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The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England

Handmaidens of the Lord

There is a curious paradox that students of New England witchcraft encounter. The characteristics of the New England witch—demographic, economic, religious, and sexual—emerge from *patterns* found in accusations and in the life histories of the accused; they are not visible in the content of individual accusations or in the ministerial literature. No colonist ever explicitly said why he or she saw witches as women, or particularly as older women. No one explained why some older women were suspect while others were not, why certain sins were signs of witchcraft when committed by women but not when committed by men, or why specific behaviors associated with women aroused witchcraft fears while specific behaviors associated with men did not. Indeed, New Englanders did not openly discuss most of their widely shared assumptions about women-as-witches.

This cultural silence becomes even more puzzling when we consider that many of these assumptions had once been quite openly talked about in the European witchcraft tradition. In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries especially, defenders of the Christian faith spelled out in elaborate detail why they believed women rather than men were likely to join Satan's forces. The reasons they gave are not very different from those evident in the patterns the New England sources reveal. This presses upon us a question of some consequence: Why had once-explicit beliefs about women's proclivity to witchcraft become implicit in their New England setting?

We can probe this question by following the lead of the anthropologist Mary Douglas and other scholars who have explored the social construction of knowledge. In Douglas's analysis, human societies relegate certain information to the category of self-evident truths. Ideas that are treated as self-evident, "as too true to warrant discussion," constitute a society's implicit knowledge. At one time explicit, implicit ideas have not simply been forgotten, but have been "actively thrust out of the way" because they conflict with ideas deemed more suitable to the social order. But the conflict is more apparent than real. In

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the "elusive exchange" between implicit and explicit knowledge, the implicit is "obliquely affirmed" and the society is shielded from challenges to its world view. The implicit resides in a society's symbols, rituals, and myths, which simultaneously describe, reflect, and mask that world view. To understand these processes, implicit and explicit knowledge must be examined together and in the context of their social environment.

In colonial New England, the many connections between "women" and "witchcraft" were implicitly understood. In Europe, several generations before, the connections had still been explicit. Over time, these established "truths" about women's sinfulness had increasingly come into conflict with other ideas about women—ideas latent in Christian thought but brought to the fore by the Reformation and the political, economic, and social transformations that accompanied it. For the Puritans who emigrated to New England in the early seventeenth century, once-explicit assumptions about why witches were women were already self-evident.

The swiftly changing conditions of early settlement left it uncertain at first whether, or how, witchcraft would serve the goals of New England society. Though men in positions of authority believed that certain women were working against the new colonies' interests, others did not see these women as witches. By the late 1640s, however, New Englanders embraced a witchcraft belief system as integral to their social order. Over the course of the seventeenth century, Puritan rituals, symbols, and myths perpetuated the belief that women posed ever-present dangers to human society, but the newer, post-Reformation ideas about women forced colonists to shrink from explicitly justifying this belief. They therefore continued to assume the complex of ideas about women-as-witches as self-evident truths. . . .

Seventeenth-century Puritan writings on women and family life reveal that the sexual hierarchy was at stake for them also, but with this difference: knowledge that detailed, explained, and justified the denigration of women had come into conflict with newer views of women. Though still vital, the old truths had been thrust from sight by the new.

The fundamental tenet of European witchcraft—that women were innately more evil than men—did not fit with other ideas Puritans brought with them to their new world. This tenet was still as necessary to Puritans as it had been for their Catholic predecessors, but it was incompatible with the emphasis Puritanism placed on the priesthood of all believers, on the importance of marriage and family relations, and on the status of women within those relations.

Puritanism took shape in late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England amidst a heated controversy over the nature of women, the value of marriage, and the propriety of women's social roles. The dominant attitude toward women in the popular press and on stage did not differ very much from the views of Catholic witch-hunters except that overall it was less virulent, delivered as often in the form of mockery as invective. According to this opinion, women were evil, whorish, deceitful, extravagant, angry, vengeful, and, of course, insubordinate and proud. Women "are altogether a lumpe of pride," one author maintained in 1609—"a masse of pride, even altogether

made of pride, and nothing else but pride, pride." Considering the nature of women, marriage was at best man's folly; at worst, it was the cause of his destruction.

The problem, as some writers of this school had it, was women's increasing independence, impudence, "masculine" dress, and "masculine" ways. The presence of women in the streets and shops of the new commercial centers was merely symptomatic of their newly found "forwardness" and desire for "liberties." But more than likely it was not so much women's increasing independence in the wake of commercial development that troubled these commentators; rather it was the increasing visibility of women within their traditional but increasingly commercialized occupations. Solutions to the problem, when offered, echoed a 1547 London proclamation that enjoined husbands to "keep their wives in their houses."

Other writers argued that women were equal if not superior to men, called for recognition of the abuse women suffered under men's tyranny, and intimated that society would be better served if economic power resided in women's hands—but their voices were few and barely heard. More often, defenders of women simply took exception to the worst of the misogynists' charges and recounted the contributions women made to the welfare of their families and their society. The most serious challenge to prevailing opinion, however, came from a group of men who shared some of the concerns and goals of women's most avid detractors. Most of these men were Protestant ministers, and they entered the debate indirectly, through their sermons and publications on domestic relations. Though not primarily interested in bettering women's position in society, they found certain transformations in attitudes toward women essential to their own social vision. Among them, it was the Puritan divines—in both old and New England—who mounted the most cogent, most sustained, and most enduring attack on the contemporary wisdom concerning women's inherent evil.

From the publication of Robert Cleaver's *A Godly Form of Householde Governement* in 1598 until at least the appearance of John Cotton's *A Meet Help* in 1699, a number of Puritan ministers did battle with "Misogynists, such as cry out against all women." If they were not unanimous on every point, most of them agreed with John Cotton that women were not "a necessary Evil," but "a necessary good." For justification of this belief, they turned to the Scriptures, to the story of the Creation. God in his infinite wisdom, John Robinson contended, had created woman from man and for man, when he "could find none fit and good enough for the man . . . amongst all the good creatures which he had made." He had made woman *from* man's rib, Samuel Willard noted, "Partly that all might derive Originally from One; Partly that she might be the more Dear and Precious to him, and Beloved by him as a piece of himself." He had made her *for* "man's conveniency and comfort," Cotton said, to be a helpmeet in all his spiritual and secular endeavors and "a most sweet and intimate companion." It followed from both the means and purposes of God's Creation that women and men were "joynt Heirs of salvation," that marriage was an honorable, even ideal state, and that women who fulfilled the purposes of their creation deserved to be praised, not vilified by godly men. In 1598,

Cleaver called men foolish who detested women and marriage. For Cotton, a century later, such men were "a sort of Blasphemers."

What had happened? Why did Puritans (along with their reforming brethren) insist on a shift in attitude that would by the nineteenth century result in a full reversal of a number of sixteenth-century notions about the "innate" qualities of men and women? We can begin to answer this question by considering a few elements critical in bringing about the transformation.

The Puritan challenge to the authority of church and state covered many issues, but one point not in dispute was the necessity of authority itself. Puritans were as disturbed by the lack of order in their society as were their enemies and were as fully committed to the principle of hierarchy. Though Puritanism developed during the period of upheavel that followed the breakup of the feudal order, Puritans were nevertheless determined to smother the sources of upheaval. Like other propertied Englishmen, Puritan men worried especially about masterlessness—insubordination in women, children, servants, vagabonds, beggars, and even in themselves.

Where they differed with other men of property was in their belief that existing authority was both ineffective and misplaced. "Faced with the ineffectuality of authorities in everyday life," one historian has argued, "the Puritans dramatically and emphatically denied the chain of authority in the church and enthroned conscience in its place. . . . The radical solution to social deterioration was not the strengthening of external authority. It was, rather, the internalization of authority itself." Foremost among the lessons Puritans taught was God's insistence on complete submission to divine will as expressed in the Bible and interpreted by ministers and magistrates. Outward compliance was not enough. Individuals who were fully committed to following the laws of God were *self*-controlled, needing only the Scriptures and an educated ministry to guide them on the path of right behavior. Submission to God's will had to be not only complete but voluntary. External discipline was still necessary to control the ungodly, but even they could be taught a measure of self-discipline.

The internal commitment to God's laws was to be inculcated primarily within the family, under the guidance and watchful eye of the head of the household, who conducted family prayer and instilled moral values in his dependents. It was not easy for family heads to ensure willing submission in their dependents, Puritans readily admitted. Minister John Robinson was talking specifically about children when he said that the "stubbornness, and stoutness of mind arising from natural pride . . . must . . . be broken and beaten down, . . . [the] root of actual rebellion both against God and man . . . destroyed," but his remarks reflect the larger Puritan belief in the difficulty of curbing human willfulness. For subordinates to accept their places in the hierarchical order, they must first be disciplined to accept the *sin* in their very tendency to rebel. From there, it was possible to develop enlightened consciences.

The family was also crucial as a symbol of a hierarchical society. Functioning as both "a little Church" and "a little Commonwealth," it served as a model of relationships between God and his creatures and as a model for all social relations. As husband, father, and master to wife, children, and servants,

the head of the household stood in the same relationship to them as the minister did to his congregants and as the magistrate did to his subjects. Also, his relationship to them mirrored God's to him. Indeed, the authority of God was vested in him as household head, and his relationship to God was immediate: he served God directly. There was therefore no need for a priesthood to mediate between God and family heads. Other household members had immortal souls and could pray to God directly, but they served God indirectly by serving their superiors within the domestic frame. This model enhanced the position of all male heads of household and made any challenge to their authority a challenge to God's authority. It thereby more firmly tied other family members into positions of subordination.

The relationship of household heads to other family members fit within a larger Puritan world view. God had created the world, Puritans maintained, in the form of a great "Chain of Being" in which man was both above other creatures and subordinate to the Deity. God had ordained that human relationships were to be similarly patterned, with husbands superior to wives, parents to children, masters to servants, ministers to congregants, and magistrates to subjects. All, however, were subordinate to God. In each of these relations, inferiors served God by serving their superiors. While Puritans viewed the parent-child relation as a natural one, all other unequal relationships were described as voluntary, based on a covenant between the individuals concerned. God also required that family heads enter into another contractual relationship, called a "family covenant." Under this agreement, men promised to ensure obedience in all their dependents, in return for God's promise of prosperity.

Finally, the family also guided children in the right selection of their "particular callings." For the English divine William Perkins, particular callings were of two types. The first was God's call to individuals to enter into one or more of the several kinds of unequal social relations (husband/wife, parent/child, master/servant, and so on), relations that were "the essence and foundation of any society, without which the society cannot be." The second was God's call to specific kinds of employment by which individuals earned their livelihoods. In each case, God did the calling, but children had to endeavor to know what God had in mind for them, and parents were responsible to see that their charges made appropriate choices. Once chosen, callings were to be attended to conscientiously, not for honor or material reward but in the service of God. What Perkins did not say was that for Puritans the second sort of calling did not apply to females. Woman was called for only one employment, the work of a wife. . . .

As the old idea of woman as a necessary evil was gradually transformed into the idea of woman as a necessary good, the fear and hostility that men felt toward women remained. The old view of woman was suppressed, but it made its presence known in the many faults and tensions that riddled Puritan formulations on woman. Though largely unspoken, the old assumptions modified the seemingly more enlightened knowledge Puritans imparted. The new discourse, "first uttered out of the pulpit," was in fact dedicated to affirming the beliefs of the old, but in ways that would better serve male interests in a society that was itself being transformed.

The belief that woman was evil continued to reside in the myth at the core of Puritan culture—the biblical tale of human origins. Really two myths in one, it is the story of Creation in the Garden of Eden and the story of Adam and Eve's fall from grace. Our concern is mostly with the latter, but the two tales are nonetheless interdependent—the joys of Paradise making comprehensible the agonies of Paradise lost.

In their version of human origins, the Puritan clergy were more ambiguous than usual about when they were discussing "man, male and female," and when they were discussing men only. Despite its many contradictions, this creation myth allowed the Puritans to establish their two most cherished truths: hierarchy and order. Even before the Fall, they maintained, God had designated woman as both inferior to and destined to serve man—though her original inferiority was based "in innocency" and without "grief." Woman's initial identity was not—like man's—as a separate individual, but as a wife in relation to a husband. The very purpose of her creation allowed Puritans to extend the idea of her subordination *as wife* to her subordination *as woman*, in much the same manner as Anglican minister Matthew Griffiths did when he observed: "No sooner was she a Woman, but presently a Wife; so that Woman and Wife are of the same standing." So interchangeable were these terms in the minds of the clergy that they could barely conceive of woman's relationship to God except through a husband.

Woman's position in the Puritan version of Eden was analogous to that of the angels and the animals. Angels were formed before Creation as morally perfect spiritual beings. Though angels were clearly above man in the hierarchy of Creation, and though man was not to have dominion over them, God would require the angels to "minister for man." Animals were even closer to the position of woman since they too were created specifically to serve man.

The Puritan account of the Fall follows the standard Christian version in its general outlines. Discontented with their position in the hierarchical order, Adam and Eve succumbed to the Devil's temptation to eat the forbidden fruit, thus challenging God's supremacy over them and rebelling against the order of Creation. Guilty of pride, both were punished, but Eve doubly because she gave in to the temptation first, thereby causing man's downfall.

Puritan elaborations on this tale are revealing. According to Samuel Willard, Adam and Eve were both principal causes of man's fall, but there were also three instrumental causes: the serpent, the Devil, and the woman. Exonerating the serpent as a creature lacking the ability to reason, he went on to discuss the two "blamable Causes," the Devil and Eve. The events of the Fall originated with the Devil, he said, explaining that the word "Devil" was a collective term for a group of apostate angels. Filled with pride in their positions as the most noble of God's creations, discontented that they were assigned to serve "such a peasant as man," envious of what they saw as a "greater honour conferred upon him," and consumed with malice against God and man, the apostate angels sought revenge by plotting man's downfall. What motivated them was not their displeasure at their place in the hierarchical order, Willard claimed, for only God was above them. Rather it was their "supreme contempt for their employment." United by their evil intentions, they are called "Satan"

in the Scriptures as a sign that they had traded their natural subjection to God for a diabolical subjection to the "Prince of Evil." In the process of accomplishing their ends, they were the first to speak falsehoods in Eden, becoming in the process blasphemers against God and murderers of the bodies and souls of men. "They seduced them . . . and thus in procuring of man's fall, they compleated their own; in making of him miserable, they made themselves Devils."

Eve's story—and her motivations—were more complex. Entering the body of the serpent, the Devil addressed himself to Eve, Willard said, suggesting to her that if she ate the fruit he offered, she would become godlike. Her senses suddenly deluded, she gave in to her lusts: "the lusts of the flesh, in giving way to carnal appetite, good for food; the lust of the eye, in entertaining the desirable aspect of the forbidden fruit, pleasant to the eyes; [and] the lusts of pride, in aspiring after more wisdom than God saw meet to endow a creature withal, to make one wise." Easily seduced, she in turn seduced Adam, thereby implicating him in her guilt. She commended the fruit, "makes offers to him, insinuates herself into him, backs all that the Serpent had said, and attracts him to joint consent with her in the great Transgression." Eve was moved not only by her sensuality but, like Satan, by pride. Her action bespoke the pride of a desire for knowledge, and by extension for God's position, rather than the resentment of her obligation to serve man.

Adam and Eve were both punished for the sin of pride, for rebelling against the order of Creation, but Eve rebelled both as part of man and as man's "other." For this reason, Willard called her both a principal and an instrumental cause of man's fall. According to Willard, when God commanded man not to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge, "though their prohibition be expresst as given to Adam in the singular [necessarily so, as Eve had yet to be created in the chapter Willard was citing]. . . yet Eve understood it as comprehending them both." Thus she shared with Adam responsibility as a principal in the matter. "Yet, looking upon her as made for the man, and by the Creators law owing a subordination to him, so she may also be looked upon as instrumental." Elaborating on this point, Willard argued that having been created as his helpmeet, she ought to have encouraged and fortified him in that obedience which God had required of them both. Instead she became a mischief, "an occasion, yea a blamable cause of his ruin." For this, the Lord placed his "special curse" upon the female sex: "Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception: in sorrow shalt thou bring forth children: and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee."

Part of woman's sin, then, was the seduction of man; another part was her failure to serve man. Though Willard never explicitly charged woman with having the same sinister motives as Satan, he did strengthen the association between these two instruments of man's fall by defining her as the Devil's willing agent: she acted "upon deliberation," he said, "and was voluntary in what she did."

In contrast, Adam (as distinguished from "man") lacked any motive for his sin. His role in the Fall was essentially passive. When God confronted the pair about their sin Adam defended himself by pointing the accusatory finger at his mate: "the woman which thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the

tree, and I did eat." Willard exonerated Adam by supporting his disclaimer and by describing him as an unwitting victim of his temptress wife: "Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, was in the transgression." The burden of Adam's guilt was thereby lifted, and the blame placed on Eve. If "man's" sin in the Garden of Eden was pride, it was woman subsumed in man who committed it. Her male counterpart deserved a share of the punishment, but merely for allowing himself to be made "a servant of servants." Willard reinforced this point in his description of the sins that made human beings like devils. It is by now a familiar list: pride, discontent, envy, malice, lying, blasphemy, seduction, and murder. Some were explicitly Eve's, others implicitly hers; none were attributed to Adam.

Eve was the main symbol of woman-as-evil in Puritan culture. She was, in many ways, the archetypal witch. Whatever the new beliefs affirmed about women's potential goodness, the persistence of Eve as a figure in the Puritan cosmology signals the endurance of older if more covert beliefs. Women could be taught to internalize the authority of men, Puritans thought—but they knew that the sweeping denial of self they demanded of women was "too bitter a pill to be well digested," that it had to "be sweetened" before it could "be swallowed." The story of the Fall taught the lesson that female submission would not come easily—not, certainly, through a theological reformulation alone. Their continuing references to the Fall bespeak Puritan belief that the subjection of the daughters of Eve, whether religious, economic, or sexual, would have to be coerced. That was the message of Eve's punishment.

Ever fearful that women's conversion to virtuous womanhood was incomplete, ministers sometimes resorted to more vivid images of physical and psychological coercion. They warned the Puritan husband that he should not "bee satisfied that hee hath robed his wife of her virginitie, but in that hee hath possession and use of her will." Women tempted to abandon their chastity, and therefore their God, were told to resolve "that if ever these Other Lords do after this Obtain any thing from you, it shall be by the Violence of a Rape." For women who had yet to learn the necessity of subjection came the ever-present threat of additional punishment: "Christ will sorely revenge the rebellion of evill wives." Though the clergy protested again and again that the position of wives was different from that of servants, when they tried to picture what husbands' position would be like if the power relations within marriage were reversed, they envisioned men kept as vassals or enchained as slaves.

Ministers described this reversal of the sexual order as a complete perversion of the laws of God and the laws of nature. The most frequently employed symbols of female usurpers were perversions of those other beings destined to serve man: angels and animals. For woman to be "a man-kinde woman or a masterly wife" conjured up images of fallen angels, demons, and monsters, distortions of nature in every respect.

The tensions within the new ideology suggest that Puritans could no more resolve the ambivalence in their feelings than they could the contradictions

in their thought. There was a deep and fundamental split in the Puritan psyche where women were concerned: their two conflicting sets of beliefs about women coexisted, albeit precariously, one on a conscious level, the other layers beneath. If woman was good—if she was chaste, submissive, deferential—then who was this creature whose image so frequently, if so fleetingly, passed through the mind and who so regularly controlled the night? Who was this female figure who was so clearly what woman was not? The ministers were not the only ones who lived with this tension, of course. The dual view of women affected everyone, male and female alike. Still, as the primary arbiters of culture in an age when God still reigned supreme, the clergy played the crucial role not only in creating the virtuous wife but in perpetuating belief in her malevolent predecessor.

In colonial New England, the intensity of this psychic tension is best seen in the writings of Cotton Mather—perhaps simply because he wrote so much, perhaps because his own ambivalence was so extreme.

In 1692, Mather published his lengthiest treatise on womanhood, *Ornaments for the Daughters of Zion*. His purpose, as he stated in his preface, was "to advocate virtue among those who can not forget their Ornaments and to promote a fear of God in the female sex." He was concerned both with women's behavior and with their relationship to God. He devoted much of his attention to the celebration of individual women, mostly biblical figures, whose lives were distinguished by quiet piety and godly ways. He presented them as models for New England women to emulate.

That same year, Mather completed *Wonders of the Invisible World,* his major justification for the Salem witchcraft trials and executions. Mather's focus here was on the behavior of witches and their relationships with the Devil—particularly women's complicity in Satan's attempts to overthrow the churches of New England. The book featured the witchcraft testimony presented against five of the accused at Salem, four of whom were women.

The nearly simultaneous publication of these two mirror-image works was not, it would seem, merely coincidental. Though Mather's witchcraft book does not explicitly address the reason why most of his subjects are women, his witches are nonetheless embodiments of peculiarly female forms of evil. Proud, discontented, envious, and malicious, they stood in direct contrast to the embodiments of female good in *Ornaments,* all of whom fully accepted the place God had chosen for them and regarded a willing and joyous submission to his will as the ultimate expression of their faith. Unable to ignore the profound uneasiness these two diametrically opposed views generated, Mather, like other New Englanders, relegated the still-powerful belief in women's evil to witches, on whom his fear and hatred could be unleashed. He was thereby freed to lavish praise on virtuous women—women who repressed the "witch" in themselves. Though his resolution allowed him to preserve man's superior position in the universe, Mather's heavy reliance in *Ornaments* on figures of Eve reveals how very delicate the balance was.

Mather's resolution was also his culture's. In the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Puritans and other like-minded Protestants were engaged in the task of transforming an ideology, formulating beliefs that would better serve them in a world in which many of the old hierarchies and truths were no longer useful or plausible. They devised a new conception of man which, though drawn from the old, increasingly conceived him as an individual in relation to his God and his neighbors. It was a formulation that better fit the new economic order. The new man required a new woman: not an individual like himself, but a being who made possible his mobility, his accumulation of property, his sense of self-importance, and his subjection to new masters. By defining women as capable and worthy of the helpmeet role, the Puritan authorities offered a powerful inducement for women to embrace it. But they also recognized that the task they had set for themselves was a difficult one. 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.

As the witchcraft trials and executions show, only force could ensure such a sweeping denial of self. New England witches were women who resisted the new truths, either symbolically or in fact. In doing so, they were visible—and profoundly disturbing—reminders of the potential resistance in all women.

Puritans' witchcraft beliefs are finally inseparable from their ideas about women and from their larger religious world view. The witch was both the negative model by which the virtuous woman was defined and the focus for Puritan explanations of the problem of evil. In both respects, Puritan culture resembles other cultures with witchcraft beliefs: the witch image sets off in stark relief the most cherished values of these societies. A central element in these cosmologies, witches explain the presence of not only illness, death, and personal misfortune, but of attitudes and behavior antithetical to the culture's moral universe.

For Puritans, hierarchy and order were the most cherished values. People who did not accept their place in the social order were the very embodiments of evil. Disorderly women posed a greater threat than disorderly men because the male/female relation provided the very model of and for all hierarchical relations, and because Puritans hoped that the subordination of women to men would ensure men's stake in maintaining those relations. Many years ago the anthropologist Monica Hunter Wilson said that witchcraft beliefs were "the standardized nightmare of a group, and . . . the comparative analysis of such nightmares . . . one of the keys to the understanding of society." New England's nightmare was what the historian Natalie Zemon Davis has called "women on top": women as the willing agents of the Prince of Evil in his effort to topple the whole hierarchical system.