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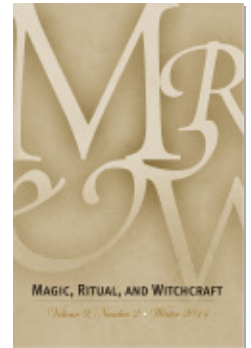
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## Escaping Salem: The Other Witch Hunt of 1692 (review)

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Loudon, and Louviers, where groups of possessed nuns accused priests and senior female religious—several of whom were consequently executed—of causing their possessions through witchcraft. Furthermore, exorcists themselves were vulnerable to charges of witchcraft. Exorcisms might effectively demonstrate the church's ability to fight the devil and assuage the suffering of the faithful, but exorcists' truck with demons nonetheless aroused the suspicion that they could be practicing diabolical conjuring.

As Ferber points out, the seventeenth century has been referred to as both the "century of saints" and "the golden age of the demoniac." In the third section of her book, she deftly explicates the connections between the two. Characterized by intense affective religiosity, post-Tridentine Catholic practice sought to achieve unmediated contact with the divine through prayer, contemplation, and asceticism. Ferber situates the emergence of "positive" possession within this broader trend. "Positive" possession envisioned the possessed as a victim of witchcraft rather than as a guilty party whose own (or whose parents') sin had precipitated her possession. By the beginning of the seventeenth century, possession came to be most commonly understood as a type of spiritual ecstasy in which the physical travails of torture inflicted by possessing devils qualified as a form of ascetic practice. Characterized as victims, then, possessed women such as Marie des Vallées and Jeanne des Anges could (if supported by the right patrons, Ferber is careful to note) attain spiritual authority as saintly figures. Their charisma came at a price, however. Not only was their "credibility . . . measured in physical suffering" (p. 122), but, in an era deeply distrustful of female religiosity, their close ties to the devil could appear dangerously suggestive of witchcraft.

Ferber's enthralling monograph, with its attention to the dialectical relationship between religious belief and social and political context, should be required reading in advanced undergraduate as well as graduate classes. Ferber writes with great verve and clarity, offering adroit explanations of difficult theological constructs. With her ability to articulate the many connections between early modern and contemporary belief systems, she has written a book that will draw in nonspecialists and specialists alike.

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RICHARD GODBEER. *Escaping Salem: The Other Witch Hunt of 1692*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. Pp. xiv + 177.

Historians of witchcraft and of early America know the long shadow cast by the Salem witch hunt of 1692. They also know what distortions and

misperceptions that shadow can bring. The number of those accused of witchcraft in Salem, and the numbers executed for this crime, surpass the totals for the rest of New England across the entire seventeenth century. The trials were, therefore, an enormous abnormality. Yet precisely because they generated the majority of witchcraft cases in colonial America, and because Salem has attained such cachet in popular culture, the trials continue to attract an enormous amount of scholarly attention. One can count almost (not quite) on one hand the number of books dealing with New England witchcraft that have not focused exclusively on Salem (Godbeer's own earlier *The Devil's Dominion* being among them). So great is the marketing force of the name that even this book about a separate, far more contained, and far more typical witch trial contains "Salem" in its title.

The particulars of the hunt that Godbeer escapes Salem to explore are these. In June, 1692, as the Salem trials were starting to get underway, far to the south in Stamford, Connecticut, a seventeen-year-old maidservant of the Wescot family, Katherine Branch, began succumbing to fits of the sort that could indicate bewitchment. She would fall into trances, cry out, collapse on the ground, contort, or go stiff as a board. She eventually began claiming to see spectral visions of witches in either human or animal form, who would afflict her. Gradually she identified at least some of these witches. This process stretched over the summer months. Only in September was a special Court of Oyer and Terminer convened. Five women were formally accused. A sixth, who would likely have been accused as well, had fled to relatives in New York State, and thus out of the reach of the Connecticut courts. Of the five, three were almost immediately set free on a preliminary review of the evidence against them. Only Elizabeth Clawson of Stamford and Mercy Disborough of Compo, near Fairfield, were held for full trial. Initially the jury could not reach a verdict, so the case was referred to the Connecticut General Assembly for its instructions, which were, simply, that the original court should review the case again and reach a decision. Ministers from around Connecticut were also consulted, and they generally urged caution and the careful weighing of evidence. Finally at the end of October, judgments were handed down—Clawson was found not guilty, but Disborough was sentenced to death. Her supporters, however, quickly appealed on her behalf, and some six months later the General Assembly finally acquitted her as well.

Godbeer is right to call this a typical trial. Branch was an impoverished orphan who, with no dowry, faced poor chances of ever marrying. She was exactly the sort of young woman whom New Englanders could imagine witches would want to recruit (the torments of her bewitchment were meant to drive her into the service of the devil). The Wescot household was a

place one could imagine bewitchment taking place. Years earlier, one of the Wescots' daughters had suffered fits, but these had passed after a few weeks. Nevertheless, although witchcraft was a possible explanation for what seemed to be occurring to Katherine, other explanations were possible as well. The Wescots initially summoned a midwife who judged that the fits were probably the result of a natural malady and should be treated with natural remedies. Only after these proved ineffective, and Katherine's visions intensified, did more and more people become convinced witchcraft was involved. Still, some maintained skepticism throughout the process, believing Katherine was either naturally afflicted, or that she was dissembling.

As suspicion of witchcraft turned to accusations against specific alleged witches, events continued to follow a typical course. Old women, generally with a reputation for cantankerousness, were targeted. These women each had been involved in disputes with the Wescot family, which Katherine either knew firsthand or likely had heard about. They also had reputations as suspected witches that stretched back years, but had never led to formal accusations. Now that accusations had been lodged, other people came forward to provide additional testimony. A significant number, however, also came forward to defend the women and testify to their good character. In other words, the trials grew out of, and quickly became a cipher for, community tensions between neighbors. When the cases came to court, however, authorities were very cautious. They knew the difficulty of proving charges of witchcraft, minus any confession on the part of the accused, when evidence was mostly conjecture or, in the case of Katherine's visions, spectral evidence that only she could see and that could, in any event, be diabolical deceptions. Ultimately both of the accused were set free not so much because they were judged innocent, but because the court could not find sufficiently certain proof of their guilt.

Godbeer's account of this entire process is a gripping narrative, drawn mainly from a close reading of the many depositions that were collected for the trial. In a methodological "Afterword" he discusses how he did not try to interpret the reports given in the case. He presents events as described, whether these be people's perceptions of Katherine's fits, other visions that some had in her presence, or people's descriptions of suspected witchcraft performed against them. He does not try to explain these events, either individually or by fitting them into some master analytical narrative. What analysis is done in this book, therefore, is done by the people originally involved in the events, as they presented different perceptions or suppositions about events, or, in the case of the legal proceedings, as one magistrate worried about what kinds of evidence could be used in cases of witchcraft and what

thresholds of proof needed to be surpassed (he took extensive notes on these matters in preparation for the trials, which Godbeer reads, in a way, as his “deposition”).

Some people, perhaps, will resent the absence of the historian’s own direct analysis. Some will object that such analysis is there anyway, merely hidden away in the selective work of constructing a fluent narrative from the original depositions. Some will be annoyed at what such (attempted, at least) fidelity to the seventeenth-century voices in this case inevitably leaves out. The gender of witches was not a point of great surprise or interest for early modern people, and so it goes virtually uncommented on in the depositions (this is one area in which Godbeer feels he must interpose himself to some extent, including a section on “Women as Witches” in his “Afterword”). Yet for what it attempts to do, the book succeeds brilliantly. Not only does Godbeer present us with an account of a trial that is far more typical than those in Salem, but he also presents the course of a trial in all its individuality. He provides a compelling picture of how seventeenth-century New Englanders understood and confronted witchcraft—their anxieties and their credulities, certainly, but also their caution and their skepticism. Moreover, since many of the sources on which Godbeer relied are available in David Hall’s *Witch-Hunting in Seventeenth-Century New England: A Documentary History 1638–1695*, those wondering if Godbeer has obscured anything in his transposition of depositions into a book can check. Students, also, could be given the book and the documents together, and be asked to examine how one historian has executed at least one aspect of the historian’s craft. This slender book is, therefore, enormously useful in several ways.

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JAMES L. HALVERSON, ed. *Contesting Christendom: Readings in Medieval Religion and Culture*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008. Pp. vii + 246.

This welcome volume takes classic and recent scholarship on medieval religious culture and presents it in bite-sized portions that can be easily digested by undergraduates. The collection of twenty-one excerpts from previously published books and articles is intended to stress the diverse ways scholars have understood social and cultural aspects of medieval Christianity, and will no doubt be useful in many courses on medieval society, culture, and religion. The brevity of the excerpts, the pithy study questions, the range