CHAPTER 3

Salem Girls (1692): Problems of Gender and Agency

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When the Salem Village witch trials began early in 1692 there was very little to indicate that they were not like previous witch trials in New England. But instead of complaints against one, two, or even three witches, the Salem trials escalated massively until by late in the year over one hundred and fifty individuals had been accused, nineteen people had been executed and at least five others had died in jail. Between March and July accusations were focused in Salem Village. Between July and September, the focus shifted to neighbouring Andover. In all, over the course of 1692 twenty-six communities in Massachusetts had experienced witchcraft accusations. Salem witchcraft “extended far beyond Salem Village to encompass large portions of Essex County and northern New England in general.” The single most important group of witchcraft accusers in these trials was a group of girls and teenage women, aged between nine and twenty years of age, who levelled accusations of witchcraft against women and men far superior to themselves in status and years. Young, female accusers were the main enactors of bewitchment in the courtroom and elsewhere. They provided a centrepiece for the theological exposition that accompanied the trials, and they were fundamental to the legal process.

These ’Salem Girls’ have been written about extensively over several centuries, and since about the mid-twentieth-century have routinely been portrayed as psychologically disturbed or mentally ill. So in 1949 Marion Starkey, author of The Devil in Massachusetts, wrote that the young girls lived “in dread of spectral rape by the incubus and of giving birth to a demon child.” In 1956 the historian

Samuel Eliot Morison wrote that the young accusers, “finding themselves the object of unusual attention, and with the exhibitionism natural to young girls [they] persisted in their accusations for fear of being found out…” Morison also offered the (somewhat startling) conclusion that “a good spanking administered to the young girls, and lovers provided for the older ones” would have prevented the trials from ever happening. In 1969 Chadwick Hansen, author of Witchcraft at Salem, wrote that the young female accusers were “not fraudulent but pathological. They were hysterics, and in the clinical rather than the popular sense of that term. These people were not merely overexcited: they were mentally ill.” The 1970s saw a shift to social historical approaches to the 1692 trials that, while innovative in many ways, largely obscured the young female accusers. In the landmark Salem Possessed, published in 1974, Boyer and Nissenbaum left the young accusers off their map of the village because “we think it a mistake to treat the girls themselves as decisive shapers of the witchcraft outbreak as it evolved.” In 1989 the first feminist study of witch trials in New England, Carol Karlsen’s The Devil in the Shape of a Woman, treated the young female accusers, not as individuals, but as emblematic of all young women in New England by arguing they were acting out a “fierce negotiation … about the legitimacy of female discontent, resentment and anger.”

In the most recent historical studies, historians have tended to argue that the young female accusers were fraudulent in their afflictions. In 1993, in Salem Story, Bernard Rosenthal argued that the young accusers were “fabricating spectres” and thus knowingly “dissembling.” By 2009 Rosenthal had sharpened his point. In his General Introduction to Records of the Salem Witch-Hunt, Rosenthal suggests the inevitably of a conclusion of fraud: “The challenge for those rejecting fraud as an explanation is to offer an evidence-based alternative … those who support the centrality of fraud among the main accusers have some hard evidence.” Rosenthal concludes that the “evidence of fraud is frequent [and] difficult to negate.” Such analyses are by no means new: in 1764 Thomas Hutchinson wrote that a “little attention must force

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10 Rosenthal, Salem Story, 38, 39.