

Witchcraft in Colonial Puritan New England

*...the... colonial Puritan
New England*

In the colonial period of American history, there existed a fear so rash and diabolical, it seems odd to think it could have possibly occurred in the history of this country, which is built upon many freedoms, such as those of expression, speech, and press. But the fear of Satan and witchcraft permeated the colonial Puritan New England culture. The roots of the accusations and their subsequent assumed validity, are issues that reach back further than the colonies and deeper than the surface of the society.

Theology, the most basic and underlying force in the lives of the colonists, was to be the one force upon which everything else stemmed from. Religion existed as the only thing the colonists could hold in their lives to be permanent. Puritans spent their lives constantly examining themselves, their actions and beliefs, to see if they were pious enough to be "saved" or "damned". Most Puritans followed the covenant of grace, which implied that God's grace could neither be earned nor denied. But this predestination was distressing to them emotionally. As pious as they behaved, one could never know until death whether they were chosen to be saved or damned. If the colonists chose to enter into this covenant of grace, it offered some solace to them, for God would not abandon those whom he had elected. On the other hand however, if a Puritan was unsure of their election, they had two alternatives. "They could reform their evil ways and hope that God would offer his grace, or God would cast into hell those who refused his free gift of grace and chose sin...instead" (Reis 17). Therefore a fear of Satan's power and eternal damnation pervaded the lives of colonists in Puritan New England. Even if they did form a covenant and take religion in to their hearts, they were taught that Satan would pursue them more strongly, hoping to pull them back to his side before Christ could claim them at death.

Even with the strong Puritan basis of their society, religious and folkloric representations and interpretations of the devil went hand in hand. Ministers preached of Satan as an ethereal and intellectual presence, but old folklore traditions made people perceive his presence as more physical and immediate. But these interpretations served each other quite well. The people absorbed what their minister told them, and the clergy could use what the laity said about Satan.

The colonists tried to avoid being tempted by Satan. They listened to those ways their minister related to them, the tactics normally incorporated by the devil. "Quite frequently Satan tried to lure people into his service by tempting them with offers of riches, an easy life, and ultimately, salvation" (Reis, 59). According to the colonists, Satan tried to convince people that life after death would be better with him than with God, offering sinners the assurance of salvation, or insisting that there was no such thing as heaven and that Judgment Day was the invention of ministers. So because of the prevalence of these ideas and the importance to the colonists of saving their souls, the subject of God compared to Satan filled Puritan sermons.

When witches began "appearing" in New England, ministers saw it as a punishment for the colonists' sins, and an omen of destruction that would ensue if they did not repent their evil ways. Witches were those people, usually women, who had made a pact with the devil. During the Salem trials, accused witches and witnesses were asked to describe in great detail how the devil had appeared to them (if he had). From surviving court transcripts, it can be seen that most everyone believed the devil capable of taking any shape or form to accomplish his work. During this time, it could be assumed that people drew upon what they knew of the supposed physical manifestations of the devil,

but at the same time most likely created their own interpretations of the devil based on their own personal prejudices and superstitions. Folk beliefs in turn reinforced Puritan theology, inciting grave fear of being tempted by Satan.

Puritans regarded the soul as a feminine entity and this is instrumental to understanding the frequency of which women were attacked as witches. Puritans also believed that the devil attacked the soul by assaulting the body. Since they felt women and their bodies were weaker than those of men, that women were therefore more susceptible to being breached by Satan. "A witch's body clearly manifested the soul's acceptance of the diabolical covenant" (Reis 94). The woman's soul was perpetually in danger, the colonists thought. The "weaker woman" would be more easily tempted by Satan, and since her soul, like her body, was "frail, submissive and passive", she would either devote herself to Christ or become a slave to Satan.

Witches were different from other commonplace sinners. Upon becoming witches, they had made an explicit *choice* to make a pact with the devil. This active choice to conjoin with Satan, rather than a good woman waiting for salvation from Christ, was denounced by the Puritans. A woman had difficulty existing as a good soul. If her soul waited longingly for acceptance by Christ, she could be considered vulnerable to Satan, "but if her soul acted assertively rather than in passive obedience, by definition it chose the devil" (Reis 94). The Puritans held an image of weakness of body and soul that allowed them to associate women with evil and sin. Their weaker bodies, which exposed them to Satan, was considered Eve's legacy, that the woman is a sinner.

Even as more and more women became members of the church in New England, sporadic witch-hunts still ensued. Historians had found that confession and strategic

accusation of others were the two best ways to keep oneself from being accused of witchcraft. Women's accusations against other women were possibly the result of multiple factors. Envy, rage, and guilt all played into the accusers motives. Some were probably in uncertain social standing, unsure if they would be guaranteed a prosperous future and felt embittered by this. Many accused those considered extremely pious in the village, perhaps because they feared that they would never reach such prominence or respectability.

Early in the Salem witch trials of 1692, the court decided that they would not kill those "witches" who confessed, hoping to convince them to provide more names of those involved in witchcraft. Most likely, the choice between life or death was enough to convince those accused to confess to being "witches." But it must be noted that women conceived sin much differently than did men. Men saw sin as an action, like missing church or Sabbath-breaking, whereas women saw sin as more directly related to their actions due to their vile natures. They therefore came to interpret their own sins, no matter how trivial, as small renunciations of God and pacts with the devil. Since women saw sin as much less of a concrete thing than men, it may have been easier for them to understand how their small, implied sins could become a compact with the devil.

The lines between those sins which bound the sinner to the devil and took them to hell, and those sins which made one a witch became increasingly blurred (Reis 125). Women risked being damned whatever their response was to the question of their making a pact with the devil. If she saw herself as a sinner because she missed church or lied or committed some other sin, she could easily be seen as weak enough to become a witch, even if she denied the charge. If she instead maintained her innocence, separating prior

sins from the accusation of being a "witch", the court could still convict her, because of her refusal to confess and repent (Reis 160). Thus the witch trials continued the gender subordination of women and their sinfulness. Those who were hanged were those who refused to confess and were hung not only for the "witches" they were presumed to be, but also for the audacity to rebel against the entire order of male authority and God himself.

After the Salem witch trials, no single witch-hunt again occurred in such a magnitude. Puritans began to take more responsibility for their own sins and souls. Yet "men continued to blame their sins for corrupting their souls; women more often blamed their corrupt souls...for producing sinful behavior" (Reis 165). But as the eighteenth century began, and a new "Age of Reason" began to form, the new "enlightened", "rational" ways of thinking may have helped old Puritan and folklore ideas of Satan to be interpreted less rashly. Ministers in the post-Salem period continued to speak of the evils of the devil, but his temptation was more directly related to the spiritual aspects of the body than the physical.

Ministers hoped that purely the fear of hell would encourage sinners to convert, rather than the fear of temptation by the devil. Vivid descriptions of fire and brimstone and eternal damnation were threatened instead of an actual attack by the physical manifestation of Satan.

Though eighteenth century ministers used the fear of hell to convert sinners, they focused more positively, than their seventeenth century predecessors, on hope of salvation and redemption. "In the seventeenth century, to sin meant to absent oneself from the Lord and consequently to bind one's soul to the devil. In the post-Salem years,

sin did not bind one's soul to the devil" (Reis 192). Those who sinned would wind up in hell with the devil, but he would not be on earth to physically take hold of their souls. No longer fearing the devil, sinners could conceive of God and the devil and have a choice between salvation or damnation.

The zealous Puritans of seventeenth century New England carried their religion into every facet of their society. The question of whether their souls would be saved or damned consumed every citizen's life. Witchcraft and fear of the devil therefore emerged as a means to explain and justify the wrongs of the sinners. Yet as the seventeenth century ended, and the colonies entered a new age of enlightenment, the hysteria of "witch-hunts" became ridiculed. Yet to the Puritans, their religion was their way of life, and nothing was to make them waver from their path to salvation.

Works Cited

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