

Cotton Mather's Involvement in the Salem Crisis

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R. Smith

Introduction

Many historians, as well as his contemporaries, have portrayed the New England minister Cotton Mather as a notorious witch hunter during the Salem Crisis. For example, historian Peter Charles Hoffer says, “no divine had more to do with the... [Salem] trials than Cotton Mather,” implying Mather was responsible for the crisis to a certain degree.¹ Mather published numerous works about witchcraft and the afflictions associated with its victims. Three of his most well known and controversial works are *Wonders of the Invisible World*, *Memorable Providences*, and *The Return of Several Ministers* (though this last work was published anonymously, many historians attribute the majority to Mather).² Richard Silverman attributes Mather’s witch hunting reputation to the last line of *The Return of Several Ministers*: “We cannot but humbly Recommend unto the Government, the speedy and vigorous Prosecution of such as have rendered themselves obnoxious, according to the Directions given in the Laws of God, and the wholesome Statues of the English Nation, for the Detection of Witchcraft.”³ This final line of *The Return* is essentially urging the magistrates to make a push toward finding and executing as many witches as possible. This statement adds to the condemnation of Mather as a witch hunter.

However, in order to judge whether Mather was a witch hunter, it is crucial to examine the full context of his works in relation to Puritan society, theology, and beliefs in the late 1600s. It is essential to take a deeper look into Mather’s writings and to examine his messages to not only the judges, but the community as a whole. Yes, he did preach about sin, evil, and witchcraft running rampant in New England, but he also

¹ Peter Charles Hoffer, *The Devil’s Disciples* (John Hopkins University Press: Baltimore 1998), 139.

² Kenneth Silverman, *The Life and Times of Cotton Mather* (Harper and Row; New York 1984), 100.

³ *Ibid.*, 100

strongly urged caution as to what materials should be allowed as evidence when convicting and executing witches.

This paper will show how Mather's main publications during the Salem Crisis were meant to inform New Englanders of the invisible world and to caution judges to carefully weigh all evidence—not to spur on the witch hunts. The paper will begin by looking at the early life and struggles of Cotton Mather. It will then briefly explore some observations made by Mather about possessed children in New England and consider their relation to the caution Mather exercised in cases of bewitchment. Also, it will look at authors whose works influenced Mather and helped to develop his opinions on witchcraft and witch-hunting. Finally, in order to show examples of Mather's caution, this paper will look at the three publications previously mentioned, along with some letters Mather wrote to his superiors, and analyze the reasons they contributed to Mather's dark reputation. Again, these publications did in fact contributed to Mather's reputation as a witch hunter, but when examined with Puritan beliefs in mind, the reasons for his subtle cautions and reluctant support of authorities becomes clear: Cotton Mather was doing his best to avoid directly challenging authority.

Background

Cotton Mather, born February 12, 1663, was destined to be a great minister. He was the product of two distinguished ministerial families: the Cottons and the Mathers. Both of Cotton Mather's grandfathers, his father, and several uncles were famous ministers in New England. Mather's father, Increase, was very devout and spent around sixteen hours or more a day in prayer and study. Increase put a lot of pressure on

Mather to follow in his footsteps as a minister. Richard Silverman notes that “however loving and attentive, this was a father not easily pleased, whose attention was not guaranteed, and whose concern often seemed to lie elsewhere than here and now.”⁴ Cotton Mather was constantly pressured to live up to the standards set by his predecessor. From a very early age, Mather took notes of his father’s sermons and spent time on a daily basis reading scripture. At eleven and a half years old, he entered Harvard as the youngest student ever admitted in its history. The entrance requirements included “a working knowledge of Latin and Greek, and signs of academic promise.”⁵ During his first year at Harvard, Mather developed a stammer worrying him and his family that he would not be able to become the successful minister they had hoped for. Luckily, there was a teacher who, “observing that no one ever stuttered when singing songs...advised Mather to speak very deliberately, with ‘a Drawling that should be little short of singing...the drawling...was at least preferable to stuttering, and would give him time to command his thoughts and to substitute a pronounceable word.”⁶ Mather’s stuttering led him to an interest in science “for at some time during his college years the impediment led him almost to despair of becoming a minister, and to apply himself to becoming a physician.”⁷ His training in medicine later led to his careful observations of cases of possible possession including, for example, the Goodwin children and Margaret Rule.

Mather finished his education as a minister, but did not immediately become a partner with his father in the ministry at North Church. As Cotton Mather neared the end

⁴ Kenneth Silverman, *The Life and Times of Cotton Mather* (Harper and Row Publishers New York, 1984) 13.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 14-15

⁶ *Ibid.*, 17

⁷ *Ibid.*, 22

of his college years, he began to keep notes on sermons given by his father and other ministers. He also became a type of secretary and confidante to his father and spent entire days praying and fasting.⁸ Mather at last fulfilled the dream his father had for him and gave his first sermon in August of 1680, at the age of seventeen, at a church in Dorchester ran by his grandfather, Richard Mather. Cotton Mather was frequently invited to give sermons at his father's North Church, but was repeatedly denied a partnership in the ministry at North Church by Increase. This shows the possibility that Increase did not want him to join the ministry at North Church. However, the congregation of North Church respected Cotton Mather and wanted him as a minister. The North Church congregation supported Mather's hopes of becoming a partner with his father in the ministry. There was a shortage of New England trained Puritan ministers. The congregation was also worried they would be left without a minister in the event Increase died.⁹ Increase Mather was frequently ill to the point that he, his family, and the community believed he would die.¹⁰ Richard Silverman speculates on reasons Increase delayed the ordination of Mather into the ministry of North Church: "He may have been gulled by their enthusiasm for his son; or he may have feared Cotton's rivalry and possible dissent." Increase also may have wanted to avoid showing favoritism to his son, or he possibly could have been voicing Mather's own worry that he was not ready for ordination.¹¹

Mather was aware of his own ambitions to become a famous minister like his father. He developed guilt because of his struggle between self glorification and the

⁸ Ibid., 23

⁹ Ibid., 26

¹⁰ Ibid., 26

¹¹ Ibid., 27

rightful glorification of God. After years of preparation and delay, Cotton Mather was ordained into the ministry at North Church in May 1685. His dream of becoming a minister was finally accomplished. However, Mather's internal struggles were ever present in his life. For example, "he spent a special day of humiliation to castigate his pride, indicting himself for desiring greater renown than his age or ability merited." With the result of "having identified and bewailed his sins Cotton prayed God to fill his soul with love, and as he hoped, his long bouts of self-condemnation and humiliation gave rise to an assured sense that God had forgiven him."¹² Many of Cotton Mather's diary entries proceed along these lines: his castigation of himself for sins of pride, followed by repentance, ending with his belief he was forgiven by God. Increase Mather pressured his son to become a minister and Cotton Mather complied. Later in his life, Cotton Mather was asked to write on topics that he did not fully agree with, such as a support of the witch trial proceedings. Again, he complied. Mather's early life is that of a typical Puritan child who does as he is told. His adult life mirrors his childhood.

Observations

As a one-time medical student, Mather became interested in reported cases of possession in New England. He studied and wrote about several of his observations including those of the Goodwin children, Mercy Short, and Margaret Rule. His purpose for investigating these claims was to decide for himself if they were indeed genuine possession cases, and if so, he wanted to find a way to treat and cure the afflicted. After being convinced witchcraft was real, he sought to convince the public to beware of the invisible world and return to the Puritan faith, as many had become lax in their faith. All

¹² Ibid., 29

of the cases mentioned involved Mather's caution in seeking out accused witches and confirmed his belief that prayer would protect against the devil. These cases led historian Chadwick Hansen to describe Mather not as a "witch hunter," but a "witchcraft scholar."¹³

Mather's first chance to observe a bewitchment case came in 1688 with the afflictions of the Goodwin children. The four Goodwin children, Martha, thirteen; John, eleven; Mercy, seven; Ben, five were members of the Charlestown Church and showed signs of being possessed. The conflict began when the oldest, Martha, accused the family servant, Mary Glover, of stealing. Not long after the accusation Martha and the others became afflicted by fits "beyond those that attend an epilepsy, or a catalepsy, or those that they call diseases of astonishment."¹⁴ The doctors who examined the Goodwin children attributed such awful fits to the devil. Mather interviewed Goodwife Glover while she was in jail awaiting execution. He tried to get her to repent, but she refused. Glover named other witches who participated in tormenting the children. Mather never released their names because he believed women who made pacts with the devil, the 'Prince of Lies,' may also be liars themselves. He wanted to be careful not to implicate the innocent.¹⁵

This was something he preached throughout the Salem trials: to thoroughly examine and carefully weigh all evidence against an accused witch. Mather never encouraged charges to be filed against a person accused of witchcraft by another witch; there was a possibility Satan was working through the convicted witch in order to

¹³ Chadwick Hansen. *Witchcraft at Salem*, (George Braziller, Inc New York, 1969), 172.

¹⁴ David Hall, *Witch-Hunting in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Northeastern University Press; Boston 1991), 268.

¹⁵ Hansen. *Witchcraft at Salem*, 24

incriminate the innocent. After Glover was executed, the afflictions of Martha Goodwin continued. Mather believed that because the Goodwins were a religious family, prayer would cure their illness. He had no tolerance for the use of white magic to counteract bewitchment because he believed that all magic was the work of the devil. Mather took Martha into his home to pray with her in hopes of curing her.¹⁶ Chadwick Hansen gives credit to Mather for eventually curing the Goodwin children of their afflictions through prayer.¹⁷ Mather believed prayer was the cure to bewitchment and later offered to do the same for some of the afflicted in Salem, but the court rejected his offer.

Cotton Mather also observed and documented the case of Mercy Short. Mercy Short's parents and some of her siblings were killed in an Indian raid leaving her an orphan. She was abducted by the Indians, but eventually escaped and returned to New England.¹⁸ Short started showing signs of possession after being cursed by a known witch in a Boston jail, at the end of the witchcraft crisis in Salem. She displayed symptoms such as the inability to eat, loss of sight and hearing, and had the feeling of being pricked with pins. Mather begins his record of the observation by discussing Short's abduction by the Indians. This suggests he thought her experiences during the abduction may have contributed to her possession. However, after observing the strange behaviors that so confounded Mather, he was forced to believe it was a clear case of possession. He did not believe Mercy Short's symptoms were the result of her abduction, or a form of hysteria, but from the devil himself.¹⁹ Short's symptoms gradually grew worse and eventually matured to a full blown case of bewitchment, but

¹⁶ Hall, *Witchhunting*, 265

¹⁷ Chadwick Hansen, *Witchcraft*, 168.

¹⁸ Deborah Kelly Kloepper, "Cotton Mather's "Dora" The Case History of Mercy Short" *Early American Literature* 44, no. 1 (2009): 3

¹⁹ Kloepper, "Dora," 5-8

not until after the final trial at Salem took place. Several times, in the midst of her fits, Short named the witches that were the cause of her bewitchment, but “Mather worked hard to suppress the occasional name that flew from her mouth.”²⁰ Mather feared that if more people were accused of being witches the trials would have gotten out of hand all over again, and so did not release the names. Again, he turned to prayer and fasting to cure the afflicted instead of pressing for a trial and execution.

Margaret Rule was another girl thought to be afflicted by witchcraft who Cotton Mather observed and tried to cure. “A miserable woman who had been formerly imprisoned on the suspicion of witchcraft” cursed Rule.²¹ The woman was known to use white magic but had not been previously accused of using malefic magic. Rule experienced fits similar to those of the Goodwin children and Mercy Short. Along with the fits, she was unable to hear or participate in prayers. This was a sure sign to the Puritans that a person was being afflicted by witchcraft.²² As soon as Mather learned Rule had been cursed he went to intervene and tried to prevent a full-blown case of bewitchment. By that time, there was already public rumor that Rule was possessed. Mather’s goal was to observe Rule and cure her as quickly as possible so as to prevent a reoccurrence of the witchcraft craze in Salem. As in the other cases observed by Mather, he refused to release the names the afflicted uttered.²³

Contemporary views on spectral evidence and witchcraft

²⁰ Kloepper, “*Dora*,” 4

²¹ Hansen, *Witchcraft at Salem*, 179.

²² Hansen, *Witchcraft at Salem*, 179.

²³ Hansen, *Witchcraft at Salem*, 179.

The Continental European means to extract confessions of witchcraft was through torture. However, in England and New England, there had to be a jury to hear and judge evidence.²⁴ Many of the witchcraft experts disagreed about some of the evidence used to convict a witch. Mather, being a learned man, probably read the works of many authors to make an informed decision about whether or not spectral evidence, and other evidence, should be considered valid and reliable. Cotton Mather took bits and pieces of advice from many witchcraft “experts” and formed his own opinions about witches and witchcraft.

One conclusion Cotton Mather came to was that spectral evidence was not reliable in convicting witches. He looked at arguments from many different sources such as William Perkins who was a minister in England. He wrote *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft* (1608) as guidelines for the conviction of witches. William Perkins believed that the Devil was a very powerful enemy and that witchcraft was a legitimate threat in England during the 1590s. Perkins advised the magistrates in England to carefully weigh evidence and accusations of witchcraft which he described as “presumptions.”²⁵ A common presumption Perkins had an issue with was the naming of other witches during an accused witch’s confession. Perkin advised not to put too much weight on the confessions and accusations, but unfortunately, after someone was accused, the accusation usually stuck with that person. Confessions of convicted witches “might be motivated by malice” and therefore should be taken lightly.²⁶ Another thing considered a presumption was a mysterious illness that occurred after a conflict with a suspected witch; again, accusations succeeding conflict should be examined for

²⁴ Peter Charles Hoffer, *The Devil's Disciples* (Baltimore. John Hopkins University Press, 1998), 142.

²⁵ Hoffer, *Disciples*, 142

²⁶ Hoffer, *Disciples*, 142

malice. It was expected for the suspected witch to be examined for the Devil's Mark, but if found Perkins did not believe it absolutely meant familiarity with the Devil, though he did believe it should lead to further investigation of witchcraft if found. These "presumptions singly and together did not amount to proof but prompted further inquiry."²⁷ Perkins did not want presumptions to be used as the only evidence in the conviction of a witch and Cotton Mather followed many of his suggestions.

Richard Bernard was another person Mather may have consulted when forming his opinions on witch hunting. Bernard wrote *Guide to the Grand Jury Men* (1630) which was consulted, as guidelines, by the judges of the Salem witchcraft trials. Like Perkins, he cautioned magistrates to weigh all pieces of evidence carefully. He cautioned them that there were "those who counterfeited symptoms for gain or revenge, to gull others, and to make themselves the center of attention."²⁸ Bernard thought the judges in witchcraft trials accepted evidence, such as spectral, too readily, for "each of the grounds for suspicion could have an innocent explanation as well as a diabolic one."²⁹ Bernard, like Mather, condemned good and bad witches alike because all magic came from the devil. He believed all witches should be punished and, like Mather, believed that the only way to cure afflictions caused by witchcraft was through prayer and not through the magical means cunning folk used known as white magic. Bernard argued the devil could not work without God's permission. So, if someone was suffering from an affliction, the victim had to search their conscience and find out how they displeased God.³⁰ Then, only through prayer could the victim be cured of their afflictions.

²⁷ Hoffer, *Disciples*, 142

²⁸ Hoffer, *Disciples*, 143

²⁹ Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare*, (Vintage Books; New York 2002), 30.

³⁰ Hoffer, *Disciples*, 143

Michael Dalton was also a famous author and witchcraft expert. He wrote *The Country Justice* in 1619. He believed that because witches powers came from the Devil there would be no “direct evidence.”³¹ He believed a sure way to identify a witch was by material evidence: a familiar, dolls, curses, etc. He believed the opposite of Perkins in regards to ‘presumptions.’ Dalton found denunciation of other witches acceptable, as well as the ‘touch test,’ and spectral evidence. Dalton also believed spectral evidence was valid in convicting a witch.

Robert Filmer was a royalist squire who challenged the views of the Puritans in regards to witchcraft.³² He argued that witches were not completely to blame because they were the Devil’s “accessory.” He could not fathom how a person could be found guilty of witchcraft when the devil was really the one to blame.³³ Another argument was added to the debate by Thomas Hobbs who disagreed that witches could take “spectral form.”³⁴ He, like Mather, meant to influence legal authorities to reject spectral sightings as evidence.

Publications

Cotton Mather influenced Puritans during the Salem Crisis. He is seen, by his contemporaries and modern historians alike, as a witch hunter during the Salem Crisis. Historian Peter Hoffer says that “in the popular imaging of the American past the man and the event are nearly synonymous.”³⁵ However, his actual level of involvement and influence has recently been debated. Some critics attribute Mather with being responsible for the Salem Crisis, citing his “credulity in believing in witches, his zeal in

³¹ Hoffer, *Disciples*, 143

³² Hoffer, *Disciples*, 144

³³ Hoffer, *Disciples*, 144

³⁴ Hoffer, *Disciples*, 144

³⁵ Silverman, *The Life and Times*, 87

seeking them out (including two communications to the judges urging them to be zealous), and his defense of the court.”³⁶ Mather’s defenders cite his numerous calls for caution in his publications and letters to the judges, and acknowledge his constant skepticism of spectral evidence (which could have greatly increased the number of convicted witches if used). Hansen says that Mather lived by the principle: “It were better that ten suspected witches should escape than that one innocent person should be condemned.”³⁷ Modern historians, along with some of his contemporaries, question Mather’s motives in publishing several essays and books on witchcraft, witch trials, and cases of possession. Historians like Peter Charles Hoffer suggest they contributed to the witchcraft crisis, while others, such as Chadwick Hansen push for a fuller understanding of Puritan life while interpreting the meanings behind Mather’s publications and letters.³⁸

Mather wrote *Memorable Providences* after observing the Goodwin siblings and some others who he deduced were afflicted by either witches or directly by the devil. The book gave thorough descriptions of the fits the children experienced, including the distorted body positions and the verbal outbursts they displayed. Mather witnessed the decrease of piety during his generation in Puritan New England. Many of Mather’s publications “attempt to reverse, or at least forestall, the decline of piety in the colony.”³⁹ This decrease in piety displeased God and allowed the devil to become active in their society. *Memorable Providences* intended to prove to New England that the invisible world was a very real threat and was therefore meant to encourage Puritans to

³⁶ Ricard H. Werking. “Reformation is Our Only Preservation”: Cotton Mather and Salem Witchcraft. *William and Mary Quarterly* 29, no. 2 (1972): 286

³⁷ Chadwick Hansen, *Witchcraft at Salem*, (George Braziller, Inc New York, 1969) 162

³⁸ Hansen, *Witchcraft*, x

³⁹ Jefferson Dillman. “Defending the ‘New England Way’: Cotton Mather’s ‘Exact Mapp’ of New England and New York.” *Historical Journal of Massachusetts*, 38, no. 1 (2010), 112

strengthen their faith. "Mather's book...provided... 'clear Confirmation, That, There is both a God, and a Devil, and Witchcraft.'"⁴⁰

Unfortunately, Mather's critics misinterpreted his concern about the threat of the invisible world. Some, like Robert Calef, believed Mather was setting the stage for many common illnesses to be understood as bewitchment.⁴¹ Calef argued that the misunderstanding would lead many people with family members showing "fits" similar to those described in *Providences* to assume witchcraft was to blame, which was not Mather's intent. Many New England ministers, including Cotton Mather, "stressed the necessity of continually reminding the people of the existence of the spiritual world and its close connection with the material world."⁴² What Mather really wanted was for people to return to prayer, to lead a moral lifestyle, and to fear the power of the devil. Mather wanted to show the episodes of bewitchment "not primarily as occasions to expose and destroy individual witches but as opportunities to call attention to the more pervasive social and religious ills of New England."⁴³

Mather was closely connected to several of the judges of the court of Oyer and Terminer. Although the judges were close family friends, they were also Mather's superiors. No matter what he thought of the judges' actions during the Salem Crisis, Mather could not speak out against them for fear of the Puritan belief that challenging authority displeased God. Mather clearly stated numerous times, in publications and letters to friends, he was against the use of spectral evidence to convict witches. Witches used specters to torment their victims. Spectral evidence was a main complaint

⁴⁰ Norton, *Snare*, 40

⁴¹ Silverman, *Life and Times*, 87

⁴² Werking, *Notes and Documents*, 283

⁴³ Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum. *Salem Possessed*. (Harvard University Press 1974), 24.

of many victims of witchcraft and was, in some cases, the only reliable evidence used to convict witches. In a letter to his friend John Foster (a member of the Governor's Council), Mather advised against using spectral evidence to convict a witch. He did agree it should play a part when looking at other actions of the accused that may fit the profile of a witch, but should not lead to a conviction. In the letter, Mather voiced his support of the court and their handling of the witchcraft trials. He told Foster he had confidence in the judges' ability to convict only those guilty of being in league with the devil, saying he knew they would never falsely accuse anyone or bring about confessions through forceful means.⁴⁴

Mather also offered words of caution to Judge John Richards about the use of spectral evidence. In his letter to Judge Richards, Mather said that if spectral evidence held more weight "then the door would be opened, 'for the Devils to obtain from the courts in the invisible world a license to proceed unto the most hideous desolation upon the reput and repose of such as have yet been kept from the great transgressions.'"⁴⁵ Had Mather been a 'witch hunter' he would have supported the use of spectral evidence in convicting witches because the number of witches tried, convicted and executed would have increased exponentially. But time and time again he spoke out against the use of spectral evidence for anything but a reason for further investigation.

Also included in the letter to Richards was Mather's admission of involvement in the construction of *The Return of Several Ministers*, saying "not only that he agreed with the joint statement's contents, 'but it was I [Mather] who drew it up.'"⁴⁶ Historians argue

⁴⁴ Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem-Village Witchcraft*, (Northeastern, Pennsylvania 1972), 119

⁴⁵ Hoffer, *Disciples*, 145

⁴⁶ Norton, *Snare*, 215

the extent of Mather's involvement in the *Return of Several Ministers* because it was written anonymously. Many historians, including Bernard Rosenthal, Peter Charles Hoffer, and Richard Silverman agree that Mather at the very least had a hand in writing the document. Governor Phips requested that the ministers of New England advise the judges on the best way to continue with the witchcraft trials.

The ministers, including Cotton Mather, subtly criticized the judges in some ways, and in other ways showed support for their efforts in ridding New England of witches. The letter starts off with the acknowledgment of afflictions caused by witches and calls for all those available in New England to help solve the problem. The letter also thanks God for New Englanders' ability to detect and recognize witches, but prays for guidance in perfecting their skills. Cotton Mather advised the judges to respect the power of Satan and to proceed with caution in the conviction of witches. He says to proceed carefully with all the accused in regards to evidence, especially if a person has not been previously accused. Mather, again, strongly discourages the use of spectral evidence in convictions, saying, "Persons may be condemned as guilty of witchcrafts, ought certainly to be more considerable than barely...the accused person being represented by a spector unto the afflicted."⁴⁷ As cautious as this letter is, it is the last line that dominates the views of Mather's critics.

Historian Richard Silverman argues that the last sentence of *The Return* greatly contributed to Cotton Mather's reputation as a witch hunter. It says, "We [the New England ministers] cannot but humbly recommend unto the Government the speedy and vigorous prosecution of such as have rendered themselves obnoxious, according to the directions given in the laws of God, and the wholesome statutes of the English

⁴⁷ Boyer and Nissenbaum, *Witchcraft*, 118

nation, for the detection of witchcraft.”⁴⁸ This is essentially urging the judges to work quickly to convict and execute as many witches as possible. It strongly negates the caution in the earlier part of the letter and therefore makes Mather appear to be a witch hunter. This is where Puritan views have to be seriously considered. Like all Puritans, Mather was taught from a very young age to respect authority and to never question the judgment of his superiors. This is why he meekly offers criticism and then quickly follows with support when writing to or about the judges, governor, or any other leader in New England. Had he directly challenged the court proceedings, it is possible his accusations may have led to great legal trouble.

Wonders of the Invisible World, an account of the witchcraft trials compiled by Cotton Mather, came under fire largely because of its support of the Salem witchcraft trials. As the trials came to a close, Governor Phips requested that Mather “draw up an account of the trials.”⁴⁹ Being written after the end of the Salem trials, *Wonders* led some people to believe, including Robert Calef, that it was meant to reignite witchcraft accusations and trials. Even historian Chadwick Hansen, a staunch defender of Cotton Mather, says *Wonders* was a “hasty, ill-considered, overwrought, partisan defense of his friends [and] he was the first to fasten the false image of witch hunter on himself.”⁵⁰ However, the judges requested that Mather compile the accounts in order to defend their actions. Throughout the book, Mather retains a neutral position of the trials, simply repeating what happened during the court proceedings according to the court documents.⁵¹ The book is described by Boyer and Nissenbaum to have an “uncertain,

⁴⁸ Boyer & Nissenbaum, *Witchcraft*, 118

⁴⁹ Hansen, *Witchcraft at Salem*, 168

⁵⁰ Hansen, *Witchcraft at Salem*, 172

⁵¹ Hall, *Witch-hunting*, 291

hesitant tone.”⁵² Mather wanted to publish something that would be available to everyone, rather than to only those he corresponded with, and hoped the publishing of some of the trials would lead to an acceptance of the procedures the courts were taking to convict witches. He wanted to create a united front when dealing with witchcraft in order to “flatten that fury which we now so much turn upon one another.”⁵³ However, in trying to defend the judges’ actions, Mather soured his name for future generations by supporting the judges, even though he had previously voiced opinions (such as cautioning against the use of spectral evidence) which could have stopped the trials.⁵⁴

Robert Calef sought correspondence with Mather to discuss the trials, but was repeatedly ignored. Consequently, Calef published his work, *More Wonders of the Invisible World*, “to embarrass Mather personally [and] to attack the trials.”⁵⁵ Calef thoroughly discusses the case of George Burroughs. This was the only execution Mather attended during the Salem Trials. In Calef’s account, George Burroughs was taken to the gallows where he offered a final prayer before his death. He ended his prayer with a perfect recitation of The Lord’s Prayer (Puritans believed a witch could not recite the prayer perfectly). Calef claims Mather urged on the execution by saying that Burroughs was not the authentic minister he claimed to be and that “the Devil has often been transformed into an Angel of Light; and this did somewhat appease the People, and the Executions went on.”⁵⁶ Another contemporary also at the execution did not point out that particular scene, but does admit that Mather believed Burroughs and the others were convicted righteously. Though this was the only execution in Salem that Mather

⁵² Boyer & Nissenbaum, *Possessed*, 26

⁵³ Norton, *Devil’s Snare*, 269

⁵⁴ Bernard Rosenthal. *Salem Story: Reading the Witch Trials of 1692* (United Kingdom Cambridge University Press 1993), 144

⁵⁵ Boyer & Nissenbaum, *Witchcraft*, 96

⁵⁶ Rosenthal, *Salem Story*, 145

attended, Calef's account added to the reputation of Mather as a crazed witch hunter who wanted all those in league with the devil to be executed.⁵⁷

Possibly ashamed of his actions at the execution of George Burroughs, Mather reluctantly included the case in *The Wonders of the Invisible World*. Mather recounted in *Wonders*, "Glad should I have been, if I had never known the Name of this man...But the Government requiring some Account of his Trial to be inserted in this Book, it becomes me with all Obedience to submit unto the Order."⁵⁸ Not only was Mather pressured by the 'government' to justify the case of George Burroughs, he was expected to support all of the proceedings.

Cotton Mather was only able to obtain documents for five witchcraft trial cases from Stephen Sewall, the clerk of the court. Two of the documents given to him were of George Burroughs and Bridget Bishop—two cases that "depended least on spectral evidence."⁵⁹ He was also given documents of two women, Susanna Martin and Martha Carrier, who fit the witch profile in most respects. Most Puritans would have agreed with the outcome of the cases of these two women; they are non-confrontational. Mather was unable to obtain any document for controversial cases such as those of Rebecca Nurse or John Procter, both of whom were believed to be innocent.⁶⁰ The courts only allowed Mather to publish accounts that did not raise suspicions, but instead contributed to the justification of the court proceedings. Mather was doing his duty to his superiors, at their request, by preparing a written account supporting the trials. It was not in the nature of a Puritan to deny a request from any authority figure.

⁵⁷ Rosenthal, *Salem Story*, 145

⁵⁸ Rosenthal, *Salem Story*, 147

⁵⁹ Hansen, *Witchcraft at Salem*, 170

⁶⁰ Hansen, *Witchcraft at Salem*, 170

Cotton Mather was in a position in Puritan New England to influence society. He published numerous accounts of bewitchment and possession cases. These came under fire because of their assumed encouragement to seek out witches. However, Mather's purpose in publishing accounts of possession was not for the purpose of witch hunting, but rather as a way to show the benefits and power of prayer on the afflicted and to convince New Englanders there was a very real threat from the invisible world. Mather was concerned with the lack of piety. He thought that by proving the devil was active in New England and that the only way to protect against the devil was through prayer, he could bring Puritan ideals to the forefront of society once again.

Most of Mather's publications can be seen as a support of witch hunting. However, when viewed through the Puritan lens, Mather had no choice but to support the judges and outcome of the trials. He was raised as any typical Puritan male and taught never to question the decisions made by authority figures. His upbringing is apparent in many of his writings; he subtly offers words of caution, but finishes with words of praise. Cotton Mather may have published works considered controversial by later generations, but in Puritan New England, he was doing his duty to his God and superiors.

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