

Marc Callis, "The Aftermath of the Salem Witch Trials in Colonial America" *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* Volume 33, No. 2 (Summer 2005).

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Editor, *Historical Journal of Massachusetts*  
c/o Westfield State University  
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## **The Aftermath of the Salem Witch Trials in Colonial America**

**By**

**Marc Callis**

In the year 1692, an event occurred that is remembered to this day among the great calamities of American History. In the small hamlet of Salem village, (now Danvers, MA) in the household of the local minister Samuel Parris, a young girl was observed acting strangely. It was not long before the strange behavior was pronounced the result of witchcraft. Soon, the mysterious behavior spread to other young girls in the village, and eventually to surrounding areas in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The Salem witchcraft hysteria of 1692 had begun. The ensuing witch trials affected people throughout not only Essex county, (where Salem village was located) but also Middlesex and Suffolk counties, and even frontier areas of the Bay Colony in what is today the state of Maine. It was by far the largest witchcraft hysteria in the history of the English colonies in North America.

The effects of the Salem Village witch trials were devastating: 141 people imprisoned, 19 people executed, and two more died from other causes directly related to the investigations.<sup>1</sup> The Salem witch trials would account for a quarter of all people executed for the crime of witchcraft in the history of New England,<sup>2</sup> and would furthermore prove to be the very last time anyone was ever legally accused of witchcraft in New England as well as the last time in the history of the English

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Weisman, *Witchcraft, Magic and Religion in Colonial Massachusetts* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), 209-216.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 192-203.

colonies that a suspected witch was convicted and executed.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the Salem trials proved distinctive in that they implicated people from many walks of life not typically named in witchcraft trials. Church members, merchants, and even clergymen were both tried and executed as witches in 1692. And all of the executions relied heavily on standards of evidence and trial procedures that were controversial even at the time. The unique nature and gravity (at least by colonial American standards) of the Salem witch trials led many of our colonial forefathers to seek lessons from the sad events of 1692. As we shall see, all thought that the Salem trials were a grave miscarriage of justice -- even those most in sympathy with the trials declined to defend them entirely. But what is most interesting is not even that those most sympathetic to the trials should still see them as the travesties they were, but rather that even to the trials' worst critics, the reality of witchcraft continued to be taken seriously.

Perhaps the first work composed in reaction to the Salem witch trials was written by Boston minister Samuel Willard, and was entitled *Some Miscellany Observations on our Present Debates respecting Witchcrafts, in a Dialog Between S & B* ("S & B" probably standing for "Salem and Boston"). This work was followed shortly by an unpublished piece intended to circulate in manuscript form composed on October 8, 1692 by a Royal Society Fellow named Thomas Brattle, and is usually referred to today as "The Letter of Thomas Brattle, FRS."<sup>4</sup> The two works are unique in that they are the only two that circulated prior to Gov. Phips's ban on publications relating to witchcraft, promulgated on October 12, 1692.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, more than likely it was these two works that spurred Phips to issue the ban.

Willard's *Dialog* was written in October of 1692.<sup>6</sup> Although Willard was from Boston, the work was published in Philadelphia. Furthermore, Willard did not put his own name to the work, but instead attributed it two of the most prominent men who had fled the Bay Colony amidst

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<sup>3</sup> George Lincoln Burr, *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases: 1648-1706* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914), v-x.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 168, 187.

<sup>5</sup> Weisman, 168.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

accusations of witchcraft in 1692: Salem merchant Philip English and Boston sea captain John Aldin (called “P.E.” and “J.A.” respectively).<sup>7</sup> In October of 1692, Willard clearly felt a stand needed to be taken against the miscarriage of justice being perpetrated by the Salem witch trials, yet he obviously felt the environment too charged to do so publicly.

The *Dialog* consists of a point-by-point refutation of the procedures and standards of evidence used in the 1692 trials, in the form of a conversation between “S” and “B.” It recognizes only two types of evidence that are in and of themselves grounds for conviction of witchcraft: un-coerced confession of the suspected witch, and the testimony of two “humane” witnesses. By humane witnesses, Willard refers to people who had witnessed an event directly by “humane” means such as sight, hearing, touch, et cetera. People who had witnessed an event by supernatural means, such as visions from the Devil, were not considered humane witnesses, nor were people who were considered bewitched, possessed, or themselves under a pact with the Devil. In these cases, one cannot rule out the direct influence of Satan in their testimony. What Willard objects to in the *Dialog* was that at Salem evidence subjected to much less rigorous standards was frequently cited to justify executions, an issue that he does not hesitate to confront directly:

B. . . . Do you think that a less clear Evidence is sufficient for conviction in the Case of Witchcraft, than is necessary in other Capital Cases, suppose Murder, &c.

S. We suppose it necessary to take up with less, how else shall Witches be detected and punished according to Gods Command?... for who saw or heard them [witches] covenanting?

B. This is a dangerous Principle, and contrary to the mind of God, who hath appointed that there shall be good and clear proof against the criminal...

S. You seem to be very nice and critical in this point.

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<sup>7</sup> Burr, 187.

B. And why not? There is Life in the case, besides a perpetual infamy on the person, and a ruinous reproach upon his Family.<sup>8</sup>

One of the most important and controversial types of evidence used as grounds for conviction in the Salem witch trials was referred to as spectral evidence. Spectral evidence was based on the hypothesis that an individual afflicted by necromancy would therefore be capable of seeing a specter resembling the person who has bewitched him or her. Since the doctrine of spectral evidence also stated that God in his mercy would never permit a specter to appear in the form of an innocent person, spectral evidence was considered by its supporters as an all but infallible means of detecting witches. Like so many who came after him, Willard flagrantly objected to the notion that detection of the black magic of the Devil could be so clear cut and easily ascertainable, and claims so directly in the *Dialog*:

B. Do the Afflicted persons know personally all whom they cry out of?

S. No; some they never saw, it may be never heard of before.

B. And upon whose information will you send for the accused?

S. That of the Afflicted.

B. And who informed them?

S. The Spectre.

B. Very good, and that's the Devil, turned informer: how are good men like to fare against whom he hath a Particular malice.<sup>9</sup>

Another equally controversial method used to detect witches at Salem was known as the ordeal of sight and touch. In this ordeal, the accused would be asked to look upon his accusers. If the accusers fell into fits upon eye contact with a suspect, that was believed to be indication that the accused was using eye contact as a conduit for black magic. If the

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<sup>8</sup> Samuel Willard, *Dialog Between S & B* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1692, Microfilm [Evans, 631]), 3-5.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

afflicted, upon touching the accused, was then cured of her fits the evidence was considered conclusive, as it was believed that only the touch of the witch who had actually cast a spell could remove its effects. As with spectral evidence, Willard objects to the ordeal of sight and touch, decrying the notion that mortal humans could use such a simple test to unravel the guile of such a powerful individual as Satan himself: "I am satisfied that there is an illusion in this as well as the other...the use of this as a trial is utterly unlawful." Willard furthermore believed that such an ordeal was not a proper part of the Puritan tradition, and states in his work that "it [ordeal of sight and touch] was borrowed from Popish Exorcists originally."<sup>10</sup>

Willard deplored the fact that many at Salem were convicted using the testimony of people who had themselves confessed to be witches. He points out in the *Dialog* that:

Less Crimes [than witchcraft] require a long probation of persons repentance: and their bare say so is but a poor evidence for them: nay though they add tears and ask forgiveness, Furthermore, some things ought to be a perpetual infamy to persons, and for ever disable them for giving a Testimony in this World: to be sure, till they are restored plentifully to the Charity of all good men.<sup>11</sup>

Willard also denounces other atrocities of the Salem witch trials, including coerced confession, asserting that the basic laws of Christian charity were violated when the benefit of the doubt was withheld from people in the absence of solid evidence against them. One particularly sharp passage perhaps best sums up Willard's overall opinion of the Salem witch trials:

S. Many of us think it be from God the discovery of Witchcraft.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 14-15.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 15.

B. ....I believe that when God raiseth up Prophets, he will reveale himself in some other way to them than by the Devil...<sup>12</sup>

Unlike many later authors, the *Dialog* does not directly criticize the motives, capacity for judgment, moral fiber, or mental state of either the authorities or the accusers at Salem. Nevertheless, Samuel Willard's meticulous point-by-point analysis of the various procedures and types of evidence used in the Salem witch trials leaves one little room to doubt what Willard felt -- that those trials were a complete travesty of the laws of God and man.

Thomas Brattle's "Letter" is of a more subjective cast than the *Dialog*, but nevertheless presents a no less effective criticism of the 1692 trials than Samuel Willard's work. Throughout the work, Brattle continually and viciously attacks the integrity, mental state, and intentions of both the accusers and the authorities. Brattle typically dismisses the accusers by referring to them with such disparaging remarks as "these afflicted (as they are so-called)" and "these blind, nonsensical girls."<sup>13</sup> His opinion of the judges is little better, and is perhaps best revealed by what he has to say regarding the sight and touch test. Brattle at first criticizes the judges for applying the ordeal in a suspicious manner: if physical contact with the accused did not cause the fits to stop right away, Brattle claims the judges would demand that the accused grasp the afflicted harder, and maintain that grasp until the fits of the afflicted stopped. He then goes on to dismiss the ordeal entirely, calling it "sorcery, and a superstitious method, and that which we have no rule either from reason or religion."<sup>14</sup> In addition, Brattle brings up the very common sense point that if the accused had the ability to put the afflicted into fits by mere eye contact, it did not make sense that "they do not cast others [besides the afflicted] into fitts" and poison others by their looks...."<sup>15</sup> In a final tirade, he takes a direct swipe at the authorities who put stock in such an ordeal, stating bluntly that:

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 9-10.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Brattle, "Letter of Thomas Brattle, FRS," 1692, in Burr, 188.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

[It is] certain that the reasonable part of the World. when acquainted herewith, will laugh at the demonstration and conclude that the said S.G. [i.e. Salem Gentlemen] are actually possessed, at least with ignorance and folly.<sup>16</sup>

Brattle has little better to say regarding spectral evidence. In a passage that mirrors Samuel Willard, he states: “If I believe the afflicted persons as informed by the Devill, and act thereupon, this my act may properly be said to be grounded upon the testimony or information of the Devill.”<sup>17</sup> In addition to the fact that he believed it invalid *per se*, Brattle also believed the spectral testimony to have been rigged. He draws attention to the fact that “These afflicted persons do say,...that they see Spectres when their eyes are shutt...I am sure they lye...for the thing, in nature, is an utter impossibility.”<sup>18</sup> As to the testimony of confessed witches, he has no faith at all in the value of their testimony, pointing out that they are sworn into court as witnesses, an act which he declared to be “a thing which I believe was never heard of in this world: that such as confesse themselves to be witches, to have renounced God and Christ, and all that is sacred, should yet be allowed and ordered to swear by the name of the great God! This indeed seemeth to me to be a grosse taking of God’s name in vain.”<sup>19</sup>

Another type of evidence typically seen in 1692 as concrete proof of a suspected witch’s guilt was the presence of the so-called “witch’s” or “devil’s teat.” According to this tenet, it was believed that one who made a pact with the Devil would be required to give suck to the Devil and/or his demons. For this purpose, the witch would grow a third teat that could be located anywhere on his or her body. In the Salem witch trials, it was common procedure for the court to appoint groups of people (usually women) to search a suspect’s body thoroughly for the presence of the teat. Any abnormal growth or mole found on the body of an accused could be interpreted as a witch’s teat, and submitted as

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 182.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 175.



unequivocal evidence that the accused was in fact a witch. While Brattle does not attack this concept *per se*, he casts doubt as to whether the search for the witch's teat could produce reliable results: "And I wonder what person there is, whether man or woman, of whom it cannot be said but that, in some part of their body or other, there is a preternatural excrescence [as witch's teats were often termed]. The term is a very general and inclusive term."<sup>20</sup>

In addition to the numerous other problems Brattle saw in the 1692 trials, he points out that the trials were also plagued by numerous instances of irregular procedure. For example, Brattle indicates that much of the evidence brought forth against the accused was not so much invalid as such, but irrelevant. In a particularly poignant passage Brattle states:

It is true, that over and above the evidences of the afflicted persons, there are many evidences brought in, against the prisoner at the bar; either that he was at a witch meeting, or that he performed things which could not be done by ordinary natural power....But if there were ten thousand evidences of this nature; how do they prove the matter of indictment! And if they do not reach the matter of indictment, then I think it is clear, that the prisoner at the bar is brought in guilty, and condemned, merely from the evidences of the afflicted persons.<sup>21</sup>

He also decries what he called "rude and barbarous methods..." used to gather information. For example, he mentions that at Andover, "...a kind of Blade was employed in bringing these women to their confession."<sup>22</sup>

Foreshadowing later authors of the Salem witch trial aftermath, Brattle also held the opinion that the Salem trials need never have happened at all:

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 175-176.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 181.

I would hope that, in the conclusion, both the Judges and Justices will see and acknowledge that such were their best friends and advisors as dissuaded from the methods which they have taken, tho' hitherto they have been angry with them, and apt to speak very hardly of them. I cannot but highly applaud, and think it our duty to be very thankfull, for the endeavors of several Elders, whose lips, (I think) should preserve knowledge, and whose counsell should, I think, have been more regarded, in a case of this nature than as yet it has been..."<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, Brattle had a good point -- a meeting of the leading ministers of the Massachusetts Bay Colony was called by Gov. Phips on June 15<sup>th</sup>, well before the trials ended in October. The "Return" produced by this meeting warned specifically and unambiguously that spectral evidence and the ordeal of sight and touch were not grounds for conviction of witchcraft.<sup>24</sup>

In Samuel Willard's work, we see a point-by-point debunking of the legal and theological foundations upon which the Salem witch trials rested. In "The Letter of Thomas Brattle" we see an equally efficient criticism of the 1692 trials based primarily on effective yet subjective attacks on the motives and mental states of the authorities and accusers -- an assertion that the occurrences of the 1692 trials were contrary not only to legal and theological theory, but also to common sense and simple logic. Based on these early reactions alone, one would expect an uncontrolled torrent of criticism in the wake of Willard and Brattle. That, however, did not prove to be the case.

The floodgates opened by these two early commentators were soon to be closed, only to be reopened gradually. In his letter to William Blathwayt on October 12, 1692, Gov. William Phips states regarding the trials: "I have also put a stop to the printing of any discourses one way or other, that may increase the needless disputes of people upon this occasion, because I saw the likelihood of kindling an

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, eds., *Salem-Village Witchcraft: A Documentary Record of Conflict in Colonial New England* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1972), 117-118.

inextinguishable flame if I should admit any public and open contests.”<sup>25</sup> In all probability, it was more works like the *Dialog* and Brattle’s “Letter” that concerned Phips. In any case the ban was successful: publications pertaining to the 1692 witch trials did not recommence until the middle of 1693. What is interesting to note is that nothing was published illegally following the publication ban. Anyone who knows the events that occurred in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1689, in which a Royal Governor was arrested and jailed on Castle Island by the colonists, knows that a decree from a Royal Governor would not alone have been enough to guarantee the obedience of the citizens of the colony. It is more than likely that Phips’s publication ban was more in line with the wishes of prominent citizens of the colony than against them. Yet there was one significant exception to the publication ban.

The exception was a work published before the year 1692 was over “by the Special Command of his Excellency, the Governor of the Province of Massachusetts Bay.”<sup>26</sup> This lone work published during the ban was authored by none other than Puritan divine Dr. Cotton Mather. Entitled *Wonders of the Invisible World*, it stands out of all the major works published in the aftermath of 1692 as the one least critical of the trials. In his book, Mather does admit that certain procedures used during the trials, such as a reliance on spectral evidence and the ordeal of stare and touch, were insufficient grounds for conviction of witchcraft. In one respect he even ups the ante on Willard and Brattle, for he not only states that spectral evidence may be used only as grounds to start an investigation,<sup>27</sup> but also reveals that some witches confessed “that they have plotted the Representations of *Innocent Persons*, to cover and shelter themselves in their witchcrafts.”<sup>28</sup> Despite this fact, Dr. Mather confidently asserts that no “disputed methods” were used to uncover

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<sup>25</sup> William Phips, “Letter to the Earl of Nottingham, February 21, 1693,” Burr, 197.

<sup>26</sup> Cotton Mather, *Wonders of the Invisible World* (New York: Bell Publishing, reprint 1974).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-26.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

“works of darkness.”<sup>29</sup> While these last two sentences would appear to present an inherent contradiction, it is not surprising that Mather thought this contradiction minor enough to be overlooked. While he freely admits “*That the Devils may sometimes have a permission [from God] to Represent an Innocent Person,*” he plays down any significance that statement may have had to the Salem witch trials by declaring “*that such things are rare and extraordinary.*”<sup>30</sup>

Mather further defends the Salem witch trials by emphasizing the fact that once a witch was hanged, the witch’s specter never affected anyone again; and that the judges, far from being the cruel and imbecilic figures described by Brattle, were to the contrary “men of an excellent spirit” who despite the difficulties inherent in conducting a large scale witch hunt strove to “best serve both God and Man.”<sup>31</sup> In Mather’s view, New England at its founding had been “a true *Utopia*” that was, in 1692, under the assault of “An Army of *Devils,*” and a “terrible plague, of *Evil Angels.*”<sup>32</sup> Despite having acknowledged the problematic nature of spectral evidence -- even pointing out difficulties that Willard and Brattle had not brought to light -- Mather boldly asserted that:

‘tis Agreed, *That* the Devil has made a dreadful Knot of *Witches* in the Country....Rooting out the Christian religion from this Country, and setting up instead of it, perhaps a more gross *Diabolism,* than ever the World saw before.<sup>33</sup>

In fact, despite acknowledging “the Great and Just Suspicion, that the *Daemons* might Impose the *Shapes* of Innocent Persons in their *Spectral Exhibitions* upon the Sufferers,” Mather believed that this should not be so construed as to cast doubt on the overall reality of a New England over-run with witches. On the contrary, he asserted that this possibility

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 15-16.

may even further prove that Satan's confederates were at work in 1692, as the implication of innocents "may perhaps prove no small part of the *Witch-Plot* in the issue."<sup>34</sup>

While *Wonders of the Invisible World* does acknowledge that some of the actions undertaken in 1692 were not completely justified, its tone is by and large sympathetic to the judges and accusers. Like Willard and Brattle, Cotton Mather acknowledges that there are problems inherent in spectral evidence, and even points out one important problem that neither Willard nor Brattle mentioned, he downplays the scale of these problems and even goes so far as to theorize that framing innocent people for witchcraft was just one more part of an evil plot devised by none other than Satan himself. Mather furthermore goes out of his way to defend the character and mental state of both the accusers and the judges, and states emphatically that whatever problems there may have been with the trials, that does not change the fact that there were in fact a large number of witches spreading evil throughout the land in 1692. All things considered, *Wonders of the Invisible World* represents an about-face in the tone of the works at that point of the 1692 aftermath.

But that about-face would prove ephemeral. Slowly but surely, the ice of Phips' taboo thawed, and as the seventeenth century passed into the eighteenth, the 1692 aftermath would reassume the unbridled criticism with which it had begun -- even Cotton Mather, whose *Wonders of The Invisible World* was in many regards apologetic about the Salem witch trials, would mollify his position. The return to a more critical outlook on the 1692 trials was inaugurated by none other than Cotton Mather's own father, the Reverend Increase Mather.

Originally written in October 1692, Increase Mather's work *Cases of Conscience Concerning Witchcrafts* was not published until June 1693, when it was bound in one volume with *Wonders of the Invisible World*.<sup>35</sup> Although he stopped short of denouncing the 1692 trials entirely, Increase Mather's work went quite far in that direction. In the preface to the work, written by William Hubbard, Hubbard states that concerning "something vulgarly called *Spectre Evidence*, and a certain *Ordeal* or trial by the sight and touch....the Refutation of such Cases as

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16.

<sup>35</sup> Weisman, 171.

these is proper for the Servants in the Ministry.”<sup>36</sup> In the main body of the text, Increase Mather himself calls such methods “Vanity” and “Superstition that better become Pagans or Papists than Professors in *New England*.”<sup>37</sup> He warns that to execute anyone on the grounds of evidence from a “*Spectre* or Devil...will bring the Guilt of Innocent Blood on the Land where such a thing shall be done.”<sup>38</sup>

In addition to the dubious nature of evidence provided by demons, Hubbard further points out that Christians are obliged by charity to make all reasonable efforts to give people the benefit of the doubt: “...the most shining Professor may be secretly a most abominable sinner, yet till he be detected, our charity is bound to judge according to what appears.”<sup>39</sup> Increase Mather also takes pains to stress that an easy detection of witchcraft is impossible because Satan is far too powerful for his wiles to be easily discovered by the investigations of men: “His [Satan’s] art is beyond what the wisest of men may pretend unto.”<sup>40</sup> Therefore, not only is spectral evidence and the trial of sight and touch not to be relied upon but “*Confessing Witches*....They are not such credible witnesses...[as] the Devil makes his witches to dream strange things of themselves and others which are not so.”<sup>41</sup> Like many other writers of the aftermath, Increase Mather has little faith in the ability of mortal men to outsmart Satan directly.

Having rejected the validity of the testimony of confessed witches, spectral evidence, and the ordeal of sight and touch, and having pointed out the superior powers of Satan compared to man, Mather goes on to describe how witches can in fact be discovered: “[only] *a free and Voluntary Confession of the Crime*....*is a sufficient ground of*

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<sup>36</sup> Increase Mather, *Cases of Conscience* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, Document on microfiche [Evans 658], 1693), 3-4.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

*Conviction.*<sup>42</sup> Increase Mather's criticism of the Salem witch trials is profound: only a direct attack on the authorities and accusers personally could have defamed the trials more. Such a direct attack on the perpetrators of the Salem trials is not forthcoming in *Cases of Conscience*, but that hardly diminishes the work's overall effect. His unqualified -- and at times quite blunt -- criticism of the procedures and standards of evidence that prevailed at the Salem trials leaves little room for any but the most negative of inferences. Yet more direct criticism would be still to come.

By 1697, much atoning for the tragedy of 1692 had already occurred. In 1694, Rev. Samuel Parris had publicly confessed wrongdoing in connection with the 1692 witch trials, although that was not enough to allow him to keep his post as the minister to Salem village. Also by that time, the jury of the 1692 witch trials had publicly confessed wrongdoing,<sup>43</sup> as had one of the Salem trials' judges, Samuel Sewall.<sup>44</sup> Daniel Neal reports in his 1720 *History of New England* that Cotton Mather by 1697 had softened somewhat the position he had taken five years before in *Wonders of the Invisible World*, having come to believe "That things were carried too far [in 1692]" due to several reasons: an abnormally large number of people had been afflicted; even more had been accused; many of the accused had been of high quality (e.g. ministers, etc.); not one of the prisoners had confessed guilt before being executed (as was typical in witch trials before 1692); and when the prosecutions had ceased there were no further afflictions.<sup>45</sup> The trials' biggest apologist had apologized.

The dawn of the new century would be greeted by a work that would bring denunciation of the Salem trials back to the level attained by Thomas Brattle. In 1700, a clothier by the name of Robert Calef published a book entitled *More Wonders of the Invisible World: The Supposed Witchcraft in New England*. Written in large part to

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>43</sup> Daniel Neal, *History of New England* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1720), 165, 170.

<sup>44</sup> Samuel Sewall, *The Diary of Samuel Sewall: 1674-1729* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1973), 366-367.

<sup>45</sup> Neal, 167-168.

denounce Cotton Mather's book of similar title,<sup>46</sup> Calef confidently asserts that the trials of 1692 were nothing short of a complete sham from the very beginning. As Calef saw them, the Salem witch trials resulted from a combination of profit motive, coerced confessions, and behavior on the part of the accusers and authorities that was as silly and irrational as it was irresponsible and mean-spirited. Calef stresses that the whole hysteria started because of Samuel Parris's attempt to pressure his congregation into deeding the parsonage in Salem Village to him personally. It was further spurred by testimony that had been coerced out of his Indian slave Tituba, who often babysat the now-infamous Parris girls.<sup>47</sup> He mentions that the key accusations were put forth by girls who were mere "wenches" and referred to their fits as little more than "juggling tricks."<sup>48</sup> The whole affair, according to Calef, quickly took on a circus atmosphere as "Spectators" gathered to see the "Novelty" of Goody Cory's examination after she was accused of witchcraft.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, he asserts that the course of events did not follow logic: many good Christians were jailed as witches,<sup>50</sup> and in the case of Rebecca Nurse in particular, he asserts that she had so many good qualities to recommend her "that for brevity they are omitted." He further stresses that: none of the executed witches confessed;<sup>51</sup> that the trial of Bridget Bishop proceeded on the testimony of Samuel Gray, who on his death bed revealed that he had made the whole thing up;<sup>52</sup> and that the confession of Margaret Jacobs, in which she firmly asserted that she had faked her confession of witchcraft, was completely ignored and executions based on her testimony proceeded nonetheless.<sup>53</sup> In addition

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<sup>46</sup> Boyer and Nissenbaum, 96.

<sup>47</sup> Robert Calef, "More Wonders of the Invisible World," Boyer and Nissenbaum, 102.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 110-111.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 104-105.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 107-108.



to accusing the accusers in the witch trials of ridiculous and fraudulent allegations, Calef asserts that the proceedings of the 1692 trials were often simply illogical. In citing the case of Boston sea captain John Aldin, Calef quotes: "Aldin asked Mr. Gidney [judge] what reason there could be given why Aldin looking upon him did not strike him down as well [as the accusers]; but no reason was given that I heard."<sup>54</sup> An additional human shortcoming Calef sees at play in the witch trials was greed. He specifically states that the Sheriff of Essex county wasted no time distributing the property of the accused.<sup>55</sup>

In general Calef quotes the grievances of the accused and relates the abuses and misjudgments of the authorities at great length, but gives the personal reasoning of the judges and accusers themselves only cursory treatment. Although this compromises the objectivity of his work, he nevertheless effectively drives home the point that the accused were not given just and rational treatment in 1692. To Calef, not only were standards of evidence poorly applied in the witchcraft trials of 1692, but no witchcraft was committed at all. Rather, the witchcraft trials of 1692 were a deliberate fraud, caused not by Satan but by illogical and unscrupulous individuals overcome by the baser aspects of human nature.

Shortly after *More Wonders*, a work was published that had been authored by the Rev. John Hale of Beverly, a man who had been an observer not only at the Salem witch trials, but at many previous witch trials as well. In 1697, he authored a piece entitled *A Modest Enquiry into the Nature of Witchcraft*, which was published posthumously in 1702.<sup>56</sup> Presumably, even in spite of the numerous public recantations of 1697, some were still afraid even in that year to make public statements regarding the witch trials of 1692.

Hale directly states his overview of the Salem trials, referring to them collectively as a "Sad Catastrophe,"<sup>57</sup> and going even further than Increase Mather in attesting to their tragic nature:

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>56</sup> Weisman, 178.

<sup>57</sup> John Hale, *A Modest Enquiry into the Nature of Witchcraft* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, Microfiche [Evans, 1050], 1697), 10-11.

*“But my Apology for this undertaking is; 1. That there hath been such a dark dispensation by the Lord, letting loose upon us the Devil, Anno 1691 & 1692. As we never experienced before: And thereupon apprehending and condemning persons for witchcraft; and neatly acquitting others no less liable to such a charge; which evidently shew we were in the dark, and knew not what to do; but have gone too far on the one side or other side, if not on both.”*<sup>58</sup>

The theory of spectral evidence, which had been used so many times to send people to the gallows, is dismissed by Hale as an “unsafe principle”;<sup>59</sup> and as for witch marks, he claims it to be virtually impossible to distinguish witch marks from natural growths on the body, stating that “its far more safe to wholly lay aside the practice of searching after suspected persons teats or witch marks [than] to lay stress upon a fallible sign.”<sup>60</sup>

For other arguments, he cites respected authorities in addition to relying on his own reasoning. Like many New England Puritan divines, Rev. Hale cites the works of Perkins and Bernard, two renowned English Puritan authors who were considered by religious leaders in 1692 to be authorities on witchcraft and demons. He also supports his denunciation of the Salem trials by referring to the ultimate authority on theological matters, the Bible itself. For example, he cites the instance in which a demon summoned by the Witch of Endor had appeared to Saul in the form of the prophet Samuel as well as what the Bible says concerning the fabulous powers of the magicians of Egypt,<sup>61</sup> as proof that innocents could be framed if one relies solely on spectral evidence. To illustrate beyond a shadow of a doubt that false accusations of witchcraft do in fact occur, Hale points out that no less a figure than Jesus himself suffered

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 73-74.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

under false accusations of having practiced magic.<sup>62</sup> Hale makes it clear that he is not the only one to have issues with the sort of things that went on in Salem.

Like Increase Mather, Hale lays heavy emphasis on casting the Salem witch trials as a lesson of history that all can reflect on so that similar tragedies may be avoided in the future. Although Hale has not quite returned to the level of criticism attained by Thomas Brattle and Samuel Willard, he does not attack the character or the mental capacity of accusers or victims, and excuses the judges on the grounds that they did not have a grasp of what they were doing. Hale nevertheless admits that the trials were an unqualified disaster: "I have a deep sense of the sad consequence of mistakes in matters capital....And what grief of heart it brings to have been unwittingly encouraging of the suffering of the innocent. And I hope a zeal to prevent for future sufferings is pardonable."<sup>63</sup> In directly and unambiguously acknowledging the fact that the Salem witchcraft hysteria was a tragedy, and in apologizing for its consequences in a direct and straightforward manner, Rev. John Hale of Beverly went farther towards denouncing the Salem witch hysteria of 1692 than any other authority figure directly involved.

As the eighteenth century wore on, more of those who had contributed to the hysteria sought relief for their consciences. In 1706, Ann Putnam, one of the very girls from Salem Village who had instigated the Salem witch hysteria, made a public confession of guilt and apology to the victims and their families. Putnam's confession was brief, and a short quotation suffices to capture its message:

I desire to be humbled before God....It was a great delusion of Satan that deceived me in that sad time....I did it not out of any anger malice or ill-will....I desire to lie in the dust and earnestly beg forgiveness of all those unto whom I have given just cause of sorrow and offense, whose relations were taken away and accused.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>64</sup> Winfield Nevins, *Witchcraft in Salem Village in 1692* (Salem, MA: Salem Observer Press, 1892), 250.

In 1711, the General Court of Massachusetts voted to financially compensate the victims of the Salem witch hysteria.<sup>65</sup> Although the fact that compensation was given is in itself a tacit acknowledgement of wrongdoing, the text of the document ordering compensation is quite dry -- it says little more than that the individuals named were to be awarded the stated sums of money -- and lacks completely the tone of tragedy and remorse found in the apologies issued by figures such as Ann Putnam and Samuel Sewall.

In 1720, a man by the name of Daniel Neal published a book entitled *History of New England*. Neal not only condemns the trials for their sad consequences, but unlike the 'too-bad-we-didn't know-better' tone of John Hale and Ann Putnam, he makes it clear that they never should have started to begin with. The passage Neal writes to introduce the section of the book about the Salem witch trials sets the tone for the entire work:

[In 1692] the Inhabitants were hanging one another for suspected Witchcrafts and Sorceries. Strange were the mistakes of the wisest and best Men on this Occasion, which must have been fatal to the whole Province, if God by his Providence had not mercifully interposed...<sup>66</sup>

Furthermore, contrary to the emotionally charged arguments of Calef and Brattle, the somewhat apologetic arguments of Hale and the Mathers, or the lengthy point-by-point rebuke published by Samuel Willard, Neal simply demonstrates that the trials' preventability was self-evident even at the time:

Had the Opinion of the Ministers been strictly follow'd [he refers here to a meeting of prominent ministers at the trials' height] all the above-mentioned Calamities had been prevented....But things went on in the old Channel...<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Boyer and Nissenbaum, 122.

<sup>66</sup> Neal, 124.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

When Samuel Sewall first read Neal's *History of New England*, he recorded in his diary: "Dr. Mather sends me Mr. Daniel Neals's History of New England....The Good and Gracious God to be pleased to save New England and me and my family!"<sup>68</sup> Neal's book, as well as Samuel Sewall's reaction to it, indicates that by 1720 ambivalence concerning the Salem witch trials had all but disappeared. By that time, all viewed them as an utter tragedy that could have been easily avoided had people merely followed common sense.

It is almost definitely the total renunciation of the Salem witchcraft trials indicated by Neal's book which accounts for the societal trend subsequent to the Salem witch trials to find other explanations for phenomena that in 1692 would have been attributed to witchcraft. Almost immediately following the conclusion of the Salem witchcraft hysteria, Cotton Mather ministered to two girls, Mercy Short and Margaret Rule, in 1692 and 1693 respectively. The two girls complained of afflictions similar to those the girls from Salem Village claimed to have suffered only slightly before, but unlike the Salem case their tribulations did not result in witch investigations. Rather than blaming their troubles on the black magic cast by local people in league with the Devil, Cotton Mather instead showed them how to pray away the demons that tormented them. Dr. Mather's idea worked, for the girls were completely cured and they went on to live normal and productive lives. In the fall of 1694, two years after the end of the Salem trials, the inhabitants of Boston encountered another wave of supernatural beings, but this time they were visited not by demons and magicians but by angels.<sup>69</sup> In 1720, a young woman confessed that she and her sisters had falsely accused a woman of witchcraft in the small Massachusetts town of Littleton. Although these accusations caused consternation within the community, no legal action was taken. Years later, the young woman felt guilty enough to confess of her own accord to the minister Rev. Turrel in her then home town of Medford.<sup>70</sup> A few decades after the

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<sup>68</sup> Sewall, 947.

<sup>69</sup> Kenneth Silverman, *The Life and Times of Cotton Mather* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 124, 126-127, 135.

<sup>70</sup> Turrel, "Detection of Witchcraft," c. 1720, MHS Collections, Boston, vol. x. of second series, 1823, 6-22.

Littleton case, girls in Hadley, Massachusetts, also experienced symptoms similar to the girls in Salem Village. When Puritan minister Jonathan Edwards witnessed this, instead of interpreting it as an attack of the Devil's army, he saw it as a sign of providence from God, and what resulted were not the Hadley witch trials, but the first Great Awakening.<sup>71</sup> Not long after the 1692 trials, and increasing in intensity as the eighteenth century wore on, one sees that not only were societal leaders no longer responsive to witchcraft accusations, but they began to find different interpretations for strange acts of individual members of society that previously would have been seen as signs of the Devil. Witchcraft was no longer "en vogue" in New England.

Perhaps the last major author of what can strictly speaking be considered colonial America is historian and Massachusetts royal governor Thomas Hutchinson. In his work *History of Massachusetts Bay*, he included but one paragraph about the 1692 witch trials. He did, however, author a work which he originally intended to be published as part of his *History*, but edited it.<sup>72</sup> Entitled *The Witchcraft Delusion of 1692*, this work was not published until 1870, but it gives us a chance to see how the Salem witch trials were viewed by the most important historian colonial America produced.

The title itself suffices to express Hutchinson's opinion of the Salem witch trials. To state it bluntly, he felt they were an out and out fraud. Like many people even in 1692, he drew parallels between the Salem witch trials and the case of the Goodwin children in 1688, a case similar to Salem in that it started when children of the Goodwin family mysteriously went into fits, and ended with the hanging of their Irish housemaid Goody Glover on the charge of witchcraft. In passages reminiscent of Thomas Brattle, Hutchinson declares that people should have seen through the Goodwin case (and by association the Salem case) from day one, stating for example how "One thing was remarkable, and ought to have been taken more notice of, that all their [Goodwin children's] complaints were in the day time, and that they slept

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<sup>71</sup> Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 27-30.

<sup>72</sup> Thomas Hutchinson, *The Witchcraft Delusion of 1692* (Boston: Private printing of previously unpublished manuscript, 1870), 3.

comfortably all night.”<sup>73</sup> Another of Hutchinson’s complaints about the Goodwin case is a more exact parallel to Salem: he was not at all amazed at the fits acted out by the Goodwin children, going so far as to say: “There is nothing in all this but what may be accounted for from craft and fraud, which children of that age are very capable of or from agility of body, in which these children are exceeded by common tumblers much younger.”<sup>74</sup> He also points out another obvious tool of fraud that both the Goodwin children and the afflicted of Salem shared:

The works of Perkins and other non-conformist divines were in the hands of many, and there is no doubt that Goodwin’s children had read or heard them in Glanvil, having very exactly imitated them. Indeed all the examinations at Salem have, in almost all the circumstances, the like to match them in the account given to the world a little while before by this relator. This conformity, instead of rendering the afflicted suspected, was urged in confirmation of the truth of their stories, the Old-En-land demons and the New-being so near alike.<sup>75</sup>

Hutchinson questions the very legality of the court appointed to conduct the Salem witch trials, the court of Oyer and Terminer: “I was at a loss...by what law they proceeded....The authority by which the court sat may well be called into question.” Hutchinson also laments that after the trials were over, and the hysteria revealed for what it was, that “the afflicted were never brought to trial for their imposture.”<sup>76</sup> And of course Hutchinson comments at length on the irregularities of the 1692 trials that had been part of the discourse since Thomas Brattle: spectral evidence, the ordeal or sight and touch, witches’ teats, et cetera. In his

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<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 34, 43.

opinion “there was no thing preternatural in the whole affair; but all proceeded from the most amazing wickedness of the accusers.”<sup>77</sup>

As to what became of the accusers, Hutchinson merely comments that “Many are said to have proved profligate, abandoned people, and others to have passed the remainder of their lives in a state of obscurity and contempt,”<sup>78</sup> an outcome that confirmed his opinion of their character and therefore that of the trials. Although Thomas Hutchinson himself thought the trials to be nothing more than a simple yet enormously successful fraud, his comments as to what the general populace of his own day thought are quite revealing:

Even to this day, the country seems rather to be divided in opinion whether it was the accused or the afflicted who were under some preternatural or diabolical possession, than whether the afflicted were under bodily distempers. or altogether guilty of fraud or imposture.<sup>79</sup>

This would indicate that William Phips’s 1693 claim to the Earl of Nottingham that “differing opinions concerning this matter are now well composed,”<sup>80</sup> was wishful thinking, or perhaps an exaggeration, if not an out and out fabrication. At the very end of the colonial period, we see a return to the objective skepticism of Willard to match the return to Brattle’s subjective style of criticism attained earlier by Calef. The aftermath had come full circle.

What is most amazing about the colonial reactions to the Salem witchcraft trials is that despite differences in opinion in some regards, everyone was in total agreement on two key issues. One was that the Salem witch trials were at least to some degree a tragedy. Whether they blamed the tragedy on Satan, or malicious intent and negligence on the part of the authorities and accusers, or on misapplied legal and theological concepts whose implications were not clear at the time but

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>80</sup> Phips, 202.



became clear upon reflection, not one major figure defended the trials as a whole. Even in *Wonders of the Invisible World*, the work of the aftermath most sympathetic to the 1692 trials, Cotton Mather asserts that spectral evidence and the ordeal of sight and touch are not sufficient grounds for conviction on the charge of witchcraft<sup>81</sup> -- an admission that despite the seriousness of the capital charges being tried, the trials were not conducted as meticulously as they could or should have been. Everyone from Cotton Mather to Robert Calef, Samuel Willard to John Hale, Increase Mather to Daniel Neal to Thomas Hutchinson agreed that spectral evidence and the ordeal of sight and touch were not sufficiently reliable to be used as evidence for conviction. Whatever their differences in sympathies towards one side or the other, all agreed that the witch trials of 1692 had been a blunder. New England had learned its lesson.

Although the 1692 Salem witchcraft hysteria put to rest forever issues such as spectral evidence, there is one important issue it did not put to rest: witchcraft itself. In spite of the magnitude of death and human suffering, and despite the unanimity with which all the major authors writing in the aftermath of the Salem trials agreed that the trials had, to say the least, placed heavy reliance on questionable theories and practices, not one author -- not even harsh cynics such as Robert Calef and Thomas Brattle -- saw the 1692 tragedy as an indication that witchcraft was itself an erroneous concept. Samuel Willard, as critical as he was of many of the procedures and concepts pivotal to the 1692 trials, went so far as to begin his *Dialog Between S&B* by saying:

S. 'Do you Believe that there are any Witches?

B. 'Yes no doubt; the Scripture is clear for it: and it is an injurious reflection that some of yours have cast upon us, if we called that truth in question.'<sup>82</sup>

John Hale laments that some had gone to "an extream on the other hand, and of dangerous consequence, viz. To deny any such persons...who by the Devil's aid discover Secrets, or do work wonders."<sup>83</sup> Even Thomas

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<sup>81</sup> Cotton Mather, 25-26.

<sup>82</sup> Willard, 2.

<sup>83</sup> Hale, 11-12.

Hutchinson in his preface to Rev. Turrel's account of the witchcraft in Littleton in 1720, states: "[I] firmly believe the existence of spirits, and invisible world, and particularly the agency of Satan, and his instruments, in afflicting and tormenting the children of men, (when permitted by God;)." <sup>84</sup> Robert Calef, one of the two most out-spoken critics in the aftermath of the 1692 trials did not see fit to argue for the legitimacy of witchcraft itself in his denunciations of the Salem Village hysteria. In fact many of Calef's key arguments for the calamitous nature of the 1692 trials would simply not make sense unless witchcraft were considered real. What use, for example, would it have been for him to decry the fact that none of the confessed witches were executed or that none of the executed witches repented before going to the gallows if witchcraft were in fact but the material of fancy and legend? Perhaps Thomas Brattle comes as close to any colonial author came to denying the existence of witchcraft when he says:

the Devill's book (which they say has been offered them) is a mere fancye of theirs, and no reality. That the witches' meeting, the Devill's Baptism, and mock sacraments, which they oft speak of, are nothing else but the effect of their fancye, depraved and deluded by the Devill, and not to be a Reality to be regarded or minded by any wise man. <sup>85</sup>

But as much as this statement would seem to indicate a belief that witchcraft was a mistaken notion, even within the statement he refers to the accusers as "deluded by the Devill." Elsewhere in the letter he speaks of the accusations themselves as "all a perfect Devillism."<sup>86</sup> In reference to the sight and touch ordeal, he declares "I am fully persuaded that it is sorcery,"<sup>87</sup> and regarding the confessors, he states "...my faith is strong concerning them that they are deluded, imposed upon, and under

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<sup>84</sup> Turrel, 6.

<sup>85</sup> Brattle, 189-190.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

the influence of some evil spirit.”<sup>88</sup> What might appear at first to be a denial of the theoretical possibility of witchcraft itself, turns out to be merely a debunking of key aspects of the particular witchcraft accounts prevalent in 1692, and brings to mind Thomas Hutchinson’s comment of how people of his day were debating which side in the 1692 trials -- accusers and authorities, or accused -- were actually under the influence of Satan<sup>89</sup> rather than that Brattle had any serious doubts as to the theoretical possibility of witchcraft. Although we can glean from the works of Willard and Hale that at least some people questioned the existence of witchcraft in the aftermath of 1692, it appears that they were a small minority or at the very least not seen as authorities, and had little influence on the mainstream debate other than to be mentioned in passing in the works of other authors.

The Salem witchcraft trials of 1692 stand out in the American historical conscience as one of the nation’s greatest disasters. It is not surprising that the tragic aspect of the 1692 trials should be understood as such, at least by some, at the time. But what is surprising is that despite the enormous variations in degree of sentiment regarding other aspects of the trials, opinion on such a key issue should be unanimous. And what is even more surprising is the unanimity of opinion on another issue that would seem to be in opposition to the first: namely, that everyone, even the loudest critics of the Salem witch trials, should still retain their belief in the reality of witchcraft itself. The end result of the Salem witch trials was death and suffering the scale of which was unprecedented in Massachusetts except as the result of war. Even the trials’ most ardent defenders were little more than mild detractors, and several of the broadsides launched at the judges and accusers were downright vicious. Yet despite the scale of the human tragedy, and the intense passions exhibited by some of the trials’ detractors, not one of the authors of the aftermath seriously speculated that all this had happened despite the fact that witchcraft simply does not exist. Salem did cause colonial people to rethink their notions of how witches can be discovered and brought to justice, and caused them to lose their taste for witch trials in general -- so much so that the Salem trials were to prove the last time in New England that anyone would be legally tried for the crime of witchcraft,<sup>90</sup> and the

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<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>89</sup> Hutchinson, 18.

<sup>90</sup> Weisman, 192-203, 209-216.

last time anyone would be executed for that crime in the history of England's North American colonies.<sup>91</sup> Nevertheless, in spite of the overall magnitude of the disaster initiated at Salem village in 1692, colonial society was not yet ready to let go of the notion of witchcraft. While it is true that colonial New England would come to repent the errors of 1692, and come henceforth to look to God rather than the Devil to explain mysterious behavior exhibited by its inhabitants, it would be left for later generations to disregard the veracity of magic and sorcery, and place witchcraft decisively within the realm of fantasy and superstition.

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<sup>91</sup> Burr, v-x.