

Sample Paper 2

Sonya Lancaster

ENGL 320; MWF 2:00

22 October 2008

Grade: B-

Modern Medical Explanations for the Phenomena Known as Spectral Evidence in the Salem Witch Trials

It is very difficult for the modern mind to wrap itself around the phenomena which occurred at the Salem Witch Trials some 300 years ago. Consequently, the readers of Cotton Mather's *Wonders of the Invisible World* and other accounts of the trial, sentencing, and executions of supposed witches in New England often do the historical literature a great disservice in shrugging off the legal evidence presented in the cases and raising an angry brow to what many suppose to be a deep fracture in a young nation's budding justice system. The presentation of young girls, some merely school-age children, the claims of supernatural happenings as evidence against an accused, and the frantic corralling and execution of countless (mostly) innocent men and women—from children as young as four to grandmothers in their nineties—all contribute to this modern generalization of contempt for those involved in the proceedings. The literary figure at hand here—Cotton Mather, himself—has been viewed in an unflattering light as a judgment casting Puritan minister, even though he was actually a heavy force in the action to halt the hunts. The accusers, certainly don't have many friends in our modern world, nor do the judges who oversaw these cases. Before rushing to judgment of any of these long-lost figures, however, it is critical to be objective in analyzing the events. The world of 1692 is most certainly a far cry from our world of 2008. And while witchcraft, to (supposed) rational thinkers and the majority of today's scholarly readers, seems to be a ridiculous

impossibility, there remain a small minority of equally modern-minded individuals who would disagree vehemently.

SINCERE BELIEF IN WITCHCRAFT & PSYCHOSOMATIC SYMPTOMS

Many argue that the reality of witchcraft is a very likely answer to the introduction and processing of spectral evidence in the courts. While a small number would argue that there were, in fact, practicing witches capable of possessing supernatural powers, the majority of those arguing this point believe otherwise. The belief instituted here is not so much in the witches themselves, but in the idea of the witches. The absolute fixation on Good vs. Evil at this time endowed many with a sort of single-track mindset. This flame of obsession was easily fanned by the predisposition of the population to be highly superstitious—something which had been imported from England (as is evidenced by the frequent witch hunts and the execution of witches at the stake in England and the rest of Europe). Author Edward Bever explores this idea of a psychosocially induced physical ailment in his article, "Witchcraft Fears and Psychosocial Factors in Disease." One of his many hypotheses on this psychosomatic manifestation is a presence of post-traumatic stress disorder from heavy conflict in the colonies just previous to the trials. He also invests a great deal of stock into the idea that the citizens of Salem were literally scared out of their wits, perhaps in response to their religious grooming and superstitious nature:

"The emotional triggers of stress stimulated by social influences include not only fear (the most obvious one in connection with witchcraft) but also less focused feelings... Fear of witchcraft and belief in (this form of) magic reflect the fact that any strong negative emotion provoked by another person's attitude or actions can cause, or contribute to, physical disorder. (581)"

