

Cotton Mather's Account of the Witch Trials, 1693

Introduction

Most Americans' knowledge of the seventeenth century comes from heavily mythologized events: the first Thanksgiving at Plymouth, Pocahontas purportedly saving Captain John Smith from execution in early Virginia, and the Salem witch trials of 1692. The myths surrounding what happened in Salem make the true story that much more difficult to uncover. Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible*, which forms the basis of many Americans' knowledge of the trials, takes liberties with the story. Miller transforms Tituba, a young Native American girl, into an African slave who led a group of young women into the forest to participate in magic rites. He also portrays the accusers as teenagers when many were in fact much younger.

Cotton Mather, a prolific author and well-known preacher, wrote this account in 1693, a year after the trials ended. Mather and his fellow New Englanders believed that God directly intervened in the establishment of the colonies and that the New World was formerly the Devil's territory. Cotton Mather's account of the witch trials reinforced colonial New Englanders' view of themselves as a chosen generation of men.

The Salem witch scare had complex social roots beyond the community's religious convictions. It drew upon preexisting rivalries and disputes within the rapidly growing Massachusetts port town: between urban and rural residents; between wealthier commercial merchants and subsistence-oriented farmers; between Congregationalists and other religious denominations—Anglicans, Baptists, and Quakers; and between American Indians and Englishmen on the frontier. The witch trials offer a window into the anxieties and social tensions that accompanied New England's increasing integration into the Atlantic economy.

Questions for Discussion

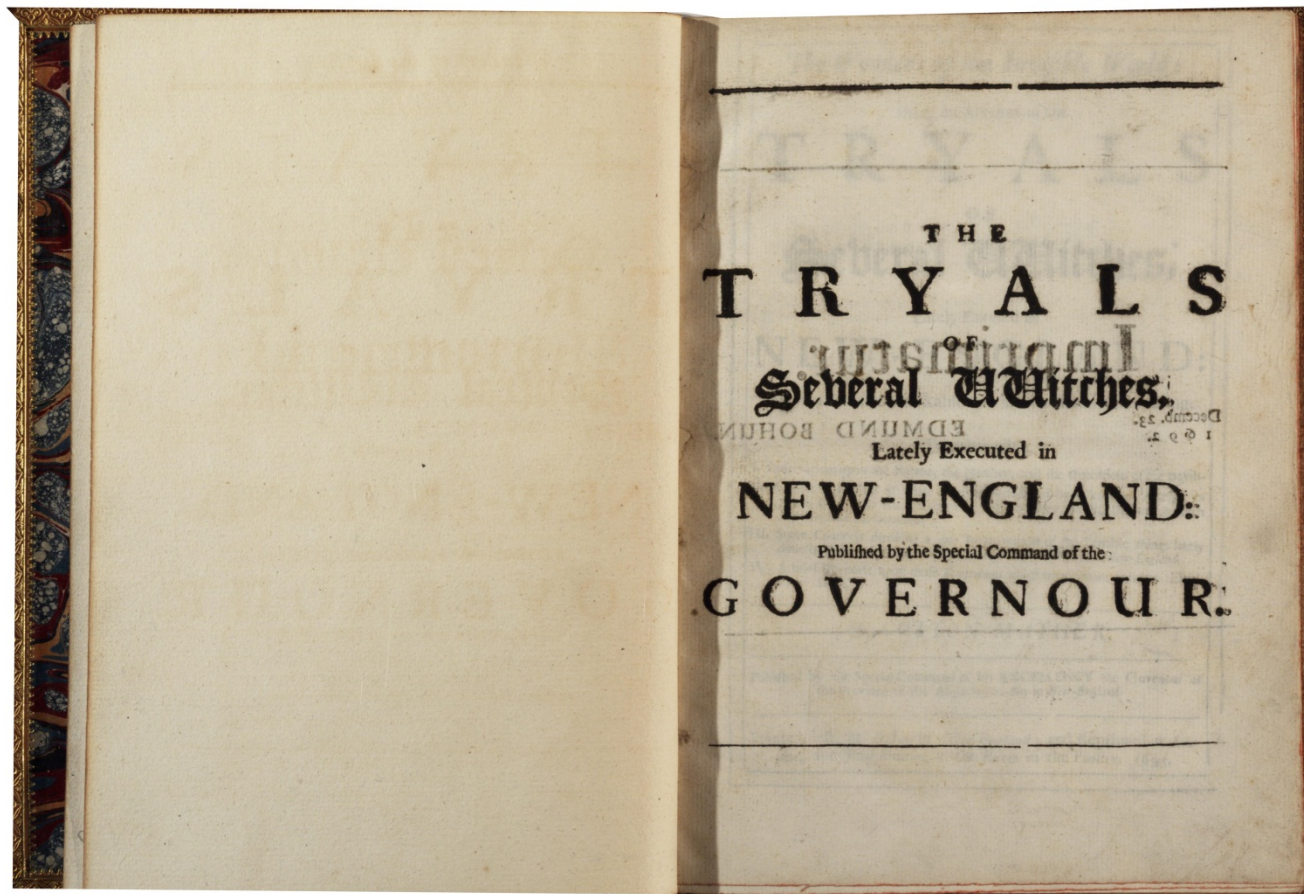
Read the document introduction and transcript and apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer these questions.

1. The events in Salem and other towns in New England took place in a region of isolated villages and towns. What part might this physical separation have played in turning neighbors against one another and stoking fears of demons?
2. According to Cotton Mather, what are the immediate and long-term goals of the Devil?
3. We now know that some of the accused were pre-teens. Why might their age make them particularly susceptible to accusations of strange behavior?
4. Describe a relatively recent historical event that resembles the situation that unfolded in Salem.

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*** Beyond Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, numerous dramatic presentations offer insights into irrational human fear. For example, "The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street," an episode of Rod Serling's *Twilight Zone* series, may provide students and teachers an opportunity to examine the phenomenon of mass hysteria.

Image



Cotton Mather. *The Wonders of the Invisible world....*,1693 (Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC00264)

Excerpt

Cotton Mather, *The Wonders of the Invisible world: Being an Account of the Tryals... [witches]*, 1693 (The Gilder Lehrman Collection, GLC00264)

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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

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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.