

An Introduction

Mary Beth Norton

When I first became interested in Salem witchcraft, I started occasionally offering a senior-level (400) seminar on the topic of Witchcraft in Early Modern England and America, in part to take advantage of the resources offered by the Cornell witchcraft collection. After I published a book on the most famous American witchcraft episode—*In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2002; Vintage Books, 2003)—I initially thought I would have to stop teaching seminars on witchcraft, because I had created a narrative that satisfied my own curiosity about the events in Essex County in 1692.

But then I realized that my work had exposed many unanswered questions about Salem witchcraft and that I could direct undergraduates toward research topics that would in fact add to our knowledge of those iconic events. Accordingly, in 2003 I first taught a 200 (now 2000) level sophomore seminar—open to all, but aimed primarily at history majors or prospective majors—focusing sharply on 1692 rather than ranging more broadly, as had my previous seminars. The course requirements include a final paper of 10-15 pages based on students' original research. Usually the seminar enrolls between 10 and 18 students.

In 2003, the first iteration, four papers—by Jackie Kelly, Mark Rice, Darya Mattes, and Jedediah Drolet—stood out as contributions to our understanding of the trials. Thanks to Ben Ray of the University of Virginia, those papers appeared on the Salem Witch Trials Documentary Archive web site, along with papers from his own undergraduate students. I wrote about the course and the papers in an article in the online journal *common-place.org*. (See <http://www.common-place.org/vol-06/no-02/norton/>, with links to the online papers), and I also arranged for the students to participate in a panel at the 13<sup>th</sup> Berkshire Conference on the History of Women, held at Scripps College, Claremont, California, in June 2005.

I next offered the course in 2006. Two papers from that class (by Tamar Weinstock and Megan Sweeney) were equally insightful and they appear here. During the most recent course offering (fall 2010), five papers met my criteria, and they appear here as well. This version of the course benefitted greatly from the availability (at long last) of an accurate, comprehensive compilation of the surviving papers: Bernard Rosenthal, et al., eds., *Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Previously, students had to make do with the flawed transcripts of the less complete and occasionally inaccurate *Salem Witchcraft Papers*, ed. Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum (1977, based on WPA transcriptions from the 1930s), and on their own reading of seventeenth-century handwriting in images of documents on the UVa web site. The new volume permits different types of historical investigation, reflected in the subjects of two of the 2010 papers included here.

These papers for the most part represent either individual or group biographical studies. Jackie Kelly wrote about Mary Ayer Parker of Andover, executed in September 1692; Mark Rice examined Margaret Scott of Rowley, also executed in September; and Megan Sweeney studied Samuel Wardwell of Andover, the only confessor executed in 1692. In addition, in the fall 2010 class Courtney Culhane looked closely at the Reverend Samuel Willard, the Boston minister who was one of the trials' most prominent critics; and Emily Santoro took advantage of the identification of handwriting in the new edition to study precisely the role played by the Reverend Samuel Parris in the legal proceedings.

The group studies have varied topics: Darya Mattes studied the young children accused as witches; Jedediah Drolet exposed the links among six women accused in Gloucester; Tamar Weinstock argued for the importance of the fact that almost all of the executed men had been accused of abusing their wives in addition to being witches; and most recently Patricio Martinez Llomport (using the new edition) examined the eight indictments returned *ignoramus* by the grand jury, suggesting that those jurors, at least, were carefully weighing the evidence and refusing to indict unless that evidence met legal criteria. Christian Kinsella ranged farther afield, uncovering biographical details about and analyzing the responses of five New York clergymen to questions about witchcraft posed to them by Massachusetts authorities in October—answers that arguably helped to convince Governor Phips to dissolve the Court of Oyer and Terminer.

The most unusual paper included here was submitted in 2010 by Joseph Featherly, a senior majoring in plant pathology, who investigated the evidence for the presence of ergot poisoning in 1692 with the benefit of his expert knowledge. Although I remain a skeptic, he makes as good a case for ergot's possible involvement in the Salem crisis as I have seen anywhere.