Escaping Salem

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF RICHARD GODBEER

Dr. Richard Godbeer is the Charles W. Battey Distinguished Professor of History and the Director of the Hall Center for the Humanities at the University of Kansas. Dr. Godbeer received his BA form Oxford University in 1984 and his PhD from Brandeis University in 1989. He has held teaching positions at the University of California Riverside, the University of Miami, and Virginia Commonwealth University. As a historian of witchcraft, religion, gender, and sexuality in early America, Godbeer has written six books, including *The Devil's Dominion: Magic and Religion in Early New England*, *The Salem Witch Hunt: A Brief History with Documents*, and *Escaping Salem: The Other Witch Hunt of 1692*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Though *Escaping Salem* focuses on a series of witch trials that took place in Stamford, Connecticut in the summer of 1692, Richard Godbeer contextualizes the fear that swept through Stamford within the larger background of the Salem witch trials in Massachusetts. These trials—the most famous witch trials in American history—took place from February of 1692 all the way through May of 1693. Over 200 people (mostly women) were accused of witchcraft. Of those, 30 were found guilty; 14 women and 5 men were executed by hanging. The mass panic that swept through New England's tight-knit and deeply religious Puritan communities shattered the Puritans' burgeoning theocracy in early America and revealed the power of fear to divide communities forever. Though the Stamford trials took place on a much smaller scale than the neighboring Salem trials, the fact that the mass hysteria of the "witch hunt" spread throughout New England in a few months demonstrates the power of groupthink and the fragility of a society founded upon strict social roles, gender norms, and religious doctrine.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Salem witch trials have captured the American imagination for centuries. Many fiction and nonfiction titles seek to explore the driving forces behind the trials, as well as how those same forces of fear, othering, sexism, and religious extremism have lingered in American society in the many years since. Marilynne Roach's *Six Women of Salem: The Untold Story of the Accused and Their Accusers in the Salem Witch Trials* seeks to contextualize, demystify, and humanize the players involved in the trials. Historian Elizabeth Reis's *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England* takes a broader view of Puritan communities in early America, examining the social structures that bred the suspicion, fear, and distrust that fueled 17th-century witch trials throughout New England. Dramas inspired by the intrigue and brutality of the Salem witch trials include Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* and Caryl Churchill's *Vinegar Tom*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Escaping Salem: The Other Witch Hunt of 1692
- **Where Written:** Riverside, California
- **When Published:** 2004
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** American History
- **Setting:** Stamford, Connecticut, 1692
- **Climax:** In 1693, after a year of imprisonment in a Stamford jail, Mercy Disborough is finally acquitted of the charge of witchcraft.
- **Antagonist:** Sexism; fear; religious extremism
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Dark Past. Though the Stamford witch trials that Godbeer explores in *Escaping Salem* happened around the same time as the Salem witch trials, Connecticut had a long history of religious panics and witch hunts. The Connecticut witch trials, which lasted from 1647 to 1663, where the first in the American colonies, predating the Salem trials by 30 years. Eleven people, including Alse Young—likely the first person ever executed in the American colonies for witchcraft—were put to death. In 2017, the town of Windsor passed a resolution symbolically clearing the names of Young and Lydia Gilbert, the town's two victims of the trials.

PLOT SUMMARY

In *Escaping Salem*, historian Richard Godbeer tells the story of the Stamford witch trials of 1692. Though not as well-known as the infamous Salem witch trials, which happened around this same time in Massachusetts, Godbeer suggests that the little-known history of the Stamford trials is just as important, as it epitomizes the strict social and gender norms that governed 17th- and 18th-century Puritan communities across New England.

In April of 1692, Katherine Branch—the 17-year-old servant girl of Daniel and Abigail Wescot, a prominent Stamford couple—began experiencing strange, frightening, and painful fits. Similar fits had plagued the Wescots' daughter Joanna

years ago, so the Wescots were on high alert. They called on a midwife, Sarah Bates, to determine the cause of Kate's fits, but none could be ascertained. Kate began to complain of nightly visits from a group of women who could transform into cats and encouraged her to sign her life over to Satan. The Wescots, as well as their friends and neighbors, kept nightly watch over Kate, who slowly began to describe and name the women who visited her in her dreams. One was Elizabeth Clawson, a woman with whom the Wescots had publicly quarreled in the past. Another was Goody Miller, whom Kate claimed had a "**Devil's mark**"—an extra breast below her arm from which she fed animal familiars with her own blood. Kate also named Mercy Disborough, another woman from the neighboring town of Compo, as well as a family of women—Mary Staples, her daughter Mary Harvey, and her granddaughter Hannah Harvey—as witches. Daniel Wescot (who faithfully believed Kate's claims), brought her several times to the home of Jonathan Selleck, a local magistrate, so that Kate could report these evil "witches" who lived among the good citizens of Stamford.

Jonathan Selleck knew that while witches could not be allowed to live among them, legislating witchcraft's invisible crimes could result in widespread panic in the community. Goody Miller eventually fled to New York; Mary Staples, Mary Harvey, and Hannah Harvey were then tried, acquitted, and set free. The court then turned its attention to Goody Clawson and Goody Disborough. Many residents of Stamford and Compo were eager to come forward with stories of the older women's ornery dispositions and unfairness as barterers, as well as of mysterious illnesses and sudden deaths that they believed the women had caused their families and livestock. Both Goody Disborough and Goody Clawson were held in jail, where they both claimed that the Devil tormented them each night. But rather than making the women seem more sympathetic, these tales only worsened their guilt in the eyes of their neighbors.

A special court was assembled to try the unique cases. Headed by Connecticut's deputy governor, William Jones, the council was careful to abide by strict guidelines for evidence needed to try and convict a witch. One of these pieces of evidence was the presence of a Devil's mark. A council of women repeatedly inspected Goody Clawson and Goody Disborough for extra breasts or other bodily abnormalities, and they discovered a discrepancy in an unnamed spot on Goody Disborough's body. Both women were also subjected to "ducking," the process of being tied up and submerged in water to determine one's familiarity with the Devil. Both women floated during ducking—to many, this was evidence of their bodies' rejection of baptismal waters and their affiliation with Satan. As evidence against the women mounted, William Jones remained skeptical of how their invisible crimes would be proven beyond a reasonable doubt.

In September 1692, Goody Disborough and Goody Clawson at last stood trial. Very few records of the proceedings at the Fairfield meetinghouse exist—but what is clear is that the jury had a very difficult time making a decision. The judges and magistrates sought help from the Connecticut representative assembly as well as a council of ministers, but it became clear that only a jury of the women's peers could decide their fates. On October 28th, the jury declared Goody Disborough guilty of "familiarity with Satan" and sentenced her to death by hanging. The jury acquitted Goody Clawson of her crimes. After a number of Compo residents protested that a change in the jury from September to October made the verdict against Goody Disborough unlawful, she was acquitted and released. But Godbeer suggests that upon release, both Goody Disborough and Goody Clawson faced down a lifetime of suspicion and fear stemming from their communities' distrust.

In a lengthy afterword, Richard Godbeer delves into the social and political structures of the tight-knit Puritan communities that sent a shocking number of accused witches—mostly women—to their deaths in the 17th and 18th centuries. Strict gender norms, intense fear of Native populations, and religious piety reigned in this society—anything that threatened the careful order of this life could be demonized and punished. Godbeer ultimately argues that Puritan New England's atmosphere of suspicion, scapegoating, and sexism still echoes throughout contemporary American society, as evidenced by phenomena like McCarthyism or the shaming of women who pursue positions of power. In order to survive, Godbeer ultimately claims, contemporary society must come together rather than continue to repeat patterns of demonizing those who deviate from the status quo.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Richard Godbeer – Historian Richard Godbeer is the author of *Escaping Salem*. Throughout the book, Godbeer offers commentary about 17th-century culture, connections between various players in the history of the Stamford witch trials, and the larger context of witch hunts taking place throughout New England at the time. Godbeer uses a blend of historical fact and dramatic interpretation of what conversations, meetings, and formal inquiries that took place in 1692 Stamford must have been like. He reconstructs intimate moments left out of the historical record by using context clues from the surviving documentation of the Stamford trials. Godbeer uses a length afterword at the end of the book to explain his process—and to point out how witch trials (and Puritan thought more generally) continue to define many aspects of contemporary American life. Godbeer's empathy for his characters—and his intense curiosity about the rigid social norms and values that defined Puritan New England—make *Escaping Salem* a rich portrayal of a bygone era. And in telling the story of Katherine Branch,

Elizabeth Clawson, and Mercy Disborough, Godbeer examines the history of women's subjugation in America and the deeply-rooted fear of the occult in the American imagination.

Katherine (Kate) Branch – Kate Branch was a 17-year-old servant of Daniel and Abigail Wescot, a prominent and wealthy Stamford couple. When Kate began to experience terrifying, painful fits (alternating episodes of convulsions and paralysis) in the spring of 1692, she quickly named local women from Stamford and the neighboring Compo as witches. These women, she claimed, appeared to her in different forms each night, attempting to coerce her into signing a covenant with the Devil himself. The women pinched and poked her—and indeed, Kate would often wake up covered in bruises. Daniel and Abigail Wescot, whose daughter Joanna had experienced similar fits in the past, were quick to believe Kate's story. They wasted no time arranging for her to meet with priests, magistrates, midwives, and other officials who could help divine whether Kate's torments were real and how her tormentors might be punished. Kate rather coincidentally named two women who were known to have had conflicts with the Wescots in the past: Elizabeth Clawson and Mercy Disborough. Kate's testimony, combined with other Fairfield county residents' anecdotes about strange happenings that seemed to be connected to the two women, led to Mercy Disborough's conviction. Though that conviction was later overturned, Godbeer charts how one young woman's accusations created a panic that spread like wildfire in a tight-knit, intensely religious, and deeply communal region. Kate Branch, though the catalyst for the Stamford witch trials of 1692, largely fades into obscurity in the historical record following the conclusion of the trials; little is known of her later life.

Elizabeth Clawson – Elizabeth Clawson was accused of witchcraft by Katherine Branch, the 17-year-old servant girl of the prominent Wescot family. At this time, Goody Clawson was in her sixties. She was known in Stamford for her ornery nature—just as her fellow accused witch, Mercy Disborough, was known in the neighboring Compo for being fiery and contrary. Goody Clawson had also had well-known public conflicts with the Wescot family in the past. She particularly disliked Mistress Abigail Wescot, whom she once called a "proud slut" and at whom she once hurled rocks in the street. Because of this, many Stamford residents hurried to support Goody Clawson once Katherine's allegations surfaced—yet their vouching for the woman's godliness was not enough. Goody Clawson was believed to possess supernatural powers, and because of the invisible nature of her crimes, it was equally difficult to prove that they had not taken place as it was to prove they had. Goody Clawson was eventually declared not guilty—in large part because of a lack of any physical evidence of a "**Devil's mark.**" This is in spite of the fact that she and Goody Disborough failed a "ducking" test (in which accused witches were thrown into water and deemed guilty of witchcraft if they floated). Little is known of what became of Goody Clawson following the Stamford witch trials of 1692—like Mercy Disborough, the historical record relegates her to obscurity following the panic about her potential association with the Devil.

Mercy Disborough – Mercy Disborough accused of witchcraft by Katherine Branch, the 17-year-old servant girl of the prominent Wescot family. At this time, Goody Disborough was in her early fifties. Though Kate had never met the woman, she claimed to have been led to Compo in the night from the neighboring Stamford by a spectral version of Goody Disborough. Goody Disborough had a reputation in her own town of being ornery and outspoken—and this perception of her, coupled by the fact that several of her neighbors suspected her of cursing their livestock or bewitching objects she traded them, meant that Goody Disborough was ultimately convicted of witchcraft. During her trial, Goody Disborough was found to have a "**Devil's mark**" (a growth or other bodily abnormality) by a council of Stamford women who searched her body. She also submitted to yet failed a ducking test, in which she was dunked into water to see if she would float (which was believed to confirm her association with the Devil). Goody Disborough ordeal serves as an example of the myriad ways in which women who did not fit in with the strict gender norms of Puritan New England were literally demonized for their bodily differences or their outspokenness. Though Goody Disborough was later acquitted due to a discrepancy in the jury trying her case, Richard Godbeer suggests that she likely lived out the rest of her life in fear of her slighted neighbors attempting to take the law into their own hands.

Daniel Wescot – Daniel Wescot the patriarch of the well-to-do Wescot family of Stamford, Connecticut; he was Abigail Wescot's husband and Joanna Wescot's father. When the Wescots' 17-year-old servant girl, Katherine Branch, began experiencing nightly fits, she accused several local women of being witches who tormented her in the night. Daniel expressed an overwhelming amount of concern for Katherine, given the fact that Joanna had recently suffered a similar series of fits. Daniel brought Katherine to high-ranking magistrates to deliver her testimony and called on reverends, pastors, and midwives to examine Katherine and determine the cause of her misery. Daniel fervently backed Kate's claims. He persisted even as other Stamford citizens sought to defend two of the women Kate accused, Mercy Disborough and Elizabeth Clawson, pointing out quarrels the Wescots had had with both women in recent years. Daniel's support of Kate has led historians to suspect that perhaps Daniel was encouraging Kate to name certain women, or even that Daniel and Kate were having some kind of romantic affair. Little is known of what happened to the Wescots after the Stamford witch trials. They moved to New Jersey in 1694, and Daniel Wescot died in 1704—but it is uncertain as to whether Kate stayed with the

Wescots following their departure from Stamford.

Abigail Wescot – Abigail Wescot was Daniel Wescot's wife and Joana Wescot's mother. Abigail enjoyed the privilege of being referred to by the honorific "Mistress" rather than the humbler title "Goodwife" or "Goody," as most Puritan women were called. Abigail had, in the past, quarreled quite publicly with Goody Clawson, one of the women Abigail and Daniel's servant girl Katherine Branch publicly accused of witchcraft. Because of this, many of Abigail and Daniel's neighbors suspected them of encouraging Katherine to name their enemies as retribution for past conflicts. However, Abigail reportedly expressed concerns and doubts about the truth of Kate's accusations—and perhaps believed that her husband and Kate were too close for comfort. Not much is known about Abigail's life following the acquittals of Goody Clawson and Goody Disborough—though the Wescots moved to New Jersey sometime in the late 1690s, it is unclear what became of Abigail or her relationship to Kate.

Jonathan Selleck – Jonathan Selleck was the wealthiest and most prominent of the four magistrates comprising Stamford's local court, which oversaw the law and community disputes. Daniel Wescot repeatedly brought his servant Katherine Branch to Selleck's home so that she could tell him the names of the women who were allegedly tormenting and trying to bewitch her. Selleck attempted to weigh the threats facing Kate against the threats facing the whole of Stamford should a hastily-pursued witch hunt spiral out of control—as witch trials in Hartford, Connecticut and Salem, Massachusetts recently had. Selleck ultimately handed over custody of Katherine's case to a special court.

William Jones – William Jones was Connecticut's deputy governor and a member of the special court assembled to try the accused witches of Stamford and Compo in 1692. Jones, like Jonathan Selleck, was aware of how carefully the courts needed to approach a witch trial in order to avoid a widespread panic and anger in the community. Jones thoughtfully drafted a lengthy memorandum, *Grounds for Examination of a Witch*, providing specific instances in which a person could be tried as a witch. Jones suggested that being defamed by "common report"; possessing a "**Devil's mark**"; or seeming to cause a neighbor "mischief," illness, or death following a quarrel were all grounds for being tried as a witch. Jones also outlined different "proofs" of testing whether someone was a witch or not—yet even Jones was wary of outdated methods such as branding or "ducking" (submersion in water). Richard Godbeer uses Jones's judicious, careful approach to amassing evidence of a person's status as a witch to point out the issues with legislating invisible crimes—especially crimes relating to the supernatural. When the Devil was involved, anything—and everything—could be seen as a deception. Jones and his contemporaries knew this, and their desire to carry out the law were often in direct competition with their desire to keep peace in their communities.

Mary Newman – Mary Newman was a Stamford resident who testified against Elizabeth Clawson after Goody Clawson was accused of witchcraft by Katherine Branch. Goody Newman claimed that Goody Clawson bewitched and killed three of her family's sheep after a quarrel that took place when Goody Newman's daughter stole apples from Goody Clawson's orchard.

Sarah Bates – Sarah Bates was a local Stamford midwife who examined Katherine Branch in order to determine whether she was truly being tormented by witches as she slept. Sarah could not determine what the cause of Kate's fits were—and later, she signed a petition in support of Goody Clawson, one of the women Kate accused of witchcraft.

David Selleck, Ebenezer Bishop, and Abraham Finch – David Selleck, Ebenezer Bishop, and Abraham Finch were three Stamford men who took turns keeping watch over Katherine Branch for several nights in order to investigate her claims of being tormented by witches in her sleep. The men all reported experiencing strange occurrences in Kate's bedroom, such as seeing a ball of fire and watching bruises appear on Kate's skin out of nowhere.

Goody Miller – Goody Miller was a Stamford woman whom Katherine Branch accused of witchcraft after allegedly seeing nightly visions of Goody Miller nursing a black dog from an extra breast below her arm. Witches were, at the time, believed to have a "**Devil's mark**," or extra breast from which they fed animal familiars. In the midst of these public accusations, Goody Miller fled to live with her well-to-do brothers in Bedford, New York. The community of Bedford refused to extradite her back to Stamford to stand trial, so she was shielded from answering to her alleged crime of familiarity with Satan.

Mary Staples – Mary Staples was an older woman and whom Katherine Branch named as one of the many supposed witches who tormented Kate nightly. This wasn't the first time she'd been accused of witchcraft. Mary Staples, as well as her daughter Mary Harvey and her granddaughter Hannah Harvey, were all acquitted of their alleged crimes of familiarity with Satan.

Goodman Grey – Goodman Grey was a Compo resident who accused Mercy Disborough of being a witch. As evidence, he provided testimony about several suspicious incidents concerning Goody Disborough. Once, Goody Disborough sold Goodman Grey a kettle which appeared new at the time of sale, but which transformed into an old, dingy thing as soon as he brought it home. Another time, after Goodman Grey suspected Goody Disborough of bewitching his livestock, he cut off the ear of a cow—and soon thereafter, he learned that Goody Disborough had taken to bed with terrible pains.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Joanna Wescot – Joanna Wescot was the young daughter of Daniel and Abigail Wescot, a prominent Stamford couple. Years before the Wescots' servant Katherine Branch began experiencing mysterious fits in 1692, Joanna herself was plagued by inexplicable fits.

Reverend John Bishop – Reverend John Bishop was an Oxford-educated Stamford resident who, at the behest of Daniel Wescot, helped to examine Katherine Branch and evaluate whether or not she was truly being tormented by witches.

Thomas Hanford – Thomas Hanford was a Stamford-area pastor who helped Reverend John Bishop to examine Katherine Branch.

Mary Harvey – Mary Harvey was Mary Staples's daughter and Hannah Harvey's mother. Katherine Branch accused all three women of being witches who appeared to her each night to torment her and tempt her into the service of Satan.

Hannah Harvey – Hannah Harvey was Mary Harvey's daughter and Mary Staples's granddaughter. Hannah was one of the suspected witches whom Katherine Branch accused of tormenting her each night.

Edward Jesop – Edward Jesop was a Compo resident who accused Mercy Disborough of being a witch. As evidence, he told an anecdote about how, during a debate over scripture at a dinner party, the pages of the host's Bible blurred when Goody Disborough got near them.

TERMS

Familiar – In the Middle Ages and early modern period, familiars were believed to be demonic supernatural entities that assisted witches in performing magic. They would often appear as animal figures.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

WOMEN, WITCHCRAFT, AND THE SUBVERSION OF GENDER NORMS

Throughout *Escaping Salem*, Richard Godbeer highlights how women who disrupted strict Puritan gender norms were considered a danger to the social order of these early American communities. Godbeer argues that such women were blamed for other people's wrongdoings—or for things that could not be explained—just because it was an easy way to punish and demonize them for subverting gender norms.

Godbeer first examines how uncommon or aggressive social behaviors in women were literally demonized throughout Puritan society. Elizabeth Clawson and Mercy Disborough are established early on as women whose grouchy behaviors earned them the ire of their neighbors. Both Goody Clawson and Goody Disborough (the honorific "Goody," short for "Goodwife," was the 1692 equivalent of addressing someone as "Mrs." or "Ms.") came under fire in their communities of Stamford and Compo for reacting negatively to quarrels or bad business deals with neighbors. When a neighbor's daughter stole from Goody Clawson's orchard, Goody Clawson reacted angrily and chastised her neighbor, Goody Newman, for permitting such bad behavior in a child. Goody Clawson also became entangled in a feud with the Wescots—one of Stamford's most powerful families and the employers of Katherine Branch, the young servant girl who accused both Goody Clawson and Goody Disborough of being witches and possessing her. After a bartering deal over a supply of flax traded between the Clawsons and Wescots went poorly, Goody Clawson publicly attacked Abigail Wescot at least twice: once by throwing rocks at her in the street and once by calling her a "proud slut." Goody Clawson's rage didn't conform to the gender norm, and people in the community wanted this abnormality to be dealt with. When Goody Disborough felt that one of her neighbors, Goodman Grey, gave her fewer apples than she paid for in a bartering deal, she, too, reacted publicly and angrily. Years later, she appeared to stiff Goodman Grey on another bartering deal for a tin kettle. Her accusers claimed that the dingy kettle she gave Grey was evidence of her ability to transform objects—which indicated that she was a witch. While both women's reactions seem relatively normal by today's standards, they were unnatural and shocking at the time. When these women spoke out about quarrels with their neighbors, stood up for their own property, or voiced their dissatisfaction with certain communal rules, they were perceived as angry and deviant. Their attempts to call out unfair deals—or, perhaps in the case of the kettle, to retaliate against insufficient payment—were seen as unacceptable. Both Mercy Disborough and Elizabeth Clawson were accused of witchcraft due to their deviation from social norms.

Godbeer then examines how society further demonized both women for their reactions to being labeled witches. "Both women reacted to the allegations against them," Godbeer writes, "in ways that seemed to incriminate them further." Goody Clawson spoke roughly to Daniel Wescot in public, while Goody Disborough sarcastically told a visitor to her cell in the county jail that she would not be "such a fool as to hang alone." These women's inflammatory, indignant remarks in the

wake of accusations of witchcraft only made them appear even guiltier of being beholden to dark forces. For women to express angry, indignant, violent, or retributive emotions was taboo and suspect in Puritan society. In expressing their anger and frustration with their circumstances, Goody Clawson and Goody Disborough unfortunately played right into the hands of their accusers.

Godbeer also demonstrates how Puritan society criminalized and literally demonized bodily anomalies in order to punish women who subverted gender norms. When Goody Clawson and Goody Disborough became the subjects of a formal inquiry in the summer of 1692, the court appointed a group of "faithfully sworn" women, or women who were faithful not only to their word but to the court's ideas of gender norms, to inspect both women's bodies for any "suspicious signs or marks." Witches were believed to have an **extra breast** from which they fed animal familiars (special "pets" taking the shape of dogs, cats, or other creatures but believed to be possessed by demonic spirits). An inspection of Goody Clawson revealed no physical aberrations—but when the group searched Goody Disborough's body, they found "a teat or something like one in her privy parts [...] which is not common in other women." "No honest wom[a]n," one of the women who searched Goody Disborough and Goody Clawson noted, would have a "mark" such as the one Mercy Disborough had. Her comment highlights how women were complicit in othering and seeking to punish other women who did not fit with the social or physical standards of femininity at the time. It is significant to note that both Goody Disborough and Goody Clawson were women in their 50s and 60s. As such, Godbeer adds yet another layer to his argument, suggesting that even in a Puritan society which claimed to value piety and modesty, there was a very narrow and ageist view of what women's bodies were permitted to look like. Any signs of aging or changing past society's expectations of how women's bodies should look, Godbeer suggests, became literally criminal. Rather than attempt to shift or challenge the rigid gender norms that governed Puritan society, most Puritans sought to eliminate any difference or eccentricity in order to uphold constricting ideals of how women should look and act.

In early American communities governed by fear and extremism, women emerged as logical scapegoats for the practical and existential problems that plagued Puritan society. Godbeer illustrates how, for women, any deviation from the gender norms of 1692 Stamford was grounds not just for shunning but even for death. In a society in which people struggled for control over a strange new world, governing women's behavior was seen as a logical way to seek out and punish any threat to an already-fragile status quo.

FEAR, LAW, AND CONTROL

In *Escaping Salem*, historian Richard Godbeer focuses on "the other witch hunt of 1692"—a series of trials that took place in Stamford, Connecticut, far from the epicenter of the Salem witch trials in Massachusetts. Throughout the book, Godbeer highlights how Puritan societies often sought to legislate the unknowable—like, for instance, whether or not a woman was indeed a witch and thus responsible for her neighbors' suffering. Godbeer argues that in both Stamford and Salem, attempts to legislate things that could not been seen, measured, or definitively proven were directly connected to the uncertainties of building a new life in a new world (Puritans were English Protestants who settled in the American colonies). Because of the difficult and unpredictable nature of life on a new continent far from home, many Puritans jumped at the chance to legislate things that were unknowable or invisible as a means of exerting some measure of control over their world.

Godbeer charts how small seeds of distrust in the community grew over time, until people were regularly trying to sue and punish one another. Underpinning this behavior was the Puritans' desire to take control of new, confusing, or distasteful social orders emerging in the New World. "Th[e] emphasis on community support [in Stamford] created intense pressure," Godbeer writes. "When requests for help were denied and when neighbors argued, resentments and recriminations often lingered. Society was intensely communal in 1692 Stamford, and such interconnectedness created just as many problems as it did safeguards. When a neighbor didn't help another neighbor—or when a neighbor actively tried to make another neighbor's life harder—this lack of communal support felt practically criminal, and people would do whatever it took to make their grievance heard.

In a new and hostile place, rifts could literally make or break a fledgling community of Puritan settlers, which meant that the law often got involved. In particular, Godbeer shows how quarrels between the Newmans and the Clawsons in Stamford, and the Greys and the Disboroughs in the nearby community of Compo, led to legal measures that sought to legislate and discipline these rifts between neighbors. The law came down especially hard on Mercy Disborough and Elizabeth Clawson when the women were accused of performing acts of witchcraft against neighbors who slighted them. The attempt to make examples of these women and their families, Godbeer suggests, stemmed from the desperate desire to control neighborly relations. Puritans were willing to do anything to keep rifts under control, even if it meant trying the women for crimes of the occult—crimes that were invisible and thus unproveable in a court of law. The Newmans accused Goody Clawson of using witchcraft to kill three of their sheep after a neighborly dispute, while the Greys accused Goody

Disborough of using powers of the occult to harm their cattle following an argument. However, neither Goody Clawson nor Goody Disborough's alleged use of black magic could be proven. Even though no one actually witnessed the women using witchcraft, authorities in Stamford and Compo nevertheless sought to legislate the women's invisible actions. Godbeer asserts that the attempt to weigh in on the invisible and legislate the unknowable was directly connected to these Puritan communities' desire to exert control over members who were considered a threat to the tenuous relationships among different families within these settlements. So little about life in New England could be controlled, and so little about disease, famine, and affliction was known at the time. Thus, the attempt to control the uncontrollable, rooted in a fear of losing all these communities had worked so hard for, took hold.

By resorting to law and order to deal with disputes among neighbors, Puritan communities were able to feel a sense of righteousness and order in a time and place where little could be foreseen or controlled. The witch trials in Stamford—and, Godbeer suggests, those that took place in Salem and beyond—were symptomatic of Puritan communities' desire to feel a sense of control. Though the "crimes" examined in these trials were often abstract and impossible to legislate, Godbeer suggests that Puritan societies grasped at any chance to exert control over their neighbors and their circumstances in order to feel more in charge of their uncertain destinies.

PRACTICAL THREATS VS. SPIRITUAL BETRAYALS

In Connecticut in 1692, God and the Devil were as real to the residents of Stamford as the air they breathed and the ground they walked on. Hardships like famine, scarcity, violence, or illness were often understood to be the result of supernatural forces intruding in everyday life. Richard Godbeer suggests that, for better or worse, Puritan colonists used the concepts of God and the Devil to explain anything, good or bad, that befell them throughout their lives. Even though the "practical threat[s]" of daily hardships such as illness, famine, and social discord had little to do with the "spiritual betrayal[s]" associated with evil and witchcraft, Puritan communities viewed even the smallest problems and threats through a spiritual lens and thus avoided actually reckoning with community issues. This tendency, Godbeer argues, often led to the unnecessary but debilitating spread of fear, distrust, and violence throughout these communities.

Throughout *Escaping Salem*, Godbeer argues that the Puritans' use of religion to interpret earthly matters often did more harm than good. "The people of Stamford," Godbeer writes, "believed that supernatural forces intruded constantly into their lives." Godbeer introduces the case of Katherine Branch to demonstrate how even practical, everyday problems in Puritan societies became evidence of these "supernatural forces" at work on Earth. Katherine Branch, a servant girl in the household of a prominent family, the Wescots, began experiencing strange fits at the age of 17 in 1692. Branch's screaming fits involved alternating bouts of convulsions and paralysis. She also claimed that she was being pinched, burned, and tormented by witches who transformed from cats into women and back again; indeed, Daniel and Abigail Wescot noticed strange bruises and marks appearing on Katherine's body after these fits. Though the Wescots' daughter, Joanna, had experienced similar fits in the past, Katherine's naming of her tormentors directly tied the practical threat of her fits (which may or may not have been related to seizures or mental illness) to a spiritual betrayal and an intrusion of the occult into the realm of the everyday. By treating Katherine's fits as evidence of dark magic or the Devil's influence, Godbeer argues, her community did her a major disservice. As the Wescots and several other members of the Stamford community fretted over how to combat the occult forces they believed to be at work within Katherine, they overlooked the more pressing matter of her painful, disorienting fits—episodes that left her physically depleted, socially ostracized, and vulnerable to intrusive and ineffective medical practices such as bloodletting.

To Puritans, illness was not the only evidence of supernatural forces at work in the more practical spheres of human life—the cruelty of nature was often seen as the work of the Devil or his emissaries. When two sets of families—the Newmans and the Clawsons in Stamford and the Greys and the Disboroughs in the neighboring Compo—began quarrelling in the early 1690s, many strange occurrences began taking place in both households. After the Newmans' daughter stole from the orchard of Goody Clawson, three of the Newmans' sheep died suddenly. After a series of quarrels between Henry Grey and Mercy Disborough, Goodman Grey noticed that his cows and sheep began acting strangely: one lamb died suddenly, while a young calf ran in circles as if trying to escape something invisible. In the spring of 1692, two more of Grey's cows died without warning. Grey blamed the losses of livestock on Goody Disborough, claiming that she was a witch who'd harnessed the powers of the Devil to seek vengeance upon him after some bad business deals. When Katherine Branch named Goody Disborough and Goody Clawson as witches after a series of fits, the evidence against the women seemed undeniable. Thus, a series of oddly coincidental but nonetheless natural occurrences—the illness and death of livestock—became "spiritual betrayals" enacted by vengeful women.

The devout Puritans who populated places like Stamford and Salem turned to their understanding of religion to explain things they couldn't understand, like fits and famines. But this strict adherence to believing that God and the Devil were at the root of all human behavior and practical, earthly threats

failed to repair distrust between neighbors, to safeguard the vulnerable or to confront the real nature of community problems. Godbeer suggests that by paying more attention to the intangible spiritual world than the pressing problems of the physical one, members of Puritan communities did themselves and their neighbors a great disservice.

SCAPEGOATING AND BLAME

The title of Richard Godbeer's book *Escaping Salem* suggests that the distrust, hysteria, and scapegoating that defined the Salem witch trials—and other witch hunts that took place throughout the 1600s and beyond in the landscape of early America—are firmly in the past. But as he rehashes the story of the Stamford witch trials of 1692, Godbeer ultimately suggests that the same driving forces of social uncertainty, financial or material crisis, religious extremism, and societal prejudice against women are still at work in contemporary America. In other words, Godbeer argues that American culture has never really escaped the paradigm of the "witch hunt" as a solution in times of perceived crisis.

Godbeer draws a direct link between the witch hunts of the 1600s and the contemporary fear of powerful women. He alleges that the disdain for women who eschew social norms extends to present-day societies. Women who pursue power, who shirk or age out of societally accepted physical appearances, or who act in ways that threaten patriarchy continue to face heightened scrutiny and hostility. Godbeer points to protestors who adopted the slogan "Ditch the Witch" as they rallied against controversial United Kingdom Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s as an example of how the rhetoric of women as "witches" persists even in contemporary society. Puritan gender ideology, Godbeer suggests, persists to this day and continues to publicly "try" women who ignore or actively seek to dismantle continuing pressures to act subserviently toward men, to focus on the home, and to seek in both appearance and behavior to operate within the still-rigid bounds of what society expects.

Cooperation was crucial to Puritan communities' survival—but that sense of trust, cooperation, and mutual advocacy was difficult in practice. Puritan societies were small and intensely communal. Much of Puritan people's livelihoods—social status, marriage prospects, business—depended on maintaining good relations with their neighbors. But the Salem witch trials and the witch hunts throughout Connecticut in the mid-to-late 1600s show that trusting one's neighbor was often easier said than done. Godbeer claims that while the life of a New England settler "could not have been more different" from the life of a contemporary city-dweller, the deeply personal interactions of the past still echo through contemporary communities. While modern society is not given to such "density of interpersonal contact [within] tiny communities" of deeply interconnected people, there does still exist a social contract between members of a community—and when that contract is threatened, the worst in people emerges quickly. Puritans did not leverage accusations of witchcraft at one another out of fear rather than spite. This fear, Godbeer suggests, still exists in small communities—and when there is a sense of overlap in communal social positions, these hair-trigger tensions remain.

Puritan society's religious extremism, Godbeer suggests, allowed for the punishment of those who were perceived to reject piety and complete devotion to God. Because Puritans saw God and the Devil as very real forces that acted on their every decision, religion was inseparable from every aspect of daily life. The "world of wonders" the Puritans inhabited was a world in which an "intensely insecure environment," and a lack of medical knowledge made it seem like there was a supernatural explanation for everything. This world is now in the past—yet as Godbeer illustrates, the double standards that deemed some behaviors as divine and ordained by God yet others as the dark work of the Devil remain. "Godly colonists," as Richard Godbeer calls them, could call upon magic with relative impunity. In other words, white men and women who enjoyed higher social standings could call on non-white servants to produce cures or spells without being accused of witchcraft themselves. These servants, however, were the first to be accused of witchcraft when a panic came to town. Godbeer implicitly draws a parallel between the ways in which godliness, piety, and rejection of magic and the occult were negotiable for the privileged few, and the ways in which contemporary society often prizes the appearance of faith over actual commitment to religious tenets.

The majority of *Escaping Salem* focuses on the lead-up to the Stamford witch trials and the legal proceedings themselves, but Godbeer's afterword demonstrates his interest in how the cultural and spiritual panics behind the Salem and Stamford trials have continued to linger in the contemporary American consciousness. Americans, Godbeer suggests, still turn to scapegoating, blame, and the model of the witch trial when confronted with fear, distrust, or disruption of the status quo. These patterns, he implies, are just as destructive in modern-day American communities as they were in 17th-century Puritan communities.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE DEVIL'S MARK

"Devil's marks" were physical abnormalities found on the bodies of women, often believed to be extra breasts meant for feeding demonic animal familiars. These

"marks" symbolize how rigid Puritan gender norms caused these communities to turn against any women who looked or acted differently than they were supposed to.

Witches were believed to have Devil's marks bestowed unto them after they entered into a compact with Satan. They mark meant that they had accepted supernatural powers in exchange for doing Satan's bidding on Earth and encouraging or enticing other men and women into similar covenants. These marks were loosely defined, but they were most often represented in the Puritan imagination as an extra breast from which possessed animals fed on blood. This grotesque imagery was used to cast grave suspicion upon any woman with a bodily anomaly of any sort. Extra skin, strange rashes, or birth defects were seen as evidence of evil and witchcraft. Puritan women's behavior was patrolled and punished with shunning or accusations of witchcraft if it was seen to be loud, offensive, or anything other than pious and submissive—and so too were Puritan women's bodies subject to intense scrutiny.

Having a Devil's mark was one of the few modes of positive evidence which could be used in witchcraft trials. Because so many witch trials centered around proving invisible crimes, any scraps of evidence identifying a person as a witch were vital—and so, Godbeer suggests, an extreme amount of faith was placed in the Devil's mark as the sure identifier of an ally of Satan. The symbol of the Devil's mark, then, externalizes and metaphorizes the how women were—and in many ways still are—held to impossible physical and behavioral standards. Any deviation from the norm was, in Puritan society, punishable by ostracization—and even, in some extreme cases, death. Devil's marks thus represent how women have historically been demonized (sometimes literally) for any deviations from social norms.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Oxford University Press edition of *Escaping Salem* published in 2005.

Prologue Quotes

❝ Kate, as she was known, had been in that tormented state since the end of April. Without warning and for no apparent reason she would suddenly collapse into agonized convulsions, crying out that she was pinched and pricked by invisible creatures, weeping and moaning in helpless terror. At other times she would sink into a paralyzed trance, stiff as a board and completely senseless. She told her master and mistress that during these fits she saw cats that sometimes transformed into women before her eyes and then changed back into animal form. It was these creatures that attacked her, she said.

Related Characters: Richard Godbeer (speaker), Katherine (Kate) Branch

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

In the prologue to *Escaping Salem*, historian Richard Godbeer lays out the true story about to unfold. Katherine Branch was a servant girl in 1692 Stamford whose mysterious fits soon became evidence of her bewitchment at the hands of several local "witches." In this passage, as Godbeer describes the terrors that came to plague Kate, he introduces at face value Kate's experiences of visions and specters of witches who attacked and cajoled her.

Laying the groundwork for Kate's experiences early on in the narrative is vital to the introduction of the book's major themes: particularly the notion of women being unfairly demonized and scapegoated, as well as the tension between practical threats and spiritual betrayals. Kate felt witches "attack" her as they urged her to enter into a compact with Satan. The crimes against Kate were invisible yet incredibly real to her. Her soul was at stake, she believed—and so was her body, as bruises bloomed on her skin each night, and her body convulsed in alternating fits of stiff paralysis and impossible contortions. As the book unfolds, Godbeer delves more deeply into the complicated nature of Kate's case against the witches whom she believed were tormenting her day and night. But for now, he calls on readers to empathize with Kate's terror as a religious individual possessed by a spiritual threat—whether his readers actually believe in that spiritual threat or not.

❝ Supernatural forces were constantly at work in the world. Sudden losses or mishaps might well be judgments from God, sent to chastise sinners and encourage moral reformation. But sometimes these misfortunes turned out to be the handiwork of someone closer to hand with much less exalted intentions, a malign neighbor using dark cunning to torment and even destroy—witchcraft might be to blame.

Related Characters: Richard Godbeer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

In underscoring immediately how real and important the

supernatural was to 17th-century Puritans, Godbeer shows how deeply threatening any incursion of malevolent supernatural forces into daily life was. Some inexplicable occurrences might be tests or punishments from God—but just as God's judgment could interfere with daily life, so too could the Devil's trickery. These invisible forces, the Puritans believed, worked on them day in and day out, informing their decisions, relationships, and behavior. Thus, the intrusion of witchcraft into a community was seen not just as a pragmatic threat to the physical health and well-being of an individual or a community but a spiritual reckoning as well. If these forces were not cast out somehow, they threatened the Puritans' entire way of life. Godbeer uses this passage to introduce his readers to the importance that the Puritans placed on legislating even invisible crimes—no matter the logistical and existential challenges involved in bringing justice against invisible forces.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ [Daniel Wescot] wanted the witches responsible for his household's afflictions punished and he wanted to be rid of them. "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live." That was, after all, God's Word.

Related Characters: Richard Godbeer (speaker), Joanna Wescot, Katherine (Kate) Branch, Daniel Wescot

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Godbeer imagines how Daniel Wescot, the well-to-do patriarch of a prominent Stamford family, might have confronted the bewitchment that seemed to be infiltrating his household. Years after strange, painful fits took hold of his daughter Joanna, Daniel now found that his servant girl, Kate, was enduring nightly visits from supposed witches and unpredictable, painful convulsions and contortions.

Daniel, like the other men in his Puritan community, was a godly and pious individual who considered his directive in life to be protecting and providing for his family. In imagining Daniel's reaction to evidence of witchcraft in his home, Godbeer is careful to consider the many fears, suspicions, and carefully-held beliefs that defined the Puritan mindset. Witches were thought to be overwhelmingly female—and because female witches both dashed the rigid gender norms of Puritan New England and invited the temptations of the Devil into their communities, they had to be dealt with swiftly. Though God's Word dictated that a witch could not be "suffered to live," however, legislating an invisible crime like witchcraft was tricky—and Daniel, Godbeer suggests, must have known this.

At the same time, as the protector of his family, Daniel needed to take whatever steps necessary to find the source of Katherine's torment and restore peace and order to his household. As Daniel considered how best to handle this frightening situation, both the practical threat of losing a servant girl to the Devil and the existential, spiritual fear of demonic possession spreading throughout his home were no doubt at the forefront of his mind.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ It was on the following day that Kate first named one of the women afflicting her: Goody Clawson. This revelation came as no surprise to the Wescots. Elizabeth Clawson, a woman in her early sixties, had lived in Stamford with her husband Stephen ever since their marriage in 1655. Goody Clawson was suspected by many of having occult powers and of using them against her enemies. She was no friend of the Wescots. The Wescots had quarreled with Goody Clawson almost a decade before over the weight of some flax that she had supplied to them.

Related Characters: Richard Godbeer (speaker), Abigail Wescot, Daniel Wescot, Elizabeth Clawson, Katherine (Kate) Branch

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Godbeer speculates on what must have happened as Katherine Branch began to name the witches who tormented her nightly. For modern-day readers, Kate's naming of Goody Clawson, an enemy of the Wescots (Kate's masters), will seem suspicious—it's reasonable to assume that the Wescots told Kate who to name. At the time, however, the opposite logic would have held: Stamford residents would have assumed that Goody Clawson would harm the Wescot family given their past conflicts.

The Westcots would have seen their past quarrel with Goody Clawson over a trade as evidence of Goody Clawson's rejection of the humility, deference, and

neighborliness that were expected of Puritan women. Goody Clawson's rejection of gender norms was grounds for considering her corrupt and perhaps even possessed. It logically follows, then, that the Wescots would have no reservations about scapegoating her as the source of Kate's present suffering. In this way, Godbeer suggests, women who fell outside the norm in any way were more likely to be condemned and demonized by their community—whether they were truly guilty or not.

"Goody Miller, hold up your arm higher that the black dog may suck you better. Now I'm sure you are a witch for you've got a long teat under your arm." Both David and Abraham had heard that witches fed demonic spirits in the form of animals—just as mothers fed their infant children, except that witches used a third nipple hidden somewhere on their bodies and nourished the familiars with blood, not milk.

Related Characters: Katherine (Kate) Branch (speaker), David Selleck, Ebenezer Bishop, and Abraham Finch, Richard Godbeer

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Godbeer recreates the moment in which Katherine Branch revealed the identity of yet another one of the witches who was tormenting her in her sleep each night: Goody Miller. Kate alleged that Goody Miller had a "long teat under [her] arm" from which she nursed a black dog. In Puritan New England, people commonly believed that true witches possessed "the Devil's mark"—a third nipple or hidden breast from which they fed "familiars," or animals possessed by the Devil. Godbeer introduces the Devil's mark in this passage as a symbol of the ways in which women were literally demonized not just for behavior that deviated from Puritan gender norms, but for bodily anomalies that marked them as strange or other. The fact that bewitched women were believed to nurse animals (not children) and to feed them blood (not milk) further symbolizes the ways in which accused witches were perceived to pervert the piety, nourishment, and familial devotion associated with standard gender norms of the time.

Chapter 3 Quotes

Yet how best to protect the town? Mister Selleck was well aware that allegations of witchcraft could multiply rapidly and plunge entire communities into crisis. [...] Selleck also knew that trying to prove an invisible crime in court was not easy. [...] Religious doctrine and the legal code invited accusations of witchcraft, yet court officials were often much less impressed by the evidence presented in such cases than were the accusers and their supporters. Ministers, magistrates, and ordinary townsfolk agreed that witches posed a real and serious threat, but agreeing on how to prove witchcraft in a court of law was quite another matter.

Related Characters: Richard Godbeer (speaker), Jonathan Selleck

Related Themes:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Godbeer provides insight into the mindset of Jonathan Selleck, a wealthy and powerful Stamford magistrate who was charged with legislating Katherine Branch's allegations of witchcraft against five women in the community.

This passage is significant because it speaks to the profound difficulties of legislating an "invisible crime" like witchcraft. Allegations of bewitchment and possession were paramount offenses in Puritan society—not just because witchcraft betrayed Puritan spiritual ideals of godliness and piety, but because of the practical threats that a witch posed to the health and well-being of her neighbors. As such, legislating crimes of witchcraft swiftly and decisively was considered a matter of utmost importance—yet magistrates, judges, and other interpreters of the law knew that they needed to tread carefully in order to avoid widespread panic and suspicion in their communities—and to avoid false accusations or convictions.

According to the clergy, witches had no occult power of their own; demons acted on their behalf, taking on the appearance of the witches for whom they acted. Most people assumed that a specter's appearance matched the identity of the witch who wanted to harm the victim. But might specters appear as innocent people so as to incriminate harmless and virtuous individuals?

Related Characters: Richard Godbeer (speaker), Mercy

Disborough, Elizabeth Clawson, Katherine (Kate) Branch

Related Themes:

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

This passage delves even more deeply into the intricacies of legislating the invisible crimes associated with witchcraft and demonic possession. Because acts of witchcraft fell into the domain of the Devil himself, Puritans could never be certain whether or not the "crimes" they perceived taking place were actually happening—and whether the alleged perpetrators of these crimes were actually responsible.

This passage is significant because it further explores the complications of a society in which the supernatural was given as much weight as the real. If the intrusion of God or the Devil into everyday affairs was possible, Puritans knew they couldn't trust their own eyes as much as they wanted to. Thus, there were many complications associated with legislating the crimes that Katherine Branch accused Elizabeth Clawson, Mercy Disborough, and other area women of committing. For instance, Kate herself could be compromised by the Devil—or the Devil could have presented her with false images and specters. Godbeer uses this passage to emphasize how fragile yet urgent the process of investigating and legislating spiritual crimes was in Puritan New England.

❝ Other neighbors, however, portrayed Elizabeth Clawson and Mercy Disborough as argumentative and vindictive. Following the arrest of the two women, a wave of Stamford and Compo residents came forward to relate quarrels with one or the other which had been followed by mysterious illness or misfortune. [...] Both women reacted to the allegations against them in ways that seemed to incriminate them further.

Related Characters: Richard Godbeer (speaker), Mercy Disborough, Elizabeth Clawson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 62-63

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Godbeer explores the ways in which Mercy Disborough and Elizabeth Clawson, two women accused of witchcraft, were negatively impacted by the expectations associated with Puritan society's strict gender norms. Both women were well-known to be ornery and combative. Because women were supposed to be humble, submissive, pious, and neighborly, their behavior made them suspect by default. Puritan logic followed that two women acting so out of step with how they were supposed to might be under the control of forces that were intentionally corrupting their behavior.

Furthermore, when both women reacted angrily and indignantly to the allegations against them, their fury and consternation appeared to their neighbors as further proof of their corrupt natures and perhaps even their demonic possession. This passage thus underscores the impossible catch-22 that Puritan women frequently faced. Any betrayal of genuine emotion—especially anger, frustration, or fear—could be taken as evidence not just of an unruly disposition but of literal demonic possession.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ "About two years past," confided Goody Newman, "I also had a difference with Goody Clawson and angry words passed between us. The next day we had three sheep die suddenly. When we opened them up we couldn't find anything amiss to explain their deaths. Some of our neighbors told us then they thought the creatures were bewitched."

Related Characters: Mary Newman (speaker), Richard Godbeer, Elizabeth Clawson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 71

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, as Godbeer recreates a conversation between Mary Newman (a Stamford resident) and one of her close friends, he underscores the ways in which gossip, scapegoating, and blame spread through Puritan communities and fueled the flames of "witch hunts." Here, Goody Newman attributes the death of three of her family's sheep to a supposed curse that Goody Clawson placed on her following the exchange of "angry words."

Earlier in the novel, Godbeer explained that inexplicable occurrences in Puritan New England were often explained away through the use of the supernatural. Here, Goody Newman uses a rumor circulating about one of her ornery neighbors as an explanation for the upsetting death of her livestock. Goody Newman uses Goody Clawson as a scapegoat, conflating the spiritual betrayal of living near a witch with the practical threats of that witch's power. This

passage also demonstrates how women felt compelled to treat other women's subversions of rigid gender norms as additional threats. When something as simple as a neighborly quarrel could be seen as evidence of demonic possession, Godbeer suggests, neighborly relationships (and thus society more largely) were always at risk of crumbling.

That emphasis on community support created intense pressure. When requests for help were denied and when neighbors argued, resentments and recriminations often lingered. People knew that conflict threatened to undermine the values on which their community was built: discord was, as the Reverend Bishop often reminded them, an opening to the Devil, who was always looking for ways to poison the well of God's vineyard.

Related Characters: Richard Godbeer (speaker), Reverend John Bishop

Related Themes:

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Godbeer hammers home the ways in which the intensely communal nature of Puritan society often provided fuel for allegations of witchcraft. Community and interpersonal relationships were of the utmost importance in Puritan New England. To rely on one's neighbor was a given in Puritan society—and being unable to do so because of a neighbor's ornery nature or suspicious behavior, Godbeer suggests, could be taken as a threat or as evidence of witchcraft. Discord between neighbors was a deviation from the rigid social norms of Puritan society—and it was thus a threat and an opening to the Devil himself.

This underscores the ways in which scapegoating and blame became knee-jerk reactions to deals gone wrong, to lack of communal support, or to any conflict with another individual in the community. When someone's actions threatened the careful fabric of Puritan society, Godbeer suggests, their behavior was considered so dangerous and so abnormal that their neighbors believed only the Devil himself could be responsible for such a betrayal.

As officials gathered evidence, [...] there emerged a long history of suspicion and resentment surrounding the two women. Katherine Branch's allegations against Mercy Disborough and Elizabeth Clawson were clearly part of a larger story. But how would the special court react to such testimony? Would these magistrates prove any more reliable than those who presided over witchcraft cases in the past? Surely the overwhelming volume of evidence against the two women would force the court to act decisively. [...] Such, at least, were the hopes of those who believed the accused to be guilty as charged.

Related Characters: Richard Godbeer (speaker), Elizabeth Clawson, Mercy Disborough, Katherine (Kate) Branch

Related Themes:

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Godbeer examines the questions at the forefront of Stamford officials' minds as they gathered evidence and built cases against Mercy Disborough and Elizabeth Clawson. The officials presiding over Katherine Branch's case knew that her supporters were hungry to see justice served against the women allegedly tormenting her. But they also knew—given the precedents set by the witch hunt in Salem and previous witch trials in Fairfield county—that legislating the invisible crimes associated with witchcraft was easier said than done.

In this passage, Godbeer highlights the difficulties of dealing with pragmatic threats to a community when those threats were also seen as spiritual or existential in nature. People wanted justice, and they wanted to see dark forces rooted out of their communities—no matter the cost. The law, however, needed to be more objective and careful in order to prevent widespread panic and suspicion. This tension between the requirements of the law and the community's desire for a scapegoat would influence the complicated and fraught proceedings in court over the months to come.

Chapter 5 Quotes

Several women [...] who had cared for Elizabeth Clawson during childbirth came forward [...] to testify that she had a physical abnormality, perhaps a Devil's mark. [...] The court of inquiry had appointed a group of women, "faithfully sworn, narrowly and truly to inspect and search her body." [...] These women reported "with one voice" that "they found nothing save a wart on one of her arms." They also searched Mercy Disborough's body that same day and did find "a teat or something like one in her privy parts, at least an inch long, which is not common in other women, and for which they could give no natural reason."

Related Characters: Richard Godbeer (speaker), Mercy Disborough, Elizabeth Clawson

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 93-94

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Richard Godbeer describes the invasive and no doubt emotionally painful process by which the courts sought physical evidence of Mercy Disborough and Elizabeth Clawson's ties to the Devil. Because crimes of witchcraft were so difficult to legislate, finding evidence of a "Devil's mark"—or a physical abnormality that indicated Satanic possession—was seen as one of the few ways by which a person's association with Satan could be definitively proven. But the search for a Devil's mark also underscores the rigid Puritan ideals of what women's bodies should look like, illustrating how any deformations or birth defects could be used against a woman to literally demonize her for physically deviating from the status quo. Women's behavior, Godbeer alleges, was not the only thing that was subject to intense scrutiny in Puritan societies—their bodies, too, could also be invaded and thus used as evidence of their association with Satan.

On 2 June both women were bound hand and foot and then thrown into the water. According to those present, Elizabeth Clawson bobbed up and down like a cork and when they tried to push her down she immediately buoyed up again. Mercy Disborough also failed to sink. If the test was trustworthy, both women were guilty. But William Jones knew from his reading that this technique, though practiced for centuries, was now extremely controversial. [...] Since the Bible made no mention of any such technique having been ordained by God, ducking must be an invention of the Devil.

Related Characters: Richard Godbeer (speaker), William Jones, Mercy Disborough, Elizabeth Clawson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 99

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Godbeer describes the process of "ducking," in which women suspected of witchcraft were bound and thrown into bodies of water. If they floated, their bodies were perceived to be rejecting baptismal waters—in other words, they were guilty. If they sunk, they were innocent—but women's lives were often lost in the process of determining their innocence.

This passage highlights the painful, humiliating, and often absurd nature of legislating the invisible crimes of witchcraft. Mercy Disborough, who had been accused of witchcraft and discovered to have a "Devil's mark" on her body, begged to be ducked in hopes of obtaining some shred of physical evidence of her innocence—but when she and Goody Clawson both floated, their guilt was only further presumed. Luckily, Godbeer asserts, the magistrate presiding over their cases, William Jones, was a cautious man who took observable evidence seriously. He believed that there needed to be very strict grounds for prosecuting a person as a witch—and that any means of obtaining evidence that wasn't ordained by God could be the Devil's attempt to fool human beings.

> Even as most trials ended in acquittal, ordinary folk continued to focus on witchcraft as a practical menace, not as a spiritual betrayal. They may have been motivated partly by stubborn resistance to pressure from the courts, or they may not have understood fully why so many trials were failing to result in conviction. But whatever the reasons, when New Englanders talked about witchcraft, most of them did so in terms of the practical threat that it posed: it seemed at such times that ordinary folk cared not a whit about the Devil, only about their dead sheep.

Related Characters: Richard Godbeer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 104

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Godbeer delves more deeply into one of the book's central themes: the tensions between practical threats and spiritual betrayals. Puritan communities saw witchcraft as the Devil at work on Earth, an attempt to destroy a community from the inside out—yet Godbeer also suggests that everyday Puritans were less concerned with the existential threat of Satan's influence as they were with the practical ramifications of his minions' actions. Illness, famine, and the death of livestock were often seen as results of a neighbor's use of witchcraft. The practical threat of losing a flock of sheep—and what that loss would mean for a family's well-being—was the more immediate threat, Godbeer alleges. Thus, it would have been more pressing for a witch to be dealt with on the grounds of the practical threat she posed to her community than on the grounds of the spiritual or existential havoc she might cause. Puritans believed that God and the Devil were going to interfere with earthly happenings no matter what—but while the Devil's influence couldn't be controlled, the practical effects of that influence could be contained.

> Katherine Branch claimed that the Devil had appeared to her "in the shape of three women, Goody Clawson, Goody Miller, and Goody Disborough." [....] Many people had heard Kate relate what she saw during her fits, yet she was the sole source for all that information and the law required that there be two independent witnesses for each incriminating incident. In any case, the information Kate gave was highly suspect: a significant number of Stamford residents doubted that the young woman's fits were genuine; and even if she was seeing specters, how could anyone be sure that the Devil was not misleading her?

Related Characters: Richard Godbeer (speaker), Mercy Disborough, Elizabeth Clawson, Goody Miller, Katherine (Kate) Branch

Related Themes:

Page Number: 105-106

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Godbeer examines the complicated nature of Katherine Branch's claims that she was being bewitched and tormented by a series of women in her community. While many people were quick to believe Kate's allegations at first, as the case dragged on, others might have begun to air suspicions about the trustworthiness of Kate's word.

It was unclear on many levels, Godbeer suggests, whether Kate's visions could be trusted. First, the Devil could be forcing Kate to see things that weren't real. She claimed that Goody Disborough, Goody Miller, and Goody Clawson appeared to her as witches and tormented her in the night—but the Devil could have designs against these three women rather than Kate, sending specters of them to Kate so that she would name and thus doom them. It was also possible, Godbeer suggests, that Kate's neighbors believed she could be possessed by the Devil herself: she could be fabricating the things she saw in service of Satan. Either way, Godbeer demonstrates how painful and impossible it was to legislate spiritual betrayals and crimes of the supernatural. Puritan communities wholeheartedly believed that Devil was an ever-present and cunning force, so it was difficult for earthly enforcers of human law to outsmart him.

Chapter 6 Quotes

> The sticking point was the need for clear proof of the Devil's involvement since hardly any of the depositions mentioned dealings between Elizabeth Clawson or Mercy Disborough and "the grand enemy of God." The witnesses focused on who had a motive to inflict occult harm on the victims, not how the harm was inflicted or whether the Devil was involved. That made for a perplexing situation.

Related Characters: Richard Godbeer (speaker), Mercy Disborough, Elizabeth Clawson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 113

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Godbeer attempts to relay what the jury trying the cases against Elizabeth Clawson and Mercy Disborough might have been thinking as they weighed the evidence and testimony presented against the accused women. The indictment against the women urged the jury to determine whether they had demonstrated "familiarity" with Satan—but the evidence against the women was largely circumstantial and focused more on their earthly transgressions against their neighbors than their spiritual dealings. The "perplexing situation" in front of the jurors, Godbeer suggests, was emblematic of the existential dilemma of legislating invisible crimes. Puritans sought to control the things they feared through the power of the law—but when legal proceedings dealt with the spiritual realm, the line between fact and belief blurred easily. Crimes of witchcraft were fundamentally impossible to legislate—and yet in order to satiate Puritan communities' desire for accountability and adherence to the status quo, something had to be done about the practical and existential threats that crimes of the occult presented.

❝ The ministers did not reject the possibility that Elizabeth Clawson and Mercy Disborough were witches, but they did repudiate the evidence before the court as a sound basis for conviction. Their advice would provide an important reinforcement as Mister Jones and his fellow magistrates urged caution upon the jury.

Related Characters: Richard Godbeer (speaker), Mercy Disborough, Elizabeth Clawson, William Jones

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

After the jury trying the case against Elizabeth Clawson and Mercy Disborough failed to reach a verdict, the court reached out to an educated council of ministers to help determine how to rule against the accused witches. Ultimately, the ministers rejected the possibility of a guilty verdict against the women because of the lack of physical evidence. The ministers ruled that even Mercy Disborough's supposed "Devil's mark" (a physical deformity or abnormality that supposedly indicated Satanic possession) was not sufficient proof of her familiarity with Satan.

This passage underscores the difficulties of legislating unseen crimes and spiritual betrayals. Even a council of ministers—ostensibly those individuals most devoted to rooting out Satan's influence and maintaining a community of godly, pious individuals—could not sentence two women to death based on hearsay and circumstantial evidence alone. If the women's knowledge of Satan—and their attempts to do his bidding on Earth—could not be proved beyond a reasonable doubt, then, they could not be put to death. The pain and profound difficulty of legislating what could not be seen is palpable as Godbeer demonstrates how the courts reached out to state representatives and ministers alike for help in figuring out what to do about the spiritual betrayals within their community.

❝ Mercy Disborough was alive and free, but were her troubles over? A decade earlier a woman in Massachusetts had been acquitted of witchcraft. But a year or so later neighbors suspected her of striking again when an elderly man in the town fell ill. One night a group of young men visited the woman: they dragged her outside, hanged her from a tree until she seemed to be gasping her last breath, then cut her down, rolled her in the snow, and buried her in it, leaving her for dead. Amazingly, she survived, though barely. The law was only one way of dealing with a witch...

Related Characters: Richard Godbeer (speaker), Mercy Disborough

Related Themes:

Page Number: 126

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Godbeer describes the relief and fear that must have accompanied Mercy Disborough's acquittal and release from jail. He suggests that while Goody Disborough would have doubtlessly been grateful to keep her life, she would have likely heard rumors of how citizens within other communities, frustrated by their courts' failures to respond adequately to allegations of witchcraft, took the law into their own hands in an attempt to root out evil. Godbeer implies that just because Mercy Disborough was acquitted, she was by no means innocent in the court of public opinion. People still needed scapegoats for their fears about spiritual betrayals—and women whose witchcraft trials didn't end the way the public wanted them to were still in danger even after the law acquitted them. This passage demonstrates the ways in which women who threatened the norms of Puritan society were perceived as direct threats to their

neighbors' safety and ways of life. Even when the law vindicated them, these women faced the hatred and ire of their communities for years to come.

Afterword Quotes

To settle on a particular interpretation of Kate's behavior strikes me as problematic, not only because of the lack of evidence but also because people at the time were clearly uncertain and divided as to whether Kate was bewitched and if her allegations against specific women could be trusted. That uncertainty was a key component of the situation and has to be retained if we are going to understand just how perplexing Kate's ordeal was for those around her.

Related Characters: Richard Godbeer (speaker), Katherine (Kate) Branch

Related Themes:

Page Number: 139-140

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, as Richard Godbeer speculates on the truth of what happened to Katherine Branch, he introduces his readers to a profound conundrum and an essential complication of interpreting history. While modern-day students of Kate's story might see her fits as epileptic seizures, psychotic episodes, or immature bids for attention, Godbeer suggests that superimposing a modern-day explanation for Kate's behavior onto her story is inherently "problematic."

Instead of interpreting history through a modern-day lens, Godbeer suggests, readers must instead inhabit the Puritan mindset in order to understand Kate's tale. Kate's actions would have been seen as potentially prophetic—or potentially demonic. Some members of her community would have trusted her as an enemy of Satan, while others might have believed she was already compromised by the Devil himself. Some would have seen Kate as a righteous defender of her community's soul, while others may have thought of her as a threat to its very foundation. Taking Kate's situation at face value and attempting to empathize with her journey is the goal of the historian, Godbeer suggests—applying modern attitudes toward religion, scapegoating, and femininity to her situation is counterproductive and anachronistic.

The supernatural realm, [The Puritans] believed, could intrude upon their lives at any time. Any extraordinary event that seemed to interrupt the natural order—comets and eclipses, dramatic fires and epidemics, deformed births and inexplicable crop failures, dreams and visions—carried supernatural significance. Some were sent by God, others by Satan. According to the world view embraced by most New Englanders, God and the Devil were constantly at work in their day-to-day lives, testing and tempting, rewarding and punishing as each son and daughter of Adam and Eve deserved.

Related Characters: Richard Godbeer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 145

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Richard Godbeer delves more deeply into ideas he introduced earlier in *Escaping Salem*, exploring the intensity and immediacy of the supernatural for the Puritans. In the "World of Wonders" that the Puritans inhabited, the spiritual and the supernatural weren't just *possible* explanations for earthly happenings—they were often the *only* explanation or justification. Blessings and bounties were seen as rewards directly from God—but so, too, could the promise of "fine things" and material possessions be seen as a temptation from Satan.

Similarly, while illness, death, and famine could be seen as punishments from God, they could also be interpreted as tricks being played by the Devil himself. In a world where the idea of God and the Devil acting directly on individuals and communities was not just a possibility but a probability, anything could be believed. This, Godbeer alleges, is both why allegations of witchcraft were taken so seriously, and why they were so difficult to prove or legislate. Puritans believed that the constant battle between God and the Devil played out in the human realm.

Women known for their magical skills were much more likely than men to be accused of witchcraft. The power wielded by cunning folk was potentially dangerous whether in the hands of a man or a woman, but it seemed especially threatening if possessed by a woman because it contradicted gender norms that placed women in subordinate positions.

Related Characters: Richard Godbeer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 150

Explanation and Analysis

Women in Puritan society were expected to behave submissively and deferential to men and to occupy positions of support and subordination. In this passage, Godbeer alleges that any women who rose up against these rigid behavioral expectations were seen as a threat. Women possessing power—especially power that was invisible and associated with demonic forces—was strictly forbidden in Puritan society. Even when their crimes were unseeable, Godbeer alleges, women were more likely than men to be prosecuted for unprovable infractions because a woman capable of influence and disruption was a tremendous liability to the fabric of Puritan society.

Through this passage, Godbeer suggests that the subjugation of women in Puritan society was rooted in a fear any threats to the social status quo or to male power. The idea that women could possess unique powers posed a serious existential problem to the men who relied on female labor in the domestic sphere and the relegation of women to the roles of wife and mother.

❝ Women whose circumstances or behavior seemed to disrupt social norms and hierarchies could easily [...] become branded as the Servants of Satan. [...] Women who seemed unduly aggressive and contentious or who failed to display deference toward men in positions of authority—women, in other words, like Elizabeth Clawson and Mercy Disborough—were also more likely to be accused. Both Clawson and Disborough [...] fit the age profile of most accused witches: Goody Clawson was sixty-one and Goody Disborough was fifty-two. Both were also confident and determined, ready to express their opinions and to stand their ground when crossed. Such conduct seemed to many New Englanders utterly inappropriate in women.

Related Characters: Richard Godbeer (speaker), Mercy Disborough, Elizabeth Clawson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 152-153

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Richard Godbeer further examines the rigid gender norms of Puritan society that often led to the demonization of any women who challenged them. Women who were "aggressive" or insufficiently deferential were believed to be possessed or bewitched, while women who had passed through menopause and experienced a change in physicality (and who no longer had any social currency as mothers or sexual objects) were also more frequently suspected of witchcraft.

Godbeer thus implies that any woman whose behavior or physicality challenged the Puritan ideal of the pious, pliable wife and "Handmaiden of God" was a threat to the survival of this image—an image that Puritan men wanted and expected from their wives. Just as conflicts between neighbors threatened the communal nature of Puritan society to the point that they were attributed to witchcraft or possession, women's rejection of gender norms was considered a threat to their community's stability.

❝ Personal interactions and influence were central to the experience of early New Englanders. It therefore made good sense to account for misfortune or suffering in personal terms (just as it should not surprise us that modern Americans inhabiting an often anonymous world, seemingly captive to faceless institutions, should sometimes blame impersonal forces like "the federal government" for their problems). Witchcraft explained personal problems in terms of personal interactions. A particular neighbor had quarreled with you and was now taking revenge for a perceived injury by bewitching you.

Related Characters: Richard Godbeer (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 157

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, taken from a section entitled "The Neighbor as Witch," Richard Godbeer further delves into the ways in which interpersonal problems in Puritan New England quickly spiraled out of control. The intensely communal nature of Puritan society meant that neighbors needed to be accountable to one another, ready to help one another at a moment's notice and sacrifice individual need in the name of communal prosperity. Such a rigid yet fundamentally delicate social contract, Godbeer alleges, meant that faults or cracks in that contract were so unimaginable and so painful that spiritual interference had to be at the root of interpersonal conflict. This further explains the reasoning behind conflicts that became inflamed so rapidly and often spiraled out of control. Such disputes underpinned

allegations of witchcraft, as people were reluctant to believe that anything but demonic possession could cause their neighbors to act in such a way. Entire communities—like Stamford and Salem—were thus implicated in widespread "witch hunts" that sought to excise untrustworthy neighbors from their homes and communities.

❝ The impulse to find a scapegoat in times of trouble and to demonize those whom we dislike and fear remains very much alive. Jews and other ethnoreligious groups, communists and capitalists, feminists and homosexuals, liberals and conservatives, religious fundamentalists—each group has figured in the minds of its enemies as an evil and alien force that threatens to corrode and destroy. A periodic need for witch hunts would appear to be one of the more resilient as well as one of the least admirable human instincts.

Related Characters: Richard Godbeer (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 169-170

Explanation and Analysis

In the final paragraphs of *Escaping Salem*, Godbeer considers how echoes of 17th- and 18th-century witch hunts continue to reverberate in contemporary society. According to Godbeer, the modern-day scapegoating of minorities mirrors the ways in which Puritan society blamed cracks in its foundation on those who deviated from the strict social and religious norms of the time. Godbeer laments that society still possesses a "periodic need for witch hunts." He cites the examples of Jewish people, who were scapegoated and brutally persecuted during the German Holocaust, over two centuries after the Stamford witch trails took place.

With this, Godbeer argues that the impulses to legislate invisible crimes, to make enemies of the vulnerable, and to conflate pragmatic threats with spiritual betrayals still linger years after the Salem and Stamford witch trials. This passage underscores the lingering fear of existential threats to the status quo. Each time society shifts, Godbeer alleges, the "need for witch hunts" resurfaces—often to devastating effect.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE

On a June evening in 1692, Ebenezer Bishop and Mary Newman—two residents of Stamford, Connecticut—crossed paths. As they passed each other in front of prominent Stamford couple Daniel and Abigail Wescot's home, they heard a blood-curdling scream inside the house. Both Ebenezer and Mary knew about the "horrors that tormented" the members of the Wescot household: Daniel and Abigail's 17-year-old maidservant, Katherine Branch, had been bewitched since the end of April. The details of Katherine's condition—fits, trances, and claims of being attacked by witches who could transform from women into cats—were well-known by everyone in the small Puritan village of Stamford.

The prologue introduces readers not just to the events that took place in 1692 Stamford but to the holistic atmosphere of the town. As a place where both male and female residents felt comfortable walking alone at night, Stamford was seemingly a safe and tight-knit community. And by introducing readers to Katherine's fits through the eyes of two Stamford residents, Godbeer is better able to translate the uncertainty, distrust, and panic surrounding the Stamford witch trials.

For Stamford residents, stories of strange fits or ailments and the unexplained deaths of livestock or withering of crops were almost always seen as "judgments from God."—or as evidence of witchcraft. Even after consulting with a local midwife and attempting to find a logical explanation for Kate's fits, Daniel and Abigail Wescot believed that their servant was being tormented by witches. The other townsfolk also heard rumors of strange bruises blossoming on Kate's skin and Kate's cries of "A Witch! A Witch!" in the night. Most agreed that Kate was a victim of witchcraft—and that Elizabeth Clawson, an "argumentative" woman who lived in Stamford, was responsible for Katherine's torments.

Richard Godbeer introduces the social and religious climate of 1692 Stamford in order to illustrate how easy it was for residents to be swept up in a witch panic. To the Puritans, God and the Devil seemed to act upon their daily lives in real, tangible ways—for a witch to be revealed in their midst, then, was seen as a legitimate threat.

In the middle of her fits, Kate named the women who were tormenting her. Among these women were Goody Clawson and Mercy Disborough. The second was a woman Kate had never met—but one with whom the Wescots had also quarreled. Kate named numerous women, puzzling townspeople as to how there were so many witches in Stamford and why they were all targeting Kate. Something serious, many residents realized, was brewing in Stamford. The the witch trials about to unfold were not nearly as widespread, impassioned, or violent as the witch trials taking place at the same time in Salem, Massachusetts. Stamford witch trials were, however, just as hasty and destabilizing to the community.

The Salem witch trials are a well-known part of American history; the panic, fear, and distrust they inspired have become infamous over the centuries. In telling the story of what happened on a lesser scale in Stamford, Godbeer isn't so much comparing and contrasting the two witch hunts—rather, he's illustrating how a small seed of suspicion can quickly grow and take over even a small, tight-knit community of pious people.

The magistrates presiding over the witch trials in Fairfield County had heard about what was happening in Salem—and they were determined to avoid the mistakes of their neighbors to the north. This is why only two women in Stamford, Goody Clawson and Goody Disborough, ended up being tried for witchcraft. Stamford residents observed Kate's fits for a long time before proceeding with allegations of witchcraft against the two women—even then, the trials were slow-moving and deliberate, with special courts appointed to deal with the invisible allegations against the women. The court, the Stamford community, and the accused themselves knew that two lives hung in the balance.

Richard Godbeer explains that the desire to avoid the mass panic of the Salem trials heavily influenced the proceedings (and indeed the outcomes) of the neighboring Stamford trials. Though Puritans sought to completely root out witchcraft within their communities, even invisible crimes associated with the Devil himself were subject to the due process of law. A spiritual issue like witchcraft was both a practical and an existential problem, and Godbeer suggests that this combination made Stamford residents extra cautious.

CHAPTER 1

Richard Godbeer returns the narrative to April of 1692 in order to describe what daily life looked like for Katherine Branch and her fellow Stamford residents. The houses that lined the streets of Stamford were small, humble, and cramped. As spring arrived, families would have looked forward to the chance to spend more time outside of their small homes and enjoy some recreation—and some privacy. The Wescots were a well-to-do family with several children, so their home would have been larger than most. Their eldest, Joanna, was fully recovered from the strange fits that had seized her years ago. Abigail and Daniel were prominent members of society whom others addressed as "Mister" and "Mistress" rather than the humble prefixes Goodman and Goodwife (or Goody).

By further contextualizing how Puritan society—and specifically Stamford society—was organized, Godbeer gives more insight into how intensely communal life was in this society. Families lived in close quarters with their servants, and there was a deep intimacy to life there in spite of the hierarchical social structure. This illustrates how profoundly destabilizing it would have been to discover that a witch was living within such a community—not just to the people immediately threatened by the witch, but for everyone in town.

That month, while everything seemed to be going well for the Wescots, their 17-year-old servant, Kate, began suffering fits of convulsions and contortions. When Kate returned from the fields one evening, she cried and screamed as invisible forces seemed to seize her body for the first time. Daniel Wescot was immediately reminded of the spells that plagued Joanna many years ago. For several weeks, Joanna had claimed that something was creeping into her room to torment her in the night. Though the fits and fears lasted only a few months, they left a lasting impression on the Wescots.

Katherine's inexplicable and painful fits were worrisome to the Wescots—even though they were not foreign or unprecedented. The cause of Joanna's night terrors and Kate's fits of pains and convulsions may have had a root in the physical or psychological—but Godbeer also illustrates how the supernatural was seen as a legitimate source of information and explanation for such ailments.

The day after Kate's first fit, the Wescots called Sarah Bates, a local midwife, to examine her. Kate lay rigid in her bed, alternating between convulsive fits of screaming and spells of paralysis and catatonia (immobility). Kate's mother had also suffered from fits. While medical knowledge at the time allowed for the possibility that Kate was suffering from an inherited malady, the Wescots also suspected that she and her mother were both victims of possession or witchcraft. The midwife tried many natural remedies—but when she tried to led blood from the catatonic Kate's feet, Kate leapt to attention and begged not to be blooded before lapsing into laughter. The midwife had no idea whether to declare Kate's manic laughter an uncontrollable symptom of her fits, a side effect of demonic possession, or evidence of Kate leading her masters and healers on.

For Puritans, threats from the spiritual realm were just was real as practical threats from the physical realm. This passage thus illustrates how difficult it was for Puritans to figure out what the cause of strange behaviors or afflictions might have been. The dichotomy between the possibility of a spiritual affliction and the possibility of a physical one was further complicated by the fact that women—especially young women—were often seen as wily and untrustworthy. Physical, spiritual, and personal concerns were all at war with one another.

As Kate's fits continued to worsen, she also began to experience visions in the night of women transforming into cats and threatening to kill her. Kate claimed she could feel hands reaching out to her in the dark of night, pinching and prodding her and offering her "fine things" such as clothes and jewels. Confused and frightened, Daniel Wescot sought the help of Stamford's minister, the reputable Oxford graduate Reverend John Bishop. Bishop and one of his fellow pastors, Thomas Hanford, evaluated Kate and then explained to her that she was being visited in her dreams by witches who wanted her to join them in devotion to Satan. The ministers promised to pray for Kate—and they warned Daniel to keep an intensely watchful eye upon Kate and provide her with both the practical and spiritual care she needed.

Again, Godbeer illustrates how the tension between the possibility of a physical affliction and the dark threat of a spiritual affliction. Kate's visions in the night could have simply been nightmares or terrors—but because the spiritual world was as real as the physical one to Stamford residents, they could just as easily have interpreted her visions as messages from emissaries of Satan.

The amount of physical and emotional energy the Wescots put into keeping close tabs on Kate soon exhausted them. Daniel and Abigail reached out to their neighbors for help, as members of the Stamford community often did in times of crisis. Daniel also hoped that his neighbors' presence in his home—and their ability to witness Kate's fits and nightmares—might help him figure out who, exactly, was responsible for Kate's afflictions before the fits spread to Wescots' own children.

This passage illustrates how profoundly the residents of Stamford relied upon each other in times of bounty and hardship alike. The intensely intimate and communal nature of Stamford society, Godbeer suggests, was a blessing in good times—but it was also a risk in times of trouble. In such a tight-knit environment, a threat against one member of the community could be seen as a threat against the entire town and thus create widespread panic.

Two of the Wescots' neighbors, David Selleck and Abraham Finch, took turns keeping watch over Kate as she slept. Both men reported experiencing strange things in Kate's room, such as seeing a "ball of fire" and feeling pinching in their sides. Ebenezer Bishop spent a night looking over Kate as well. He watched bruises and lesions appear on her skin in real time—yet he saw no presence apart from himself enter the room. As more and more neighbors offered up their time to keep watch over Kate, curiosity and intrigue bloomed throughout the community. Rumors of Kate's incredible physical contortions, **swelling breasts**, and levitations spread like wildfire.

Again, this passage illustrates how Puritan communities came together in times of trouble—even when the threat of a spiritual attack seemed imminent. The Wescots' neighbors' reports from their nights spent watching over Kate seemed to confirm that there was a spiritual offensive being launched—if not against the entire town, than at least against the Wescots. Worse still, it seemed to begin with the most isolated and vulnerable member of their household.

Neighbors who took shifts watching Kate experimented upon her by holding weapons over her to see how she'd respond. Even though Kate emerged from stupors and calmed herself from fits each time her life was threatened—which true victims of witchcraft were said to be unable to do—Kate claimed that the Devil himself had appeared to her in the form of a black calf, a white dog, and three witches, ordering her to become his servant. As Kate's apparitions became more and more frequent, interrupting not just her nighttime slumber but her daytime tasks, the Wescots and their neighbors became more determined than ever to find out who was tormenting Kate—and how they could be stopped.

Even though the experiments the Wescots' neighbors performed on Kate seemed to indicate that she was faking her fits and spells, her allegations of witchcraft being performed on her outweighed any evidence to the contrary. This speaks to the gravity of the spiritual world within the Puritan imagination—a threat from the Devil, even one that seemed manufactured, could not be overlooked or explained away hastily. Justice, and elimination of the spiritual threat, had to be pursued—no matter the cost.

CHAPTER 2

After attempts to find natural causes for Kate's afflictions failed, the Wescots and their neighbors became increasingly convinced that Kate was truly being preyed upon by Satan and a coterie of witches. The Wescots kept continually careful vigils over Kate and began asking her who she saw tormenting her in her nightly visions. Slowly, Kate began to describe—and then name—the women in her dreams.

The Wescots perceived the threat against Kate as a threat against their entire family—and perhaps even their entire community. As Kate began to name her tormentors, likely at the behest of her master and mistress, the Wescots may have believed that in learning the names of the women preying upon Kate, they could restore justice and peace to their community.

One of these women was Goody Clawson, a Stamford woman who had long been suspected of using occult power against her neighbors. In fact, the Wescots had quarreled with Goody Clawson years ago over a trade of flax. Goody Clawson frequently insulted the Wescots, throwing stones at Abigail in public and calling her a "proud slut." The Wescots always suspected Goody Clawson of being behind Joanna's fits—and now that Kate claimed to see Goody Clawson regularly appear to her in the night as an emissary of Satan, they believed they had proof of Goody Clawson's dealings with the Devil.

This passage implies that Kate may have been naming prior enemies of the Wescots in order to please them—or because they had instructed her to name certain women as witches. At the same time, Godbeer implies that because women who expressed anger toward their neighbors were so vilified in Puritan society, the community would have been quick to see Goody Clawson's appearances to Kate as evidence of her facility with witchcraft. This could have prevented them from realizing that Kate's naming of Goody Clawson may have been a plot to remove one of the Wescots' enemies from the community.

As neighbors continued to rotate their watches over Kate, they heard her name many different women as witches—some of whom had named they recognized, while others had nicknames like "Goody Crump" and "Goody Hipshod". Kate accused a woman named Goody Miller of nursing a black dog from an **extra breast below her arm** (witches were believed to have an extra breast from which they fed animal familiars, or possessed pets, their own blood).

This passage introduces the image of the "Devil's mark"—an extra breast that witches were believed to develop after entering into a covenant with Satan. Anomalies found on women's bodies became evidence of their unholiness or darkness, meaning that women who didn't conform to the community's standards of beauty or normalcy were more likely to be accused of witchcraft.

Kate also mentioned seeing a woman with "thick lips"—Abigail Wescot heard the description and immediately thought of a woman named Mercy Disborough who lived in the neighboring town of Compo. Mercy was known to be a "difficult and vindictive neighbor," and she had been accused of witchcraft before. Kate, however, had never been to Compo—Abigail was confused as to how Kate would know to describe a woman whom the Wescots knew, yet whom Kate had never met herself.

This passage continues to cast doubt on how Kate was divining the appearances of women she'd never met. Once again, although there was a practical explanation for every step of Kate's ordeal, the Puritan community around her did not discount the darker, supernatural reasoning behind Kate's visions.

In May of 1692, Daniel Wescot lodged a formal complaint alongside Kate in the local preliminary courts at the Stamford meetinghouse. Four magistrates heard their lament. Kate named Goody Clawson, Goody Disborough and a woman she called Goody Hipshod—whose real name Kate did not know—as the witches who tormented her nightly. The next day, Goody Clawson and Goody Disborough were brought in for questioning, and they each insisted upon their own innocence. But when Kate was brought into the meetinghouse during their questioning, she succumbed to a fit, claiming that Mercy was tormenting her that instant. Mercy Disborough was thus sent to jail, and Elizabeth Clawson was placed on house arrest. Goody Hipshod continued to appear to Kate, but after Goody Disborough and Goody Clawson were contained, Kate claimed that they stopped bothering her.

This passage shows that even though Kate's claims could be said to be spurious or highly coincidental, Stamford officials took no risks where witchcraft was concerned. Because Kate mentioned witchcraft, her word was seen as worth more than the accused women's. Though their crimes against Kate were invisible and difficult to pin down, Goody Clawson and Goody Disborough were immediately punished and confined in an attempt to control the fear and uncertainty spreading throughout the community.

On June 13th, however, Daniel Wescot accompanied Kate to the home of Jonathan Selleck, the wealthiest of the four magistrates in the local court. Kate told Mister Selleck that four more women had appeared to her as witches: two women whose names she didn't know, plus Goody Miller—the woman with the alleged **extra breast**—and two women called Goody Glover and Goody Abison. At yet another audience with Selleck later that month, Kate claimed that Goody Clawson had returned to tormenting her more terribly than ever. Daniel Wescot attested to Kate's misery. Elizabeth Clawson was removed from house arrest and placed in jail.

This passage casts further suspicion on Kate's mention of Goody Clawson—a known enemy of the Wescots. It's possible that Daniel Wescot felt house arrest was not punishment enough for Goody Clawson, and that he spurred Kate to claim the woman was still tormenting her. Whether or not Daniel was behind Kate's further accusations in this passage, it is clear that witches were seen as such tremendous threats that they needed to be sequestered from the rest of their community.

As the summer went on, Kate's fits continued. She eventually named the two women who'd appeared to her namelessly at first as Mary Staples and Hannah Harvey. When Kate provided the magistrates with these names, Selleck was reminded of a New Haven woman named Mary Staples who'd recently been accused of witchcraft. Staples, it turned out, had a daughter Mary who married a man named Harvey. Mary Harvey had a daughter named Hannah. After naming these women, Kate broke down in tears. Selleck recognized the fear and exhaustion in Kate's demeanor. He became determined to do what he could to protect her—and to weed out the witches tormenting Stamford, no matter the legal and political struggles ahead as the trials began.

Many of the women Kate named throughout her ordeal had suffered public or private accusations of witchcraft in the past. Goody Clawson, Goody Disborough, and Goody Staples were all ornery women who had experienced difficulties with their respective communities in the past. For this reason, perhaps, the magistrates were more likely to believe Kate's claims. Women who repeatedly caused trouble for their communities were seen as dangerous liabilities in Puritan New England.

CHAPTER 3

As the weeks passed, Jonathan Selleck became increasingly anxious about the threat not just to Kate but to the whole of Stamford. He and his fellow magistrates, having borne witness to witch panics in Hartford in the 1660s, knew how quickly a witch hunt could spiral out of control—and how difficult it could be to legislate an "invisible crime." Many of the women tried in Hartford were later pardoned or acquitted due to insufficient evidence, and thus a sketchy precedent for legislating crimes of witchcraft was in place throughout Connecticut. The public had little faith in a legal system that could not protect citizens from alleged witches.

This chapter introduces the serious logistical and existential threats that Johnathan Selleck needed to leverage as he considered how to restore order to Stamford. Legislating the "invisible crime" of witchcraft was not a straightforward thing—and yet, if a response to a supposed incident of possession or witchcraft wasn't dealt with, panic, suspicion, and hatred could quickly spread throughout the community.

Selleck knew that in addition to the thorny legal process of trying an accused witch, many people in Stamford saw Kate as untrustworthy. Abigail Wescot herself expressed concern over the intensity of her husband's investment in Kate's ordeal and his unconditional belief in her statements. Many townsfolk began to suspect that Daniel himself was encouraging Kate to name and accuse certain people. And even if Kate was truly bewitched, many townsfolk believed the Devil to work through trickery—they wondered if the specters Kate claimed to see were really who they seemed to be, or whether Satan was deliberately running certain women's names through the mud. Obtaining hard evidence in such a strange case, Godbeer points out, was nearly impossible.

Selleck didn't just have the problem of a potential witch (or witches) to contend with. As a magistrate and legal servant of Stamford, he had to consider the intricate and potentially scandalous social alliances that defined his community. Failing to take Kate's claims seriously because of the community's suspicion about her relationship with Daniel and Daniel's influence on her could result in more pain and suffering for everyone. But, on the other hand, taking the word of a liar seriously could also have devastating effects for the accused.

Goody Miller fled to Bedford, New York to live with her brothers, two prominent members of their community, as soon as she was accused. The Stamford courts could not touch her there, and the community in Bedford refused to extradite her. Meanwhile, Connecticut's assembly, following the example set in Salem, assembled a special court to adjudicate the cases against the five other women Kate had named: Elizabeth Clawson, Mercy Disborough, Mary Staples, Mary Harvey, and Hannah Harvey. The fates of these women now rested not in the hands of Selleck or the Stamford magistrates, but of the members of this special court.

In addition to the complicated social implications of a witchcraft case, there were legal boundaries that had to be maintained. Goody Miller's flight to Bedford protected her, ramping up the need to legislate the cases against the other supposed witches quickly and thoroughly. This was the only way to make up for the woman who slipped through the cracks of the law.

In September, the court began hearing testimony against Mary Staples, Mary Harvey, and Hannah Harvey. Only two witnesses came forward. Their testimony was deemed insufficient evidence, and in the middle of the month, the three women were acquitted and set free. The court then turned their attentions to Goody Clawson and Goody Disborough.

The "evidence" against the women of the Staples-Harvey clan was insufficient, and so their case was dismissed. This demonstrates that in spite of the palpable weight that accusations of witchcraft had, there were strict protocols that needed to be followed when it came to the legislation of invisible crimes. Hearsay was not enough—and so the cases against Goody Clawson and Goody Disborough, needed to be rooted in more tangible proof.

Many people—including prominent Stamford citizens such as Sarah Bates and Jonathan Bell (another magistrate)—signed a petition in support of Goody Clawson. Other neighbors, however, came forward with testimony against the women, claiming that in the wake of quarrels with both Goody Clawson and Goody Disborough, illness and misfortune had befallen them. Goody Clawson and Goody Disborough were both deeply indignant about the testimony against them and, in private conversations, expressed their anger and frustration. After Daniel Wescot visited Goody Clawson in jail, Kate's fits worsened—and Daniel's youngest daughter fell out of her bed one evening.

This passage demonstrates that a bad word against an alleged witch was worth much more than a good one. In other words, allegations of unseen evil associations or behavior carried more weight than proof of visible good deeds. The invisible was more compelling than what could be seen because it was perceived as more fearsome and dangerous.

In jail, Mercy Disborough experienced torments and sleepless nights herself. She confided in her jailer that she believed the Devil was after her—but her jailer only took this as further evidence that Mercy was damned. He relayed his testimony to the court. The testimony against both women piled up, and soon, there was enough evidence to send them to formal trials. Both women asserted their innocence, knowing that if they were found guilty at trial, they would be hanged. Yet again, as the court prepared for the formal trial, the magistrates judging the women's cases found themselves uncertain of how to establish proof, motive, and guilt in a case concerning the occult and the unseen. As far as the women's accusers were concerned, however, there was already enough evidence against them.

Even though Mercy Disborough claimed that she was being pained and tormented by unseen forces, the damage was already done. Her community aw her as untrustworthy, so nothing she said—even if it echoed the words of her own accuser—could save her form the court of public opinion. The magistrates needed to find evidence that would successfully convict the women—but if they could not, Godbeer implies, the women would still face the wrath of their community.

CHAPTER 4

As the trials approached, many residents of Stamford and Compo began sharing stories among themselves of unfortunate encounters they'd had with Goody Clawson and Goody Disborough. One man spoke with a neighbor about how, after a quarrel with Goody Clawson, his young daughter experienced terrible pain for two weeks before passing away. He was now certain that Goody Clawson caused the girl's death. Mary Newman claimed that after a similarly small quarrel with Goody Clawson over her child stealing from Goody Clawson's apple orchard, three of the Newmans' sheep suddenly died. Godbeer states that because so many things about life in Stamford were mysterious, unnerving, or inexplicable, it's understandable that these individuals believed that bewitchment could explain away their misfortunes.

Illnesses, fires, the death of livestock, and the failure of crops all had natural causes—but 17th-century Puritans also saw the supernatural as a reasonable explanation for these things. Adversity could be seen as punishment from God—or a neighbor's ability to harness malevolent forces for their own devices. The power of hearsay was undeniable, and as neighbors compared stories, they found that they all seemed to share a common enemy. To dispel their fears of the unseen, Stamford residents rallied together against a scapegoat for their troubles.

Godbeer goes on to explain that because of the deeply communal nature of life in Stamford, everyone's collective welfare depended on good will and cooperation between neighbors. Conflict threatened Puritan values—and it was often seen as the work of (or a spiritual opening to) the Devil.

In 1692 Stamford, betraying one's neighbor was one of the worst sins one could commit. Therefore, anyone who willingly quarreled with their neighbor was thought to be a witch—or at least under the control of Satan.

In Compo, a man named Goodman Grey claimed that years ago, Goody Disborough had bewitched his livestock and led them to drown to death in a swamp. Goodman Grey also claimed that after bargaining for a new kettle with the Disboroughs, the kettle he took home from Goody Disborough tarnished and bent spontaneously as soon as he arrived home with it. He explained her ornery nature as evidence of witchcraft. Many other neighbors came forward with stories of strange losses of livestock in the wake of quarrels with Goody Disborough. Many of these neighbors had, in the past, confronted Goody Disborough and accused her of witchcraft. She always denied the allegations wholeheartedly, yet the community's distrust of her persisted.

Goody Disborough was seen as an ill-tempered, untrustworthy woman to begin with—and the strange happenings amid quarrels or disagreements with her pushed her neighbors over the edge. In a strict Puritan community like Compo, being a rough-spoken woman was a social aberration—and being a dishonest or opportunistic neighbor was an even greater one. These things combined made evil and witchcraft the only logical explanation for Mercy's behavior in the eyes of her wary neighbors.

In September of 1692, as Goody Disborough's trial began, many agitated neighbors traveled all the way from Compo to tell stories that seemed to confirm her facility with witchcraft. One man, Edward Jesop, claimed that as Mercy and another guest at a dinner party debated scripture over an open Bible, the words on the pages of the holy book blurred when Mercy Disborough touched them. That night, on the way home, the man's horse continually tried to steer itself into the river. Goodman Grey came forward again to tell the story of how, when he suspected his cattle of being bewitched, he cut off the ear of one of his heifers, hoping to cause pain in whoever had procured the spell. Days later, he heard that Mercy Disborough was confined to bed with terrible pains.

As Mercy Disborough's neighbors continued bringing forth anecdotes of her witchcraft, the circumstantial evidence against her began to pile up. In a situation in which invisible crimes were being legislated, the mountain of ill reports against her would have been seen as the closest thing to hard evidence the courts were able to obtain. At the same time, the special court trying the case would have been aware that simple rumors were not enough—some kind of physical evidence or a confession would be needed to hold Mercy accountable for her invisible transgressions.

As officials continued gathering evidence against both Mercy Disborough and Elizabeth Clawson, it became clear that their communities' fear and hatred of them were "part of a larger story." It was now up to the courts to use the combination of communal hearsay and evidence to decide whether the two women would be charged for their crimes.

Godbeer once again emphasizes that even amid mounting circumstantial evidence against both women, the courts knew that they needed to tread carefully as they proceeded. Otherwise, they could sow further panic, distrust, and anger throughout the community.

CHAPTER 5

William Jones, Connecticut's deputy governor, was a member of the special court assembled to try the accused witches of Stamford and Compo. In the summer of 1692, Jones drafted a memorandum outlining the procedure for prosecuting an accused witch—Jones knew he had to tread carefully presiding over two cases that carried the death penalty, especially cases in which most of the evidence was circumstantial or based in hearsay. Thought magistrates worked hard to ensure that they were considering only concrete evidence, in many witch trials, the public felt that circumstantial stories and anecdotes were more than enough to prove that a woman was a witch.

For a person's testimony of another's malevolence to be dismissed was a painful, even unforgivable thing in these small Puritan communities. A neighbor's word was supposed to be good enough, especially when evil forces were involved. In trials concerning witchcraft, however, legislators were placed in the difficult position of needing to make a decision that would satisfy the community's fears and grievances without falling into the trap of creating widespread panic and unchecked suspicion.

Jones's detailed memorandum, *Grounds for Examination of a Witch*, offered up instances in which a person could be tried as a witch. These included "notorious defamation by […] common report," "mischief," illness, or death following a quarrel or a cursing. Evidence of a person having "**the Devil's mark**," or an extra breast or nipple, was also sufficient. Because Goody Disborough and Goody Clawson were both commonly reported to be witches—and because they had, it seemed, cursed their enemies' livestock—there were grounds for their examinations.

William Jones sought to temper the flood of allegations he may have perceived as a threat to his community's sense of camaraderie and mutual trust. If there were not clear grounds for what constituted witchcraft, anything could be perceived as the work of the Devil. Jones insisted upon finding physical evidence of a person's association with the Devil rather than relying solely on hearsay and circumstantial evidence.

Both women were also reported to have a "**Devil's mark**," and so the court appointed a group of women to inspect both Goody Clawson and Goody Disborough for extra breasts. Goody Clawson was reported to have no abnormalities after all—but Mercy Disborough was found to have "a teat or something like one in her privy parts, at least an inch long, which is not common in other women." Further and later examinations by different groups of women revealed conflicting reports about what "marks" the women did or did not have—and whether those marks were natural or supernatural in nature. The court ordered repeated searches of the women's bodies, determined to find the "hard evidence" that only the presence of the Devil's mark could provide.

In this passage, Godbeer describes the intense and invasive physical scrutiny that women suspected of witchcraft were subjected to. In the search for physical evidence that could be used against them, women accused of witchcraft were treated like objects to be prodded and experimented on. Their bodies became liabilities—and any physical feature that deviated from the norm of what women's bodies were meant to look like was literally demonized.

The second part of Jones's guide provided methods of "proving" that a person was a witch. Some outdated "proofs" included burning a person with an iron or scalding water to see if they reacted; if they did not, they were a witch. While this method was considered barbaric by the 1690s, "ducking"—or tying a person up and submerging them in water to see if they floated, proving their status as a witch—was still more or less accepted. Goody Disborough and Goody Clawson both enthusiastically agreed to being ducked. Both women were ducked—and both floated. Jones, however, felt that because ducking was not mentioned in the Bible, it was an invention of the Devil. He did not trust the "evidence" that ducking provided.

This passage demonstrates the lengths to which legislators went to find acceptable modes of physical evidence to use in witchcraft cases. Physical evidence was necessary yet hard to come by because of Puritans' profound belief that the Devil could interfere in their earthly affairs. Anything that seemed to support a person's use of witchcraft, then, might also be the Devil trying to mislead an entire community.

Katherine Branch's claims of having seen both women appear to her as specters in the night were also suspect. The court perceived these "cunning" apparitions to be unreliable because they were "received only on the Devil's authority." Only voluntary confession from the accused witch, or the testimony of two trustworthy witnesses who had observed the accused witch consorting with the Devil, were regarded as sufficient proof of witchcraft.

Just as physical evidence was subject to doubt, individual testimony—especially that of a young woman—was similarly seen as an inscrutable liability. When nothing could be trusted because of the Devil's potential interference, no one could be believed. This impossible catch-22 no doubt fueled the atmosphere of panic, uncertainty, and constant suspicion that spawned the witch trials in the first place.

Godbeer writes that the reasoning for such strict parameters for evidence was rooted in the fact that people who accused their neighbors of witchcraft were not primarily concerned with the "spiritual betrayal" of a person consorting with the Devil. Rather, they were concerned with the "practical menace[s]" associated with witchcraft: curses that took the form of illness, famine, or the death of livestock.

This passage gets at the central contradiction of witch trials: witchcraft was just as much a pragmatic threat as it was an existential betrayal. Puritans, Godbeer asserts, were often more interested in protecting their bodies and their property than saving the souls of their neighbors or rooting Satan out of their communities.

In light of little reliable evidence supporting Katherine Branch's claims about Elizabeth Clawson and Mercy Disborough—and the many layers of suspicion surrounding witchcraft cases—William Jones likely began to worry about whether someone was urging Katherine to make these accusations. The inconsistencies in the findings of **marks** on the women's bodies—as well as both Goody Disborough and Goody Clawson's claims that they themselves were being tormented by the Devil while locked in their cells—further obscured the truth.

When the majority of the available evidence in a case was hearsay—and when even paltry physical proof was suspected to be the work of the Devil himself—nothing and no one could be considered truly trustworthy. The spiritual realm was invisible and impossible to legislate, control, or predict—and thus, every investigation into spiritual matters was complex and uncertain.

The last bastion of evidence that could be used against the women was proof that they used the Devil's powers to predict the future or summon ghosts. Fortune-telling and weather prediction were skills attributed to "cunning folk" throughout New England—many of whom were seen as healers and benign predicters of the future by their neighbors, even if their actions raised the suspicions of the local clergy. If evidence could be found of Goody Clawson or Goody Disborough using "cunning" powers, they might be convicted yet—but William Jones was increasingly worried about what the women's accusers would have to say if their "cunning" could not be proved.

Coincidences were not enough for William Jones, and neither was hearsay or even physical evidence. Only the women's direct use of supernatural powers seemed to be enough to prove their facility with Satan. Jones was treading extremely carefully as he built cases against Goody Disborough and Goody Clawson—but with such an abundance of caution, it seemed that the community would never get the convictions they craved.

CHAPTER 6

On September 14th, 1692, the trial of Elizabeth Clawson and Mercy Disborough began at the meetinghouse in Fairfield. Witnesses traveled from both Compo and Stamford to address the special magistrates, the trial jury, and two prosecutors, offering up their testimony against the accused witches. Godbeer writes that while there is "no surviving account of the mood in the meetinghouse" throughout the trials, there is record that the jury, once sent away to reach a verdict, failed to come to a final resolution. In spite of the testimony that the jury members heard, not all of them were convinced that women were guilty of witchcraft.

Though there is an absence of documentation as to what happened in the meetinghouse during Goody Clawson and Goody Disborough's trial, whatever transpired throughout the proceedings was clearly not enough to convince the jury that the two women were witches. Gaps like this in the historical record, Godbeer demonstrates, are often just as revealing as a wealth of information: students of history can extrapolate the fact that the trial was beset by uncertainty and perhaps lacked consistent testimony.

The magistrates needed to make a decision. They could wait for word from the jury; they could step in and provide additional evidence; or they could refer the cases back to Connecticut's representative assembly. The magistrates sent word to the assembly, but on the 13th of October, the representatives replied that the special court must take responsibility for finishing up the case itself.

This passage demonstrates how profoundly difficult it was even for a special court of highly educated men to legislate an invisible crime like witchcraft. The central conundrum of witchcraft trials, Godbeer has shown throughout the book, was always a lack of objectivity and grounding in physical, provable fact.

The judges then sought the opinion of a group of ministers, believing that learned religious men would be able to shed some light on what to do. The ministers replied to the inquiry by stating that the results of a ducking experiment were not grounds for conviction—nor, they said, were the "**Devil's marks**" found upon the women's bodies, since the women's examiners were not physicians. Lastly, the ministers stated that they carried "a suspicion of [...] counterfeiting" when it came to Katherine Branch's testimony, and that they did not see "strange accidents" surrounding Goody Clawson and Goody Disborough as evidence of witchcraft.

Because the crimes being legislated were crimes of the supernatural, the judges thought that a council of ministers would be better-qualified to rule upon them. The ministers, however, were clearly skeptical of the entire case, believing that the Devil himself could potentially have influenced even the alleged victims. Again, Godbeer demonstrates how difficult it was to legislate invisible, spiritual crimes.

On the 28th of October, court reconvened at the meetinghouse in Fairfield. The jury spokesman announced—surely, Godbeer writes, to the surprise of most of those present—that the jury had found Mercy Disborough guilty of "familiarity with Satan." William Jones urged the jury to return to quarters and reconsider their decision—but when they emerged again, the verdict remained. The court sentenced her to execution by hanging. The jury then announced Goody Clawson's verdict: she was found not guilty.

This passage implies that Goody Clawson was acquitted while Goody Disborough was convicted due to the discrepancy found on Goody Disborough's body—her supposed "Devil's mark." This demonstrates how women's bodies were often seen as objects to be controlled or punished for existing outside of the status quo. Women who represented a threat to rigid Puritan ideals of femininity were persecuted, while those who embodied the norm were spared.

Within days of the verdicts, many of Mercy Disborough's supporters began petitioning the courts to retry the woman's case, stating that one of the jurors from the September trial had missed a meeting of the October trial. The claim was investigated, and Goody Disborough was granted a stay of execution. In May of 1693, three magistrates agreed with Disborough's supporters: the change in jurors was illegal. Moreover, the magistrates stated that they believed there was not enough evidence to sentence Goody Disborough to death after all.

Though Mercy Disborough's status as a witch was proven on shaky ground at best, it was very easy for the courts to see that there was a practical legal problem with the proceedings. This further underscores Godbeer's assertion that trying to legislate witchcraft was a matter of asserting control rather than bidding for actual justice.

Mercy Disborough was acquitted and released from jail. Godbeer states that while there is no record of who collected her from jail—nor what their reaction was to her acquittal—it is safe to assume that Mercy Disborough was publicly maligned for years to come following her release. She was not free yet in the court of public opinion and was likely still hated by the neighbors she'd angered long before her trial. Godbeer darkly suggests that in Puritan communities, "the law was only one way of dealing with a witch."

Godbeer's ominous ending to the tale of Mercy Disborough and Goody Clawson suggests that just because the women were ultimately acquitted in a court of law, the court of public opinion was not so easily sated. The women, he suggests, likely had to contend with threats from their community and the constant fear of extrajudicial punishment for their perceived crimes.

AFTERWORD

In the wake of her acquittal and release, Mercy Disborough was indeed plagued by repeated instances of slander and lies about her past relationships with men. Her community, Godbeer writes, refused to leave her in peace. Her husband died in 1709, but there is no record of Mercy's date of death. Elizabeth Clawson's life, too, disappears rather abruptly from the historical record—her death as noted as having occurred on May 10th, 1714. Godbeer laments that most-accused witches made only "brief and dramatic appearance[s]" in the historical record, while the details of their lives post-acquittal largely faded into obscurity. It is challenging, he writes, to reconstruct the aftermath of a witch trial in the present day—but because few or no formal records mention either woman, it is safe to assume that the tensions in Stamford and Compo never again required legal interference.

In this passage, Godbeer explains how he can learn more about the later lives of Mercy Disborough and Elizabeth Clawson from what is missing *from the historical record rather than he can from what is present. The women were only considered noteworthy when they were regarded as threats and disturbances. For the rest of their lives, they faded into the backgrounds of their communities, wrestling with whatever remaining threats or disagreements their neighbors directed at them.*

Telling the Story. Godbeer seeks to explain how he reconstructed the Puritan mindset, how he came to understand accusations of witchcraft (and belief in dark magic) as commonplace, and how he reimagined letters, conversations, and spoken testimonies. In order to understand the social atmosphere of 1692 Stamford, Godbeer states, he had to parse what few official records of depositions and statements *do* exist. Only then can he read between the lines and ascertain the beliefs, prejudices, and allegiances of all the players in the cases. While Godbeer admits to taking dramatic license in relaying the ways in which neighbors heard about scandals that seemed to them evidence of witchcraft, he has taken all facts from documented court testimony.

As Godbeer explains his methodology to his readers, he underscores the importance of reading historical records as living documents. His goal in writing this book was to bring the past to life in an authentic way while refraining from the impulse to superimpose modern ideology onto a story from a bygone era. Godbeer uses what remains of the historical record to illuminate the things that have been lost—but he has taken care to remain loyal to the experiences of the individuals whose lives he is examining.

Though *Escaping Salem* was written to examine the Stamford trials from the perspectives of all involved, one perspective is more or less missing from the historical record: that of Katherine Branch (who, ironically, put the wave of Stamford accusations in motion). Godbeer writes that he intentionally maintained a sense of mystery surrounding Katherine's "fits." They might have been rooted in epilepsy or psychosis, or they might have been a sham constructed so that Kate could name women who had affronted the Wescots. To settle on any one explanation for Kate's actions, Godbeer says, is inherently "problematic"—even at the time of the accusations, the residents of Stamford were uncertain about whether to trust Kate. That uncertainty, Godbeer asserts, is central to understanding what happened in Stamford.

Even though Godbeer is a historian whose job it is to examine and interpret history, he asserts that there is an enormous degree of responsibility in anachronistically applying modern-day knowledge to Puritan thought. Kate's ordeal was far more complicated than a simple question of whether or not she was the victim of a seizure disorder or a psychological illness: the reality of her world was different from ours. Godbeer hopes to honor the truth of her experiences, whatever they may be.

Little is known of what happened to Kate following the conclusion of the trials. The Wescots relocated to New Jersey sometime after 1694, but it remains unclear whether Kate accompanied them. Like the women she accused of witchcraft, Kate "simply fades into oblivion." Ironically, Godbeer suggests, Kate had already begun to fade into the background during the trials themselves: she was more an "object" to the residents of Stamford than a person, and her claims were subject to constant scrutiny and experimentation due to the tricky nature of witchcraft allegations.

Though Kate's testimony was the main catalyst for the Stamford trials, she largely disappears from her own narrative at a certain point. This demonstrates her community's need to find scapegoats for problems that had little to do with securing justice and more to do with rooting out unpleasant, undesirable residents.

A World of Wonders. Godbeer delves into the "intensely insecure environment" in which the inexplicable was explained through the supernatural. Extraordinary events like comets, eclipses, fires, illnesses, birth defects, crop failures, and untimely or strange deaths were all believed to have supernatural significance. God and the Devil, Puritans believed, were at work in their daily lives. Temptations, rewards, and punishments were believed to be sent by God and Satan in the form of divine messages. When a natural explanation could not be found, a combination of Puritan religious beliefs and folk beliefs carried over from England stepped in to explain the unexplainable.

This section of Godbeer's afterword encapsulates the environment of intense contradictions that governed many Puritan communities. When the lines between the spiritual world and the physical world were blurred, anything was possible. The unique struggles of adjusting to a new country brought many hardships for Puritan settlers—and the Puritans often explained these strange new challenges through the religious and folk beliefs. This outlook provided comfort and logic in an uncomfortable, unknowable environment.

Some users of "cunning" and defensive magic were seen as healers or benign helpers—but whose supernatural talents were gifts from God and whose were curses from Satan could change on a dime, especially when it came to the folk magic of servants and people of color. In other words, supernatural forces were useful in the eyes of many New Englanders until they were not. Supernatural cures and spells were practical solutions to practical problems—but when a "spiritual betrayal" took place and someone believed themselves or a neighbor to be the target of malicious witchcraft, the tables turned. Someone who had been regarded as a helpful healer one week could easily find herself "on trial for her life" the very next.

This passage ties in with the theme of law and control, or legislating the unseen. The rules of the law changed depending on whom the law was being applied to. Some women of privilege were able to get away with "cunning" or perceived supernatural powers, while others were heavily monitored for any behavioral departure from the rigid, pious status quo.

Women as Witches. Godbeer explains why it was so threatening for women, especially, to be perceived as witches: any woman's supposed facility with the occult, he alleges, contradicted the Puritan gender norms which placed women in positions of subordination or submission. Witchcraft was seen as a "primarily female phenomenon" both across the Atlantic in England and in the New World. Women were believed to be physically weaker and thus more susceptible to the Devil's bewitchment and possession. At the same time, women believed to be witches were seen as a dangerously powerful threat to the status quo.

Godbeer uses this section to delve more deeply into the reasons why women constituted the overwhelming majority of witchcraft accusations. Women in Puritan societies were constantly placed in a dangerous catch-22: they were perceived to be submissive by default and thus easy prey for dark forces. But at the same time, women who rejected this deferential model of femininity and stood up for themselves were thought to be controlled by the Devil.

Women who failed to embody Puritan gender norms, women who had passed through menopause, and women who exhibited aggressive behavior were more likely to be seen as "Servants of Satan." Both Goody Clawson and Goody Disborough, Godbeer points out, were older women in their fifties and sixties who were notorious for being confident, expressive, and unwilling to stand for unfair treatment. These things were just as dangerous for girls and women like Katherine Branch who accused others of witchcraft: they could be seen as innocent victims of supernatural plots, or they could be seen as dangerous liabilities who were already in the palm of the Devil.

Any women who operated outside of strict and rigid Puritan gender norms were seen as a direct threat to the entire organization of Puritan society. Women's bodies, too, were sites of scrutiny, as behavior and appearance were heavily regulated. Women who were different in terms of physicality or disposition due to factors beyond their control were perceived to be just as dangerous as women who chose to shirk gender norms.

The Neighbor as Witch. Godbeer notes that when 17th-century New Englanders believed themselves to be bewitched, they often named a close neighbor with whom they had a history of conflict as the one bewitching them. Many times, when an exchange of goods went awry or tensions arose between neighboring families, witchcraft was seen as the culprit. Puritan communities were intensely personal and layered: families were interconnected, and individuals served many different overlapping roles within their towns and counties.

In this passage, Godbeer ties the intimacy of Puritan communal life to the Puritans' fear of witches. Neighbors were supposed to give their all to the other members of their community. Failure to do so was not just an aberration or an affront but a literal threat to the organization of Puritan life. It was unimaginable to many that their neighbors could willfully shirk their communal duties—so when someone did just that, the influence of Satan had to be the explanation for such rogue behavior.

Everything was personal—and so suffering, hardship, and misfortune were seen as personal as well. Unfriendly neighbors were seen as anomalous and even threatening. Moreover, as the economy transformed and opportunities for social mobility shifted in the New World, the communal nature of society was threatened. Godbeer suggests that this led to an atmosphere of increased suspicion, hostility, and jealousy.

A neighbor seeking individual prosperity or glory could be seen as bewitched because individualism was such a contrary value to godly, communal Puritan life. Such suspicions spread quickly and easily in these small, intensely religious communities.

Witch Trials in Seventeenth-Century New England. Godbeer examines New England's legal system, which he describes as "rigorous and cautious" even as jurors and magistrates sought to legislate crimes that were often invisible. Witchcraft was both a spiritual betrayal and a practical problem—yet New Englanders, Godbeer suggests, were more likely to see bewitching, possession, or witchcraft as a nuisance to be dealt with rather than an existential fear or affront. Most testimony presented at witch trials throughout New England ultimately proved unconvincing and insufficient. Additionally, because Satan was seen as the root of all witchcraft, all testimony was potentially tainted by the influence of the Devil himself.

In this passage, Godbeer attempts to unravel the counterintuitive logic of the threat that witchcraft posed to Puritan communities. Though Puritans saw witches as spiritual betrayers, they were often less concerned with symbolically condemning an affront to their religious beliefs than they were with condemning a practical threat to their families or livestock. Although the Puritans were a devout people who feared the influence of the Devil, the more pressing concern was often to eliminate the pragmatic, immediate threat to their bodies and their property.

The Salem witch trials, Godbeer says, have retained such notoriety because confessions were often the only evidence deemed sufficient—and the confessions obtained in Salem were extracted from the accused through torture and psychological pressure. Acquittals were far more common across New England—but even then, the acquitted faced prejudice, tension, and hostility from their neighbors because many people believed they hadn't been adequately punished.

Godbeer has spent much of the book describing the tricky nature of witch trials. Only certain evidence was deemed acceptable—and so in communities where scapegoats were desperately needed but where evidence was sparse, prosecutors used dubious methods to make sure that the result they wanted was obtained. But in places like Stamford, where the integrity of the evidence was preserved, community distrust lingered.

Escaping Salem. Godbeer contextualizes the Stamford trials within the larger legacy of the more intense and panicked Salem witch trials. The Salem trials, Godbeer suggests, were so much larger in scale because of social and political problems within the region, such as conflicts between Puritans and Quakers and encounters with the Native populations of Massachusetts. Puritans believed that both Quakers and Native Americans were possessed by Satan—and so the "outbreak of witchcraft" among the residents of Salem was overwhelming to the colonists there. The trials in Stamford, by contrast, were much more representative of how most witch trials proceeded—slowly, cautiously, and anticlimactically in the face of insufficient evidence and widespread suspicion.

Godbeer suggests that Salem's panic about witches was actually rooted in the desire to explain and cope with issues within and around the community. Religious and racial tensions in the area created the need for a common enemy, given the fracturing of the community along so many different lines. By naming witches as enemies of the people, Salem's community could root out perceived evils and hopefully quiet concerns about larger, unapproachable threats. When certain populations couldn't be dispatched or dealt with swiftly enough, legislating the invisible crimes of witchcraft became a way to satiate the community's need for a common enemy.

Shortly after the Salem witch trials were brought to a swift conclusion, embarrassment and shame about the panic spread and the unfortunate legal precedents followed throughout the witch hunt spread throughout New England. As Enlightenment ideals reached the New World in the early 18th century, witch trials all but vanished—even though belief in witches persisted.

In this passage, Godbeer provides some context as to why witch trials quieted down amid new societal structures based on intellectualism rather than spirituality. That's not to say that belief in the spiritual world vanished entirely—simply that communities no longer gave the same weight to spiritual betrayals as they once did.

Modern witch hunts, Godbeer suggests, still plague America. Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible* was first performed in 1953—and though it was written about the Salem witch trials, it was an obvious response to Senator Joseph McCarthy's Red Scare, an attempt to root out supposed communists and "subversives" within the American government. Godbeer suggests that the scapegoating of social, political, or religious minorities is still at the heart of America's "periodic need for witch hunts." Women in power, such as Margaret Thatcher and Hillary Clinton also draw comparisons to "witches" from their detractors, proving society's continual fear of women assuming positions of power and control.

This passage encapsulates the ways in which the Salem witch trials—as well as the Stamford trials—have echoed through American history, continually defining periods of panic, scapegoating, and othering. The fear of certain people—women, political outliers, et cetera—assuming power continues to rear its head and result in periodic displays of widespread suspicion, violence, and retribution.

Modern-day witch hunts, Godbeer writes, often reflect genuine fears in a region's social and political consciousness—the Puritan mindset, he says, is not as far from our own as we would like to believe. To demonize others instead of recognizing and banding together to combat human weaknesses, Godbeer writes, is one of the most "persistent tragedies" of contemporary society.

In the concluding lines of the book, Godbeer suggests that the problems that plagued Puritan society still threaten America's integrity today. Rather than demonizing their neighbors, Godbeer suggests, communities should rally together in difficult and recognize what they have in common—not what threatens to tear them apart.

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