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FEARFUL TENSION:
THE SALEM WITCH TRIALS

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Abstract: In 1692, Salem, Massachusetts descended into witchcraft paranoia on a scale unprecedented in North America. Before authorities could quell the frenzied witch-hunt, over two hundred people had been accused of witchcraft and around twenty-five had been executed. What caused Salem to erupt into such unprecedented and senseless violence? This historiographical essay seeks to analyze three different books about the witch trials—Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum's *Salem Possessed*, Carol F. Karlsen's *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, and David D. Hall's *Worlds of Wonder: Days of Judgement*—in order to answer this elusive central question. The paper begins with an introduction of the central focuses of each author. Boyer and Nissenbaum focus on the rise of capitalism and the accompanying social tensions, Karlsen focuses on the role of misogyny, and Hall focuses on the role of popular folklore and fears of societal declension. After introducing the sources, this paper puts them in dialogue and then offers an ideal synthesis of their central ideas. It will argue that truly understanding the Salem Witch Trials requires balancing the colonists' religious fears with their underlying social and economic motives.

In 1692, paranoia swept through Salem, Massachusetts. The daughter of Samuel Parris, the minister of Salem Village, was diagnosed by the village doctor with demonic possession after exhibiting inexplicable behavior such as barking like a dog and violently contorting her limbs. The residents feared that the Devil was among them, sewing discord and seeking to destroy their holy society. In a desperate attempt to curb what these colonists feared was impending doom, they sought to purge the source of these demonic possessions—witches—from among them. This purgation initiated a period of mass panic and widespread accusations of witchcraft. Hundreds of Salem residents were accused of being witches and stood trial under the looming threat of public execution.

Witch hunts were not new to the Puritans, but Salem's witch hunt transcended all those that preceded it. Far from a symbolic ritual of societal purification, the Salem Witch

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Trials resulted in close to two hundred accusations, around twenty-five deaths, and forty-eight 'demonic possessions.'[2] Violence and fear tore the small town of Salem apart. When the trials were finally stopped, the town was left with a profound sense of regret and confusion. Something had just occurred "which no one anticipated beforehand and which no one could explain at the time."[3]

The Salem Witch Trials have been an important locus for historical and theological scholarship in the centuries following the tragedy. Numerous scholars have attempted to add meaning to and provide an explanation for the mysterious and violent crisis. This essay will analyze three such attempts—Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum's *Salem Possessed*, Carol F. Karlsen's *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, and David D. Hall's *Worlds of Wonder: Days of Judgement*—in hopes of gleaning a multifaceted understanding of the crisis. Through analysis of each author's distinct viewpoint, a clearer image emerges out of the otherwise opaque Salem mystery. Indeed, we come to understand that on the eve of structural transformation, a town under severe social strain fired one last salvo of a bygone era in hopes of preserving its hierarchical (male-dominated) Puritan dream.

In 1974, Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum published *Salem Possessed*, revolutionizing the way scholars viewed the Salem Witch Trials. Through extensive analysis of institutional structures, economic and geographic data, and social trends, they developed a decidedly neo-Marxist explanation for the crisis. Their book sought to undermine explanations of the witchcraft trials that centered on the perception of Salem Village as a morally deviant community among its New England neighbors, instead presenting the outbreak as a result of the severe institutional weakness within Salem.[4] This institutional weakness, and its accompanying societal tension, were not unfortunate coincidences, but rather, the byproducts of economic exploitation and the emerging capitalist economy. The emergence of this hyper-competitive system deeply clashed with the original communal errand of Puritan New England. Indeed, the Western farmers of Salem, excluded from the growing capitalist economy, felt that this newfound "assertion of private will posed the direst

[2] Carol F. Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 41-42.
[3] Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 21.
[4] Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 51.

possible threat to the stability of the community."[5] With no strong political institutions to turn to, the exploited underclass of Salem "unconsciously fell back on a different and more archaic strategy: they treated those who threatened them not as political opposition but as an aggregate of morally defective individuals."[6] For Boyer and Nissenbaum, the witch trials were the Western farmers' attempt to combat economic exploitation through the only method of social agency left open to them.

Boyer and Nissenbaum view the Salem Witchcraft Outbreak as inseparable from the structural aspects of Salem's community. They assert that the uncontrollable paranoia of the trials makes sense only when viewed as a result of the town's key structural defects. Belief in witchcraft was prevalent across all of New England. However, only Salem descended into ungovernable madness and accusation. This paranoia was only possible because of the unprecedented institutional weakness of Salem. The most glaring issue was Massachusetts's lack of "a legally established government."[7] While England was in the midst of the Glorious Revolution, Massachusetts's government remained in deadlock without a governor or charter: "For the crucial first three months of the Salem Witchcraft Outbreak, the authorities had no official recourse except to throw suspects into jail without a trial."[8] Without any authority 'coming from above,' Salem's inept government was left to deal with the crisis, a task they were fundamentally incapable of performing. Salem was, in reality, composed of two distinct communities: Salem Town and Salem Village. While Salem Town had its own established church and thus a centralized meeting house and authority, Salem Village was deprived of this luxury until 1689, far too late for it to gain real administrative authority in the decentralized community. Thus, while the merchants of Salem Town amassed 62% of Salem's overall wealth, Salem Village was structurally barred from taking part in the Town's economic growth.[9] Rather, Salem Village "provided the food which the Town proper could not supply" and bolstered their coffers with tax revenue.[10] They very much existed as an exploited underclass fueling the progress of Salem Town.[11] This feeling of exploitation did

[5] Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 109.
[6] Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 109.
[7] Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 6.
[8] Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 7.
[9] Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 87.
[10] Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 39.
[11] Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 92.

not sit right with Salem Village's traditional Puritan farmers. Raised to distrust and disdain outward expressions of the private will, these exploited farmers saw such capitalistic progression as the work of the Devil.[12] The capitalist mindset of Salem Town seemed to fundamentally attack John Winthrop's dream of a united and cooperative body politic. As such, Boyer and Nissenbaum assert that the witch trials were the farmers' subconscious response to these economic tensions. However, while fueled by economic grievances, the trials were only allowed to descend into unchecked paranoia because of the crippling lack of structure and authority in Salem. The very institutional weakness that had kept Salem Village economically oppressed became the reason the trials and witchcraft accusations became so uncontrollable.

While Boyer and Nissenbaum indisputably expose the economic crisis at the root of the Salem Witch Trials, their argument is not without its flaws. One of their most glaring missteps is a failure to adequately address the role of misogyny in the witchcraft outbreak. In *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, Carol F. Karlsen aims to address this flagrant omission. Her argument builds on Boyer and Nissenbaum's, attempting to complicate the Trials through a re-analysis of the data through an explicitly feminist lens. In her view, "the story of witchcraft is primarily the story of women."[13] Karlsen argues that there are clear demographic trends for those accused of witchcraft in New England. From 1620-1725, for example, 78% of those accused of witchcraft were women.[14] More specifically, women over 40 and those who stood to inherit were even more vulnerable to accusations of witchcraft.[15] These statistics make it impossible to ignore the role of misogyny in witchcraft accusations. The very definition of a witch in New England was intertwined with fears of female rebellion against the strict gender norms. In broad terms, witches simply symbolized women who refused "to accept their 'place' in New England's social order."[16] Like fantastical witches' perceived ability to use magic to "disrupt the social and natural order," the women labeled as witches openly disrupted the social order through their real-world actions.[17]

[12] Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 104.
[13] Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, xxi.
[14] Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 47.
[15] Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 65.
[16] Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 119.
[17] Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 134.

Karlsen generally agrees with Boyer and Nissenbaum that economic concerns undergirded Salem's descent into paranoia and madness. For Karlsen, however, these economic fears stemmed from the perceived threat that women who held property and asserted their independence posed to the patriarchal power structure of Puritan New England. Witchcraft accusations were a societal defense mechanism against women who strayed from the prescribed norm of subservience and passivity. Witchcraft, in essence, was just the perversion of women's traditional societal roles.[18] Those labeled as witches were typically older women who stood to inherit, exercised power in the realm of healthcare, or were successful entrepreneurs. They were typically viewed by the community as "discontented, angry, envious, malicious, seductive, lying, and proud."[19] These were women who exercised palpable power, often directly at the expense of men. They rejected the subordinate role assigned to them, often expressing dissatisfaction with male leaders and the church hierarchy. Puritan society refused to tolerate such empowered women. Puritan society in the seventeenth century was built on hierarchy.[20] Ordained by God, the church led the men who were in turn ordained to lead their families. When women challenged their husbands, they disrupted this system and directly challenged God as well.[21] If women failed to uphold their marital fidelity, they threatened a man's ability to pass property down to his rightful heirs. If the strict gender norms for women were broken, there were serious consequences for the entire community. Witchcraft accusations served to force women into the subordinate role that the Puritan leadership deemed necessary for their holy experiment.[22] "If women were to repress their own needs, their own goals, their own interests—and identify with the needs, goals, and interests of the men in their families—then the impulse to speak and act on their own behalf had to be stifled."[23] However, "as the witchcraft trials and executions show, only force could ensure such a sweeping denial of self."[24] Ultimately, it was "fear of independent women that lay at the heart of New England's nightmare."[25] Those who dared to assert

[18] Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 145.
[19] Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 152.
[20] Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 181.
[21] Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 164.
[22] Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 180.
[23] Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 180.
[24] Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 180.
[25] Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 213.

themselves and defy societal norms directly threatened the social order and male prosperity. "By treating female dissent as evidence of witchcraft as well as heresy, the authorities may have effectively silenced Puritan women's opposition."[26]

In contrast to Boyer and Nissenbaum and Karlsen, David D. Hall does not attempt to explain the Salem Witch Trials through an analysis of the crisis using neo-Marxist or feminist ideologies in *Worlds of Wonder: Days of Judgement*. He instead focuses on the role of popular religion and magic in New England society, and how these practices transformed the witch-hunt into a method for dealing with "social strife and sickness."[27] Unlike Boyer and Nissenbaum's and Karlsen's attempts to extract the true tension behind the trials, Hall focuses on explaining why the witch-hunt was New England society's method of dealing with social crises in general. Hall asserts that actual religious belief in New England often deviated sharply from what was preached in sermons and meetinghouses. Rather than dissecting underlying social conflicts, Hall argues that understanding the Salem Witch Trials requires an analysis of the ways New England's popular religious practice intermingled with folklore and magic. For the majority of New England colonists, religion was functioned as "a loosely bounded set of symbols and motifs that gave significance to rites of passage and life crises, that infused everyday events with the presence of the supernatural."[28] Alongside the Bible swirled a culture full of "tales of witchcraft and the Devil, of comets, hailstorms, monster births, and apparitions."[29] Witchcraft accusations served as a manifestation of the intermingling of Christian thought with stories of magic and wonder. The Puritans believed that purging the society of sin would earn greater favor from God and protect their salvation from the advances of the Devil. In a tumultuous world, tales of wonder and rituals of cleansing—like witch-hunts—served as attempts to respond to social crises and regain what little agency residents of New England could have over their uncertain lives.[30]

However, Hall does not simply describe the Salem Witch Trials as a routine manifestation of New England's belief in magic and ever-present fear of the Devil. Rather, for Hall, this deep belief in magic and the reality of witches explains why New England

[26] Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 197.
[27] David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 192.
[28] Hall, *Worlds of Wonder,* 18.
[29] Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 72.
[30] Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 94.

society instinctively turned to witch-hunts in times of crisis. The Salem Witch Trials *were* an aberration, but one that can be explained through a combined analysis of social tensions and of New England's belief in magic. Hall asserts that because the belief in the supernatural was so pervasive and "so widely credited as real, these stories readily became, as well, weapons in a complex game of politics."[31] The entrenchment of belief in wonder allowed any member of society the freedom to legitimately interpret events such as strange deaths or ominous comets. For many members of the community without agency in the restrictive religious institutions, prophecy and magic offered avenues of empowerment.[32] For the clergy, the prevalent belief in wonder among the laity often proved problematic. But, instead of trying to purge it from society, they attempted to co-opt it and use it to push their central message of "impending judgement."[33] Fearing society's declension, clerics hoped to use wonder to instill a fear of communal sin and imminent doom. With the threat of the Devil lurking, they hoped to impel members of the community to embrace God and actively participate in the church. This message of danger and judgment was coupled with the message of terror promoted in the popular "penny godlies" that circulated New England. These books peddled depictions of "sudden death, the gaping jaws of hell, a Christ who comes in judgement, [and] the torments of despair."[34] These messages from the pulpit and from the popular press combined to create "a chilling sense of vulnerability" and despair among the general population.[35]

Yet this message of fear backfired. Many became disenchanted with the ministry and began to turn elsewhere for the assurances of certainty these messages denied them. Many of the confessing witches at Salem claimed that they had turned to the Devil as a respite from their overwhelming sense of shame. Faced with no achievable path to salvation through the church, many people turned instead to the ideas of wonder permeating societal discourse, one of which was the Devil. In pursuing the Devil, they sought relief from the shame impressed on them from the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Others took a different route to the

[31] Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 94.
[32] Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 100.
[33] Hall, *Worlds of Wonder,* 116.
[34] Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 135.
[35] Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 135.

same end of religious agency and purity that the church failed to provide—they tried to purge the Devil from society, rather than consorting with him.

While clerical legalism created tensions that pushed many to embrace wonder, magic, and the Devil to gain agency and control in the face of uncertainty, this phenomenon does not fully explain the Salem Witch Trials or the culture surrounding witch-hunts in New England. While some witches confessed to their crimes and truly believed themselves in league with the Devil, the vast majority of those convicted maintained their innocence. Framing witch-hunts as a broader societal attempt to retain agency, Hall asserts that "in using witch-hunts to purge witches, the colonists were resorting to familiar instruments, the fast day and the public execution, to cleanse the land of sin."[36] Even though many of the people convicted were totally innocent, in a culture so rich with "descriptions of declension, it was easy to suppose that everyone was guilty of allowing Satan to invade the land."[37] For New England society, witch-hunting became a means of moral reformation to restore the purity of their fallen land. In a society so ripe with stories of wonder that fueled fears of moral degradation, declension, and the ever-looming Devil, witch-hunts seemed to be the only way to "restore their land to cleanliness."[38] However, Salem took this culture of purity rituals too far. Meant to bring the community together and purge out sin, the Salem trials instead drove it farther apart. Thus, the Salem Witch Trials became a dark manifestation of New England's belief in magic and wonder, an attempt to enforce societal cohesion that ultimately served as the dying breath of this past culture. In the wake of the trials, the magic that had justified them and the clergy that had perpetuated them lost credibility. For many residents of Massachusetts, it was clear that rather than a purge of the Devil, the trials were a manifestation of his will.

All three of these books attempt to dig under the surface of the mystery of the crisis and explain what prompted such a violent outbreak in Salem in 1692. The residents of Salem themselves struggled to comprehend what they had done. In the wake of the witch trials, they were left with a profound sense of confusion and regret. In this period, New England went through a societal reckoning—a reconsideration of values of hierarchy and draconian

[36] Hall, *Worlds of Wonder,* 189.
[37] Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 193.
[38] Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 194.

methods of ensuring societal cohesion. Four years after the trials, the Massachusetts government mandated a period of fasting in hopes that the Lord would "pardon all the errors of his servants in the 'Tragedie' of the great witch-hunt."[39] While Boyer and Nissenbaum, Karlsen, and Hall all draw different conclusions about the true cause of the Salem Witch Trials, they all start with an analysis of Puritan society and its cultural norms. They all focus on the love of order, the essential structure of hierarchy, and the requirement that individual members of society repress their private will. For each author, the Salem Witch Trials represented a societal response to the breach of these sacred and structurally essential norms. However, beyond this basic agreement, their arguments diverge and develop distinct conceptions of the direst threat to Salem's Puritan norms.

While Boyer and Nissenbaum and Karlsen disagree about the exact causes of the Salem Witchcraft Outbreak, both their books seek to answer the same question: what were the witch trials *really* a manifestation of? For Boyer and Nissenbaum, the trials represent Puritan society's reckoning with the emergence of capitalism and the demise of their once-hallowed errand to build a holy society. For Karlsen, the trials represent societal fear of female agency and were an attempt to force women into a subordinate role through violence and fearmongering. However, despite these disagreements, both agree that the trials were essentially a collective societal response to a perceived threat to the Puritan social structure. The trials served as an archaic mode of purging the society of those who violated its norms. While the authors' opinions on who posed this threat to Puritan society differ, the broad structure of their respective explanations for the crisis are remarkably similar. Boyer and Nissenbaum refer to the trials as "not simply a personal quarrel, an economic dispute, or even a struggle for power, but a mortal conflict involving the very nature of the community itself."[40] A Puritan was raised to "distrust his private will, to perceive it as the 'old Adam' which, above all, constituted original sin."[41] If the will could not be tamed, then it had to be eradicated from society to stave off spiritual ruin. Karlsen expresses the threat women posed to society in essentially the same fashion. She asserts that Puritans valued hierarchy and order above all else. Like Boyer and Nissenbaum, she also argues that the maintenance of

[39] Hall, *Worlds of Wonder,* 195.
[40] Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 103.
[41] Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 104.

this strict hierarchical system required a systematic eradication of the private will. People who refused to accept their "place in the social order were the very embodiments of evil."[42] While all disorderly people posed a threat to the hierarchical Puritan model, Karlsen believed that women threatened it most of all. Just as Boyer and Nissenbaum cite capitalists in Salem Town as the manifestation of the Devil infiltrating the holy experiment, Karlsen uses this same conception of the Puritan value structure to posit instead that empowered women were perceived as agents of the Devil's desire to "topple the whole hierarchical system."[43] For both Boyer and Nissenbaum and Karlsen, witchcraft accusations served as Salem's defense against anyone who strayed from the imperative repression of self-interest and dared to impose the personal will on the outside world.

It is no surprise that Boyer and Nissenbaum and Karlsen operate within this similar framework, as Karlsen was directly influenced by *Salem Possessed*. In writing *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, Karlsen built on the facets of *Salem Possessed* that she found unproblematic, reassessing parts that she felt ignored the role of misogyny in the crisis. Thus, parts of Karlsen's argument assume some of Boyer and Nissenbaum's most airtight claims, while others openly refute their assertions. Boyer and Nissenbaum spend a large portion of *Salem Possessed* discussing how the town's institutional weakness and chronic buildup of social tension allowed for such a violent and unique outburst. The genius of their thorough analysis transforms the mysterious and seemingly unexplainable Salem Witchcraft Outbreak into an understandable result of high tensions in a community ill-equipped to handle disputes through the organs of government. This analysis of the divide from Salem Town and the resulting decentralization of power that kept Salem Village from gaining autonomy renders intelligible the witchcraft paranoia that occurred there. Without this context, it is difficult to understand why a similar response did not occur in other parts of New England similarly confronted by the emergence of the capitalist model. The infamous witch trials happened in Salem, and only in Salem, because "the Village's institutional arrangements were unusual—indeed, nearly unprecedented—in seventeenth-century Massachusetts. Salem Village was virtually the first Massachusetts community to enter for a protracted period this gray area in

[42] Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 181.
[43] Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 181.

which its separate existence was given legal recognition, but in such a way as to deny it any real autonomy."[44] Unlike in communities with real governmental structure, disputes arising in Salem Village festered until they involved the entire community. Through an analysis of town records, geographical data, and land deeds, Boyer and Nissenbaum expose the extent of the decentralization and exploitation of Salem Village, and how this structural instability led to the unprecedented scale of the Salem Witchcraft Outbreak.

Karlsen simultaneously takes for granted and critiques this central structural component of Boyer and Nissenbaum's argument. Karlsen undoubtedly accepts the reality of Salem's unique institutional weakness and its role in escalating the crisis. However, she also pushes back against Boyer and Nissenbaum by pointing out the issues with their narrow focus on Salem. Boyer and Nissenbaum use the specific conditions of Salem to explain the witchcraft outbreak as a struggle over the very nature of the community, a struggle between the exploited farmers and the beneficiaries of the new capitalist system. While their argument is compelling in the singular context of Salem, it does not really fit into the wider context of witchcraft accusations throughout New England. By adopting a broader focus on witchcraft accusations across all of New England, Karlsen aims to demonstrate how, while the events at Salem were an escalation, they were not an aberration. The victims of Salem's witch trials fell into the same demographic category as those persecuted on a smaller scale across all of New England: they were typically women who deviated from their societal role of subordination.[45] While the institutional weakness of Salem allowed for accusations to occur on a larger scale than in other places, "the Salem outbreak created only a slight wrinkle in this established fabric of suspicion."[46] Rather than a unique crisis, Salem was simply a more obvious manifestation of pre-established and universally enforced rules for women in Puritan New England. For Karlsen, Boyer and Nissenbaum's specific focus on Salem exposes serious issues with their argument. By ignoring the role misogyny played in Salem, they fail to see how previous victims of witchcraft accusations in the 1640s and 1650s fit the same description as the Salem witches. Karlsen's scope is far wider because her underlying argument isn't about Salem—it is about Puritan New England as a whole. Regardless of

[44] Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 51.
[45] Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 116.
[46] Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 116.

whether they were accused in Salem in 1692 or in Hartford in 1647, the criteria for witches stayed consistent. "However varied their backgrounds and economic positions, as women without brothers or women without sons, they stood in the way of the orderly transmission of property from one generation of males to another."[47] By focusing solely on Salem, Boyer and Nissenbaum may have missed the larger trend of witchcraft accusations and wildly misinterpreted the crisis.

While Karlsen pushes back on Boyer and Nissenbaum's glaring omission of the role of misogyny in the Salem Witch Trials, she agrees that economic tensions played a large role in the crisis. The tensions created by Salem Town's exploitation of Salem Village fuel Boyer and Nissenbaum's explanation of the trials. They point to the conflict preceding the witch trials, the appointment of Salem Village's new minister, as a clear example of the factions on either side of the subsequent witch-hunt. Through an analysis of Salem Village's tax records, they observe that the poorest residents of Salem Village supported Samuel Parris' appointment as village minister, while the richest residents largely opposed it.[48] Similarly, most of Parris' supporters lived in the northwestern region of the Village, furthest from Salem Town, while those who opposed him lived in the eastern region of the Village, close to the Town. The members of the pro-Parris faction were united in their exclusion from the economic success of Salem Town. In contrast to the Town's prosperity, they faced shrinking plots of land and economic stagnation.[49] Deprived of any political agency in Salem's governmental superstructure, Samuel Parris and his supporters felt that "the total thrust of that commercial development [in Salem Town] represented a looming moral threat with implications of the most fundamental sort."[50] Thus, their economic grievances fueled their initiation of the witch trials in an attempt to combat the agents of "private will" they felt had led to their increasingly destitute lives.[51] Samuel Parris himself initiated the entire panic. For Boyer and Nissenbaum, the factionalism at the heart of the trials was a direct result of capitalist exploitation.

[47] Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 116.
[48] Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 82.
[49] Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 90.
[50] Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 105.
[51] Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 109.

Karlsen agrees that economics played a critical role in the crisis, but challenges Boyer and Nissenbaum's assessment of this role. Rather than simply driving the tension that undergirded the trials, she argues that economic clashes served to expose the already underlying "fear of independent women that lay at the heart of New England's nightmare."[52] In her opinion, Boyer and Nissenbaum expose the centrality of economic issues in men's lives, but totally fail to notice how women "were profoundly affected by these concerns."[53] Economic instability exacerbated the resentment men already harbored towards women who refused to remain subordinate. As resources in Salem became more and more scarce, struggling men began to see widows and other propertied women as seriously threatening "obstacles to property and prosperity."[54] For men struggling to gain enough property to support their families and start their public lives, widows posed a direct barrier to their "inheritances long denied."[55] Boyer and Nissenbaum posit that the female victims of witchcraft accusations were persecuted for their participation in the burgeoning Salem Town economy rather than simply because of their gender. However, Karlsen starkly asserts that her "research does not support the idea (as Boyer and Nissenbaum's argument about Salem suggests) that these women were beneficiaries of the new economic order."[56] Rather, those accused of being witches "stood symbolically opposed to—and were therefore subversive of—that order, in that they did not accept their assigned place within it."[57] Thus, unlike Boyer and Nissenbaum's assertion that female witches simply happened to be beneficiaries of emerging capitalism, Karlsen asserts that "the daughters of Eve" instead became the scapegoats of Salem Village's economic woes.[58] Faced with economic suffering, men reverted to internalized misogyny to purge the society of any woman who posed a threat to their acquisition of property. In the context of Karlsen's overarching argument about misogyny's role in witchcraft accusations, economic tension simply served to aggravate the underlying fears of female autonomy that threatened the male hold on society.

[52] Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 213.
[53] Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 214.
[54] Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 217.
[55] Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 217.
[56] Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 217.
[57] Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 217.
[58] Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 217.

These differing views of the role of the economic tensions that plagued Salem in the late 17th century indicate profound differences in how Boyer and Nissenbaum and Karlsen explain the witch-hunt crisis. The Salem Witchcraft Outbreak was undisputedly spurred by economic tensions. For Boyer and Nissenbaum, these tensions pitted the farmers clinging to a dying Winthropian dream of New England society against the emerging merchant class moving on to a new epoch of societal organization. Economic inequalities, tensions over money, and squabbles over land fueled the underlying dispute over the social structure and the morality of Salem. For Karlsen, this explanation of the crisis severely misses the mark, ignoring the suffering of women in favor of focusing on lofty ideas about the morality of society. For her, the economic tensions in Salem instead exacerbated the underlying fear of female agency.

Despite their differences of opinion on what undergirded the trials, Karlsen and Boyer and Nissenbaum both attempt to contextualize the madness of Salem by bringing in modern social theories. While both offer exceptional and relatively accurate explanations of the crisis, they run the risk of eisegesis that threatens any attempt at reading modern theories into past contexts. In positing modern views of economic exploitation and feminism at the heart of the crisis, they miss the dominance of religious motives for the actual people who carried out the trials. Hall's *Worlds of Wonder: Days of Judgement* attempts to explain the crisis not through the lens of modern theories but instead through the mindset of 17th century New England. He analyzes the messages of the clergy, the popular books of the day, and the diaries of New England residents to develop a conception of popular sentiment at the time of the Salem Witch Trials. While Boyer and Nissenbaum and Karlsen's economic and gender-based explanations of the crisis are more fulfilling to the tastes of a modern reader, Hall's work does not fall prey to the dangers of eisegesis and is relatively unproblematic.

Unlike Boyer and Nissenbaum and Karlsen, Hall's book does not focus entirely on witchcraft. Rather, it offers a comprehensive discussion of the role of magic and wonder in New England popular culture. Hall strives to determine which cultural beliefs and religious convictions motivated the perpetrators of the Salem Witch Trials. The residents of Puritan New England were immersed in a culture teeming with deep fears of eternal damnation and dark magic. Popular books warned of the fires of Hell and told stories of those who had been tricked into betraying God. The clergy, hoping to inspire religious participation, co-opted

these cultural fears and used them to push their own narratives of impending judgment. This alarmism profoundly affected the colonists, especially in times of crisis. Strange sicknesses or natural disasters would often stir a profound belief that God was punishing members of society for their sins. The general sentiment of the time was that the Puritans' once holy experiment was moving further and further from God's grace. Thus, Witchcraft accusations became a mode of societal agency over Salem's perceived descent into sin. Rituals like the fast, the thanksgiving, and the witch-hunt, were desperate attempts to establish the holiness of the community and preserve God's protection.[59] While Hall does not reduce the witch trials to a method of ensuring religious purity, his linkage of magic and Christianity does expose that, for many, magic was fundamentally tied to deep religious convictions. In perpetuating witch-hunts, these colonists were deeply motivated by fears for their own salvation and for that of their families.

Boyer and Nissenbaum and Karlsen fail to touch on the Puritans' relationship with magic or with their Christian convictions. In both of their books, Puritan norms and culture are presented in a very secular 20th-century fashion. Both analyses of the Salem Witchcraft Outbreak attempt to expose the underlying economic and sexist motivations as the true heart of the conflict. However, by looking past the professed religious motives of the day, these authors may have completely misunderstood the motives of the trial's perpetrators and mischaracterized the crisis. The closest Boyer and Nissenbaum get to a discussion of the deep religious beliefs of the residents of Salem is their discussion of what they characterize as the moral crisis that emerging capitalism posed. They go on to lay out the Winthropian dream of Puritan society and discuss the norm of repressing self-interest in favor of the common good. For them, this moral issue is supposed to explain the "passionate emotions" that animated the factional disputes in Salem.[60] However, for Boyer and Nissenbaum, this moral crisis is simply a mask for the underlying economic dispute. Aside from discussing religion's social power, and briefly discussing sexism in European theology, Karlsen also gives short shrift to any meaningful discussion of the role of religious belief in the Salem Witch Trials. This is a massive oversight. There were no atheists in colonial New England. Nor were there any powerful enlightenment deists in the vein of the American Founding

[59] Hall, *Worlds of Wonder,* 170.
[60] Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 103.

Fathers. While levels of religious participation varied, the colonists of New England were immersed in a religious and supernatural world. They often acted for explicitly religious reasons—which were not simply masking underlying motivations. Their world was one of danger and uncertainty. A mixture of religion and magic helped them explain their existence and gave them agency in a world full of "invisible forces" and "mystery."[61] While Hall admits that these widely believed tales of magic and wonder became "weapons in a complex game of politics," he discourages the dismissal of the beliefs of Salem's residents as a simple cover for underlying motivations.[62] Salem's residents truly believed that wonders were signs and predictions of God's judgment.[63] Hall's analysis of confessions and diaries from the era exposes a deep societal fear of judgment and a sense of vulnerability. While such fear often manifested only in times of crisis, it deeply affected the actions of the colonists. These were deeply God-fearing people petrified of the fires of Hell. They often acted in ways incomprehensible to the modern reader in order to secure their salvation and uphold God's favor for the community. By failing to discuss the religious motivations of the perpetrators of the witch trials, Boyer and Nissenbaum and Karlsen may have missed the primary motivating factor for the members of New England society.

Accurately understanding the Salem Witch Trials requires a blending of Boyer and Nissenbaum, Karlsen, and Hall's analyses. Appreciating the residents of 17th century Salem's religious convictions and deep belief in magic is essential to correctly assess their motivations for and justification of the witch-hunts as an appropriate response to crises. As Hall asserts, these colonists genuinely believed in both magic and portents, and saw the witch-hunt as a way to protect the spiritual health of the community. Hall's analysis, while essential to understanding why witch-hunts were an instinctive response to crisis, lacks a meaningful explanation of the social tensions in Salem in 1692 that prompted such an unprecedented reaction. To truly understand Salem, and to uncover these underlying tensions, Boyer and Nissenbaum and Karlsen's commentaries become necessary. While Hall offers a more adequate commentary on the reason the Puritans resorted to witch-hunts, these authors illuminate the deeper level of meaning underlying the seemingly mysterious crisis.

[61] Hall, *Worlds of Wonder,* 94.
[62] Hall, *Worlds of Wonder,* 94.
[63] Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 114.

Both of their arguments explain the tensions that erupted in the witch trials, filling in the gaps in Hall's analysis.

David Hall best explains the real significance of religious practice for colonists in New England. Without his comprehensive discussion of widely believed wonder stories, rituals essential to societal cohesion, and widespread fear of damnation, it is impossible to truly understand why Salem turned to witch trials as a mode of dealing with societal disaster. Neither Boyer and Nissenbaum nor Karlsen fully appreciate the religious motives of the New England colonists; nor do they fully account for the very real fear of witchcraft and the Devil. Hall touches briefly on the way in which tensions between the general population and the church may have caused some to actively seek out the Devil. However, his book is otherwise not concerned with explaining which social tensions truly led to the Salem outbreak. His goal is to demonstrate why the colonists resorted to witch-hunts in times of crisis. The faith of Puritan New England was a faith of action. For the colonists, "religion was a matter of incessant striving to defeat the evil in the world as well as in oneself."[64] Especially in the face of disaster, the church became a source of understanding, relief, and protection for the common people. Thus, when societal tensions erupted in Salem in the late 17th century, the residents turned to the church to cleanse the land of sin and restore harmony and cohesion. The Great Witch-Hunt was the residents' way of doing so. Without Hall's discussion of the deep belief in magic widespread among both the clergy and the general public, the witch-hunt makes little sense as a response to social tension. It seems like little more than a mask for ulterior economic motives. Discounting the legitimate religious convictions of the Salem residents fundamentally misrepresents the crisis. Hall's analysis is essential to contextualizing the claims made in *Salem Possessed* and *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*.

While Hall gets a lot right, he does not adequately explain exactly what underlying tension resulted in the Salem trials. Hall makes it clear that the witch-hunt was about "cleansing, reconciliation, [and] affirmations of authority."[65] In closing his discussion on Salem, he touches on how the trials demonstrate "the intensity with which these people valued the coherence of the body social."[66] The Salem trials failed to secure this valued

[64] Hall, *Worlds of Wonder,* 121.
[65] Hall, *Worlds of Wonder,* 196.
[66] Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 196.

cohesion, instead exacerbating social tensions. This failure led to the cessation of witch-hunts in New England. Residents and ministers realized that cohesion was no longer easily enforceable and that crackdowns on growing pluralism, like witch-hunts, would only further damage the community. In the face of this realization, the Winthropian goal of unity lost some of its significance. This lofty ideal of conformity was seen as unachievable and not worth the social turmoil that accompanied its enforcement. In this short wrap-up of the trials, Hall barely scratches the surface of Boyer and Nissenbaum's analysis of the crisis. While *Worlds of Wonder: Days of Judgement* is essential to understand how witch-hunts were a mode of social cohesion and spiritual health, it does not take the next step to truly explain why the Winthropian dream died on Witch's Hill. Hall's argument is the safest and least problematic of the three—it raises little fear of mischaracterization or eisegesis. Yet this very strength results in a shallow interpretation of Salem's social dynamics and the ulterior motives of its residents. To satisfy the yearning for deeper answers about the tensions at play in Salem, and about the ramifications of the crisis, Boyer and Nissenbaum and Karlsen are necessary reading.

Boyer and Nissenbaum's most essential contribution to the discussion of the Salem Witch Trials is their analysis of the tensions over the Winthropian communal values. Hall briefly states that the witch trials led to moral reckoning and a rethinking of Puritan society's practice of strictly enforcing societal cohesion. Boyer and Nissenbaum expand on Hall's limited analysis and fully explain this phenomenon. They depict the specific social tensions present in Salem that necessitated a witch-hunt to cleanse society of sin and enforce coherence. Conflict between Western farm labor and the Eastern merchant class, aggravated by the rise of the capitalist economy, led to serious conflict over the way the community should be organized. Would New England abandon Winthrop's instruction to "rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, our community as members of the same body?"[67] Were the colonists willing to renounce their fundamental goal of a well-ordered society and religious errand for a capitalist system based on individual will and economic prosperity? This was the core tension tearing Salem apart. The witch trials served as a final attempt by the farmers to reassert the dominance of the Winthropian dream—an attempt that failed. The

[67] Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 104.

trials served as the dying breath of Winthropian doctrine, forcing the society to accept the pluralism growing in their midst. Hall simply fails to acknowledge this central reality of the crisis.

Boyer and Nissenbaum's *Salem Possessed* is also essential to understanding why this tragedy happened in Salem and not anywhere else. While the narrow focus of their analysis somewhat problematically protects their neo-Marxist narrative, it also helps to answer the looming question: Why Salem? Only Salem's institutional weakness can explain why the community fell subject to "a strikingly high level of internal bickering and disarray."[68] The lack of political agency afforded to the disaffected residents of Salem Village meant their limited outlets for social grievances were "archaic" societal modes of authority, like the witch-hunt.[69] While Boyer and Nissenbaum's overtly neo-Marxist viewpoint can at times prove constraining, they alone present a satisfying explanation of Salem's unique vulnerability to the paranoid violence of the witch trials.

Karlsen's viewpoint tempers both Boyer and Nissenbaum and Hall's descriptions of the crisis. While Karlsen's argument has twinges of eisegesis (especially in her fifth chapter, where she claims to find evidence of European misogyny in the New England consciousness), no explanation of the Salem Witch Trials can be complete without a discussion of misogyny. Hall and Boyer and Nissenbaum simply gloss over the stark reality that "the story of witchcraft is primarily the story of women."[70] The very description of a witch was associated with female characteristics. From 1620-1725, 78% of those accused of witchcraft were female.[71] A witch was someone who defied the social norms of Puritan society. They not only expressed dissatisfaction with their social position but often criticized ecclesiastical and political leadership in an outrightly confrontational manner. Women's forced status of subordination made them more likely to express dissatisfaction with their lives and assert their personal will publicly. When they did so, they posed a threat to the colony's hierarchy and social cohesion. Even women who came into power through inheritance, through no fault of their own, represented a threat to Puritan and patriarchal hierarchy. To fully appreciate the religious and social reckoning of the Salem Witch Trials,

[68] Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 45.
[69] Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed*, 109.
[70] Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, xxi.
[71] Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, 47.

it is critical to understand the ways in which these events sought to bind women in a subordinate role. Thus, Karlsen's *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman* is necessary to showcase how other accounts of the crisis, like *Salem Possessed*, gloss over gender to focus on underlying social issues.

The Salem Witch Trials present a scholarly quandary. The colonists of 17th century New England lived in a world fundamentally different from ours. Theirs was a world in which religious motives were often the only acceptable public justification for an individual's actions. However, these religious justifications were often sensationalized and covered ulterior motives. Thus, understanding the Salem Witch Trials requires a tricky balancing act of considering the colonist's own religious justifications and motivations among the other social and economic motives that undoubtedly influenced their actions. David Hall provides the explanation of beliefs about magic in New England necessary to understand the cultural phenomenon of witch-hunts. However, it is Boyer and Nissenbaum and Karlsen whose analysis truly dives into the psyche of the residents of Salem to flesh out the underlying social tensions that so forcefully animated the Salem crisis.

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