The Witchcraft Scare

John C. Miller

One of the striking phenomena of recent years has been widespread interest in witchcraft, the occult, and occurrences beyond normal, sensory perception. Hollywood producers have beaten paths to the bank with the box office receipts from dozens of films on vampires, ghosts, and satanic possession. Thousands of readers have believed quite as firmly in the reality of supernatural forces haunting the house in Amityville as in the astrological forces in their own lives. One major university has a center for the study of extrasensory perception, and many others offer courses on magic, the devil, and the mystery of evil. If, after all, one believes in God and the forces of good, is it illogical to believe in Satan and the forces of evil?

One might, however, ask why the belief or at least the interest in magic and witchcraft seems to be especially strong in certain periods and to be the subject of skepticism or ridicule at other times. Some scholars have suggested that a society is more likely to turn to supernatural explanations in an especially troubled time and to charge unpopular or deviant members of the society with witchcraft when it needs scapegoats. For many years, this was the fundamental historical explanation of the Salem witchcraft episode that staggered Massachusetts in 1692. In recent years, historians have reexamined Salem witchcraft and have developed a number of other explanations. One writer has suggested that witchcraft was actually practiced in Salem, and that the victims who felt tormented by witches were suffering from hysteria, rather than deliberately misleading the community by false accusations. Another writer has suggested that a peculiar fungus in the rye grain, which some of the citizens in one part of the town used in baking, caused them to experience hallucinations similar to an LSD trip. Others have argued that the witchcraft affair was a religious and socioeconomic conflict between two different parts of the town.

The Salem episode has fascinated novelists and dramatists from Nathaniel Hawthorne to Arthur Miller. Like historians, they have seen very different things in the outbreak of witchcraft. Miller, writing his play The Crucible in the 1950s when Senator Joseph McCarthy was conducting a Communist witch hunt, saw parallels between the events of his own day and those of 1692. In the conclusion of a French film about the affair, a crowd storms the gallows area in a scene reminiscent of events at the Bastille in 1789. Other writers have viewed Salem witchcraft as little more than the logical outcome of a narrow-minded religious outlook, whether in Catholic
Europe where thousands perished or in Puritan Massachusetts where twenty men and women died.

The following selection by John C. Miller represents an eclectic, and perhaps a somewhat old-fashioned, point of view in the sea of new interpretations. Miller suggests that socioeconomic conflict, the troubles the colony had recently experienced, and a lack of enlightenment all contributed to the hysteria. He is a bit harsher on the Mathers than some recent writers, but on the whole his essay gives a concise and balanced summary of the whole episode. His comments on witchcraft in Europe suggest that some restraint is in order before we label seventeenth-century Salem as an especially dark and bloody chapter of our past.

During the period 1670-1690, among the evidences of backsliding noted by the New England clergy was a growing disposition on the part of the people to take witchcraft lightly. The Reverend Increase Mather observed with alarm that even some church members were beginning to say that people possessed by demons mentioned in the Bible were simply epileptics or lunatics. Taking what he regarded as an extraordinarily tolerant attitude toward these skeptics, Mather said that he would not "suspect all those as guilty of witchcraft, nor yet of heresie, who call the received opinion about witches into question." But neither did he admit that they had a right to advance such heretical opinions.

To alert these skeptical citizens to their danger, Mather included in his Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences (1684) a long discourse upon witchcraft. The elder Mather prided himself upon taking a dispassionate, scientific view of witchcraft and of other natural phenomena. He admitted, for example, that many accounts of possession by demons were mere fables, and he denied that it was possible for spirits to generate bodies or beget children or that witches could transform themselves or others into another species of creature such a horse, wolf, cat and mouse. "It is beyond the power of all the devils in hell to cause such a transformation," he asserted. "They can no more do it than they can be the authors of a true miracle." Moreover, he disapproved of many of the "superstitious and magical ways" of detecting witches-"whereby," he said, "much innocent blood hath been shed." Only by exhaustive cross-examination and scientific appraisal of the evidence, said Mather, could the guilt of witches be proved beyond all doubt.

The "Invisible World" was also very real to Cotton Mather-more real, it sometimes seemed, than the little world of churchgoers over which he presided. He invested commonplace events with supernatural, portentous meaning. For example, when he suffered from toothaches "he considered whether or not he had sinned with his teeth. How? By sinful and excessive eating; and by evil speeches." Thus even a simple case of caries was endowed with theological significance.
In sounding the alarm against witchcraft, Cotton Mather acted under what he supposed was a special mandate from Heaven. In 1686, God appeared to him in a vision and told him that his mission was to fight witchcraft. Accordingly, after protracted fasting and prayer, Mather took up his pen - specially consecrated, he believed, by the Almighty to expose "the whole Plot of the Devil against New England in every branch of it" - to write against witches. The result of his revelation was the publication in 1689 of *Memorable Providences Relating to Witchcraft and Other Possessions*.

Both Increase and Cotton Mather were impressed by the inability of science to explain the phenomena they studied. To them, science left the ultimate mysteries untouched. Lacking a scientific explanation for many baffling events in human affairs, they were driven to the conviction that demons were constantly at work among men and that the Devil, for God's own purposes, had been permitted to act through the medium of witches - always, however, within definite restrictions laid down by the Almighty.

The Mathers tried to buttress the case for witchcraft with pseudoscientific "evidence" derived from their observation of people under seizure. What they recorded were cases of abnormal psychology, but they presented them as irrefutable "proof" of the existence of demons. By their books and sermons they succeeded in inculcating the idea that witchcraft was increasing by leaps and bounds in New England and that God's own plantation might fall before the wiles of stratagems of Satan. "Tis our Worldliness, our Formality, our Sensuality, and our Iniquity," said Cotton Mather that had provided Satan with an entering wedge into God's own plantation.

In the jeremiads, the clergy portrayed the crusade against sin and worldliness within their favorite frame of reference - the struggle between God and the Devil. All history, as they saw it, consisted of variations on this cosmic theme. Although the last thing the clergy wanted to see was a plague of witches descend upon New England - by their reckoning no greater disaster could befall a country - yet by their books and sermons they inadvertently prepared the way for Salem witchcraft. People who fear witches and who talk about them constantly are likely to be assailed by them sooner or later.

Salem witchcraft was merely an episode - hardly more than a footnote - in the history of an ancient superstition, for evidences of belief in the malefic power of certain individuals has been found in the most primitive societies. But it was not until the late Middle Ages, when witchcraft was identified with heresy and therefore came within the purview of the Holy Inquisition that a witchcraft mania really began. The Reformation intensified the zeal of the witch-hunters. While Roman Catholics and Protestants disagreed upon many points, they agreed in holding witches in abhorrence and in putting an end to their existence as summarily as possible. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries - the age of the Renaissance and the New Science - over 100,000 people charged with having leagued themselves with the Devil were put to death.
Witchcraft was believed to originate in a bargain between a man or woman and the Devil by which he or she agreed to sell his or her soul to Satan. This transaction, of course, was a great victory for Satan: he had turned against God one of God's own creatures and ensured the damnation of a human being. It was supposed that the Devil insisted that his victims sign a book agreeing to renounce the Christian religion, pay homage to the Prince of Darkness, and join in celebrating the Black Mass. Not until it was all down in writing did Satan feel that the bargain was truly consummated. Everything was neat, orderly and legal, the Devil having served his apprenticeship in Heaven where making contractual obligations - or so the Puritans believed - was the approved Procedure. After the signatories signed the "contract," they were permitted to have carnal intercourse with devils, join in the witches' sabbat, revel with the Devil himself, and enjoy the power to subvert God's order on earth. Women who put their signatures to this horrid affidavit became witches; men who joined the Devil's legion were known as wizards.

Witchcraft was therefore treated as a legal crime - an offense against God - which merited the death penalty. Every country in Christendom enacted laws against witchcraft and hauled suspects into civil or ecclesiastical courts to stand trial. The act need not be malefic or destructive: if it were proved to have been performed through "conference with the Devil," it became a capital offense.

Witches were held responsible for storms, droughts, the death of cattle, sexual impotence, epidemics - and all the evils, in short, that the Devil chose to inflict upon mankind. But, clearly, malice, spite, and unreasoning fear played an important part in determining who were the Devil's agents. Unpopular eccentrics and "far-out" people were always candidates for suspicion. Old women were particularly vulnerable: being accused of practicing witchcraft was one of the hazards of being old, ugly, and unwanted.

The Devil was no respecter of persons. James I, who regarded himself as God's own anointed, also believed that he was the victim of a witches' conspiracy. He was firmly persuaded that they had almost succeeded in drowning him by brewing up a storm while he was at sea. As was his custom when he was particularly exercised by anything from tobacco to theology, James wrote a book against it. *Demonologie*, a dialogue upon witchcraft, appeared in 1597.

As a rule, outbreaks of witch-hunting occurred especially in countries distinguished by clerical power, popular ignorance, the breakdown of government, and the use of torture. Germany, where all these conditions existed, was the site of the most sanguinary efforts to suppress witchcraft. At the height of the mania, no one was safe from the suspicion of being in league with the Devil. The estates of wealthy people made them particularly vulnerable, and a lenient judge was liable to incur the charge of being an accomplice of the accused. Even the expression of disbelief in witchcraft was apt to be construed as circumstantial evidence of guilt. As James I said in *Demonologie*, the author of a book casting doubt on the existence of witches betrayed himself to be "one of that profession."
In whipping the people into a frenzy of fear of witches, intellectuals played a vital role. The belief in witches and the determination to stamp them out was in part a by-product of the scholarship of the age: the more learned and religious the individual, the more zealous and remorseless was his attitude toward witches likely to be. In the great witch-hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the prime instigators were men of learning who instilled their fear of the prevalence of witchcraft into the minds of the common people.

Vast ingenuity was expended by scholars upon the problem of determining how a witch could be detected. While such signs as moles or warts, an insensitive spot which did not bleed when pricked, a capacity to float in water, and an inability to recite the Lord's Prayer constituted only circumstantial evidence, they gave witch-hunters a clear lead in tracking down the Devil's agents.

On the European continent, torture was used to extract confessions from those accused of witchcraft. The rack, red-hot pincers, thumbscrews, scourges, leg-crushing machines - the familiar appurtenances of torture - together with a novel instrument, the witches' chair (a seat under which a fire was kindled), were the ultimate resorts of judges and inquisitors confronted with people who obstinately protested their innocence. By express orders of the Pope, issued in 1468, there were no limits upon the amount or degree of torture that could be applied. But the inquisitors were not content with a confession procured under torture: the accused had to be tortured until he or she confessed voluntarily.

In England, although those accused of witchcraft were not tortured, they were subjected to intensive interrogation, sometimes lasting for weeks or even months without benefit of habeas corpus. Those convicted in England were hung rather than burned at the stake - a distinction which, however finely drawn, was important to those who suffered the penalty. Moreover, James I and other authorities on witchcraft enjoined judges and juries strictly to observe the rules of evidence. Even so, about 30,000 people were convicted of witchcraft in the British Isles.

During the centuries when witchcraft was in flower, the professional witch-hunter and informer flourished in Europe. Judges welcomed the services of these itinerants who ferreted witches out of their deepest lairs. One of the most successful witch-hunters on record was Matthew Hopkins, who, during the 1640s, was personally responsible for the death of over 200 English witches. But Hopkins enjoyed an unfair advantage over his rival witch-hunters: he was said to have secured the Devil's own list of witches commissioned to operate in England.

As a result of the bloodletting of the period 1600-1660, when the mania reached its height, a reaction against witch-hunting set in. On the Continent, torture had been carried to such lengths that the confessions which had brought thousands of men and women to their deaths seemed worthless. During this period, thousands of people saw one or more of their relatives suffer death under one of the most terrible charges that could be made against a human being – selling his or her soul to the Devil and contracting to aid the Devil against God.
Being the most militant of English Protestants in the struggle against the Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation, the Puritans were peculiarly prone to believe in witchcraft and the ubiquitous power of Satan. Literal believers in the Bible, they took the injunction "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" to mean that they were under a religious duty to exterminate witches. As Calvin said, "The Bible teaches that there are witches and that they must be slain. . . God expressly commands that all witches and enchantresses shall be put to death; and this law of God is a universal law." In Geneva, Calvin suited the action to the word. Before he came to that city, little had been heard of witchcraft, but in the 60 years that followed, over 150 witches were burned. It is not therefore merely coincidental that the most destructive witch craze in English history occurred during the period of Puritan ascendancy.

By the last quarter of the seventeenth century, the maniacal phase of witchcraft was clearly on the wane. Fewer and fewer of the "Accursed tribe" were sent to the stake or the gallows. As Montaigne said, "After all, it is rating one's conjectures at a very high price to roast a man alive on the strength of them." In the late seventeenth century, Holland abolished witchcraft trials altogether. In Geneva, the final witch burning occurred in 1652, and the last mass holocaust took place in Germany in 1679 when the Archbishop of Salzburg consigned 97 witches to the flames. In 1672, Louis XIV of France ordered that all prisoners recently condemned to death for witchcraft by the Parlement of Rouen should have their sentences commuted to banishment.

But the belief in witchcraft could not yet be dismissed as a mere peasant superstition. What had really changed was not the belief in witchcraft but confidence in the effectiveness of the methods used to detect it. While few doubted that many of those who perished at the stake were genuine witches who richly deserved their fate, it began to dawn upon the sober-minded, particularly after the mania had spent itself, that many had fallen victim to biased evidence, rumor, hearsay, envy, and malice.

What is truly remarkable about Salem witchcraft is that it occurred so late in the history of an ancient superstition. Far from playing a leading part in the mania, the Puritans did not enter upon the stage until the final act. That, in part, is why they became so conspicuous: most of the other actors, having already played out their terrible parts, had left the scene.

In Puritan New England, the outbreak of witchcraft occurred in a social context characterized by instability, clerical power, tension, and fear. The decade 1680-1690 had seen the loss of the Massachusetts charter, the establishment of the despotic Dominion of New England, the revolution of 1688-1689, and an abortive expedition against Quebec. The "great fear" abroad in the land was the fear of crypto-Roman Catholics in high places who were believed to be plotting the overthrow of the Protestant religion. It is significant that the witch-hunt was preceded by a hunt for Roman Catholics. To a marked degree, Salem witchcraft was a continuation of the anti-Roman Catholic agitation. Puritans would have been hard pressed to tell which of the two - Roman Catholics or witches – was more malefic. In any event, at the very
time that the threat of Roman Catholicism was approaching its climax, the country was infested with swarms of witches.

In Salem Village - now Danvers, Massachusetts - the anxiety and apprehension felt by all the people of the colony were aggravated by dissension between the pastor and his congregation (just before the outbreak of witchcraft, two ministers had successively taken their parishioners to court to collect their salaries, and both had won judgments); by educational backwardness; by petty squabbles among the villagers over land, animals, and crops; and by the presence of Tituba, a slave woman of mixed black and Indian ancestry whose mind was filled with the primitive lore of her people. Tituba was a slave in the household of the Reverend Samuel Parris, who had come to Salem Village in 1689 and who, like his predecessors, had quarreled with his parishioners over his salary. The Reverend Mr. Parris's family consisted of his wife, his daughter, and his niece. Tituba regaled these highly impressionable adolescents with tales of the occult: Salem witchcraft was the product of the conjunction of the pagan superstition of Africa with the Christian superstition of Western Europe.

The Reverend Mr. Parris was a firm believer in witchcraft, and his young daughter and niece had probably learned at his knee all about black magic and the Invisible World. It certainly seemed very real to them; at the age of twelve they were experts on demonology. Growing up in the narrow world of a country parsonage in an intellectual atmosphere that came straight from the Middle Ages, with overtones of voodooism, and living in a backward, tension-ridden, credulous, quarrelsome community, these girls were in a strategic position to start a witch-hunt. Not surprisingly, they were seized with fits and convulsions, pinched and choked by unseen hands, pricked with invisible pins and needles, and visited by specters who tried to entice them into selling their souls to the Devil.

In 1691, few people doubted that the long-heralded assault on New England by the Invisible World had begun. . . . The most dismal predictions of the jeremiads seemed mild in comparison with the horrible reality. Cotton Mather declared that "prodigious Witch-Meetings" were being held all over the country at which "a fearful knot of proud, ignorant, envious and malicious creatures" volunteered for the Devil's service. But Mather was not surprised by this untoward event: "Where," he asked rhetorically, "will the Devil show most Malice, but where he is hated, and hateth most?" Mather rejoiced at the prospect of a decisive encounter with his old enemy who, he was persuaded, had sent the witches "as a particular Defiance unto my poor Endeavours to bring the Souls of men unto Heaven." . . . But at least the enemy was identifiable. From reports he had heard, Mather pieced together a picture of the Devil: "a short and a Black Man . . . no taller than an ordinary Walking-Staff," wearing "a High-Crowned Hat, with strait Hair, and had one Cloven-Foot."

In May 1692, at the advice of the clergy, Governor Phips appointed a special court of oyer and terminer in which those accused of witchcraft could be tried. This court was composed of merchants, public officials, and doctors. Most of the members were college graduates. There was not a lawyer among them, but this circumstance was not accounted
important: college graduates were deemed sufficiently learned in the law to qualify as judges, and in any event, the problem of ridding the country of witches was thought to transcend the skill and erudition of any mere lawyer. Only the most pious, God-fearing men could cope with this assault.

In Salem witch trials, despite the strong sense of urgency and crisis, no precipitate action was taken. There was a three-month delay between the first accusations and the first trial. During this interval, the bodies of the accused were carefully examined for such telltale evidence of guilt as insensitive spots, supernumerary teats, warts, or moles. The physical checkup over, the accused were asked to recite the Lord's Prayer. If they stammered, stuttered, or missed a word, it was all up with them, for it was a well-known fact that the Devil could not get through the Lord's Prayer without stumbling. Inability to shed tears was likewise accounted as an incriminating sign, since the Devil was incapable of feeling remorse for any of his misdeeds. Those who failed to clear themselves of suspicion were indicted and bound over for trial. Without legal counsel, they conducted their own defense - no easy task in view of the fact that the judges and jurors, who were all church members, were strongly inclined to regard them as guilty until proved innocent.

Among the accused was a backwoods preacher, the Reverend George Burroughs. Burroughs was alleged to be the "black man" who sounded the trumpet that summoned the witches to their rendezvous, and he was also accused of having successively murdered his two wives by incantation. The first witness against Burroughs was his own granddaughter! During his examination and trial, spectators cried out that he was biting them - and, wonderful to relate, marks made by his teeth were found on their arms even though he had not stirred from the dock. Evidence was presented that Burroughs had performed feats of running and weightlifting clearly beyond the powers of mortal man unless aided by the Devil.

For Cotton Mather, the clinching evidence against Burroughs was supplied by five witches from Andover who testified that he was their ringleader and that in that capacity he had presided over their infernal get-togethers. Thenceforth, Mather took a personal interest in seeing Burroughs brought to the gallows, unusual as it was for one clergyman to display such zeal for putting a halter around the neck of another wearer of the cloth.

Burroughs was duly convicted and sentenced to death. But as he was being prepared for the noose, he made a moving plea of innocence and recited the Lord's Prayer without making a single mistake, and the spectators were almost persuaded that Burroughs was not a wizard after all. At this point, Cotton Mather, mounted on a horse, proved that he was as effective an orator in the saddle as in the pulpit. He turned the crowd against Burroughs by pointing out that the condemned man was not really an ordained minister and that all the persons hitherto executed had died by a righteous sentence. Burroughs was strung up, and Cotton Mather rode home satisfied with having done a good day's work for the Lord.
A convicted witch could save herself by confessing; indeed, the object of the prosecution was not to kill witches but to extract confessions from them. Some of the accused took this easy way out, implicating others in their accounts of their dealings with the Devil. These confessions brought an ever-widening circle of people under suspicion. As in England, torture was not used to procure confessions, but wizard or witch could go to the gallows protesting his or her innocence or stubbornly refusing to speak.

Confession, while it usually saved a person's life, led to forfeiture of property. Giles Cory, who would have been found guilty in an ordinary court of law of nothing more serious than eccentricity, refused to answer his accusers when charged with entering into a compact with the Devil - in the hope thereby of preserving his estate for his heirs. By English law (not repealed until 1772), *peine forte et dare* - pressing by weights until a confession, or death, was forthcoming - was prescribed for those who stood mute. The weights were placed upon Cory, and after several days of torture, he died without opening his lips. At that incredible cost, he made it possible for his heirs to inherit his property.

Salem witchcraft was not merely the result of a welling up of ignorance, superstition, and fear from the depths of society. The clergy, the magistrates (including Governor Phips himself), and educated people in general shared the conviction of the most ignorant and deluded people that they were witnessing an outbreak of "horrible Enchantments and Possessions" instigated by Satan.

As long as the accusations were made against friendless old women and people of low degree, the clergy hallooed on the witch-hunters and sanctified the good work by quoting the injunction of the Book of Exodus: "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." In the trials, every kind of "evidence" - hearsay, gossip, old wives' tales - was admitted provided that it indicated the guilt of the accused. Some of this so-called evidence went back many years and obviously originated in personal spite. None of the defendants had counsel to raise objections to the admission of this kind of evidence or, indeed, to question the legality of the procedure or the jurisdiction of the court. As a result, there was no one to contest the legality, of "spectral evidence."

In their confessions, or in giving evidence on the witness stand, many people alleged that they had been approached by people who passed as respectable members of society yet who now appeared in the guise of the Devil's agents urging their victims to sign the Devil's book and to commit other enormities. This was "spectral evidence," and if it were indiscriminately admitted to be valid, there was obviously no limit to the number of people who might be accused of witchcraft. The weighty question raised by spectral evidence was whether or not the Devil could assume the shape of an innocent person or whether or not every person who appeared to the afflicted actually served the Devil's purposes.

When their opinion was asked, the Mathers recommended that the judges observe "a very critical and exquisite caution" lest they be taken in by the Devil's legerdemain. Caution was
especially important, they warned, in cases of "persons formerly of an unblemished reputation." "It was better for a guilty witch to live," said Increase Mather, "than for an innocent person to die." Cotton Mather admitted that the Devil might, by God's permission, appear in the shape of an innocent person, but he thought that this permission was rarely given.

In essence, Cotton Mather took the position that spectral evidence merely offered grounds for suspicion and, at most, a presumption of guilt but that corroborative evidence was required before a verdict could be rendered. The immediate danger, as he saw it, was that evil spirits would confuse the judges by appearing in the guise of innocent people, thereby permitting bona fide witches to escape scot-free. Chief Justice Stoughton, much as he revered the Mathers, did not accept their views on the admissibility of spectral evidence. In his opinion, the fact that the Devil assumed the form of a respectable individual, even though he was a pillar of the community, must mean that that individual had sold his soul, for, he declared, the Devil could not impersonate an innocent man or woman. He therefore instructed the jury that "as the Devil had appeared in the form of many of the accused, according to the eye-witnesses there, the defendants must be guilty." This instruction resulted in the conviction of several of the accused.

Nor did the people follow the Mathers in drawing these fine distinctions regarding the admissibility of spectral evidence. To them, any person who took the form of a specter must be an agent of Satan. In consequence, Massachusetts was gripped by a reign of terror. Ties of friendship and of blood ceased to matter. It was a case of every man for himself and the Devil take the hindmost. Wives testified against their husbands; children charged their parents with practicing witchcraft; a wife and daughter gave evidence against their husband and father in order to save themselves; and a seven-year-old girl helped send her mother to the gallows. When two young men would not confess, they were tied together by the neck until they accused their own mother. The roll of specters began to read like a Who's Who of New England. Captain John Alden, the eldest son of John and Priscilla Alden, was accused of being a wizard on the strength of spectral evidence, but the resourceful captain escaped from jail. Dudley Bradstreet, the son of a former governor, fled the colony before he could be brought to trial. The wife of the Reverend John Hale, secretary of the colony of Connecticut, was denounced as a witch, and one woman who was hung at Salem was a church member. Cotton Mather himself was not safe: in October 1693, a young woman swore that Mather's image threatened and molested her. "I cried unto the Lord," Mather wrote in his Diary, "for the Deliverance of my Name, from the Malice of Hell." Thus the work of casting out devils seemed likely to lead to the depopulation of Massachusetts. Who would be alive to hang the last witch?

Clearly, events were escaping from the control of the clergy and magistrates. Witch-hunting had reached the height of mass hysteria: the people clamored for more victims, and no one was safe from their zeal and fear.
To add to the danger, although Salem Village continued to be "the Chief Seat of these Diabolical Vexations," witches began to expand their operations until all Massachusetts reeled under "the horrible Assaults made by the Invisible World." The citizens of Gloucester, expecting to be attacked by an army of witches, took refuge in a stockade. In Andover, where an epidemic was blamed on witches, more than 50 people were accused of having had dealings with the Devil. One of the magistrates who dared to defy public opinion by refusing to institute proceedings against the suspects was himself accused of sorcery. But the mania was short lived: one of the accused instituted action for defamation of character against his accusers. "This wonderfully quenched zeal," it was observed, "the accusers saw his spectre no more."

By September 22, 1692, the Salem judges had tried 27 suspects, one-third of them church members; all had denied being witches. All 27 had been sentenced to death, and of this number 19 had been hanged and 1 pressed to death. A man accused of bewitching a dog barely escaped with his life, but the dog, presumably possessed by devils, was killed. None of the 50 who confessed that they were witches had been executed; 100 persons accused of being witches were in jail awaiting trial; and an additional 200 had been accused but had not yet been imprisoned. Two judges had resigned from the court of oyer and terminer to protest the course the proceedings had taken. Among the suspects were Lady Phips, the wife of the Governor of the province, and the Reverend Samuel Willard of Boston, the president of Harvard College. Willard was under suspicion because he had questioned some of the evidence presented at the trials.

On September 22, 1692, at the advice of the clergy, now thoroughly alarmed by the use to which spectral evidence was being put, Governor Phips suspended the proceedings of the court of oyer and terminer. In December the accused were brought before the Superior Court for trial. Spectral evidence was sparingly admitted, with the result that of the 52 persons brought to trial, 49 were acquitted. Only three were found guilty and condemned, but Phips first reprieved them and then granted a general pardon to all under suspicion. In 1957, the Massachusetts Legislature adopted a resolution absolving all the Salem witches of wrongdoing.

Chief Justice Stoughton bitterly lamented the decision to call a halt to the trials: "We were in a way to have cleared the land of them," he said. "Who it is that obstructs the cause of justice I know not; the Lord be merciful to this country!"

It is ironical that Cotton Mather, who wished to be known above all as a man of God and a do-gooder, should be remembered chiefly for his part in the Salem witch trials and therefore held to be typical of all that was most narrow, bigoted, and repellent in Puritanism - the very epitome of the black-frocked, blue-nosed zealot. He was by no means the most remorseless and bloodthirsty of the witch-hunters; indeed, his position on spectral evidence marks him as a moderate and a stickler for the observance of legal formalities. The people, and some of the clergy, demanded more witch trials and more executions, but Mather tried to calm the storm he had helped create. In his poem dealing with Salem witchcraft, Longfellow makes Mather say:
Be careful. Carry the knife with such exactness, That on one side no innocent blood be shed By too excessive zeal, and, on the other, No shelter given to any work of darkness.

Yet Cotton Mather did not question the justice of the verdicts handed down at Salem, nor did he doubt that all who had been executed were guilty. Those who asked God to attest to their innocence were guilty, in his opinion, of "monstrous impudence." Lest it be supposed that innocent people had been condemned on the basis of inadequate evidence, Mather wrote a book entitled *Wonders of the Invisible World* (1692). Yet Mather was not as sure as he professed to be that justice had been done: in 1696, he recorded in his diary his fear that God was angry with him for "not appearing with Vigor enough to stop the proceedings of the Judges, when the Inextricable Storm from the Invisible World assaulted the Country."

The period of the Salem witchcraft marked the last occasion on which witches and wizards were executed in the colonies, but the belief in witchcraft did not end, nor did the indictment and trial of suspects stop. In Virginia in 1705, a woman was accused of practicing witchcraft. The court ordered that her body be examined for witch marks and that she be subjected to the trial by water. The incriminating marks were found, and she floated while bound - strong evidence of guilt. Nevertheless, she was not tried as a witch, nor, for that matter, was she given an opportunity to clear her reputation.

Nevertheless, even during the trials at Salem, doubts had been expressed by one of the judges and by some clergymen regarding the guilt of some of the condemned. Not, however, that they doubted the existence of the Devil and of witchcraft: their reservations extended only to the kinds of evidence held admissible by the court. Yet the feeling gained ground that New England lay under the heavy indictment of having shed innocent blood. For this reason, some of the jurors and witnesses publicly repented their part in the proceedings at Salem. In 1697, Judge Samuel Sewall stood before his congregation and acknowledged his "blame and shame . . . asking pardon of men, and especially desiring prayers that God, who has unlimited authority, would pardon that sin and all others his sins." On the other hand, Chief Justice Stoughton went to his death insisting that he had been in the right.

It was the educated laity rather than the clergy who took the lead in discrediting witchcraft. In 1700, Robert Calef, a Boston merchant, published *More Wonders of the Invisible World*, an attack upon Cotton Mather and witchcraft. Calef believed that a great deal of innocent blood had been shed at Salem, and he held Cotton Mather primarily responsible for it. The girls who had started the frenzy he called "a parcel of possessed, distracted, or lying Wenches, accusing their Innocent Neighbours." Cotton Mather denounced Calef 's book as "a firebrand thrown by a madman," and Increase Mather, as president of Harvard College, ordered the book publicly burned in the College Yard.

The eighteenth-century Enlightenment completed the rout of witchcraft. Science shifted the attention of educated men from the supernatural to the natural world, thereby resuming a
process which, having begun with the Renaissance, had been interrupted by the Reformation. Satan suffered the second of the two great disasters that befell him in his long and checkered career: having been cast out of Heaven, his power to control human events now began to be questioned. In short, Satan lost the thing upon which his power over men had always depended - his credibility. Witchcraft, after a long and bloody history, was relegated to the ignominious status of a mere superstition, and the thousands of men and women who had perished in the flames or on the scaffold were seen to have been the victims of a great delusion.