Underlying Themes in the Witchcraft of Seventeenth-Century New England

JOHN DEMOS

IT is faintly embarrassing for a historian to summon his colleagues to still another consideration of early New England witchcraft. Here, surely, is a topic that previous generations of writers have sufficiently worked, indeed overworked. Samuel Eliot Morison once commented that the Salem witch-hunt was, after all, “but a small incident in the history of a great superstition”; and Perry Miller noted that with only minor qualifications “the intellectual history of New England can be written as though no such thing ever happened. It had no effect on the ecclesiastical or political situation, it does not figure in the institutional or ideological development.”

Popular interest in the subject is, then, badly out of proportion to its actual historical significance, and perhaps the sane course for the future would be silence.

This assessment seems, on the face of it, eminently sound. Witchcraft was not an important matter from the standpoint of the larger historical process; it exerted only limited influence on the unfolding sequence of events in colonial New England. Moreover, the literature on the subject seems to have reached a point of diminishing returns. Details of fact have been endlessly canvassed, and the main outlines of the story, particularly the story of Salem, are well and widely known.

There is, to be sure, continuing debate over one set of issues: the roles played by the persons most directly involved. Indeed the historiography of Salem can be viewed, in large measure, as an unending effort to judge the participants—and, above all, to affix blame. A number of verdicts have been fashionable at one time or another. Thus the ministers were really at fault; or Cotton Mather in particular; or the whole culture of Puritanism; or the core group of “afflicted girls” (if their “fits” are construed as conscious fraud). The most recent, and in some ways most so-

Mr. Demos, whose major field of interest is American social history, is author of A Little Commonwealth: Family Life in Plymouth Colony (New York, 1970). He studied with Oscar Handlin and Bernard Bailyn at Harvard and is currently associate professor of history at Brandeis University. An earlier version of this paper was presented at a meeting of the Organization of American Historians in April 1967. The author is grateful to the following for comments and criticism: Robert Middlekauff, Mary Maples Dunn, Robert I. Rotberg, Raphael Demos, Dorothy Lee, Robert A. LeVine, the members of the Group for Applied Psychoanalysis, and, most especially, David Hackett Fischer and Virginia Demos.


2 Examples of these varying interpretations may be found in Charles W. Upham, Salem Witchcraft (Boston, 1867); Winfield S. Nevins, Witchcraft in Salem Village (Salem, 1916); John Fiske, New
phisticated, study of the Salem trials plunges right into the middle of the same controversy; the result is yet another conclusion. Not the girls, not the clergy, not Puritanism, but the accused witches themselves are now the chief culprits. For "witchcraft actually did exist and was widely practiced in seventeenth-century New England"; and women like Goody Glover, Bridget Bishop, and Mammy Redd were "in all probability" guilty as charged.  

Clearly these questions of personal credit and blame can still generate lively interest, but are they the most fruitful, the most important questions to raise about witchcraft? Will such a debate ever be finally settled? Are its partisan terms and moral tone appropriate to historical scholarship? 

The situation is not hopeless if only we are willing to look beyond the limits of our own discipline. There is, in particular, a substantial body of interesting and relevant work by anthropologists. Many recent studies of primitive societies contain chapters about witchcraft, and there are several entire monographs on the subject. The approach they follow differs strikingly from anything in the historical literature. Broadly speaking, the anthropological work is far more analytic, striving always to use materials on witchcraft as a set of clues or "symptoms." The subject is important not in its own right but as a means of exploring certain larger questions about the society. For example, witchcraft throws light on social structure, on the organization of families, and on the inner dynamics of personality. The substance of such investigations, of course, varies greatly from one culture to another, but the framework, the informing purposes are roughly the same. To apply this framework and these purposes to historical materials is not inherently difficult. The data may be inadequate in a given case, but the analytic categories themselves are designed for any society, whether simple or complex, Western or non-Western, past or contemporary. Consider, by way of illustration, the strategy proposed for the main body of this essay.

Our discussion will focus on a set of complex relationships between the alleged witches and their victims. The former group will include all persons accused of practicing witchcraft, and they will be called, simply, witches. The category of victims will comprise everyone who claimed to have suffered from witchcraft,

---


4 Those I have found particularly helpful in developing my own approach toward New England witchcraft are the following: Clyde Kluckhohn, Navajo Witchcraft (Boston, 1967); E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande (Oxford, 1936); M. G. Marwick, Sorcery in its Social Setting (Manchester, 1965); Witchcraft and Sorcery in East Africa, ed. John Middleton and E. H. Winter (London, 1963); Beatrice B. Whiting, Paiute Sorcery (New York, 1950).

5 This usage is purely a matter of convenience, and is not meant to convey any judgment as to whether such people actually tried to perform acts of witchcraft. Chadwick Hansen claims to show, from trial records, which of the accused women were indeed "guilty"; but in my opinion his argument is not convincing. The testimony that "proves" guilt in one instance seems quite similar to other testimony brought against women whom Hansen regards as innocent. There may indeed have been "practicing witches" in colonial New England, but the surviving evidence does not decide the issue one way or another.
and they will be divided into two categories to account for an important distinction between different kinds of victims. As every schoolchild knows, some victims experienced fits—bizarre seizures that, in the language of modern psychiatry, closely approximate the clinical picture of hysteria. These people may be called accusers, since their sufferings and their accusations seem to have carried the greatest weight in generating formal proceedings against witches. A second, much larger group of victims includes people who attributed to witchcraft some particular misfortune they had suffered, most typically an injury or illness, the sudden death of domestic animals, the loss of personal property, or repeated failure in important day-to-day activities like farming, fishing, and hunting. This type of evidence was of secondary importance in trials of witches and was usually brought forward after the accusers had pressed their own more damaging charges. For people testifying to such experiences, therefore, the shorthand term witnesses seems reasonably appropriate.

Who were these witches, accusers, and witnesses? How did their lives intersect? Most important, what traits were generally characteristic and what traits were alleged to have been characteristic of each group? These will be the organizing questions in the pages that follow. Answers to these questions will treat both external (or objective) circumstances and internal (or subjective) experiences. In the case of witches, for example, it is important to try to discover their age, marital status, socioeconomic position, and visible personality traits. But it is equally important to examine the characteristics attributed to witches by others—flying about at night, transforming themselves into animals, and the like. In short, one can construct a picture of witches in fact and in fantasy; and comparable efforts can be made with accusers and witnesses. Analysis directed to the level of external reality helps to locate certain points of tension or conflict in the social structure of a community. The fantasy picture, on the other hand, reveals more directly the psychological dimension of life, the inner preoccupations, anxieties, and conflicts of individual members of that community.

Such an outline looks deceptively simple, but in fact it demands an unusual degree of caution, from writer and reader alike. The approach is explicitly cross-disciplinary, reaching out to anthropology for strategy and to psychology for theory. There is, of course, nothing new about the idea of a working relationship between history and the behavioral sciences. It is more than ten years since William Langer’s famous summons to his colleagues to consider this their “next assignment”;

but the record of actual output is still very meager. All such efforts remain quite experimental; they are designed more to stimulate discussion than to prove a definitive case.

There is a final point—about context and the larger purposes of this form of inquiry. Historians have traditionally worked with purposeful, conscious events,

---

"restricting themselves," in Langer's words, "to recorded fact and to strictly rational motivation." They have not necessarily wished to exclude non-rational or irrational behavior, but for the most part they have done so. Surely in our own post-Freudian era there is both need and opportunity to develop a more balanced picture. It is to these long-range ends that further study of witchcraft should be dedicated. For witchcraft is, if nothing else, an open window on the irrational.

The first witchcraft trial of which any record survives occurred at Windsor, Connecticut, in 1647, and during the remainder of the century the total of cases came to nearly one hundred. Thirty-eight people were executed as witches, and a few more, though convicted, managed somehow to escape the death penalty. There were, of course, other outcomes as well: full-dress trials resulting in acquittal, hung juries, convictions reversed on appeal, and "complaints" filed but not followed up. Finally, no doubt, many unrecorded episodes touching on witchcraft, episodes of private suspicion or public gossip, never eventuated in legal action at all.

This long series of witchcraft cases needs emphasis lest the Salem outbreak completely dominate our field of vision. Salem differed radically from previous episodes in sheer scope; it developed a degree of self-reinforcing momentum present in no other instance. But it was very similar in many qualitative aspects: the types of people concerned, the nature of the charges, the fits, and so forth. Indeed, from an analytic standpoint, all these cases can be regarded as roughly equivalent and interchangeable. They are pieces of a single, larger phenomenon, a system of witchcraft belief that was generally prevalent in early New England. The evidence for such a system must, of course, be drawn from a variety of cases to produce representative conclusions. For most questions this is quite feasible; there is more evidence, from a greater range of cases, than can ever be presented in a single study.

Yet in one particular matter the advantages of concentrating on Salem are overwhelming. It affords a unique opportunity to portray the demography of witchcraft, to establish a kind of profile for each of the three basic categories of people involved in witchcraft, in terms of sex, age, and marital status. Thus the statistical tables that follow are drawn entirely from detailed work on the Salem materials. The earlier cases do not yield the breadth of data necessary for this type of quantitative investigation. They do, however, provide many fragments of evidence that are generally consistent with the Salem picture.

There is at least minimal information about people accused as witches during the entire period of the Salem outbreak.

---

7 Ibid., 90.
9 Some of these episodes are mentioned, in passing, among the records of witchcraft cases that came before the court. See, for example, the references to Besse Sewall and the widow Marshfield, in the depositions of the Parsons case, published in Samuel G. Drake, Annals of Witchcraft in New England (Boston, 1869), 218–57. It is clear, too, that many convicted witches had been the objects of widespread suspicion and gossip for years before they were brought to trial.
10 These findings are based largely on materials in the vital records of Salem and the surrounding towns.
11 In some cases the information is not complete—hence the variation in the size of sample among the different tables. Still the total for each table is large enough to lend overall credence to the results.
These figures point to an important general conclusion: the witches were predominantly married or widowed women, between the ages of forty-one and sixty. While the exceptions add up to a considerable number, most of them belonged to the families of middle-aged, female witches. Virtually all the young persons in the group can be identified as children of witches and most of the men as husbands of witches. In fact this pattern conformed to an assumption then widely prevalent, that the transmission of witchcraft would naturally follow the lines of family or of close friendship. An official statement from the government of Connecticut included among the “grounds for Examination of a Witch” the following:

if ye party suspected be ye son or daughter the servt or familiar friend; neer Neighbor or old Companion of a Knowne or Convicted witch this alsoe a presumton for witchcraft is an art yt may be learned & Conveyd from man to man & oft it falleth out yt a witch dying leaveth som of ye aforesd. heirs of her witchcraft.12

In short, young witches and male witches belonged to a kind of derivative category. They were not the prime targets in these situations; they were, in a literal sense, rendered suspect by association. The deepest suspicions, the most intense anxieties, remained fixed on middle-aged women.

Thirty-four persons experienced fits of one sort or another during the Salem trials and qualify thereby as accusers.

Here again the sample shows a powerful cluster. The vast majority of the accusers were single girls between the ages of eleven and twenty. The exceptions in this case (two boys, three males of undetermined age, and four adult women) are rather difficult to explain, for there is little evidence about any of them. By and large, however, they played only a minor role in the trials. Perhaps the matter can

12 An early copy of this statement (undated) is in the Ann Mary Brown Memorial Collection, Brown University.
be left this way: the core group of accusers was entirely composed of adolescent girls, but the inner conflicts so manifest in their fits found an echo in at least a few persons of other ages or of the opposite sex.

Eighty-four persons came forward as witnesses at one time or another during the Salem trials.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>63</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>84</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Single</th>
<th>Married</th>
<th>Widowed</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Under 20</th>
<th>21-30</th>
<th>31-40</th>
<th>41-50</th>
<th>51-60</th>
<th>61-70</th>
<th>Over 70</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here the results seem relatively inconclusive. Three-fourths of the witnesses were men, but a close examination of the trial records suggests a simple reason for this: men were more likely, in seventeenth-century New England, to take an active part in legal proceedings of any type. When a husband and wife were victimized together by some sort of witchcraft, it was the former who would normally come forward to testify. As to the ages of the witnesses, there is a fairly broad distribution between twenty and sixty years. Probably, then, this category reflects the generalized belief in witchcraft among all elements of the community in a way that makes it qualitatively different from the groupings of witches and accusers.

There is much more to ask about external realities in the lives of such people, particularly with regard to their social and economic position. Unfortunately, however, the evidence is somewhat limited here and permits only a few impressionistic observations. It seems that many witches came from the lower levels of the social structure, but there were too many exceptions to see in this a really significant pattern. The first three accused at Salem were Tituba, a Negro slave, Sarah Good, the wife of a poor laborer, and Sarah Osbourne, who possessed a very considerable estate. Elizabeth Godman, tried at New Haven in 1653, seems to have been poor and perhaps a beggar; but Nathaniel and Rebecca Greensmith, who were convicted and executed at Hartford eight years later, were quite well-to-do; and

---

13 The proceedings against these three defendants are included in the typescript volumes, Salem Witchcraft, 1692, compiled from the original records by the Works Progress Administration in 1938. These volumes—an absolutely invaluable source—are on file in the Essex County Courthouse, Salem.


15 Some original records from this trial are in the Willys Papers, Connecticut State Library, Hartford. For good short accounts see Increase Mather, An Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences, in Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases, ed. G. L. Burr (New York, 1914), 18-21, and a letter from John Whiting to Increase Mather, Dec. 10, 1682, entitled “An account of a Remarkable passage of Divine providence that happened in Hartford, in the yeare of our Lord 1662,” in Massachusetts Historical Society Collections, 4th Ser., VIII (Boston, 1868), 466-69.
“Mistress” Ann Hibbens, executed at Boston in 1656, was the widow of a wealthy merchant and former magistrate of the Bay Colony. What appears to have been common to nearly all these people, irrespective of their economic position, was some kind of personal eccentricity, some deviant or even criminal behavior that had long since marked them out as suspect. Some of them had previously been tried for theft or battery or slander; others were known for their interest in dubious activities like fortunetelling or certain kinds of folk-healing. The “witch Glover” of Boston, on whom Cotton Mather reports at some length, was Irish and Catholic, and spoke Gaelic; and a Dutch family in Hartford came under suspicion at the time the Greensmiths were tried.

More generally, many of the accused seem to have been unusually irascible and contentious in their personal relations. Years before her conviction for witchcraft Mrs. Hibbens had obtained a reputation for “natural crabbedness of . . . temper”; indeed she had been excommunicated by the Boston church in 1640, following a long and acrimonious ecclesiastical trial. William Hubbard, whose General History of New England was published in 1680, cited her case to make the general point that “persons of hard favor and turbulent passions are apt to be condemned by the common people as witches, upon very slight grounds.” In the trial of Mercy Desborough, at Fairfield, Connecticut, in 1692, the court received numerous reports of her quarrelsome behavior. She had, for example, told one neighbor “yt shee would make him bare as a bird’s tale,” and to another she had repeatedly said “many hard words.” Goodwife Clawson, tried at the same time, was confronted with testimony like the following:

Abigail Wescot saith that as shee was going along the street goody Clasen came out to her and they had some words together and goody Clason took up stones and threw at her: and at another time as shee went along the street before sd Clasons dore goody Clason caled to mee and asked mee what was in my Chamber last Sabbath day night; and I doe afirm me that I was not there that night: and at another time as I was in her some Steephens house being neere her one hous shee folowed me in and contended with me becase I did not com into her hous caling of me proud slut what-are you

---


17 For example, Giles Corey, executed as one of the Salem witches, had been before the courts several times, charged with such offenses as theft and battery. Mary Parsons of Springfield was convicted of slander not long before her trial for witchcraft.

18 For example, Katherine Harrison, prosecuted for witchcraft at Weathersfield, Connecticut, in 1668, was reported to have been given to fortunetelling; and a group of ministers called to advise the court in her case contended that such activity did “argue familiarity with the Devil.” See John M. Taylor, The Witchcraft Delusion in Colonial Connecticut (New York, 1908), 56–58. Evidence of the same kind was offered against Samuel Wardwell of Andover, Massachusetts, in 1692. See the proceedings in his case in the typescript volumes by the Works Progress Administration, Salem Witchcraft, 1692, in the Essex County Courthouse, Salem. Margaret Jones, convicted and executed at Boston in 1648, was involved in “practising physic.” See Winthrop’s Journal, ed. J. K. Hosmer (New York, 1908), II, 344–45. Elizabeth Morse, prosecuted at Newbury, Massachusetts, in 1679, was alleged to have possessed certain occult powers to heal the sick. See the depositions published in Drake, Annals of Witchcraft, 258–96.

proud of your fine cloths and you love to be mistres but you neuer shal be and several other provoking speeches.\textsuperscript{20}

The case of Mary and Hugh Parsons, tried at Springfield in 1651, affords a further look at the external aspects of our subject. A tax rating taken at Springfield in 1646 records the landholdings of most of the principals in the witchcraft prosecutions of five years later. When the list is arranged according to wealth, Parsons falls near the middle (twenty-fourth out of forty-two), and those who testified against him come from the top, middle, and bottom. This outcome tends to confirm the general point that economic position is not, for present purposes, a significant datum. What seems, on the basis of the actual testimonies at the trial, to have been much more important was the whole dimension of eccentric and anti-social behavior. Mary Parsons, who succumbed repeatedly to periods of massive depression, was very nearly insane. During the witchcraft investigations she began by testifying against her husband and ended by convicting herself of the murder of their infant child. Hugh Parsons was a sawyer and brickmaker by trade, and there are indications that in performing these services he was sometimes suspected of charging extortionate rates.\textsuperscript{21} But what may have weighed most heavily against him was his propensity for prolonged and bitter quarreling; many examples of his "threatening speeches" were reported in court.

One other aspect of this particular episode is worth noting, namely, the apparent influence of spatial proximity. When the names of Parsons and his "victims" are checked against a map of Springfield in this period, it becomes very clear that the latter were mostly his nearest neighbors. In fact nearly all of the people who took direct part in the trial came from the southern half of the town. No other witchcraft episode yields such a detailed picture in this respect, but many separate pieces of evidence suggest that neighborhood antagonism was usually an aggravating factor.\textsuperscript{22}

We can summarize the major characteristics of the external side of New England witchcraft as follows: First, the witches themselves were chiefly women of middle age whose accusers were girls about one full generation younger. This may reflect the kind of situation that anthropologists would call a structural conflict—that is, some focus of tension created by the specific ways in which a community arranges the lives of its members. In a broad sense it is quite probable that adolescent girls in early New England were particularly subject to the con-

\textsuperscript{20} Hutchinson, History of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts Bay, I, 160; Hubbard, 574. There is a verbatim account of the church proceedings against Mrs. Hibbens in the journal of Robert Keayne, in the Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston. I am grateful to Anita Rutman for lending me her transcription of this nearly illegible document. Manuscript deposition, trial of Mercy Desborough, Willys Papers; manuscript deposition, trial of Elizabeth Clawson, Willys Papers.

\textsuperscript{21} The tax list is published in Henry Burt, The First Century of the History of Springfield (Springfield, Mass., 1898), I, 190–91; a long set of depositions from the Parsons case is published in Drake, Annals of Witchcraft, 219–56; see also 224, 228, 242. Mary Parsons herself offered some testimony reflecting her husband's inordinate desire "for Luker and Gaines."

\textsuperscript{22} See Burt, First Century of the History of Springfield, I, for just such a map; see Increase Mather, An Essay etc., 18 ff., on the case of the Greensmiths. Also Richard Chamberlain, Lithobolia, in Narratives, ed. Burr, 61, on the case of Hannah Jones at Great Island, New Hampshire, in 1682.
Witchcraft in Seventeenth-Century New England

trol of older women, and this may well have given rise to a powerful underlying resentment. By contrast, the situation must have been less difficult for boys, since their work often took them out of the household and their behavior generally was less restricted.

There are, moreover, direct intimations of generational conflict in the witchcraft records themselves. Consider a little speech by one of the afflicted girls during a fit, a speech meticulously recorded by Cotton Mather. The words are addressed to the "specter" of a witch, with whom the girl has been having a heated argument:

What's that? Must the younger Women, do yee say, hearken to the Elder?—They must be another Sort of Elder Women than You then! they must not bee Elder Witches, I am sure. Pray, do you for once Hearken to mee.—What a dreadful Sight are You! An Old Woman, an Old Servant of the Divel!23

Second, it is notable that most witches were deviant persons—eccentric or conspicuously anti-social or both. This suggests very clearly the impact of belief in witchcraft as a form of control in the social ordering of New England communities. Here indeed is one of the most widely-found social functions of witchcraft; its importance has been documented for many societies all over the world.24 Any individual who contemplates actions of which the community disapproves knows that if he performs such acts, he will become more vulnerable either to a direct attack by witches or to the charge that he is himself a witch. Such knowledge is a powerful inducement to self-constraint.

What can be said of the third basic conclusion, that witchcraft charges particularly involved neighbors? Very briefly, it must be fitted with other aspects of the social setting in these early New England communities. That there was a great deal of contentiousness among these people is suggested by innumerable court cases from the period dealing with disputes about land, lost cattle, trespass, debt, and so forth. Most men seem to have felt that the New World offered them a unique opportunity to increase their properties,25 and this may have heightened competitive feelings and pressures. On the other hand, cooperation was still the norm in many areas of life, not only in local government but for a variety of agricultural tasks as well. In such ambivalent circumstances it is hardly surprising that relations between close neighbors were often tense or downright abrasive.

"In all the Witchcraft which now Grieviously Vexes us, I know not whether any thing be more Unaccountable, than the Trick which the Witches have, to

24 See, for example, Whiting, Paiute Sorcery; Evans-Pritchard, Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande, 117 f.; and Witchcraft and Sorcery in East Africa, ed. Middleton and Winter.
25 For material bearing on the growth of these acquisitive tendencies, see Philip J. Greven, Jr., "Old Patterns in the New World: The Distribution of Land in 17th Century Andover," Essex Institute Historical Collections, CI (April, 1965), 133-48; and John Demos, "Notes on Life in Plymouth Colony," William and Mary Quarterly, 3d Ser., XXII (Apr. 1965), 264-86. It is possible that the voluntary mechanism of colonization had selected unusually aggressive and competitive persons at the outset.
render themselves and their Tools Invisible.” Thus wrote Cotton Mather in 1692; and three centuries later it is still the “invisible” part of witchcraft that holds a special fascination. Time has greatly altered the language for such phenomena—“shapes” and “specters” have become “hallucinations”; “enchantments” are a form of “suggestion”; the Devil himself seems a fantasy—and there is a corresponding change of meanings. Yet here was something truly remarkable, a kind of irreducible core of the entire range of witchcraft phenomena. How much of it remains “unaccountable”? To ask the question is to face directly the other side of our subject: witchcraft viewed as psychic process, as a function of internal reality.

The biggest obstacles to the study of psycho-history ordinarily are practical ones involving severe limitations of historical data. Yet for witchcraft the situation is uniquely promising on these very grounds. Even a casual look at writings like Cotton Mather’s Memorable Providences or Samuel Willard’s A briefe account etc. discloses material so rich in psychological detail as to be nearly the equivalent of clinical case reports. The court records on witchcraft are also remarkably full in this respect. The clergy, the judges, all the leaders whose positions carried special responsibility for combatting witchcraft, regarded publicity as a most important weapon. Witchcraft would yield to careful study and the written exchange of information. Both Mather and Willard received “afflicted girls” into their own homes and recorded “possession” behavior over long periods of time.

A wealth of evidence does not, of course, by itself win the case for a psychological approach to witchcraft. Further problems remain, problems of language and of validation. There is, moreover, the very basic problem of selecting from among a variety of different theoretical models. Psychology is not a monolith, and every psycho-historian must declare a preference. In opting for psychoanalytic theory, for example, he performs, in part, an act of faith, faith that this theory provides deeper, fuller insights into human behavior than any other. In the long run the merit of such choices will probably be measured on pragmatic grounds. Does the interpretation explain materials that would otherwise remain unused? Is it consistent with evidence in related subject areas?

If, then, the proof lies in the doing, let us turn back to the New England witches and especially to their “Trick . . . to render themselves and their tools Invisible.” What characterized these spectral witches? What qualities were attributed to them by the culture at large?

The most striking observation about witches is that they gave free rein to a whole gamut of hostile and aggressive feelings. In fact most witchcraft episodes

27 Cotton Mather, Memorable Providences etc., 93–143; Samuel Willard, A briefe account of a strange & unusual Providence of God befallen to Elizabeth Knap of Groton, in Samuel A. Green, Groton in the Witchcraft Times (Groton, Mass., 1883), 7–21.
28 The best group of essays dealing with such issues is Psychoanalysis and History, ed. Mazlish. See also the interesting statement in Alexander L. George and Juliette L. George, Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House (New York, 1964), v–xiv.
began after some sort of actual quarrel. The fits of Mercy Short followed an abusive encounter with the convicted witch Sarah Good. The witch Glover was thought to have attacked Martha Goodwin after an argument about some missing clothes. Many such examples could be accumulated here, but the central message seems immediately obvious: never antagonize witches, for they will invariably strike back hard. Their compulsion to attack was, of course, most dramatically visible in the fits experienced by some of their victims. These fits were treated as tortures imposed directly and in every detail by witches or by the Devil himself. It is also significant that witches often assumed the shape of animals in order to carry out their attacks. Animals, presumably, are not subject to constraints of either an internal or external kind; their aggressive impulses are immediately translated into action.

Another important facet of the lives of witches was their activity in company with each other. In part this consisted of long and earnest conferences on plans to overthrow the kingdom of God and replace it with the reign of the Devil. Often, however, these meetings merged with feasts, the witches’ main form of self-indulgence. Details are a bit thin here, but we know that the usual beverage was beer or wine (occasionally described as bearing a suspicious resemblance to blood), and the food was bread or meat. It is also worth noting what did not happen on these occasions. There were a few reports of dancing and “sport,” but very little of the wild excitements associated with witch revels in continental Europe. Most striking of all is the absence of allusions to sex; there is no nakedness, no promiscuity, no obscene contact with the Devil. This seems to provide strong support for the general proposition that the psychological conflicts underlying the early New England belief in witchcraft had much more to do with aggressive impulses than with libidinal ones.

The persons who acted as accusers also merit the closest possible attention, for the descriptions of what they suffered in their fits are perhaps the most revealing of all source materials for present purposes. They experienced, in the first place, severe pressures to go over to the Devil’s side themselves. Witches approached them again and again, mixing threats and bribes in an effort to break down their Christian loyalties. Elizabeth Knapp, bewitched at Groton, Massachusetts, in 1671, was alternately tortured and plied with offers of “money, silkes, fine cloaths, ease from labor”; in 1692 Ann Foster of Andover confessed to being won over by a general promise of “prosperity,” and in the same year Andrew Carrier accepted the lure of “a house and land in Andover.” The same pattern appears most vividly in Cotton Mather’s record of another of Mercy Short’s confrontations with a spectral witch:

“Fine promises!” she says, “You’ll bestow an Husband upon mee, if I’ll bee your Servant. An Husband! What? A Divel! I shall then bee finely fitted with an Husband:

29 See Cotton Mather, A Brand Pluck’d Out of the Burning, 259–60, and Memorable Providences etc., 100.
... Fine Clothes! What? Such as Your Friend Sarah Good had, who hardly had Rags to cover her! ... Never Dy! What? Is my Life in Your Hands? No, if it had, You had killed mee long before this Time!—What's that?—So you can!—Do it then, if You can. Come, I dare you: Here, I challenge You to do it. Kill mee if you can...."  

Some of these promises attributed to the Devil touch the most basic human concerns (like death) and others reflect the special preoccupations (with future husbands, for example) of adolescent girls. All of them imply a kind of covetousness generally consistent with the pattern of neighborhood conflict and tension mentioned earlier.

But the fits express other themes more powerfully still, the vital problem of aggression being of central importance. The seizures themselves have the essential character of attacks: in one sense, physical attacks by the witches on the persons of the accusers and in another sense, verbal attacks by the accusers on the reputations and indeed the very lives of the witches. This points directly toward one of the most important inner processes involved in witchcraft, the process psychologists call "projection," defined roughly as "escape from repressed conflict by attributing ... emotional drives to the external world." In short, the dynamic core of belief in witchcraft in early New England was the difficulty experienced by many individuals in finding ways to handle their own aggressive impulses. Witchcraft accusations provided one of the few approved outlets for such impulses in Puritan culture. Aggression was thus denied in the self and attributed directly to others. The accuser says, in effect: "I am not attacking you; you are attacking me!" In reality, however, the accuser is attacking the witch, and in an extremely dangerous manner, too. Witchcraft enables him to have it both ways; the impulse is denied and gratified at the same time.

The seizures of the afflicted children also permitted them to engage in a considerable amount of direct aggression. They were not, of course, held personally responsible; it was always the fault of the Devil at work inside them. Sometimes these impulses were aimed against the most important—and obvious—figures of authority. A child in a fit might behave very disobediently toward his parents or revile the clergy who came to pray for his recovery. The Reverend Samuel Willard of Groton, who ministered to Elizabeth Knapp during the time of her most severe fits, noted that the Devil "urged upon her constant temptations to murder her p'rents, her neighbors, our children ... and even to make away with herselfe & once she was going to drowne herself in ye well." The attacking impulses were quite random here, so much so that the girl herself was not safe. Cotton Mather

30 Willard, A briefe account etc., in Groton in the Witchcraft Times, ed. Green, 8; deposition by Ann Foster, case of Ann Foster, deposition by Andrew Carrier, case of Mary Lacy, Jr., in Works Progress Administration, Salem Witchcraft, 1692; Cotton Mather, A Brand Pluck'd Out of the Burning, in Narratives, ed. Burr, 269.
31 This is the definition suggested by Clyde Kluckhohn in his own exemplary monograph, Navajo Witchcraft, 239, n. 37.
32 See, for example, the descriptions of the Goodwin children during the time of their affliction, in Cotton Mather, Memorable Providences etc., 109 ff., 119.
reports a slight variation on this type of behavior in connection with the fits of Martha Goodwin. She would, he writes, “fetch very terrible Blowes with her Fist, and Kicks with her Foot at the man that prayed; but still . . . her Fist and Foot would alwaies recoil, when they came within a few hairs breadths of him just as if Rebounding against a Wall.”33 This little paradigm of aggression attempted and then at the last moment inhibited expresses perfectly the severe inner conflict that many of these people were acting out.

One last, pervasive theme in witchcraft is more difficult to handle than the others without having direct recourse to clinical models; the summary word for it is orality. It is helpful to recall at this point the importance of feasts in the standard imaginary picture of witches, but the experience of the accusers speaks even more powerfully to the same point. The evidence is of several kinds. First, the character of the “tortures” inflicted by the witches was most often described in terms of biting, pinching, and pricking; in a psychiatric sense, these modes of attack all have an oral foundation. The pattern showed up with great vividness, for example, in the trial of George Burroughs:

It was Remarkable that whereas Biting was one of the ways which the Witches used for the vexing of the Sufferers, when they cry’d out of G.B. biting them, the print of the Teeth would be seen on the Flesh of the Complainers, and just such a sett of Teeth as G.B.’s would then appear upon them, which could be distinguished from those of some other mens.34

Second, the accusers repeatedly charged that they could see the witches suckling certain animal “familiars.” The following testimony by one of the Salem girls, in reference to an unidentified witch, was quite typical: “She had two little things like young cats and she put them to her brest and suckled them they had no hair on them and had ears like a man.” It was assumed that witches were specially equipped for these purposes, and their bodies were searched for the evidence. In 1656 the constable of Salisbury, New Hampshire, deposed in the case of Eunice Cole,

That being about to stripp [her] to bee whipt (by the judgment of the Court att Salisbury) lookeing upon her brests under one of her brests (I thinke her left brest) I saw a blew thing like unto a teate hanging downward about three quarters of an inche longe not very thick, and haveing a great suspition in my mind about it (she being suspected for a witche) desiered the Court to sende some women to looke of it. The court accepted this proposal and appointed a committee of three women to administere to Goodwife Cole the standard, very intiinate, examination. Their report made no mention of a “teate” under her breast, but noted instead “a place in her leg which was proveable wher she Had bin suckt by Imps or the like.” The women also stated “thatt they Heard the whining of puppies or such like under Her Coats as though they Had a desire to sucke.”35

33 Willard, A briefe account etc., 9; Cotton Mather, Memorable Providences etc., 108, 120.
34 Cotton Mather, Wonders of the Invisible World, 216-17.
35 Deposition by Susannah Sheldon, case of Philip English, in Works Progress Administration, Salem Witchcraft, 1692; manuscript deposition by Richard Ormsbey, case of Eunice Cole, in Massachusetts Archives, Vol. 135, 3; manuscript record, case of Eunice Cole, in ibid., 13.
Third, many of the accusers underwent serious eating disturbances during and after their fits. "Long fastings" were frequently imposed on them. Cotton Mather writes of one such episode in his account of the bewitching of Margaret Rule: "tho she had a very eager Hunger upon her Stomach, yet if any refreshment were brought unto her, her teeth would be set, and she would be thrown into many Miseries." But also she would "sometimes have her Jaws forcibly pulled open, whereupon something invisible would be poured down her throat . . . She cried out of it as of Scalding Brimstone poured into her." These descriptions and others like them would repay a much more detailed analysis than can be offered here, but the general point should be obvious. Among the zones of the body, the mouth seems to have been charged with a special kind of importance for victims of witchcraft.

In closing, it may be appropriate to offer a few suggestions of a more theoretical nature to indicate both the way in which an interpretation of New England witchcraft might be attempted and what it is that one can hope to learn from witchcraft materials about the culture at large. But let it be said with some emphasis that this is meant only as the most tentative beginning of a new approach to such questions.

Consider an interesting set of findings included by two anthropologists in a broad survey of child-rearing practices in over fifty cultures around the world. They report that belief in witchcraft is powerfully correlated with the training a society imposes on young children in regard to the control of aggressive impulses. That is, wherever this training is severe and restrictive, there is a strong likelihood that the culture will make much of witchcraft. The correlation seems to suggest that suppressed aggression will seek indirect outlets of the kind that belief in witchcraft provides. Unfortunately there is relatively little concrete evidence about child-rearing practices in early New England; but it seems at least consistent with what is known of Puritan culture generally to imagine that quite a harsh attitude would have been taken toward any substantial show of aggression in the young.

Now, some further considerations. There were only a very few cases of witchcraft accusations among members of the same family. But, as we have seen, the typical pattern involved accusations by adolescent girls against middle-aged women. It seems plausible, at least from a clinical standpoint, to think that this pattern masked deep problems stemming ultimately from the relationship of

---

36 Cotton Mather, Memorable Providences etc., 131.
38 John Robinson, the pastor of the original "Pilgrim" congregation, wrote as follows in an essay on "Children and Their Education": "Surely there is in all children . . . a stubbornness, and stoutness of mind arising from natural pride, which must be broken and beaten down. . . . Children should not know, if it could be kept from them, that they have a will in their own: neither should these words be heard from them, save by way of consent, 'I will' or 'I will not.'" Robinson, Works (Boston, 1851), I, 246-47. This point of view would not appear to leave much room for the free expression of aggressive impulses, but of course it tells us nothing certain about actual practice in Puritan families.
mother and daughter. Perhaps, then, the afflicted girls were both projecting their aggression and diverting or "displacing" it from its real target. Considered from this perspective, displacement represents another form of avoidance or denial; and so the charges of the accusers may be seen as a kind of double defense against the actual conflicts.

How can we locate the source of these conflicts? This is a more difficult and frankly speculative question. Indeed the question leads farther and farther from the usual canons of historical explanation; such proof as there is must come by way of parallels to findings of recent psychological research and, above all, to a great mass of clinical data. More specifically, it is to psychoanalytic theory that one may turn for insights of an especially helpful sort.

The prominence of oral themes in the historical record suggests that the disturbances that culminated in charges of witchcraft must be traced to the earliest phase of personality development. It would be very convenient to have some shred of information to insert here about breast-feeding practices among early New Englanders. Possibly their methods of weaning were highly traumatic, but as no hard evidence exists we simply cannot be sure. It seems plausible, however, that many New England children were faced with some unspecified but extremely difficult psychic tasks in the first year or so of life. The outcome was that their aggressive drives were tied especially closely to the oral mode and driven underground. Years later, in accordance with changes normal for adolescence, instinctual energies of all types were greatly augmented; and this tended, as it so often does, to reactivate the earliest conflicts—the process that Freud vividly described as "the return of the repressed." But these conflicts were no easier to deal with in adolescence than they had been earlier; hence the need for the twin defenses of projection and displacement.

39 However, we can determine with some confidence the usual time of weaning. Since lactation normally creates an impediment to a new conception, and since the average interval between births in New England families was approximately two years, it seems likely that most infants were weaned between the ages of twelve and fifteen months. The nursing process would therefore overlap the arrival of baby teeth (and accompanying biting wishes); and this might well give rise to considerable tension between mother and child. I have found only one direct reference to weaning in all the documentary evidence from seventeenth-century New England, an entry in the journal of John Hull: "1659, 11th of 2d. My daughter Hannah was taken from her mother's breast, and, through the favor of God, weaned without any trouble; only about fifteen days after, she did not eat her meat well." American Antiquarian Society, Transactions, III (Boston, 1857), 149. Hannah Hull was born on February 14, 1658, making her thirteen months and four weeks on the day of the above entry. Hull's choice of words creates some temptation to speculate further. Was it perhaps unusual for Puritan infants to be "weaned without any trouble"? Also, does it not seem that in this case the process was quite abrupt—that is, accomplished entirely at one point in time? (Generally speaking, this is more traumatic for an infant than gradual weaning is.) For a longer discussion of infancy in Puritan New England see John Demos, A Little Commonwealth: Family-Life in Plymouth Colony (New York, 1970), Chap. 8.

40 I have found the work of Melanie Klein on the origins of psychic conflict in infancy to be particularly helpful. See her The Psycho-Analysis of Children (London, 1932) and the papers collected in her Contributions to Psycho-Analysis (London, 1950). See also Joan Riviere, "On the Genesis of Psycltical Conflict in Earliest Infancy," in Melanie Klein et al., Developments in Psycho-Analysis (London, 1952), 37–66.

41 See Peter Blos, On Adolescence (New York, 1962). This (basically psychoanalytic) study provides a wealth of case materials and some very shrewd interpretations, which seem to bear strongly on certain of the phenomena connected with early New England witchcraft.

42 It is no coincidence that projection was so important among the defenses employed by the afflicted girls in their efforts to combat their own aggressive drives. For projection is the earliest of all defenses, and indeed it takes shape under the influence of the oral phase. On this point see Sig-
One final problem must be recognized. The conflicts on which this discussion has focused were, of course, most vividly expressed in the fits of the accusers. The vast majority of people in early New England—subjected, one assumes, to roughly similar influences as children—managed to reach adulthood without experiencing fits. Does this pose serious difficulties for the above interpretations? The question can be argued to a negative conclusion, in at least two different but complementary ways. First, the materials on witchcraft, and in particular on the fits of the accusers, span a considerable length of time in New England’s early history. It seems clear, therefore, that aggression and orality were more or less constant themes in the pathology of the period. Second, even in the far less bizarre testimonies of the witnesses—those who have been taken to represent the community at large—the same sort of focus appears. It is, above all, significant that the specific complaints of the accusers were so completely credible to so many others around them. The accusers, then, can be viewed as those individuals who were somehow especially sensitive to the problems created by their environment; they were the ones who were pushed over the line, so to speak, into serious illness. But their behavior clearly struck an answering chord in a much larger group of people. In this sense, nearly everyone in seventeenth-century New England was at some level an accuser.