Cotton Mather

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| **Salem Witch Trials in History and LiteratureAn Undergraduate Course, University of VirginiaSpring Semester 2001**Born on Feb. 12th 1663 into a family of renown New England Puritan ministers, including Rev. John Cotton and Rev. Richard Mather, Cotton Mather seemed destined to achieve fame. His own father, Rev. Increase Mather, also held a position of prominence as a well-admired political leader, minister of the South Church in Boston, as well as the presidency of Harvard College. Excelling in his entrance exams in Latin and Greek, young Cotton began his schooling at Harvard at only 12 years of age. After receiving his M.A. at age 18, he felt called to a life of service in the clergy. A terrible stutter, however, forced him to delay entering the ministry and the demands of preaching, and instead he entertained the notion of becoming a doctor. Encouragement from a friend eventually pulled him over this speech impediment and back to his calling, although medicine remained a key interest throughout his life. Mather preached his first sermon in August of 1680, and went on to be ordained by 1685 at age 22. Besides his involvement with the witch trials in Salem during the 1690s, Cotton Mather is remembered as one of the most influential Puritan ministers of his day. Never achieving his father's success as a political leader or president of Harvard, Cotton made his mark through his efforts as a master of the pen. By the end of his life, he had published over 400 of his works, ranging from the subject of witchcraft to smallpox inoculation. His publication, *Curiosa Americana*(1712-24), demonstrated his abilities as an accomplished scientist, and earned him election to the prestigious Royal Society of London, England. Although his efforts of encouragement in smallpox inoculation were met with much resistance and nearly killed his own son, he is recognized as having been a progressive medical advocate for his day.In regard to the Salem witch trials, however, it was Mather's interest in the craft and actions of Satan that won him an audience with the most powerful figures involved in the trial proceedings, several of the judges and the local ministers in Salem. Before the outbreak of accusations in Salem Village, Mather had already published his account, *Remarkable Providences* (1684), describing in detail he possession of the children of the Goodwin family of Boston. Mather actually took the eldest of the children, 13-year-old Martha, into his home to make a more intense study of the phenomenon. Later scholars have suggested that this book in fact outlined the symptoms of clinical hysteria. It was this same hysteria that provided the behavioral model for the circle of "afflicted" girls during the trials in Salem. Mather, however, used his experience with Goodwins to further his notion that New England was in fact a battleground with Satan. Similar themes appear in his sermons and in the Preface to one of his children's books, in which he warns young readers: "They which lie, must go to their father, the devil, into everlasting burning; they which never pray, God will pour out his wrath upon them; and when they bed and pray in hell fire, God will not forgive them, but there [they] must lie forever. Are you willing to go to hell and burn with the devil and his angels?". Thus, the subject of eternal damnation weighed constantly upon Mather's mind, and it resonates in his own diary accounts. Scholars suggest that Mather's dramatic descriptions the devil's activity upon the young Goodwin children may have led to the first cry of witchcraft among the young girls in Salem Village.Although Mather was not directly involved in the proceedings of the Salem witch trials, he wrote a letter to one of the magistrates in the trials, John Richards of Boston, urging caution in the use of spectral evidence. Mather was also the author of the "Return of the Several Ministers," a report sent to the judges of the Salem court. This carefully-worded document advised caution in the use of spectral evidence, saying that the devil could indeed assume the shape of an innocent person, and decrying the use of spectral evidence in the trials, their "noise, company, and openness", and the utilization of witch tests such as the recitation of the Lord's Prayer. However, the final paragraph of the document appears to undercut this cautionary statement in recommending "the detection of witchcrafts". Thus, in Bernard Rosenthal and Perry Miller's opinions, the courts interpreted the letter as Mather's seal of approval for the trials to go on.Accounts of eye-witnesses and historians paint a more contradictory portrait of Mather's hand in the trials. Mather is haunted in history by the account given in Robert Calef's book *More Wonders of the Invisible World* (1700) of his conduct at the hanging of former Salem minister George Burroughs. Calef reported that Burroughs recited a perfect rendition of the Lord's Prayer while on the gallows, something Mather himself thought impossible for anyone guilty of an alliance with the devil. The crowd was so moved that some wanted to prevent the execution. Mather, mounted on his horse, proclaimed that Burroughs was no ordained minister, and that the "Devil has often been transformed into an Angel of Light." With those words, under the tearful gaze of an ambivalent crowd the George Burroughs was hanged.Perhaps Cotton's most self-damning act within the public eye was his publication of the volume *The Wonders of the Invisible World,* in October, 1692, after the final executions. Although Cotton's words describe, and to some degree justify the trials and deaths in Salem that year, the book is anything but resolved with regards to Mather's true feelings about the trials. Although Cotton insists the book is not written in an evil spirit or with any prejudice, he writes of the trials of accused witches such as Bridget Bishop saying there was "little occasion to prove witchcraft, it being evident and notorious to all beholders". He describes Susanna Martin as, "one of the most impudent, scurrilous, wicked creatures in the world". And worst of all, he condones the use of the spectral evidence to convict the witches of his five cases outlined! In his own letter to William Stoughton, penned during the trial of George Burroughs, Cotton also asserts the guilt of this man, stating he is the ringleader of 10 other witches, a confession received from five Andover witches that "refreshes his soul".Careful analysis of the document, as well as Mather's own diaries, reveals that he may not have been quite as convinced of the righteousness of the trials as he describes in his book. A cautious foreword to the manuscript reads, "I live by Neighbours that force me to produce these undeserved lines". Perry Miller describes the whole work as "utter confusion". Robert Calef, author of *More Wonders of the Invisible World,* published a very different account than Mather's that put Cotton on the defensive for the rest of his life. Mather cried libel and threatened to sue, but the issue was never resolved and Cotton was forced to bite his tongue and bear what would become a flood of contemporary scorn for his witch-hunting labors. Near the end of his life, his diary records a hint of regret for the thanklessness of the groups he had spurned in his work. He is baffled by why "everybody points at me, and speaks of me as by far the most afflicted minister in all New England". Perry Miller describes Cotton's later years as a time of intense regret and remorse about the trials. He points out that Cotton's diary paints a picture of a man "panicky lest the Lord take revenge upon his family 'for [Mather's] not appearing with Vigor enough to stop the proceedings of the Judges'". Clearly Cotton could not see his outside of his own world of expectations, reputations, and contradictions. He died on Feb. 13th 1728 at age 66, survived by only one of his three wives and two of his fifteen children. |
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| **Bibliography**Calef, Robert. *More Wonders of the Invisible World*,1700,Hill, Frances. *A Delusion of Satan,*1997.Miller, Perry. *The New England Mind, from colony to province,*1953.Mather, Cotton. *Diary of Cotton Mather, 1681-[1724]*Mather, Cotton. *The Wonders of the Invisible World,*1693.Rosenthal, Bernard. *Salem Story,*1997. |