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Dynamics of Confession, Elizabeth Reis

17th-century America was a very religious world. And people believed fervently in God, and along with that was a belief in the Devil. And so, what being a witch meant to people in the 17th century was that somebody—usually a woman, but not always—had signed a contract with the Devil. That contract gave the Devil permission to go into that person's body, to take their shape and go around and harm other people.

First of all since they did live in a religious world, they had to go to church services; they heard about God and the Devil all the time during a regular week. Ministers were always talking about God and Satan and how you had to be careful not to go down Satan's path, basically. The important part for this is that Puritans were very concerned that if they—they were looking for signs to see whether or not they were among the "elect." And that meant whether or not they would go to heaven once they died. So they were also looking for signs that they were actually going to hell. And looking for signs that maybe Satan was taking them along that path.

So all of this business about witchcraft, when the witchcraft accusations started in 1692, it didn't come from out of nowhere. They were just very used to thinking about God and the Devil in these kind of very . . . proximate ways—that God and the Devil were always around.

In New England there were over 200 accusations during the Salem crisis. So all of those records of people being accused, of people being—undergoing an examination, going to trial, all of this was written down. One of the questions that sometimes comes up when I teach this material is, "Why would a person confess to witchcraft?" It doesn't seem like it would have a good outcome. . . . Why? Because the rule was "thou shalt not suffer a witch to live," which meant that somebody who was a witch was going to be killed, so why would you confess to this? It doesn't seem to make any sense. Well, one of the reasons—but this didn't come to light until pretty far into the whole process—but one of the reasons was that all of the confessors ended up living. And *all* of the people who denied ended up being hanged.

Now people didn't know this was going to happen in the beginning of the whole process, but I find this really interesting. What was going on here? At first, the confessors, they just kept them in prison. The reasoning was that they wanted them to confess, and name more names, you know, who *else* was involved in this witchcraft scheme? So they kept them in jail hoping that that would happen. And then ultimately when the whole thing was over they were released.

The deniers, as we'll see, were just never believed. When a person, supposedly, became a witch that meant that they had given themselves over to the Devil by signing this pact. So that was kind of like the worst thing that you could do on a spectrum of sin; I mean obviously signing the Devil's pact, that's the absolute worst thing that you could do. But it was a sin and there was a spectrum of sins in the Puritan world. And so what we see with the deniers is that they try to deny this. "No I had nothing to do with the Devil! I had nothing to do with signing his pact! Really, I'm a wife, I'm a mother, I do everything right!" And they would have supporters come in to court saying, "Yes, my wife or my aunt or my cousin or daughter— whoever—was the model of Puritan womanhood." They didn't say it in those words, but "she's just perfect, she could never have done this pact with the Devil." And then they would try to push the person to see, "Well, haven't you done some sin? Haven't you let the Devil in the door even just a little bit?" Then these women who were good Puritan women kind of had to admit that, "Yeah, okay, maybe a little bit I let Satan in the door." Then the accusers—the court—would just kind of seize on that saying, "Really? You let the Devil in your heart? What did he look like? What shape? When did he come to you?" And kind of push them, push them.

So let me give an example of that. Okay, so this is a woman named Rebecca Eames. She was accused of witchcraft, and her confession—I'll just read this. You can see how several things are blending together here in her confession. She says:

She explains to the court that after making a black mark with her finger, sealing the covenant.

So she's admitting that she signed the Devil's book. And this is a quote from the source:

She was then in such horror of conscience that she took a rope to hang herself and a razor to cut her throat by reason of her great sin and committing adultery. And by that the Devil gained her, he promising she should not be brought out or ever discovered.

So that's her confession. It doesn't really say anything about witchcraft, doing anything wrong, harming any other people. What it says is that she signed this compact with the Devil because he told her she wouldn't get found out about the sin of adultery. So she's bringing something else up all together, this is one of the occasions where I want to just yell back to Rebecca, "Don't mention the adultery! That's not what they're asking you! Just talk about witchcraft, you didn't do it." So this confession really displays this terrible confusion on the part of some women who confessed, and we'll see how they talk about the deniers in kind of a different way. But the idea is that some women I think unwittingly said, "Yes, I signed the Devil's book" when really they meant "Yes, I've done some sin in my life"—as everybody did, there wouldn't have been any person who would have said, especially not a woman, "I'm free from sin." That just wasn't part of their worldview of how sin and godliness worked.

THE EXAMINATION OF REBECCA NURSE, MARCH 24, 1692

Mr. Harthorn. What do you say (speaking to one afflicted) have you seen this Woman hurt you?

Yes, she beat me this morning

Abigail. Have you been hurt by this Woman?

Yes

Ann Putman in a grievous fit cried out that she hurt her.

Goody Nurse, here are two Ann Putman the child & Abigail Williams complains of your hurting them. What do you say to it

Nurse: I can say before my Eternal father I am innocent, & God will clear my innocency

Here is never a one in the Assembly but desires it, but if you be guilty pray God discover you.

Then Hen: Kenny rose up to speak

Goodm: Kenny what do you say

Then he entered his complaint & farther said that since this Nurse came into the house he was seizd twice with an amaz'd condition.

Here are not only these but, here is the wife of Mr. Tho: Putman who accuseth you by credible information & that both of tempting her to iniquity, & of greatly hurting her.

N:I am innocent & clear & have not been able to get out of doors these 8. Or 9. Dayes.

Mr Putman: give in what you have to say

Then Mr Edward Putman gave in his relate

Is this true Goody Nurse

N: I never afflicted no child never in my life

You see these accuse you, is it true

N: No.

Are you an innocent person relating to this Witchcraft.

Here Tho: Putmans wife cried out, Did you not bring the Black man with you, did you not bid me tempt God & dye How oft have you eat and drunk y'r own damaon What do you say to them Oh Lord help me, & spread out her hands, & the afflicted were grievously vexed

Do you not see what a solemn condition these are in? when your hands are loose the pesons are afflicted.

Then Mary Walcot (who often heretofore said she had seen her, but never could say or did say that she either bit or pincht her, or hurt her) & also Eliz: Hubbard under the like circumstances both openly accused her of hurting them

Here are these 2 grown persons now accuse you, w't say you? Do not you see these afflicted persons, & hear them accuse you.

N: The Lord knows I have not hurt them: I am an innocent person

It is very awfull to all to see these agonies & you an old Professor thus charged with contracting with the Devil by the [a] effects of it & yet to see you stand with dry eyes when thee are so many whet—

N: You do not know my heart

You would do well if you are guilty to confess & give Glory to God

N: I am as clear as the child unborn

What uncertainty there may be in apparitions I know not, yet this with me strikes hard upon you that you are at this very present charged with familiar spirits: this is your bodily person they speak to: they say now they see these familiar spirits com to your bodily #[spirits com to your bodily] person, now what do you say to that

N: I have none Sir:

If you have confess & give glory to God I pray God clear you if you be innocent, & if you are guilty discover you And therefore give me an upright answer: have you any familiarity with these spirits?

N: No, I have none but with God alone.

How came you sick for there is an odd discourse of that in the mouths of many—

N: I am sick at my stomach—

Have you no wounds

N: I have none but old age

You do Know whither you are guilty, & have familiarity with the Devil, & now when you are here present to see such a thing as these testify a black man whispering in your ear, & birds about you what do you say to it

N: It is all false I am clear

Possibly you may apprehend you are no witch, but have you not been led aside by temptations that way

N: I have not

What a sad thing it is that a church member here & now an other of Salem, should be thus accused and charged

Mrs Pope fell into a greivous fit, & cryed out a sad thing sure enough: And then many more fell into lamentable fits.

Tell us have not you had visible appearances more than what is common in nature?

N: I have noe nor never had in my life

Do you think these suffer voluntary or involuntary

N: I cannot tell

That is strange every one can judge

N: I must be silent

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

N: I cannot tell what to think of it

Afterwards when this was som what insisted on she said I do not think so: she did not understand aright what was said

Well then give an answer now, od you think these suffer against thewir wills or not

N: I do not think these suffer against their wills

Why did you never visit these afflicted persons

N: Because I was afraid I should have fits too

Note Upon the motion of her fits followed upon the complainants abundantly & very frequently

Is it not an unaccountable case that when you are examined these persons are afflicted?

N: I have got no body to look to but God

Again upon stirring her hands the afflicted persons were seized with violent fits of torture

Do you believe these afflicted persons are bewitched

N: I do think they are

When this Witchcraft came upon the stage there was no suspicion of Tituba (Mr. Paris's Indian Woman) she professed much love to that child Betty Paris, but it was her apparition did the mischief, & why should not you also be guilty, for your apparition doth hurt also.

N: Would you have me bely myself—

She held her Neck on one side, & accordingly so were the afflicted taken

Then Authority requiring it Sam: Paris read what he had in characters taken from Mr. Tho: Putmans wife in her fits

What do you think of this

N: I cannot help it, the Devil may appear in my shape.

This a true account of the sume of her examination but by reason of great noises by the afflicted & many speakers, many things are pretermitted

Memorandum

Nurse held her neck on one side & Eliz: Hubbard (one of the sufferers) had her neck set in that posture whereupon another Patient Abigail Williams cried out set up Goody Nurses head the maid's neck will be broke & when some set up Nurses head Aaron Wey observed that Betty Hubbards was immediately righted

Salem Village March. 24th 1691/2

The Rever't Mr. Samuell Parris being desired to take in writing the Examination of Rebekah Nurse hath Returned itt as aforesaid

Upon hearing the afores'd and seeing what wee then did see together with the Charge of the persons then present—wee Committed Rebekah Nurse the wife of Fran's Nurse of Salem village unto their Majest's Goale in Salem as a Mittimus then given out, in order to farther Examination

John Hathorne }

} Assists

Jonathan. Corwin }

The examination and confession (8. Sept. 92.) of Mary Osgood , wife of Captain Osgood of Andover, taken before John

Hawthorne and other their Majesties justices.

She confesses, that about 11 years ago, when she was in a melancholy state and condition, she used to walk abroad in her orchard; and upon a certain time, she saw the appearance of a cat, at the end of the house, which yet she thought was a real cat. However, at that time, it diverted her from praying to God, and instead thereof she prayed to the devil; about which time she made a covenant with the devil, who, as a black man, came to her and presented her a book, upon which she laid her finger and that left a red spot: And that upon her signing, the devil told her he was her God, and that she should serve and worship him, and, she believes, she consented to it. She says further, that about two years agone, she was carried through the air, in company with deacon Frye's wife , Ebenezer Baker's wife , and Goody Tyler , to five mile pond, where she was baptized by the devil, who dipped her face in the water and made her renounce her former baptism, and told her she must be his, soul and body, forever, and that she must serve him, which she promised to do. She says, the renouncing her first baptism was after her dipping, and that she was transported back again through the air, in company with the forenamed persons, in the same manner as she went, and believes they were carried upon a pole. Q. How many persons were upon the pole? A. As I said before, viz. four persons and no more but whom she had named above. -- She confesses she has afflicted three persons, John Sawdy , Martha Sprague and Rose Foster , and that she did it by pinching her bed clothes, and giving consent the devil should do it in her shape, and that the devil could not do it without her consent. -- She confesses the afflicting persons in the court, by the glance of her eye. She says, as she was coming down to Salem to be examined, she and the rest of the company with her, stopped at Mr. Phillips's to refresh themselves, and the afflicted persons, being behind them upon the road, came up just as she was mounting again and were then afflicted, and cried out upon her, so that she was forced to stay until they were all past, and said she only looked that way towards them. Q. Do you know the devil can take the shape of an innocent person and afflict? A. I believe he cannot. Q. Who taught you this way of witchcraft? A. Satan, and that he promised her abundance of satisfaction and quietness in her future state, but never performed any thing; and that she has lived more miserably and more discontented since, than ever before. She confesses further, that she herself, in company with Goody Parker , Goody Tyler , and Goody Dean , had a meeting at Moses Tyler's house, last monday night, to afflict, and that she and Goody Dean carried the shape of Mr. Dean, the minister, between them, to make persons believe that Mr. Dean afflicted. Q. What hindered you from accomplishing what you intended? A. The Lord would not suffer it so to be, that the devil should afflict in an innocent person's shape. Q. Have you been at any other witch meetings? A. I know nothing thereof, as I shall answer in the presence of God and his people; but said, that the black man stood before her, and told her, that what she had confessed was a lie; notwithstanding, she said that what she had confessed was true, and thereto put her hand. Her husband being present was asked, if he judged his wife to be any way discomposed. He answered, that having lived with her so long, he doth not judge her to be any ways discomposed, but has cause to believe what she has said is true. -- When Mistress Osgood was first called, she afflicted Martha Sprague and Rose Foster , by the glance of her eyes, and recovered them out of their fits by the touch of her hand. Mary Lacey and Betty Johnson and Hannah Post saw Mistress Osgood afflicting Sprague and Foster . -- The said Hannah Post and Mary Lacey and Betty Johnson, jun. and Rose Foster and Mary Richardson were afflicted by Mistress Osgood , in the time of their examination, and recovered by her touching of their hands. I underwritten, being appointed by authority, to take this examination, do testify upon oath, taken in court, that this is a true copy of the substance of it, to the best of my knowledge, 5 Jan1692 -- 3. The within Mary Osgood was examined before their Majesties justices of the peace in Salem.

Attest. John Higginson , Just. Pac.

Cotton Mather's Account of the Salem Witch Trials [excerpt]

The New Englanders are a people of God settled in those, which were once the devil's territories. And it may easily be supposed that he devil was exceedingly disturbed when he perceived such a people here accomplishing the promise of old made unto our Blessed Jesu ?? that He should have the utmost parts of the earth for His possession....

The devil is now making one attempt more upon us; an attempt more difficult, more surprising, more snarled with unintelligible circumstances than any that we have hitherto encountered; an attempt so critical, that if we get well through, we shall soon enjoy halcyon days, with all the vultures of hell trodden under our feet. He has wanted his incarnate legions to persecute us, as the people of God have in the other hemisphere been persecuted; he has, therefore, drawn his more spiritual ones to make an attack upon us. We have been advised by some credible Christians yet alive that a malefactor, accused of witchcraft as well as murder, and executed in this place more than forty years ago, did then give notice of a horrible & against the country by witchcraft, and a foundation of witchcraft then laid, which if it were not seasonably discovered would probably blow up and pull down all the churches in the country. And we have now with horror seen the discovery of such a witchcraft! An army of devils is horribly broke in upon the place which is the center, and after a sort, the firstborn of our English settlements. And the houses of the good people there are filled with the doleful shrieks of their children and servants, tormented by invisible hands, with tortures altogether preternatural. After the mischiefs there endeavored, and since in part conquered, the terrible plague of evil angels has made its progress into some other places, where other persons have been in like manner diabolically handled. These our poor afflicted neighbors, quickly, after they become infected and infested with these demons, arrive to a capacity of discerning those which they conceive the shapes of their troublers; and notwithstanding the great and just suspicion that the demons might impose the shapes of innocent persons in their spectral exhibitions upon the sufferers (which may prove no small part of the witch plot in the issue), yet many of the persons thus represented, being examined, several of them have been convicted of a very damnable witchcraft.. Yea, more than twenty-one have confessed that they have signed unto a book, which the devil showed them, and negated in his hellish design of bewitching and ruining our land.... Now, by these confessions it is 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 neighbors; whereupon there have ensued such mischievous consequences upon the bodies and estates of the neighborhood as could not otherwise be accounted for; yea that at prodigious witch meetings the wretches have proceeded so far as to concert and consult the methods of rooting out the Christian religion from this country, and seeing up instead of it perhaps a more gross diabolism than ever the world saw before. And yet it will be a thing lime short of miracle if, in so spread a business as this, the devil should not get in some of his juggles to confound the discovery of the rest.

Life in Salem: Economic and Social Divisions

In 1692, Salem was divided into two distinct parts: Salem Town and Salem Village. Salem Village (also referred to as Salem Farms) was actually part of Salem Town but was set apart by its economy, class, and character. Residents of Salem Village were mostly poor farmers who made their living cultivating crops in the rocky terrain. Salem Town, on the other hand, was a prosperous port town at the center of trade with London. Most of those living in Salem Town were wealthy merchants.

For many years, Salem Village tried to gain independence from Salem Town. The town, which depended on the farmers for food, determined crop prices and collected taxes from the village. Despite the three-hour walk between the two communities, Salem Village did not have its own church and minister until 1674.

But there was also a division within Salem Village. Those who lived near Ipswich Road, close to the commerce of Salem Town, became merchants, such as blacksmiths, carpenters, and innkeepers. They prospered and supported the economic changes taking place. But many of the farmers who lived far from this prosperity believed the worldliness and affluence of Salem Town threatened their Puritan values. One of the main families to denounce the economic changes was the Putnams—a strong and influential force behind the witchcraft accusations.

Tensions became worse when Salem Village selected Reverend Samuel Parris as their new minister. Parris was a stern Puritan who denounced the worldly ways and economic prosperity of Salem Town as the influence of the Devil. His rhetoric further separated the two factions within Salem Village.

It is likely that the jealousies and hostilities between these two factions played a major role in the witch trials. Most of the villagers accused of witchcraft lived near Ipswich Road, whereas the accusers lived in the distant farms of Salem Village. It is not surprising that Reverend Parris was a vigorous supporter of the witch trials, and his impassioned sermons helped fan the flames of the hysteria.



Salem Witch Trials: The Fungus Theory

More than three centuries after the end of the Salem witch trials, they continue to defy explanation. In the mid 1970s, a college undergraduate developed a new theory. Does it hold water? Read on and decide for yourself.

SEASON OF THE WITCH

In the bleak winter of 1692, the people of Salem, Massachusetts, hunkered down in their cabins and waited for spring. It was a grim time: There was no fresh food or vegetables, just dried meat and roots to eat. Their mainstay was the coarse bread they baked from the rye grain harvested in the fall.

Shortly before the New Year, the madness began. Elizabeth Parris, the 9-year-old daughter of the local preacher, and her cousin, 11-year-old Abigail Williams, suffered from violent fits and convulsions. They lapsed into incoherent rants, had hallucinations, complained of crawly sensations on their skin, and often retreated into dull-eyed trances. Their desperate families turned to the local doctor, who could find nothing physically wrong with them. At his wit's end, he decided there was only one reasonable explanation: witchcraft.

BLAME GAME

Word spread like wildfire through the village: an evil being was hexing the children. Soon, more "victims" appeared, most of them girls under the age of twenty. The terrified villagers started pointing the finger of blame, first at an old slave named Tituba, who belonged to Reverend Parris, then to old women like Sarah Good and Sarah Osborn. The arrests began on February 29; the trials soon followed. That June, 60-year-old Bridget Bishop was the first to be declared guilty of witchcraft and the first to hang. By September, 140 "witches" had been arrested and 19 had been executed. Many of the accused barely escaped the gallows by running into the woods and hiding. Then, sometime over the summer, the demonic fits stopped -and the frenzy of accusation and counter-accusation stopped with them. As passions cooled, the villagers tried to put their community back together again.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

What happened to make these otherwise dour Puritans turn on each other with such destructive frenzy? Over the centuries several theories have been put forth, from the Freudian -that the witch hunt was the result of hysterical tension resulting from centuries of sexual repression- to the exploitive- that it was fabricated as an excuse for a land grab (the farms and homes of all the victims and many of the accused were confiscated and redistributed to other members of the community). But researchers had never been able to find real evidence to support these theories. Then in the 1970s, a college student in California made a deduction that seemed to explain everything.

Linnda Caporael, a psychology major at U.C. Santa Barbara, was told to choose a subject for a term paper in her American History course. Having just seen a production of Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible* (a fictional account of the Salem trials), she decided to write about the witch hunt. "As I began researching," she later recalled, "I had one of those 'a-ha!' experiences." The author of one of her sources said he remained at a loss to explain the hallucinations of the villagers of Salem. "It was the word 'hallucinations' that made everything click," said Caporael. Years before, she'd read of a case of ergot poisoning in France where the victim had suffered from hallucinations, and she thought there might be a connection.

THE FUNGUS AMONG US

Ergot is a fungus that infects rye, a grain more commonly used in past centuries to bake bread than it is today. One of the byproducts present in ergot-infected grain is ergotamine, which is related to LSD. Toxicologists have known for years that eating bread baked with ergot-contaminated rye can trigger convulsions, delusions, creepy-crawly sensations of the skin, vomiting, ...and hallucinations. And historians were already aware that the illness caused by ergot poisoning (known as St. Anthony's Fire) was behind several incidents of mass insanity in medieval Europe. Caporael wondered if the same conditions might have been present in Salem.

They were. Ergot needs warm, damp weather to grow, and those conditions were rife in the fields around Salem in 1691. Rye was the primary grain grown, so there was plenty of it to be infected. Caporael also discovered that most of the accusers lived on the west side of the village, where the fields were chronically marshy, making them a perfect breeding ground for the fungus. The crop harvested in the fall of 1691 would have been baked and eaten during the following winter, which was when the fits of madness began. However, the next summer was unusually dry, which could explain the sudden drop in the bewitchments. No ergot, no madness.

SHE RESTS HER CASE

Caporael continued to research her theory as she pursued her Ph.D., publishing her findings in 1976 in the journal *Science*, which brought her support from the scientific community and attention from the news media. Caporael had been careful to say that her theory only accounts for the initial cause of the Salem witch hunts. As the frenzy grew in scope and consequence, she's convinced that the actual sequence of events probably included not only real moments of mass hysteria but also some overacting on the part of the accusers (motivated as much by fear of being accused themselves as by any actual malice toward the accused).

Did Cold Weather Cause the Salem Witch Trials?

Natalie Wolchover, Life's Little Mysteries Staff Writer | April 20, 2012 11:57am ET

Historical records indicate that, worldwide, witch hunts occur more often during cold periods, possibly because people look for scapegoats to blame for crop failures and general economic hardship. Fitting the pattern, scholars argue that cold weather may have spurred the infamous Salem witch trials in 1692.

The theory, first laid out by the economist Emily Oster in her senior thesis at Harvard University eight years ago, holds that the most active era of witchcraft trials in Europe coincided with a 400- year period of lower-than-average temperature known to climatologists as the "little ice age." Oster, now an associate professor of economics at the University of Chicago, showed that as the climate varied from year to year during this cold period, lower temperatures correlated with higher numbers of witchcraft accusations.

The correlation may not be surprising, Oster argued, in light of textual evidence from the period: popes and scholars alike clearly believed witches were capable of controlling the weather, and therefore, crippling food production.

The Salem witch trials fell within an extreme cold spell that lasted from 1680 and 1730 — one of the chilliest segments of the little ice age. The notion that weather may have instigated those trials is being revived by Salem State University historian Tad Baker in his forthcoming book, "A Storm of Witchcraft" (Oxford University Press, 2013). Building on Oster's thesis, Baker has found clues in diaries and sermons that suggest a harsh New England winter really may have set the stage for accusations of witchcraft.

According to the Salem News, one clue is a document that mentions a key player in the Salem drama, Rev. Samuel Parris, whose daughter Betty was the first to become ill in the winter of 1691-1692 because of supposed witchcraft. In that document, "Rev. Parris is arguing with his parish over the wood supply," Baker said. A winter fuel shortage would have made for a fairly miserable colonial home, and "the higher the misery quotient, the more likely you are to be seeing witches."

Psychology obviously played an important role in the Salem events; the young girls who accused their fellow townsfolk of witchcraft are believed to have been suffering from a strange psychological condition known as mass hysteria. However, the new theory suggests the hysteria may have sprung from dire economic conditions. "The witchcraft trials suggest that even when considering events and circumstances thought to be psychological or cultural, key underlying motivations can be closely related to economic circumstances," Oster wrote.

Weather patterns continue to trigger witchcraft accusations in many parts of Africa, where witch killings persist. According to a 2003 analysis by the Berkeley economist Edward Miguel, extreme rainfall — either too much or too little — coincides with a significant increase in the number of witch killings in Tanzania. The victim is typically the oldest woman in a household, killed by her own family.

The Witches of Salem: Theories and Speculations

In the year 1692 a number of young girls started to show bizarre behaviors in the quiet village of Salem, Massachusetts. They contorted and convulsed their bodies, crying out in an alarming manner. Adults quickly concluded that the girls were bewitched and hysteria swept through the small town. A court was convened and 19 people, accused by these "afflicted" girls, were hung for supposedly practicing witchcraft. Over a hundred other people were arrested for the same crime and many spent months in jail. A few died there.

What caused this sudden fear of witches and ripped the small community apart? Nobody knows. The past three centuries, however, have seen no end of books and articles filled with all kinds of theories and speculation about the reasons behind the terror. Today, scholars and pundits still look for meaning in what happened. Here are some of the theories:

There Really Were Witches at Salem

These days most people scoff at the idea that witches exist, or if they do, that they have real supernatural powers. It is important to remember, however, that in 1692 almost everybody, from the most uneducated slave to the president of Harvard, believed witchcraft was widely practiced and was a real threat to the community. Cotton Mather, a respected Puritan minister who was present at the time of the trials, wrote an account of them for the governor. His essay clearly shows that he believed that some of the people who were hung in Salem were indeed guilty of using black magic to torment the "afflicted" girls. Though very much in the minority, there are probably a few people even today who take the position that this was indeed the case.

While many people in the period believed that witches had supernatural powers given to them by the devil, many of the better-educated people, such as philosopher Thomas Hobbes, acknowledged that witchcraft was practiced but any spells that were cast only had power in the minds of the witch and those that thought themselves bewitched. It is important to note, however, that even Hobbes thought that this kind of witchcraft, though it had no physical power, brought real harm to a community and should be punished.

The Afflicted Girls Thought They Were Being Bewitched

Here the argument is that in a society that believes in witchcraft, witchcraft really works, not because there is any supernatural power behind it, but simply because of how the fear of being bewitched works on the victim's mind. Any symptoms such as convulsive fits, blisters on the skin, or choking sensations are psychosomatic rather than organic.

One of the "afflicted" girls rolls on the ground as a woman declares her innocence to the court.

Today we know that the mind can have a powerful effect on the body. Placebos are a necessary part of many drug studies in order that the psychological effects of taking the medicine can be separated from the organic effects. Psychological stress is known to cause all kinds of problems from rashes to high-blood pressure and heart disease. Studies have shown that hypnosis alone can induce an allergic reaction with no physical agent involved.

If the girls believed that someone had cursed them, that would have created enough stress in their minds to cause physical symptoms. In fact, historian Chadwick Hansen argues that many of the symptoms the girls had are nearly identical to a clinical definition of hysteria.

Whether some of those accused of witchcraft actually carried out some kind of ritual that might be associated with cursing someone is not as important as if the girls believed that this had been done. If the girls just believed that they had been bewitched, it might have been enough to produce the physical effects that were observed.

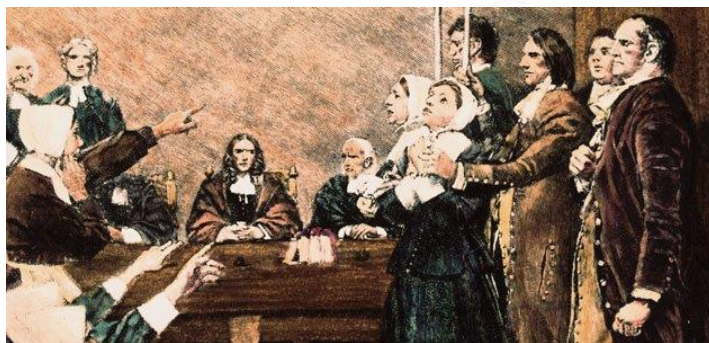
An Out-of-Control Game

The "afflicted" girls who made the accusations were some of the most powerless members of their society. Most were young and unmarried, and some worked as menial servants for other people. In the Puritan culture, nobody paid much attention to them until they started acting strangely and having fits. Perhaps it started as a game with the girls having no intentions of accusing anyone of witchcraft or causing them harm. The concerned adults around them seeking explanations soon came to believe the girls were bewitched and started putting pressure on them to identify the witch that was tormenting them. Perhaps the adults even suggested a few candidates. Finally, when one of the girls gave in and named a witch, they all saw what kind of power it gave them in the community and how it would allow them to strike out at people they didn't like.

Their fame wasn't only in the village but throughout Massachusetts: a heady power trip for a young girl in Puritan society. Once they started down this path, though, the girls found themselves trapped. If they admitted that they had been lying, they would be harshly punished for it, either by the authorities or by the other girls.

At one point when it looked like someone was actually going to be hung, one of the girls, Mary Warren, admitted she had been making up the accusations and that the other girls had been lying, too. Immediately, the rest of the girls turned on her and identified Warren as a witch. Warren soon changed her story again, saying she had been lying about lying. She had little choice. If she had maintained that the girls had been making up the stories about witches, she soon would have been tried as a witch herself and probably hung. Many of the girls probably felt like Warren that the game had gone too far but were unable to confess to what they were doing for fear of what would happen to them.

EXPLORING THE AMERICAN EXPERIENCE



A girl is accused during the Salem Witch Trials (Bettmann / CORBIS)

A Brief History of the Salem Witch Trials

One town's strange journey from paranoia to pardon

By Jess Blumberg

The Salem witch trials occurred in colonial Massachusetts between 1692 and 1693. More than 200 people were accused of practicing witchcraft—the Devil's magic—and 20 were executed. Eventually, the colony admitted the trials were a mistake and compensated the families of those convicted. Since then, the story of the trials has become synonymous with paranoia and injustice, and it continues to beguile the popular imagination more than 300 years later.

Salem Struggling

Several centuries ago, many practicing Christians, and those of other religions, had a strong belief that the Devil could give certain people known as witches the power to harm others in return for their loyalty. A "witchcraft craze" rippled through Europe from the 1300s to the end of the 1600s. Tens of thousands of supposed witches—mostly women—were executed. Though the Salem trials came on just as the European craze was winding down, local circumstances explain their onset.

In 1689, English rulers William and Mary started a war with France in the American colonies. Known as King William's War to colonists, it ravaged regions of upstate New York, Nova Scotia and Quebec, sending refugees into the county of Essex and, specifically, Salem Village in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. (Salem Village is present-day Danvers, Massachusetts; colonial Salem Town became what's now Salem.)

The displaced people created a strain on Salem's resources. This aggravated the existing rivalry between families with ties to the wealth of the port of Salem and those who still depended on agriculture. Controversy also brewed over Reverend Samuel Parris, who became Salem Village's first ordained minister in 1689, and was disliked because of his rigid ways and greedy nature. The Puritan villagers believed all the quarreling was the work of the Devil.

In January of 1692, Reverend Parris' daughter Elizabeth, age 9, and niece Abigail Williams, age 11, started having "fits." They screamed, threw things, uttered peculiar sounds and contorted themselves into strange positions, and a local doctor blamed the supernatural. Another girl, Ann Putnam, age 11, experienced similar episodes. On February 29, under pressure from magistrates Jonathan Corwin and John Hathorne, the girls blamed three women for afflicting them: Tituba, the Parris' Caribbean slave; Sarah Good, a homeless beggar; and Sarah Osborne, an elderly impoverished woman.

Witch Hunt

All three women were brought before the local magistrates and interrogated for several days, starting on March 1, 1692. Osborne claimed innocence, as did Good. But Tituba confessed, "The Devil came to me and bid me serve him." She

described elaborate images of black dogs, red cats, yellow birds and a "black man" who wanted her to sign his book. She admitted that she signed the book and said there were several other witches looking to destroy the Puritans. All three women were put in jail.

With the seed of paranoia planted, a stream of accusations followed for the next few months. Charges against Martha Corey, a loyal member of the Church in Salem Village, greatly concerned the community; if she could be a witch, then anyone could. Magistrates even questioned Sarah Good's 4-year-old daughter, Dorothy, and her timid answers were construed as a confession. The questioning got more serious in April when Deputy Governor Thomas Danforth and his assistants attended the hearings. Dozens of people from Salem and other Massachusetts villages were brought in for questioning.

On May 27, 1692, Governor William Phipps ordered the establishment of a Special Court of Oyer (to hear) and Terminer (to decide) for Suffolk, Essex and Middlesex counties. The first case brought to the special court was Bridget Bishop, an older woman known for her gossipy habits and promiscuity. When asked if she committed witchcraft, Bishop responded, "I am as innocent as the child unborn." The defense must not have been convincing, because she was found guilty and, on June 10, became the first person hanged on what was later called Gallows Hill.

Five days later, respected minister Cotton Mather wrote a letter imploring the court not to allow spectral evidence—testimony about dreams and visions. The court largely ignored this request and five people were sentenced and hanged in July, five more in August and eight in September. On October 3, following in his son's footsteps, Increase Mather, then president of Harvard, denounced the use of spectral evidence: "It were better that ten suspected witches should escape than one innocent person be condemned."

Governor Phipps, in response to Mather's plea and his own wife being questioned for witchcraft, prohibited further arrests, released many accused witches and dissolved the Court of Oyer and Terminer on October 29. Phipps replaced it with a Superior Court of Judicature, which disallowed spectral evidence and only condemned 3 out of 56 defendants. Phipps eventually pardoned all who were in prison on witchcraft charges by May 1693. But the damage had been done: 19 were hanged on Gallows Hill, a 71-year-old man was pressed to death with heavy stones, several people died in jail and nearly 200 people, overall, had been accused of practicing "the Devil's magic."

Restoring Good Names

Following the trials and executions, many involved, like judge Samuel Sewall, publicly confessed error and guilt. On January 14, 1697, the General Court ordered a day of fasting and soul-searching for the tragedy of Salem. In 1702, the court declared the trials unlawful. And in 1711, the colony passed a bill restoring the rights and good names of those accused and granted £600 restitution to their heirs. However, it was not until 1957—more than 250 years later—that Massachusetts formally apologized for the events of 1692.

In the 20th century, artists and scientists alike continued to be fascinated by the Salem witch trials. Playwright Arthur Miller resurrected the tale with his 1953 play *The Crucible*, using the trials as an allegory for the McCarthyism paranoia in the 1950s. Additionally, numerous hypotheses have been devised to explain the strange behavior that occurred in Salem in 1692. One of the most concrete studies, published in *Science* in 1976 by psychologist Linnda Caporael, blamed the abnormal habits of the accused on the fungus ergot, which can be found in rye, wheat and other cereal grasses. Toxicologists say that eating ergot-contaminated foods can lead to muscle spasms, vomiting, delusions and hallucinations. Also, the fungus thrives in warm and damp climates—not too unlike the swampy meadows in Salem Village, where rye was the staple grain during the spring and summer months.

In August 1992, to mark the 300th anniversary of the trials, Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel dedicated the Witch Trials Memorial in Salem. Also in Salem, the Peabody Essex Museum houses the original court documents, and the town's most-visited attraction, the Salem Witch Museum, attests to the public's enthrallment with the 1692 hysteria.