a witch?" Lacey was asked. She could only agree, although she seemed to be working from a different definition: a recalcitrant child, she had caused her parents plenty of trouble. She had, she insisted, signed no diabolical pact.

The ideal Puritan girl was a sterling amalgam of modesty, piety, and tireless industry. She was to speak neither too soon nor too much. She read her Scripture twice daily. Increase Mather warned that youths who disregarded their mothers could expect to "come to the gallows, and be hanged in gibbets for the ravens and eagles to feed upon them." The attention to a youngster's spiritual state intensified at adolescence, when children became simultaneously more capable of reason and less reasonable. Fourteen was the dividing line in law, for slander among other matters. One was meant then to embrace sobriety and to "put away childish things," as a father reminded his Harvard-bound son.

The father was the master of the family, its soul, the governor of all the governed. He was often an active and engaged parent. He sat vigil in the sickroom. He fretted over his children's bodies and souls. A majority of the bewitched girls had lost fathers; at least half were refugees from or had been orphaned by attacks in "the last Indian war." Those absences were deeply felt. A roaring girl wrestled aloud with the demons who would assault her the following year: she was well aware that she was fatherless—how often did they need to remind her as much? But she was hardly an orphan. In a heated, one-sided conversation, observed and preserved by Cotton Mather, the seventeen-year-old admonished her tormentors, "I have God for my father and I don't question but he'll provide well for me."

The justices reminded Mary Lacey, Jr., that if she desired to be saved by Christ she would confess. "She then proceeded," the court reporter noted. She was more profligate with details than her mother or her grandmother had been. It was a hallmark of Salem that the younger generation—Cotton Mather included—could be relied on for the most luxuriant reports. It appeared easier to describe satanic escapades when an

adolescent had already been told, or believed, that she cavorted with the Devil. The record allows a fleeting glimpse of Mary's sense of herself. "I have been a disobed—" she began, after which the page is torn.

Following Mary's testimony, her mother was returned to the room. The older woman had so often scolded that the Devil should fetch her away. Her wish had come true! Tears streaming down her face, the teen-ager now managed a spot of revenge: "Oh, mother, why did you give me to the Devil twice or thrice over?" Mary sobbed. She prayed that the Lord might expose all the witches. Officials led in her grandmother; three generations of enchantresses stood before the justices. Mary continued her rant: "Oh, grandmother, why did you give me to the Devil? Why did you persuade me and, oh, grandmother, do not you deny it. You have been a very bad woman in your time." The three returned to jail as a clutch of warrants made their way to Andover.

By the end of July, it was clear that—with the help of a minister mastermind—the Devil intended to topple the Church and subvert the country, something he had never before attempted in New England. Certain patterns emerged as well. To cast aspersions on a bewitched girl, to visit one's imprisoned spouse too regularly, was to risk accusation. It bordered on heresy to question the validity of witchcraft, the legitimacy of the evidence, or the wisdom of the court. The skeptic was a marked man. It could be wise to name names before anyone mentioned yours. It was safer to be afflicted than accused. Increasingly, you slept under the same roof, if not in the same bed, as your accuser.

Bewitched women choked with fits, whereas men—who stepped forward only once the trials had begun—tended to submit to paralyzing bedroom visits. Imputations proved impossible to outrun. The word of two ministers could not save an accused parishioner. Neither age, fortune, gender, nor church membership offered immunity; prominent men stood accused alongside homeless five-year-old girls. No one ever suffered afflictions without being able to name a witch. Many braced for a knock at the door.

The court met again early in August, when three men were convicted: George Jacobs, an elderly farmer; John Willard, a much younger one; and John Proctor, the first village man to have been accused. In Cotton Mather's first Thursday sermon that month, he addressed the trial that all of Massachusetts awaited. Tipping his hand a little, he called

once for compassion for the accused, twice for pity for the justices. They were, after all, up against the greatest sophist in existence. They labored to restore the innocent while excising the diabolical; it made for a hazardous operation. The following day, Mather wrote excitedly to an uncle in Plymouth. God was working in miracles. No sooner had they executed five witches—all impudently protesting their innocence—than God had dispatched the Andover witches, who offered “a most ample, surprising, amazing confession of all their villainies,” acknowledging the five executed that had been their confederates, and naming many more. They identified their ringleader, who came to trial that afternoon. “A vast concourse of people,” noted Mather, made their way to Salem for the event, his father among them.

The demonic mastermind was a minister in his early forties named George Burroughs. He had grown up in Maryland and graduated from Harvard in 1670, narrowly missing Samuel Parris. He was in his late twenties when he first arrived in Salem village, where he spent three contentious years. He was never ordained. Before and after that tenure, Burroughs served on the vulnerable Maine frontier. During a 1689 raid, he had joined in a seven-hour battle, waged in a field and an orchard. A veteran Boston militia captain lauded the Reverend for his unexpected role. The assault cost the settlers dearly; two hundred and fifty of them were killed or taken captive. Twice widowed, Burroughs retreated down the coast to Wells, eighty miles north of Boston. From a lice-infested garrison, he several times in the winter of 1692 appealed to the colonial authorities, who had withdrawn troops from the frontier, for clothing and provisions. The enemy lurked outside. They could not hold out for long.

Burroughs's spectre had been terrifying Salem villagers since April, when he first choked the twelve-year-old daughter of the Parris stalwart. He nearly tore her to pieces, bragging afterward that he outranked a wizard—he was a conjurer. (Days later, he introduced himself with the same credentials to Parris's niece, whom he also bewitched.) He had murdered several women and—evidently a secret agent, in the employ of the French and the Indians—dispatched a number of frontier soldiers as well. His mission was a frightful one, he informed the twelve-year-old: he who should have been teaching children to fear God had now “come to persuade poor creatures to give their souls to the Devil.” It was he who presided over the satanic Sabbaths.

Sixteen people had given evidence at Burroughs's preliminary hearing. Nearly twice as many testified at his trial. Eight confessed witches revealed that he had been promised a kingship in Satan's reign. Nine witnesses accused the short, muscular minister—a "very puny man," in the estimation of Cotton Mather—of feats that would have taxed a giant. (Mather provided the sole surviving account of the trial, although we have no evidence that he ever entered the courtroom.) "None of us could do what he could do," a forty-two-year-old Salem weaver recalled. He had attempted to lift a shotgun that Burroughs had fired but, even with both hands, could not steady the seven-foot weapon. Asked to account for his preternatural strength, Burroughs said that an Indian had assisted him in firing the musket. Lurking behind the testimony was what may have been the most pertinent charge against the former village minister: he had survived every Indian attack unscathed. Several of the bewitched had not been so lucky. Others who might have testified about the musket handling were dead.

The girls delivered up their own reports with difficulty, falling into testimony-stopping trances, yelping that Burroughs bit them. They displayed their wounds for court officials, who inspected the minister's mouth. The imprints matched perfectly. Choking and thrashing stalled the proceedings; the court could do nothing but wait for the girls to recover. During one delay, Chief Justice Stoughton appealed to the defendant. What, he asked, did Burroughs think throttled them? The minister replied that he assumed it was the Devil. "How comes the devil then to be so loath to have any testimony born against you?" Stoughton challenged. A brainteaser of a question, it left Burroughs without an answer.

He was equally bewildered when ghosts began to flit about the overcrowded room. Some observers who were not bewitched saw them too. Directly before Burroughs, a girl recoiled from a horrible sight: she explained that she stared into the blood-red faces of his dead wives. The ghosts demanded justice. By no account an agreeable man, Burroughs managed to join abusive behavior at home with miraculous feats abroad. If those in the court did not know already that, as Mather had it, Burroughs "had been famous for the barbarous use of his two late wives, all the country over," they did soon enough. He monitored their correspondences. He made them swear never to reveal his secrets. He berated them days after they had given birth. All evidence pointed to the same conclusion: he was a bad man but a very good wizard.

At one point, a former brother-in-law testified, Burroughs had vanished in the midst of a strawberry-picking expedition. His companions hollered for him in vain. They rode home to find that he had preceded them, on foot and with a full basket of berries. He had divined as well what was said about him in his absence. The Devil could not know as much, the brother-in-law protested, to which Burroughs replied, "My God makes known your thoughts unto me." Was it possible, the chief justice suggested, that a devil had fitted Burroughs into some sort of invisibility cloak, so that he might "gratify his own jealous humor, to hear what they said of him"? Burroughs's answer is lost; Mather deemed it not "worth considering." The evidence dwarfed the objections. Burroughs does seem to have bungled his defense. He stumbled repeatedly, offering contradictory answers—a luxury afforded only the accusers. As for "his tergiversations, contradictions, and falsehoods," Mather chided, "there never was a prisoner more eminent for them."

Out of excuses, Burroughs extracted a paper from his pocket. He seemed to believe it a deal-clincher. He did not contest the validity of spectral evidence, as had others who came before the court, who did not care to be convicted for crimes they committed in someone else's imagination. Instead, Burroughs, reading from the paper, asserted that "there neither are, nor ever were witches, that having made a compact with the Devil can send a Devil to torment other people at a distance." It was the most objectionable thing he could have suggested. If diabolical compacts did not exist, if the Devil could not subcontract out his work to witches, the Court of Oyer and Terminer had sent six innocents to their deaths.

A tussle ensued. Stoughton—who had graduated from Harvard around the time Burroughs was born—recognized the lines at once. Burroughs had lifted them from the work of Thomas Ady. A leading English skeptic, Ady inveighed against "groundless, fantastical doctrines," fairy tales and old wives' tales, the results of middle-of-the-night imaginings, excessive drinking, and blows to the head. Though witches existed, they were rare. The Bible nowhere connected them with murder, or with imps, compacts, or flights through the air.

Ady believed that witches were a convenient excuse for the ignorant physician. He suggested that when misfortune struck we should not struggle to recall who had last come to the door. Burroughs denied having borrowed the passage, then amended his

answer. A visitor had passed him the text in manuscript. He had transcribed it. He had already several times agreed with the justices that witches plagued New England. It was too late for such a dangerous gambit.

Early on the morning of August 19th, the largest throng to date turned out to inspect the first men whom Massachusetts was to execute for witchcraft. Martha Carrier joined them on the trip to the gallows. As the cart creaked up the hill, George Burroughs, George Jacobs, John Proctor, and John Willard insisted that they had been falsely accused. They hoped that the real witches would soon be revealed. They “declared their wish,” a bystander reported, “that their blood might be the last innocent blood shed upon that account.” They remained “sincere, upright, and sensible of their circumstances, on all accounts.” They forgave their accusers, the justices, the jury; they prayed they might be pardoned for their actual sins. Cotton Mather journeyed to Salem for the execution. Some of the condemned appealed to him in heartrending terms. Would he help them to prepare spiritually for the journey ahead? It is unclear if he did so or if he held the same hard line as the Salem town minister, who did not pray with witches.

Burroughs appears to have climbed the ladder first. With composure, he paused midway to offer what many expected to be a long-delayed confession. A wisp of his former self after fourteen weeks in a dungeon, he remained a contrarian. Perched above a crowd that included his former in-laws and parishioners, a noose around his neck, he delivered an impassioned speech. With his last breaths, Burroughs entrusted himself to the Almighty. Tears rolled down cheeks all around before he concluded with some disquieting lines. “Our Father, who art in Heaven,” Burroughs began, continuing, from the ladder, with a blunder-free recitation of the Lord’s Prayer—an impossible feat for a wizard, one that any number of other suspects had not managed. For a few moments, it seemed as if the crowd would obstruct the execution.

Minutes later, the minister dangled from a roughly finished beam. The life had not gone from his body when Mather, on horseback, pressed forward to smother the sparks of discontent. He reminded the spectators that Burroughs had never been ordained. (That was also true of others on the hill that day, but at least made the dying minister seem unorthodox.) What better disguise might the Devil choose on such an occasion, Mather challenged, than to masquerade as “an angel of light”? To the last, George

Burroughs was condemned for his gifts. The protests quieted, as did the minister hanging in midair. He may have heard a portion of Mather's remarks.

The execution of a beguiling, Scripture-spouting minister, protesting his innocence to the end, created nearly as much disquiet as had the idea that a beguiling, Scripture-spouting minister recruited for the Devil. It raised qualms about the court and on the bench. Several of the justices soon allowed that their methods had been "too violent and not grounded upon a right foundation"; were they to sit again, they would proceed differently. And it sent Cotton Mather to his desk.

On September 2nd, he wrote to the chief justice. Already, Mather claimed, he had done far more behind the scenes than Stoughton could possibly know. He had been fasting almost weekly through the summer for an end to the sulfurous assault. He felt that the Massachusetts ministers ought to support the court in its weighty, worthy task; none had sufficiently done so. He volunteered to step into the breach, to "flatten that fury, which we now much turn upon one another." He had begun to write up a little something, "to set our calamity in as true a light as I can." With this new book, he proposed to dispel any doubts that innocents were in danger, a passage he underlined. Mather promised to submit his narrative to Stoughton, so that "there may not be one word out of point." Might the chief justice and his colleagues sign off on his endeavor, which would remind the people of their duties in such a crisis? In a singular valediction, Mather wished Stoughton "success in your noble encounters with Hell."

Increase Mather, too, was at work on a book. As father and son wrote, confessions and concerns multiplied. Reports circulated that seven hundred witches preyed on Massachusetts. A prominent Bostonian carried his ailing child the twenty miles to Salem, the Lourdes of New England, to be evaluated by the village girls, incurring the wrath of Increase Mather. Was there "not a God in Boston," he exploded, "that he should go to the Devil in Salem for advice?" Things were wholly out of hand when a Boston divine was up against an adolescent oracle. On October 4th, for the first time, seven suspects, all under the age of eighteen, went home on bail. Among the eldest was Mary Lacey, Jr., Ann Foster's headstrong granddaughter.

"I found this province miserably harassed with a most horrible witchcraft," Governor Phips wrote on October 12th, in his first report to London on the supernatural plague. He sounded as if he were writing from Sweden rather than from Boston, borrowing

Mather's details of that infestation. Grappling with the future of the court, which was scheduled to reconvene in two weeks, he insisted that the justices had always ruled with empirical evidence, but admitted that many now condemned their work. He placed a ban on witchcraft books. "I saw a likelihood of kindling an inextinguishable flame if I should admit any public and open contests," Phips explained. That ban applied only to volumes that did not bear the name Mather on the cover. "The Wonders of the Invisible World" soon slipped into print, followed by Increase Mather's "Cases of Conscience," both artfully postdated to 1693.

"The Wonders of the Invisible World" was America's first instant book. Garlanded in credentials, it advertised itself as having been "published by the special command of his Excellency the Governor." Stoughton prefaced the volume, professing himself mildly surprised but immensely gratified by the work. What a timely account, so carefully and moderately composed! The chief justice was particularly grateful for Mather's painstaking efforts, "considering the place that I hold in the Court of Oyer and Terminer, still laboring and proceeding in the trial of the persons accused and convicted for witchcraft." Cotton Mather introduced the text with a tribute to his own courage. It was crucial that proper use be made of the "stupendous and prodigious things that are happening among us." He did so only, he professed, because no one else volunteered. Weeks earlier, he had promised that his work would in no way interfere with that of two colleagues, whom he effectively cut off at the pass.

What constituted sufficient proof of witchcraft? Father and son disagreed. Fifty-three-year-old Increase explained in "Cases" that a "free and voluntary confession" remained the gold standard. When credible men and women could attest to these things, the evidence was sound. He had no patience for mewling teen-age girls. One did not accept testimony from "a distracted person or of a possessed person in a case of murder, theft, felony of any sort, then neither may we do it in the case of witchcraft." He cast a vote for clemency: "I would rather," he wrote, "judge a witch to be an honest woman than judge an honest woman as a witch."

Cotton Mather worried less about condemning an innocent than about allowing a witch to walk free. In "Wonders," he set out "to countermine the whole plot of the devil against New England." He would not be surprised if the witchcraft reached even farther than was suspected, folding into his volume an account of a celebrated thirty-

year-old English case, similar to Salem's, except perhaps for a combusting toad. He chose that trial with reason: it was one in which spectral evidence had served to convict. Mather seems occasionally to have embroidered on court reports with details that appear nowhere in the surviving pages: the smell of brimstone, money raining down, a corner of a sheet ripped from a spectre. He otherwise adhered closely to the evidence while working some magic with his pages; no witnesses for the defense or petitions on their behalf appear in "Wonders." Mather included all the crowd-pleasing spectral stories, while issuing regular reminders that flights and pacts played only supporting roles in the convictions.

He expressed his fervent hope that some of the witches in custody might prove innocent. They deserve "our most compassionate pity, till there be fuller evidences that they are less worthy of it." Twenty pages later, he wrote of George Burroughs, "Glad I should have been if I had never known the name of this man." His very initials revolted Mather. He wrote up five trial accounts in all; Burroughs alone was so powerful a wizard that he could not be named.

As quickly as Mather worked, "The Wonders of the Invisible World" arrived as a case of too much too late. Conceived as a justification, billed as a felicitous accident, advertised in the author's own words, the volume read as a full-throated apologia. Governor Phips disbanded the witchcraft court at the end of October. Days after the book's publication, Mather wailed to his Plymouth-based uncle. A cataract of "unkindness, abuse, and reproach" roared his way. People said lovely things to his face and hideous things behind his back. He meant only to tamp down dissent at a critical time. He found himself under fire for another infraction as well: filial disrespect. He had not endorsed his father's volume. (Nor had his father endorsed his.) Among all the freewheeling accusations in 1692, not once had a father accused a son or a son implicated a father. He could see little to do but die.

The new administration could ill afford a rift at this juncture; Increase Mather added a postscript to his pages. He remained convinced that witches roamed the land. He meant not to deny witchcraft but to make its prosecution more exact. He had declined to endorse his son's volume only out of an aversion to nepotism; he was most grateful to him for having established that no one had been convicted purely on spectral evidence. He too made a point of including Burroughs, who had, Increase Mather

assured his readers, accomplished things that no one who “has not a devil to be his familiar could perform.” Burroughs had deserved to hang. As Cotton Mather saw it, he had made a case for prosecuting the guilty, his father for protecting the innocent. Were they not saying the same thing? An early death no longer appealed.

A year after the trials, Cotton Mather treated two newly afflicted girls. A seventeen-year-old servant began to convulse after insulting a woman who had been imprisoned in 1692. The girl interrupted sermons and fell into trances. She went twelve days without food. She discoursed with spectres who tempted her with diabolical pacts; she shrieked so loudly that well-wishers fled the room; she tore a leaf from Mather’s Bible. He followed the same protocol he had with the Goodwins, four years and nineteen executions earlier, assembling groups to pray and to sing Psalms at her bedside.

Both girls eventually recovered. Mather devoted thirty-eight pages to the initial case but left them unpublished. Given the tenor of the times, he wrote, “No man in his wits would fully expose his thoughts unto them, till the charms which enrage the people are a little better dissipated.” He did not care in 1693 to cultivate what, centuries later, would be termed the paranoid strain in American politics, with its “sense of heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy.” Political stability remained paramount. Mather did, however, retail the teen-ager’s report that Frenchmen and Indians—“horrid sorcerers and hellish conjurers”—had colluded in Salem witchcraft. He insisted on it for years.

“There is no public calamity,” Mather noted, in “Wonders,” “but some ill people will serve themselves of the sad providence, and make use of it for their own ends, as thieves when a house or town is on fire, will steal what they can.” Twenty-eight years later, a smallpox epidemic raged through Boston. Cotton Mather faced down the entire medical establishment to advocate something that seemed every bit as dubious as spectral evidence: inoculation. He had studied medicine at Harvard. Over the decades, he had come better to understand infectious disease. Moving from imps and witches to germs and viruses, he at last located the devils we inhale with every breath. The battle turned so vitriolic that it dragged Salem out of hiding; Mather was bludgeoned for lunacy on two counts. Yet again, Massachusetts seemed to be in the grip of distemper. The people talked, he huffed in his diary, “not only like idiots but also like fanaticks.”

He remained as steadfast on the subject of inoculation as he had been equivocal on witchcraft. In November, 1721, a homemade bomb came sailing in his window at 3 A.M. His reputation never recovered. ♦

This article appears in the print edition of the September 7, 2015, issue.

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