

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.

## **2011 Papers**

During the fall semester 2011, five students in History/FGSS/American Studies 2090 produced papers that constitute contributions to Salem witchcraft scholarship. In alphabetical order of the authors' last names, these are:

Rachel Benjamin, who researched the background of Giles Corey, the "hero" of some accounts of the trials because of his adamant rejection of the court's authority when he refused to enter a plea. She discovered that Corey the man bore little resemblance to Corey the symbol of principled opposition to the Court of Oyer and Terminer.

Kevin Burra, a chemistry major, who became interested in the pseudo-scientific nature of some of the evidence used in the witchcraft trials. He examined the so-called touch test, in which accused witches were first asked to look at the afflicted people, who responded with fits, and then to touch them, at which their fits purportedly ceased. He carefully traced the introduction and usage of the test, showing how over-dependence on it helped to end the trials presided over by the Court of Oyer and Terminer.

Leela Chantrelle, who chose to study closely the three enslaved defendants in the trials, linking Tituba, Samuel Parris's Indian slave, with the two accused witches identified as being of African origin: Candy and Mary Black. In a nuanced analysis, she showed how the "otherness" of the three linked them and affected their treatment by the court.

Anne Powell, who investigated the two prosecutors who handled the cases at the Court of Oyer and Terminer—Thomas Newton, a trained English lawyer; and Anthony Checkley, another English immigrant (who was not an attorney). By taking advantage of the new information offered in the recent edition of the legal records, she uncovered details of how the prosecutors constructed their cases. Even more importantly, she researched their biographies and revealed their connections to the members of the court.

Madeleine Przybyl, who was interested in tracing the transmission of gossip about "witches" from one town to another. She investigated the familial connections that linked witnesses against Susannah Martin, an accused witch from Amesbury (20 miles from Salem Village), and residents of the Village. Although she located no definitive proof, she identified two different plausible pathways of relationships through which information about an Amesbury woman long suspected of witchcraft might have made its way to the ears of the afflicted people in the Village.

## **2012 Papers**

Among the papers submitted in fall 2012, three covered intriguing new ground.

In alphabetical order of the authors' names, these are:

David Estey's examination of the Reverend John Hale—a man who testified in two trials but later became skeptical of witchcraft claims, especially after his own wife was named by a woman who said she saw her specter. He wrote one of the most important attacks on the trials, *A Modest Enquiry into the Nature of Witchcraft*, which was published after his death. Along with the judge Samuel Sewall and the accuser Ann Putnam Jr., Hale was one of the three participants in the trials who publicly admitted to changing his mind, but he has received less scholarly attention than have the other two.

Devon McMahon's careful analysis of the use of so-called "witch's marks" as evidence. These were purported signs on the bodies of the accused of a link to the devil, and they were potentially important because they seemed to provide physical evidence of phenomena that otherwise appeared spectral or questionable. But McMahon's study demonstrates that the search for marks on the accused turned out to be problematic, thus explaining why such a strategy was likely abandoned in later trials.

James Ojalvo's investigation of the patterns of compensation offered to the victims and their families by the colony of Massachusetts about two decades after the

conclusion of the trials. Ojalvo, scrutinizing the colonial records with care, shows that such compensation was more limited than claimants (and many historians) have assumed was the case.

## **2015 Papers**

I did not offer the course in 2013 or 2014 because of other teaching obligations.

In the seminar in fall 2015, two students were intrigued by the actions of two of the “afflicted girls,” young women usually lumped together without further analysis. But Rachel Mitnick’s study of Elizabeth (Betty) Hubbard and Jael Goldfine’s of Mary Warren, both of them servants, pointed up their differences and similarities to great effect. In both cases, the households in which they served turned out to have had a marked influence on the trajectory of their participation in the crisis.

Samantha Myers looked beyond the accused and the accusers, the judges and the witnesses, to unearth the role of an elusive but significant “public” throughout the proceedings. Myers shows that although evident only in the interstices of contemporary accounts, that public presence nevertheless had a significant impact in 1692.

Zoe Jackson chose to examine the specifics of one of the more unusual accusations in 1692, that of the wealthy Salem merchant Philip English (who was a French-speaking immigrant from the isle of Jersey) and his wife Elizabeth Hollingsworth, the daughter of a prominent local family. Studying the earlier interactions of the families with that of a key accuser, William Beale, she demonstrates that the 1692 confrontations between them had deep roots in Essex County.

Finally, Melissa Sarmiento was interested in the relationship of the historical Salem trials and their portrayals on the stage and in film, particularly through their best-known interpreter for the public, Arthur Miller. She analyzes Miller’s “The Crucible,” in both its theatrical (1953) and movie (1996) versions, showing how Miller’s approach itself changed as his script moved from stage to screen and from the 1950s to the 1990s.