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Confess or Deny? What's a "Witch" to Do?

When I teach about the Salem trials, students typically ask two related questions: "why were women accused of witchcraft more often than men?" and "why would a woman confess to witchcraft if she really didn't do it?" This essay attempts to answer both of these questions. But, first, what was a "witch"? For Puritans, a witch was a person who made a pact with the devil, thus giving the devil permission to use her body to harm others and lure them into his service. This definition highlights something important about the Puritan world—it was the scene of a cosmic struggle between God and Satan. Puritan New Englanders accepted the devil's presence and believed he could come to earth, seduce victims to sign his book or covenant, and enlist sinners in his war against God.

Witches could be male or female, but in New England they tended to be women. In fact, so many of the accused witches in Salem were women (approximately 78 percent) that it is worth exploring Puritan attitudes towards women, sin, and the devil. It would be easy, but inaccurate, to characterize the Puritans simply as misogynists. In fact, Puritan New Englanders considered themselves to be rather more enlightened than others when it came to women's place in society and in their cosmology. They did not subscribe to the prevailing European view that women were inherently more evil than men. And yet womanhood and witchcraft were inextricably linked both to each other and to Puritan interpretations of evil and sin (1).

Ministers spoke of the devil's proximity in their weekly sermons and they articulated the notion that his presence was ubiquitous.

Ministers made it perfectly clear that intimacy with Satan ended one's chance of attaining saving grace and damned one to an eternity in hell. They preached that unreformed sinners—those who served the devil rather than God—would be doomed, and they peppered their sermons with images of hell's dark abyss. Calvinism made salvation an uncertain reward for even the most righteous, but it surely damned those who followed the devil's path. Even within the confines of predestination, sinners could indeed work their way to hell.

Because complicity with Satan implied such dire consequences, ministers felt it was their obligation to warn their audiences of the devil's objectives. In weekly sermons and written tracts, ministers repeatedly admonished their congregations not to fall prey to Satan's methods. While the devil could not force one to lead a life of sin and degradation, he possessed a frightening array of persuasive tools and temptations and would go to any length to lead people into sin, thereby possessing their souls.

Perhaps unwittingly, the clergy's evocative language and constant warnings about the devil's intrusions reinforced folk beliefs

about Satan, in the minds of both ordinary church-goers and clergy. The violent battle between Satan and God described in glorious detail in the ministers' sermons became, during the witchcraft crises, a vicious confrontation between the accused and her alleged victim. True, during church services, ministers did not describe the



Rebecca Nurse stands in chains in front of Rev. Nicholas Noyes, who pronounces her guilty in front of the congregation. (From John R. Musick, *The Witch of Salem or Credulity Run Mad*, [New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1893] 275. Artist: F. A. Carter)

devil's actual, physical appearance specifically, in all its horror. His existence in this arena remained ethereal rather than corporeal. Yet during the witchcraft episodes, when both the accusers and the accused detailed their encounters with the devil, neither the clergy nor the court challenged lay images of Satan. Whether he appeared in the shape of a dog, a yellow bird, or a hideous creature, part monkey and part man, such testimony was eagerly accepted. In their zeal to put the devil to rout in the godly commonwealth, believers emphasized Satan's direct physical presence.

During witchcraft trials, the court set out to prove that accused women had indeed signed the devil's book, thus becoming witches. They hoped to find witnesses to such signings, as the laws of evidence required, but they also realized how difficult it was to obtain such proof—everyone knew that the devil obtained his signatures in secret. In fact, no witnesses to any actual signing ever came forward during the Salem trials.

Confessions were the next best thing. If an accused woman admitted to signing the devil's book, then the case against her was assured. What better "proof" that witches were indeed among the godly in Salem than a confession? It is important to point out that very early in the Salem episode, the court decided not to hang those who confessed, hoping that they could be persuaded to name others involved in this wicked affair. Surely this decision—and the avenue of escape it seemed to open for the accused—helps to account for many of the approximately fifty confessions. Yet self-preservation alone does not explain the admissions of guilt at Salem, even though those accused faced the gallows.

"Why did they confess?" might not be as pertinent a question to ask as "how did they confess?" Confessors' language suggests that the choice to confess or to deny charges of witchcraft paralleled the ways in which women and men confessed more generally in early New England. Women and men thought about sin and guilt differently, whether they were applying for church membership or trying to convince the court that they were innocent of witchcraft. Women were more likely to interpret their own sin, no matter how ordinary, as a tacit covenant with Satan, a spiritual renunciation of God. In the completely different context of conversion narratives (oral testimonies required of both women and men in order to achieve full membership in a church), women spoke about their vile nature, while men tended to focus on particular sins like drinking or gambling. In essence, women were more convinced that their sinful natures had bonded with the devil; men seemed confident of their ability to throw off their evil ways and turn to God in time.

If women more generally feared they had unwittingly covenanted with the devil, it took less to convince them that they had in fact accepted a literal invitation from Satan to become witches. During the Salem witchcraft trials and other episodes, the distinction was blurred between an implicit covenant through sin, which fettered sinners to the devil and would take them to hell, and an explicit pact with the devil, which turned sinners into witches. This was especially true for women.

Rebecca Eames's confession illustrates the slippery slope that turned confessions of ordinary sin into admission of witchcraft. Eames first confessed that she had covenanted with the devil and that she had seen him in several guises, including a mouse or a rat. She wavered on whether or not her shape had actually harmed



A woodcut from Cotton Mather's 1692 account of witchcraft depicts the power of Satan behind the witches.

anyone but apologized nonetheless. During her second examination she slipped and blurted out that right after she made a black mark in the devil's book, signing her name, she "was then in such horror of Conscienc that she tooke a Rope to hang herselfe and a Razer to cutt her throate by Reason of her great sin in Committing adultery & by that the Divell Gained her he promising she should not be brought out or ever discovered." In effect, she admitted her earlier sin of adultery and used its potential exposure as her excuse for covenanting with the devil. Was Eames horrified by the evil pact with the devil or by confrontation with her prior sin? Or did she believe she had effectively covenanted with the devil by virtue of her earlier sexual violation?

The court believed confessors like Eames because their disclosures made sense to them. A confessing woman was the model of Puritan womanhood, even though she was admitting to the worst of sins. Apology was critical; recounting tales of the devil's book was not enough. A good Puritan woman/witch needed to repent her obvious sins. A confessing woman confirmed her society's belief in both God and the devil. She validated the court's procedures, and she corroborated Puritan thought concerning sin, guilt, and the devil's wily ways. A confessing woman created a model of perfect redemption, and during the Salem trials (though not elsewhere) she was rewarded with her life. In confessing, these women reacted to the unbearable pressures of their own and their community's expectations of proper female behavior.

And what of the deniers? Why did the court not believe their protestations of innocence? Many deniers had credible alibis and flawless reputations, yet the court hounded and pressured them with questions seemingly designed to force them to admit that they were indeed guilty of witchcraft, or at least of *some* sin. The denials are as telling as the confessions; women who insisted on their innocence often implicated themselves unwittingly because they admitted to being sinners. They were unable to convince the court and their peers that their souls had not entered into a covenant with the devil; they could not wholeheartedly deny a pact with Satan when an implicit bond with him through common sin was undeniable.

The sense of the depraved female self, which also emerges from women's conversion narratives, merged with the community's (and each accused woman's own) expectations about the rebellious female witch. Ironically, those who would not confess and allow themselves to be forgiven—yet who did admit to sin, as any good Puritan should have—were executed.

Let us look at Rebecca Nurse's denial. Known for her piety, Nurse insisted that she was innocent of the crime of witchcraft. But she could not deny that something was amiss with the accusing girls in court, as they thrashed about in the courtroom, feigning attacks by Nurse's supposed specter. Clearly the girls were bewitched, Nurse admitted, thus further implicating herself.

She maintained her own blamelessness but asked, "what sin hath god found out in me that he should lay such a burden on me in my old age?" In other words, Nurse denied that she had literally signed the devil's book, but she unwittingly acknowledged that she had been guilty of *some* other sin in her lifetime.

Rebecca Nurse was hanged because the court did not believe she was free from sin. The court even conceded that perhaps she did not sign the book. But the magistrates asked, "haven't you been led aside by temptations that way?" Either way, she would be in the devil's camp. The

court wanted to believe that the accused were guilty, as at least one woman, Sarah Churchill, noticed. Churchill first confessed to witchcraft charges, then later recanted. When asked why she had initially confessed, she explained that the magistrates had threatened to put her in the dungeon if she refused. Furthermore, she stuck with her story for so long that she did not know how to extricate herself. Most presciently, Churchill believed "that If she told mr Noys but ons [once] she had sat hur hand to the Book he would be leve her but If she told the truth and saied she had not seat her hand to the Book a hundred times he would not beleve hur" (2). Indeed, everyone wanted to believe that witches flourished in Salem, and they expected that these witches were female.

Not only was it far more unusual for a man to be accused of witchcraft than a woman, but when men were accused, or when they confessed or denied, their gender mattered as well. Men were far more audacious in their rejection of the charges. One man, George Jacobs Sr., shouted back at the court "You tax me for a wizard, you might as well tax me for a buzard. I have done no harm." Another, Andrew Carrier, confessed after a fashion, though his ambivalent recounting of a witch meeting expressed none of the apology or remorse typical of the female confessors. His confession "counted" nonetheless, and he escaped the gallows because the court was not prepared to convict many male

witches (3). Puritans simply did not suppose that men would surrender to the devil as easily as women.

Clergy and laity shared assumptions about their world, about God and the devil, about sin and salvation, and about the ways in which the devil afflicted the body in order to possess the soul (and seemed to possess women more successfully than men). During the witch trials, when women predominated among the accused, lay visions of the devil's powers pushed ministers' teachings in unforeseen directions. The consequences for women could be grim. Women were accused more than men because Puritans believed that they were more likely to succumb to the devil's temptations. According to a strict interpretation of Puritan theology, both men

and women could cleave to the devil or choose to follow in God's path. But in actuality, Puritans believed that women were more frail, both physically and mentally. Women's weaker bodies betrayed them, thus allowing Satan greater access to their souls.

During examinations, accused women were damned if they did and damned if they did not: if they confessed to witchcraft charges, their admissions would prove the cases against them; if they denied the charges, their very intractability, construed as the refusal to admit to sin more generally, might mark them as sinners and hence allies of the devil. Theology thus conspired with mundane practice, making it easier for Puritans (Puritan women as well as men) to

imagine that women were more likely than men to submit to Satan and become witches. □



"Oh, give me leave to pray!" (S.C. Kilburn, artist, 1880. In Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "Giles Corey of Salem Farms," *The Poetical Works of Longfellow* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin Boston, 1902] 747.)

Endnotes

1. Carol F. Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York: Norton, 1987), 47; see Richard Godbeer, *The Devil's Dominion: Magic and Religion in Early New England* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 235-42 for useful appendixes of names and outcomes of cases before and during the Salem crisis. For other cases that never came to trial see John Demos, *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 402-09.
2. Paul S. Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, eds., *The Salem Witchcraft Papers: Verbatim Transcripts of the Salem Witchcraft Outbreak of 1692*, 3 vols. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1977) I: 212.
3. *Salem Witchcraft Papers*, II: 475-76, 530.

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