

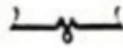
Devils in the Shape of Good Men

“Stunning. . . A rabble-rouser of a book.”
—THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

IN THE DEVIL’S SNARE



THE SALEM WITCHCRAFT CRISIS
OF 1692



MARY BETH NORTON

Author of *FOUNDING MOTHERS & FATHERS*, Pulitzer Prize finalist



Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692*. New York: Knopf, 2002. 432pp., cloth, \$30.00. Reviewed by Carol Karlsen.

In the Devil's Snare, Mary Beth Norton's new interpretation of the Salem witchcraft crisis, both enlightens and disappoints. Revising the chronology and enlarging the political and emotional context of this infamous 1692 event, the book offers the most carefully researched account to date of what-happened-when. It also provides the most thorough discussion of the links between the Salem trials and the series of violent late-seventeenth-century encounters between English settlers and their French and Native American neighbors. Norton does herself and her readers a disservice, though, in trying to force so much uncooperative evidence into a "Daemons in the Shape of Armed Indians and Frenchmen" framework—Puritan minister Cotton Mather's claim that Salem's troubles could be attributed to New England's external enemies. Witchcraft in late seventeenth-century Massachusetts, as Norton's book otherwise attests, was more complicated than that.

Building on Bernard Rosenthal's heroic efforts to correct the many errors that have crept into the Salem story since 1692, Norton tells her own tale with such aplomb, and with such close attention to nuance and detail, that she easily establishes *In the Devil's Snare* as the best Salem narrative around. Norton offers what she calls "a dual narrative," two histories "intricately intertwined." One part unfolds the day-to-day day events comprising New England's most horrific witchcraft outbreak, from the first signs of "invisible agents" assaulting young girls in the Salem parsonage sometime in early January to the governor's official halt of the trials in late October. The other part focuses on the quite visible military attacks on farms and unprotected settlements during King Philip's (1675-76) and King William's (1688-99) Wars, what colonists called the First and Second Indian Wars. For Norton, the events of the second stand out. The Salem witchcraft crisis can be comprehended, she argues, only by reckoning with the terror generated by the post-1688 French and Wabanaki surprise attacks "to the eastward" in nearby Maine and New Hampshire, and the mistakes Massachusetts leaders made in their handling of these physical and psychological threats to the region.

Although most of the publicly identified witches find a place in Norton's chronological account of the Salem events, the interpretive sections of her book lead readers away from those suspects who had few connections to the tragic events unfolding along the northeastern frontier, and away from the adult neighbors who testified against them. She draws attention instead to four groups. The first two, composed primarily of women and young girls, were the infamous "afflicted accusers" and those accused witches who confessed. The third cohort consists mainly of adult men, those Norton calls "unusual suspects"—alleged witches who had never been tarred with the witch's brush before 1692, and some of whom had been plucked, shockingly, from the ranks of

the colonial elite. The fourth is made up of those judges and other male officials who determined both Massachusetts policies during the Second Indian War and suspected witches' fates.

In her analysis of the words and actions of each of these four groups, Norton tells a moving story of the devastating effects of the late-seventeenth-century wars on specific participants in New England's most massive witchcraft scare. As traumatized orphans and refugees from "the eastward" who had been placed as servants in Boston- and Salem-area households after their families had been decimated, afflicted accusers complained that they were being attacked not only by the usual suspects but by many unusual suspects who had ties to the war-torn region. Norton finds that these girls and young women were expressing their own guilt and resentment of others for surviving the wrath of their families' killers. At the same time they expanded the scope of the trials so far beyond earlier New England witchcraft cases that they made the Salem outbreak unique. Confessors, especially one fourteen-year-old girl from Maine, lent full support to the visions of these accusers, intensifying the crisis by passing on gossip about unlikely as well as likely suspects. In admitting guilt, they too expressed the fear so many settlers felt in the face of seemingly random but increasingly frequent French and Indian assaults.

Turning to the question of why the Salem outbreak created so many of what Cotton Mather identified as "Devils in the Shape of Good Men," Norton finds in the witchcraft accusation against George Burroughs, a minister from Maine's Casco Bay, the key to understanding why so many other men with ties to the Maine and New Hampshire frontier drew suspicion. Burroughs was no good man in Mather's eyes, but apparently Mather came to believe that most of these other men were. For Norton, once the accusation against Burroughs stuck, the crucial line separating usual and unusual suspects had been breached and no other ministers, magistrates, military commanders—or the women in their families—could be sure that they would not be named as Satan's agents. With the Devil impersonating such prominent "innocents," the implications of what afflicted females and confessed witches had wrought in claiming for themselves the "official" duties of the court gradually came home to many supporters of the trials. Once reservations about the role of the afflicted in the Salem crisis reached the level of open debate, it was only a matter of time before the trials came to an end and the "strange reversal that had placed women on top was then righted."

Prosecution of witches who treacherously allied themselves with demonic Indians and Frenchmen also assuaged the guilt of Massachusetts's ruling elite. Looking into correspondence and other documents that previous scholars had not found germane to the Salem outbreak, Norton does much to explain why the authorities did so little for so long to stop the accusations from spinning out of control. As historians have long been aware, New England's leaders generally agreed with their neighbors about who Satan's instruments were. That their own stereotypes broke down so drastically during the events of 1692 suggests to Norton that invisible attacks by previously unknown witches were easier to cope with than

palpable attacks by hostile forces who appeared and disappeared with such uncanny speed. Holding themselves responsible on some level for failing to muster the money, men, and munitions required to defeat the enemy and protect outlying settlers from harm, Massachusetts leaders paved the way for prosecution of the unusual witchcraft suspects in their midst.

If Norton brings together New England's Indian wars and its most tragic witchcraft outbreak more vividly and persuasively than ever before, she also draws on a long historical and literary tradition. Contemporary public awareness of these connections go back to the two mid-twentieth-century narratives that have shaped popular opinion about the trials more generally, journalist Marion Starkey's *The Devil in Massachusetts: A Modern Inquiry into the Salem Witch Trials* (New York, 1949), and playwright Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (New York, 1952). Neither Starkey nor Miller dwelt on relations between English immigrants and New England's native population. But like many authors before and since, they saw Indian raids on isolated settlements and widespread apprehension of the wilderness as essential background to the Salem events. Like the loss of the Massachusetts charter, anxiety over land titles, smallpox epidemics, and incessant squabbling over property boundaries, Indian attacks were one more sign to Puritans that God was punishing his once chosen people for their backsliding ways. Guilt for their sins, belief that God had abandoned them, and conviction that Satan and his minions hovered nearby encouraged the good people of Salem to deal with forbidden attractions and longstanding hatreds by casting their neighbors as more evil than themselves.

Some two decades after Starkey and Miller wrote, more substantial treatments of the associations between the Salem outbreak and King William's War began to appear. Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration through Violence* (Middletown, Conn., 1973) offered a probing psychological analysis, bringing together the slaughter of Mercy Short's family during the 1690 French and Indian attack on Salmon Falls (now Berwick), Maine, and her own captivity, redemption, and subsequent witchcraft possession in Boston. Carefully documenting New Englanders' post-1688 intermixing of witchcraft and barbarism imagery, Slotkin observed that they had perceived Indians as devils and devil worshipers for decades. Not until the series of social crises preceding the Salem outbreak, he noted, did specters of Indians, Frenchmen, and witches begin meeting and vanishing together. By 1692, fear that some men had either aided—or indeed received supernatural assistance from—the enemy resulted in their being suspected as witches.

While Slotkin paid more attention to the Indian side of what Cotton Mather saw as a demonic alliance of "Half Indianized French, and Half Frenchified Indians," in 1974, legal historian David Konig turned to the French. With the outbreak of King William's War, long-term suspicions of Philip English and other Isle of Jersey immigrants to Salem came to the surface, expressing deeper anxieties about foreign loyalties, subversive plots, "papist" takeovers and, eventually, spectral attacks inflicted by Philip English, Mary English, and a few other women related to French-speaking men. Later, in *Law and Society in*

Puritan Massachusetts: Essex County, 1629-1692 (Chapel Hill, 1979), König joined his analysis of the French threat to a closer look at responses to the Indian-French military alliance and other “simmering tensions” plaguing Essex County and its legal system. Among them he found growing discontent with government’s unwillingness to protect its citizens from external enemies, which the court effectively deflected in its pursuit of suspected witches.

Although Paul Boyer’s and Stephen Nissenbaum’s immensely successful *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Cambridge, Mass., 1974) diverted the attention that had been paid to the association between witchcraft and King William’s War towards longstanding intra-Salem conflicts, John Demos, in *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England* (New York, 1982), drew attention back, but with a difference. He reoriented the field toward the then little-known pre-Salem cases with his compelling and richly documented argument that a single-minded focus on 1692 had distorted the story of New England witchcraft. He found the “chronic ‘guerrilla warfare’” between colonists and local Indians and the intense anxiety, fear, and hatred accompanying it vital to understanding why terror of witches was rife among colonists for decades, not just near the end of the century. But however much this sustained conflict helped explain the extraordinary depth of witch fear in the region, Demos considered it simply one among the many concerns and controversies explaining the significance of witchcraft suspicions and accusations in New England’s history.

Examining a few earlier accusations as well, James Kences returned in a 1984 article specifically to the relationship between the Salem outbreak and King Philip’s and King William’s Wars. His was the most comprehensive treatment of the subject at the time, incorporating several additional people with Maine ties into his interpretation of Salem and bringing other Essex County towns into his narrative. Recognizing that Mercy Short was not the only war refugee participating in the 1692 events, Kences probed more deeply than others into the tales told by ministers, accusers, and others of “witch militias . . . who Muster[ed] in Armes” and “bewitched” soldiers to the eastward. Mercy Lewis, a young refugee from Maine who had lived for a while in the household of George Burroughs, found an important place in Kences’s account. Like many other young accusers, Lewis articulated her fears in the biblical and martial language so familiar from Puritan teachings, suggesting to Kences how vital religious education was in fostering both hatred of Indians and the 1692 witch panic. He explored other reasons for accusers’ concerns, from the emotional trauma of witnessing and surviving violent deaths of their families to anxieties created by wartime shortages of marriageable men.

Some of my own conclusions in *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* supported Kences’s. For example, I also discovered that many young, possessed accusers were refugees from the northeastern wars and argued as well that their afflictions expressed the intensity of their religious training and the war-related psychological and economic stresses they faced. But my interest in the gender dynamics of witchcraft accusations before

and during the Salem outbreak led me to evidence that most young, possessed accusers in 1692 were orphans, in sharp contrast to their afflicted counterparts prior to the Salem events. While this pattern held in Salem even when the possessed were not refugees, I found the wars crucial to understanding the differences between them and nonpossessed accusers as well as the growing proportions of men and other "unlikely" witches accused in Salem. While community gossip could explain why the possessed named "likely witches" as their afflictors, the men they accused fit into two overlapping categories—survivors of the wars whom the possessed had probably known or at least heard of in their previous communities and men the possessed considered seducers or tormentors of women. Accusations against unlikely witches brought an end to witchcraft trials in New England in part because the possessed had so successfully usurped the power to name names that community leaders denied them the "spectral sight" ministers had once accorded them.

Only a few analyses of New England witchcraft published in the 1990s connected Salem witchcraft with Indian wars. One of these, Richard Godbeer's *The Devil's Dominion: Magic and Religion in Early New England* (New York, 1992) integrated the work on King William's war and views of Indians as devil worshipers into his witchcraft chapter, while bringing additional evidence to bear on Salem Village's intense "preoccupation with invasion." Elaine Breslaw's *Tituba, Reluctant Witch of Salem: Devilish Indians and Puritan Fantasies* (New York, 1996) did not focus on the wars themselves but drew attention to the image of Indians as "other." In constructing the history of Tituba, the Indian woman first named a witch during the Salem outbreak, Breslaw saw these wars, settlers' growing demonization of Indians, and the witchcraft confession of a young girl previously from Maine as crucial to Tituba's success in convincing local authorities that the witches they were after were "outsiders." When located, a great many turned out to be men who lived well beyond Salem's borders.

In a 1996 essay, John McWilliams revisited the Indian military threat and other late-seventeenth-century political crises. Unlike Breslaw, he found Tituba less critical to his story than her husband John Indian, in part because the "spectre-devil" that most concerned colonists was "the figure of the male Indian, who might look like the Black Man, the Red Man, or a 'Tawny.'" If scholars had had a lot to say about devilish Indians by the time he published his essay, McWilliams provided further documentation of Satan's dark, presumably Indian, coloration. He lent support as well to earlier reminders that more witches were accused in the towns around Salem than within it, making an effective argument that the 1692 outbreak needed to be studied as a regional rather than simply an intra-Salem or even Essex County affair. Though agreeing with the local conflict analysis put forth by Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, he found that too much emphasis on Salem's internal economic and religious struggles obscured the town's strategic location and the chronological concurrence of Indian and witch attacks. McWilliams was unwilling to say that the wars were *the* cause of the witch trials, but he insisted that Salem was "historically inconceivable" without them in that they explained "why

accusations took hold so firmly and spread so rapidly beyond Salem Village.”

While Mary Beth Norton builds a solid edifice on the research and insights of her predecessors, *In the Devil's Snare* is more than just a sum of these parts. In her hands, the attacks on Salmon Falls, York, Casco Bay, and other outlying New England settlements are vividly recreated, in minute detail, as are the Salem outbreak's accusations, confessions, and trials. The quality as well as the quantity of evidence she has gathered allows her to fill in formerly unknown parts of this history and to correct earlier scholars' factual errors. Norton presents the Wabanakis and their military strategies in human rather than abstract terms, focusing some attention on the kinds of treatment that led them to strike back at colonists when, where, and how they did. Most effectively, she provides evidence that Massachusetts political and military leaders were not fundamentally different in their motivations, emotions, and responses from the rest of the English-speaking population. Because of her subtle exploration of elite men's personal stakes in the witch trials, New England's largest outbreak will never look quite the same again.

Where Norton lets readers down is in her too often reductionist effort to have the frontier wars be *the* explanation of the 1692 witchcraft outbreak. There is no question that French and Native American attacks were vital in increasing the accusations and intensifying their pace during the Salem crisis. Indeed, Salem was unique in any number of ways. But Norton's conclusion—that “had the Second Indian war on the northeastern frontier somehow been avoided, the Essex County witchcraft crisis would not have occurred”—fails to persuade. Norton attempts to qualify this statement by immediately cross-arguing that the war did not “cause” the Salem crisis but rather that the conflict simply “created the conditions that allowed the crisis to develop as rapidly and as extensively as it did.” Yet the overall impression she leaves is that she has not departed much from her acknowledgment in an earlier article that, “[A]ll roads seemed to lead me to Maine.”

Take, for example, her claim that the ubiquitous presence in the Salem records of “repeated spectral sightings of the ‘black man’” . . . “establishes a crucial connection” between witches and Wabanakis. Norton admits that this imagery was not totally new in 1692. But in downplaying evidence of its widespread usage prior to the late seventeenth century, she suggests that most if not all references of this kind point to the northeast. This is simply not the case.

Whether in New England before King Philip's War, in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, or even further back in the historical or mythical past, devils were rarely any other color but black. As the “Prince of Darkness,” Satan hailed from the dark, impenetrable depths of Hell. Devils, male and female, came black-hearted, with dark impulses, clothed in black, covered with black hair, shaped like black animals, and as one early-seventeenth-century source put it, with “black ugly visages, grisly with smoke.” In early modern Europe, devils could be black like Africans, black like Native Americans, or black like

"little black children with wings," suggesting among other things the shifting shapes of imagined evil in newly and much broader colonial contexts. That New Englanders so often found their Devil in the shape of a black man "not of a Negro, but of a Tawney, or an Indian colour" is not at all surprising, given the terror accompanying the frontier wars. Still, that does not necessarily mean that all black devils in the Salem records resided in Maine.

Norton's suggestion that the prevalence of martial imagery in the Salem testimony demonstrates the uniqueness of the 1692 outbreak also ignores colonists' long-term understanding of Satan's struggle to wrest human souls from God. When Puritans saw specters of witches and Indians assembled in military companies, heard trumpets mustering them to meetings, or cried out that invisible attackers were tearing them to pieces, they were articulating the beliefs of their ancestors in England as well as their own New England assumptions. In England's witchcraft literature, for instance, a devil could appear as a centurion, a general, a colonel, a commander, even, according to one wag, a "captainess" or "Muster-meister," any of whom might be found leading the regiments of Hell against God's well-armed Christian forces. Even when no soldiers were arrayed for battle, early modern witches and demons might assault their victims by slashing them with knives, ripping skin from their bones, tearing them to pieces, and even devouring their flesh. Again, that colonists in northeastern New England so frequently saw Wabanakis and Frenchmen alongside Satan's witch allies does not mean that other terrors long associated with witches had somehow disappeared. If anything, these fears magnified as the region's tensions deepened.

Her single-minded insistence that the intertwined histories of Salem and the frontier wars made Salem more anomalous than it was leads Norton to some very convoluted recountings of who "must have" known whom and who "undoubtedly" said what. At times, her suppositions make good sense and fascinating reading. Too often, however, discussion of a particular individual's role or a sequence of events slips from speculation to certainty over the course of the narrative. In Norton's lengthy and at times highly perceptive attempt to make the nineteen-year-old Maine orphan Mercy Lewis play a critical role in her interpretation, for instance, she shifts from identifying Lewis as a possible source of gossip about some of the Maine accused to saying that the information "could only have come from" her. Although Boyer and Nissenbaum provided considerable documentation of other possibilities, Norton here as elsewhere minimizes important pieces of evidence and maximizes others to render her take on events more palatable. One of the reasons the Salem outbreak has such a hold on the popular and scholarly imagination today is that so much of the story cannot be pinned down. Norton's assumption that it can, and should, pushes her to exaggerate the strength of her argument and greatly diminishes the value of her book.

Norton's rough handling of evidence that does not fit her interpretation of Salem's uniqueness goes beyond the outbreak itself to the pre-Salem cases. Her effort to convince readers of the relationship between the terror the wars

caused and the enormity of the 1692 witchcraft outbreak need not compel her to diminish the numerical or cultural significance of pre-Salem accusations. Nor does she have to ignore patterns linking Salem's suspects to their predecessors. For example, by not fully acknowledging the demographic, economic, and other shared experiences of Salem's accused, Norton can easily pass over resemblances between the many women named before the Salem crisis and those women named in 1692, both those who had and those who did not have ties to the Maine or New Hampshire frontier.

Also, the vast majority of people labeled as witches during the Salem outbreak did not have any identifiable links to the northeastern frontier. Nor did most accusers. One, perhaps two, Indians can be found among the scores of suspects and only a few others had French backgrounds. Even among accused witches whom Norton lists in an appendix as having frontier ties, the number of women is so small and the ties so insubstantial that including them in this category seems to be grasping at straws. These numbers alone confirm that the connections between the wars and the witches tell only part of the Salem story.

Dividing accused witches into usual and unusual suspects—and leaving most of the usual suspects and the testimony against them out of the *analytical* picture—further masks the complexity of the Salem crisis. When she reduces most of the women accused of witchcraft during the Salem outbreak to usual suspects, Norton implies that the reasons for these accusations do not need to be analyzed. These presumed witches were, in her view, “quarrelsome older women, some with dubious reputations, who fit the standard seventeenth-century stereotype of the witch.” Certainly, an argument can and has been made that these women made themselves the object of witchcraft gossip, that they were inevitably caught up in the net that the Salem authorities cast, and that their plight in 1692 needs little further explanation. That argument remains highly problematic, however, if for no other reason than the evidence that has survived about them tells only one side of bitter, often quite prolonged arguments between neighbors. Norton's marginalization of these women as “usual suspects,” I find, not only substantially detracts from *In the Devil's Snare's* accomplishments, it bespeaks another untold tale.

Surprisingly, given her long career as a pioneer in the history of women and gender in early America, Norton does not offer much of an interpretation of the social relations that she does place at the center of her narrative. She clearly agrees with those of us who have argued that possessed accusers claimed a power and authority they were never meant to have, and that they obliquely challenged the gender hierarchy even if their naming of unlikely witches eventually lost them their right to “spectral sight.” At times she seems to place confessing witches among this role-reversing group. I expected the author of *Founding Mothers and Fathers: Gendered Power and the Forming of American Society* (New York, 1996) to say much more, though, about how the links between the Salem outbreak and the frontier wars illuminate the relations of gender and power and vice versa.

Even if Norton had not already contributed so much to feminist scholarship on early America, the opening pages of *In the Devil's Snare* imply that gender will be one of its most salient themes. In her earlier essay on her research, she even more emphatically affirmed that "it was inconceivable that gender could have played absolutely no role in the development and outcome of [the Salem] crisis" and that a study of late-seventeenth-century gender and politics was inconceivable without confronting Salem. Speaking to the latter, she claimed that "if one is interested in that theme in America between 1670 and 1750, Salem is the 800-pound gorilla sitting there staring you in the face." Certainly, this is a book about men accused of witchcraft in Salem—and gender studies in recent years have embraced the study of manhood. But this is not a book about men *as men*. Even as it offers one of the most insightful interpretations of why Salem produced so many "Devils in the Shape of Good Men," without a gender analysis, that 800-pound gorilla is still there, staring us in the face.

Further Reading: For Mary Beth Norton's earlier essay, see "Finding the Devil in the Details of the Salem Witchcraft Trials," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 21 January 2000, B4. See also Mary Beth Norton, "[The Refugee's Revenge](#)," *Common-place* 2:3 (April 2003). Other articles mentioned above include David T. Konig, "A New Look at the Essex 'French': Ethnic Frictions and Community Tensions in Seventeenth-Century Essex County, Massachusetts," *Essex Institute Historical Collections*, 110 (1974) 167-80; James E. Kences, "Some Unexplored Relationships of Essex County Witchcraft to the Indian Wars of 1675 and 1689," *Essex Institute Historical Collections*, 120 (1984) 179-212; and John McWilliams, "Indian John and the Northern Tawnies," *New England Quarterly* 69 (1996) 580-604. Bernard Rosenthal's identification of accuracies and inaccuracies in the Salem scholarship is in *Salem Story: Reading the Witch Trials of 1692* (New York, 1993). For more on Cotton Mather's role in constructing Native Americans as demonic, see his *The Life of Sir William Phips*, ed. Mark Van Doren (New York, 1929) and *Decennium Luctuosum: Or, The Remarkables of a Long War with Indian Savages*, reprinted in Charles H. Lincoln, ed., *Narratives of the Indian Wars, 1675-1699* (New York, 1913). European assumptions about witches and demons can be found in the witchcraft debate literature; skeptic Samuel Harsnet's, *A Declaration of Popish Impostures* (London, 1603), drawn on for this review, offers some of the most vivid representations of English beliefs.

This article originally appeared in issue 3.2 (January, 2003).

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