

Did the Mathers Disagree about the Salem Witchcraft Trials?

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THE QUESTION THAT I have posed may seem at first to be antiquarian in the narrowest sense. One of my colleagues suggested that I make the title more provocative by asking, Did the Mathers disagree about the Salem trials, and who cares? What could be more parochial than asking whether two embattled ministers, serving in the same congregation, disagreed toward the end of one of the most shameful episodes in early New England history? I could argue that this topic is worth thirty minutes of your time because the Salem trials have already held a disproportionately large place in American historical consciousness for nearly three centuries. Somehow we choose the historical topics that will become notorious. Everyone knows that twenty people were executed in Salem in 1692, whereas I had a doctorate in the History of American Civilization before I learned that in the city of New York, nearly half a century after the Salem trials, many black people were actually burned at the stake for an alleged conspiracy to revolt.¹ The question that I shall pursue instead concerns fairness to historical characters, and it asks us, in examining these recondite materials, to reconsider how it is that historical villains, and especially historical heroes, are made. The documentary evidence is small enough to be examined carefully in a brief space,

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¹ See John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*, 3d ed. (New York, 1969), pp. 93-94.

and debatable enough to remind us that the answer to questions about such evidence often depends on our own desires. Learned historians and biographers, sophisticated in our self-awareness, we can still occasionally resemble Huckleberry Finn, the simple boy who decided to forgo 'borrowing' two of the fruits that he had been taking from people's trees. He decided to borrow no more crabapples or persimmons, so that he could believe that his borrowing of other fruits really did differ from stealing. 'I was glad the way it come out, too,' he says, 'because crabapples ain't ever good, and the p'simmons wouldn't be ripe for two or three months yet.'²

I cannot say that the scholars with whom I disagree are rationalizing quite so baldly as Huck Finn, but I shall try to show you why I believe that they have allowed their healthy skepticism about one kind of documentary evidence to betray them into credulous neglect or dismissal of other evidence that is equally explicit in the record. They put far too much emphasis on a postscript to Increase Mather's book on the Salem trials, and by shining their flashlights on one paragraph in that postscript itself, they leave other sections—and many of their trusting readers—in the darkness. Perry Miller, the most eminent of these scholars, and Kenneth Silverman, the most recent, have portrayed Increase Mather as a reasonable critic who belatedly demolished the reliability of the witchcraft court's procedures and verdicts in the autumn of 1692. The same scholars have argued that Cotton Mather, by persisting in defending the court, broke dramatically with his father and the other leading ministers of the colony;³ that Cotton Mather thus tied to his own name the tin can that has rattled through

² Mark Twain, *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, ed. Leo Marx (Indianapolis, 1967), p. 82.

³ Perry Miller, *The New England Mind from Colony to Province* (Cambridge, Mass., 1953), and Kenneth Silverman, *The Life and Times of Cotton Mather* (New York, 1984). Specific page numbers referring to these editions will be cited in parentheses in the text.

history for nearly three centuries because he failed to stand with his father and their colleagues against the misguided judges, but chose instead to write a book in defense of the court.⁴

Let me warn you, too, against my own desire. Ever since I first studied these materials thirty-seven years ago, I have believed that Increase and Cotton Mather worked cooperatively in this crisis, as they did on nearly every other major and minor issue during their forty years as colleagues in the Second Church in Boston. Both father and son had written books in the 1680s to encourage the recording of 'illustrious' or 'remarkable providences,' and several nineteenth- and twentieth-century historians blamed those books as major causes of the Salem delusion. Modern scholarship has generally acknowledged that the lore, fear, and accusations of witchcraft were well known in Massachusetts through surer and earlier sources than the books of any ministers. Virtually nobody in Massachusetts denied, before it was much too late, that witches exist and that the state is obliged to execute them. I believe it is also fair to say that, although judgments of individual ministers range from severe criticism to praise, a modern consensus acknowledges the Boston clergy's efforts—equivocal and ineffective though they surely were—to protect the rights of the defendants and to warn judges against procedures that might convict defendants who were not guilty.⁵ Cotton Mather wrote a long letter of this kind to one of the judges on May 31, 1692, three days before the first trial, and when Governor Phips asked the ministers for advice soon after that trial, Cotton Mather copied and paraphrased his letter in the document that

⁴ It was Samuel Eliot Morison who wrote that Robert Calef had tied to Cotton Mather's tail a can that has rattled through the pages of popular history for three centuries. Perry Miller declares that 'the right can was tied to the proper tail, and through the pages of this volume it shall rattle and bang.' *From Colony to Province*, p. 204.

⁵ One of the most sympathetic versions of this judgment is that of Chadwick Hansen, *Witchcraft at Salem* (New York, 1969).

he drafted and the other ministers, including his father, signed on June 15, 1692.⁶

This document is known to scholars as 'The Ministers' Return—that is, their answer to Governor Phips's request for advice. Five of its eight numbered paragraphs argue forcibly for great care. They urge 'a very critical and exquisite caution, lest by too much credulity for things received only upon the Devil's authority, there be a door opened for a long train of miserable consequences, and Satan get an advantage over us, for we should not be ignorant of his devices.' They insist that nobody should even be arrested, let alone convicted, on the mere testimony that a specter (or ghostly form) appeared to an afflicted person in the form of a real human being, for the ministers said it was both 'undoubted' and 'notorious' that a demon could appear to human beings in the shape of innocent and virtuous people. (Such evidence was called spectral evidence or specter evidence.) The ministers even went so far as to recommend that the people and the court try to insult the Devil by refusing to believe any evidence 'whose whole force and strength is from [the devils] alone'—evidence such as startling changes that seemed to be caused in 'the sufferers, by a look or touch of the accused.' Both Increase and Cotton Mather endorsed these warnings, and both also endorsed the final article of advice, which began with a big NEVERTHE-LESS and called for 'the speedy and vigorous prosecution of such as have rendered themselves obnoxious, according to the direction given in the laws of God, and the wholesome statutes of the *English* nation, for the detection of witchcrafts.'

My reason for reminding you that both Mathers signed this equivocal document is to underline Cotton's participation in the plea for caution and Increase's endorsement of vigorous

⁶ Cotton Mather to John Richards, May 31, 1692, *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 4th ser. 8(1868):391-97. My quotations from *The Return of Several Ministers Consulted . . . by His Excellency . . . Upon the Present Witchcrafts in Salem Village* are taken from Thomas J. Holmes, *Cotton Mather: A Bibliography of His Works* 3 vols. (Cambridge, 1940), 3:913.

prosecution. From the beginning of the crisis, they both expected, or at least hoped, to protect the innocent and prosecute the guilty. But as we all know, the door was indeed opened for a train of miserable consequences. By autumn, twenty men and women had been executed, others had been convicted, and many more were in jail awaiting trial. The accusations seemed to be spreading uncontrollably, and at the same time a growing feeling of doubt and resentment was questioning the fairness and the procedures of the special court, which had tried the cases without following the ministers' advice against spectral evidence. By the beginning of September, both Increase and Cotton Mather were writing books about the trials.

Increase Mather called his book *Cases of Conscience Concerning Evil Spirits Personating Men*, and he read it to a group of ministers early in October. This eloquent statement demolishes the validity of spectral evidence. Increase Mather not only establishes the truth that all the ministers had called notorious at the beginning of the summer. He declares that it would be better for ten guilty witches to go free than for one innocent person to be condemned.⁷ He insists that 'the father of lies is never to be believed,' because that master of deceit will utter twenty truths in order to make us believe one of his lies (p. 40). And Increase Mather also demands that the court stop accepting testimony from the alleged victims of the witches, for these afflicted witnesses are admittedly possessed by the Devil, and therefore under his control in their testimony as well as in their dreadful fits.

Cotton Mather's book, *The Wonders of the Invisible World*, was completed no more than eight days after his father's *Cases of Conscience*, and the son's book was actually published first.⁸

⁷ Increase Mather, *Cases of Conscience Concerning Evil Spirits Personating Men, Witchcrafts, Infallible Proofs of Guilt in Such as Are Accused with That Crime* (Boston, 1693), p. 6. Further citations of this edition appear in parentheses in the text.

⁸ On the dates of publication, see Holmes, *Cotton Mather*, 3:1257-58, and *Increase Mather: A Bibliography of His Works*, 2 vols. (Cleveland, 1931), 1:106, 123. Further citations from Cotton Mather, *The Wonders of the Invisible World* (London, 1693), will appear in parentheses in the text.

Here too one finds unmistakable acknowledgment that the Devil's purpose in the entire affair may have aimed at getting the Lord's people to maul one another 'hotly and madly . . . in the dark' (p. 43), and that spectral evidence may well have led the court into grave error. But Cotton Mather's *Wonders* has a purpose that more than one modern historian has called odious. This book sets out to 'countermine the whole PLOT of the Devil, against New-England, in every branch of it, as far as one of my darkness can comprehend such a *Work of Darkness*' (p. [vi]). Here Cotton Mather argues that, whatever their perplexities and errors, the judges acted in good faith and did convict a number of real witches—a position that Increase Mather's book stated just as clearly, though much more briefly. The theme of *The Wonders of the Invisible World* resounds in the five trials that Cotton Mather summarizes, with detailed quotation and paraphrase from the depositions and from transcripts of oral testimony before the magistrates and the special court. He tries to show that in every one of these five convictions spectral evidence was less important than reliable kinds of incriminating evidence, ranging from the defendant's perjury or self-contradiction to explicit curses, puppets with pins stuck in them, and feats that could not have been performed without supernatural aid. Cotton Mather also asked for the help of William Stoughton, the deputy-governor and chief justice of the special court, who returned the courtesy by writing a prefatory letter of commendation and signing (with Judge Samuel Sewall) an endorsement of the narratives.⁹

Here we have the essential division on which our little historical problem is based. Increase Mather, the father, presents a thorough argument, both scriptural and rational, for excluding all evidence that is in any way influenced by the Devil. Increase's son Cotton publishes a shrill, sometimes incoherent mixture of arguments, sermons, and narrative to show how the

⁹ Stoughton's letter is printed on p. [vii] of Mather's work, and the brief endorsement of factual accuracy, subscribed by Stoughton and Sewall, appears on p. 48.

people became perplexed, why one should still believe in the Devil's power to set witches loose on human victims, and how a well-meaning, though fallible court could have justly convicted and condemned guilty defendants. Increase Mather demands an immediate, drastic change in procedure; Cotton Mather tries to persuade the people not to condemn the court.

The question for us to consider is whether these two books were complementary parts of a cooperative venture, or whether they represent an ill-concealed split between the Mathers. Besides the tones and themes of the two books themselves, the chief seventeenth-century evidence of a clear disagreement is of a negative kind: both Mathers explicitly deny that they disagree, and both explicitly say that others have attributed the disagreement to them. So far as I know, no documents survive that actually attribute disagreement to father and son. We cannot examine the rumors or any contemporaneous arguments for the existence of a disagreement. We have only the Mathers' denials. Let us consider them now.

Increase Mather had read his manuscript to the ministers on October 3, but by the time his book was published several weeks later, he already knew about rumors, presumably started by the publication of Cotton's *Wonders*, of a rift between himself and his son. Increase added a postscript to the first edition of his own book, and near the end of that addition he said, 'Some I hear have taken up a Notion, that the Book newly published by my Son, is contradictory to this of mine. 'Tis strange that such Imaginations should enter into the Minds of Men: I perused and approved of that book before it was printed, and nothing but my Relation to him hindered me from recommending it to the World: But myself and Son agreed unto the humble advice . . . which twelve Ministers concurringly presented . . . which let the World judge, whether there be anything in it dissentany from what is attested by either of us (p. [73]).' Increase then concluded his book by reprinting the entire eight articles of the Ministers' Return.

Cotton Mather's allusions to the rumors of disagreement appear in a letter and in his diary (or 'Reserved Memorials'), and his tone plainly indicates that he considers the minds of the rumormongers just as strange as his father says they were. When *The Wonders of the Invisible World* was printed, he writes in his diary at the end of the year, 'Many besotted People would not imagine any other, but that my Father's, *Cases of Conscience, about Witchcraft*, which came abroad just after it, were in opposition to it.'¹⁰ Indeed, we have clear evidence that those besotted minds had put Cotton Mather on the defensive before either of these books had been written. At the outset, in his preface to *Wonders* (which he calls 'The Author's Defense'), he says that he has been 'driven' to defend himself 'by taking off the false Reports, and hard Censures about my Opinion in these Matters'—as if he had been trying to divide rather than reconcile the ministers, the court, and the people. He insists, too, that his 'unvaried Thoughts' about witchcraft trials 'will be owned by most of the Ministers of God in these Colonies; nor can amends be well made me, for the wrong done me, by other sorts of *Representations*' (p.[vi]).

But if Cotton Mather agreed with his father and the other ministers, why didn't he sign their preface endorsing his father's *Cases of Conscience*? Perry Miller and Kenneth Silverman have chosen to read the Mathers' protestations of agreement as insincere. In this reading of the evidence, Increase Mather's declaration that he had read and approved his son's manuscript is simply rejected as a polite lie—because neither one signed the preface to the other's book, because the two books differ in tone and emphasis, and because of a letter Cotton Mather wrote to his maternal uncle, John Cotton, a minister in Plymouth.¹¹ A close examination of that letter may yield a different interpretation.

¹⁰ *The Diary of Cotton Mather*, 2 vols., ed. Worthington C. Ford (Boston, 1912), 1:153.

¹¹ The letter from Cotton Mather to his uncle, held in the Boston Public Library, is printed in Holmes, *Cotton Mather*, 2:551–52.

The letter is dated October 20, 1692. Here Cotton Mather is evidently distressed, only a few days after the publication of his *Wonders*, by both the unfavorable response to his book and the claim that his book contradicts his father's. He begins by saying that he has never needed his favorite uncle's comforting thoughts more than he needs them now, but then he begs his uncle to read the book 'critically' and 'Lett mee know whether You think, I have served, as you know I have designed there in to serve, God and my generation.' The central issue is in the next three paragraphs, which I must quote in full:

There are fourteen Worthy Ministers, that have newly sett their Hands, unto a Book now in the press, Containing, *Cases of Conscience* about Witchcrafts. I did, in *my* Conscience think, that as the Humours of this people now run, Such a Discourse going Alone, would not only Enable our Witch-Advocates, very Learnedly to Cavil & Nibble at the Late proceedings against the Witches, considered in parcels whilst things as they Lay in Bulk, with their whole Dependences, were not exposed. but also everlastingly Stifle any further proceedings of justice & more than so produce a public & open contest with the Judges, who would (tho beyond the intention of the Worthy Author & subscribers) find themselves brought unto the Bar before the Rashest *Mobile*[.] For such cause, & for one more, I did with all the modesty I could use, decline, Setting my Hand unto the Book: assigning the Reason, that I had already a Book in the press, which would sufficiently declare my opinion: and such a Book too, as had already passed the censure of the Hand which wrote what was then before us.

With what Sinful & Raging Asperity, I have been since Treated, I had rather Forgett than Relate. Altho' I challeng'd the Fiercest of my Accusers, to find the Thousandth part of One wrong step taken by mee, in all these matters, Except it were my use of all Humble & Sober Endeavor, to prevent Such a bloody Quarrel between *Moses* and *Aaron*, as would bee *Bitterness in the Latter End*; no other Fault has yett been Laid before mee. At Last I have been driven to say *I will yett bee more vile!* and quoting, Math. 5. 9. I have concluded, *So, I shall not want a Father!*

Since the Trial of these unworthy Treats, the persons that

have used them, have Endeavoured such Expressions of sweetness towards mee, as may make mee satisfaction. But for the Great Slander, with which they have now fill'd the country against mee, *That I Run Against my own Father, & all the Ministers in the countrey*, meerly because I Run Between them, when they are Like mad men Running Against one another; they can make mee no Reparaçon; However my God will!

It is easy to see why modern readers of this extraordinary letter would emphasize evidence of disagreement between the Mathers. Cotton Mather's allusions to the uses that 'Witch-Advocates' might make of his father's book, and his concern for what a mob might do to the judges—these combine with the tone of *Wonders*, the rumors of a rift, and the failure of either Mather to sign the other's book. Small wonder, then, that Miller and Silverman, though each in his own way, represent the postscript to *Cases of Conscience* as a belated, perfunctory gesture.

At least for the sake of argument, however, let us look at other language in the letter, and then at the corroborating evidence to which it leads us. Notice first that both father and son say explicitly not merely that Increase Mather failed to condemn his son's book, but that he had read the manuscript and approved it before it was published. Even if one believes that Increase Mather would lie publicly about such a question, we have no reason to believe that Cotton Mather would lie about it in a private letter to his uncle.

Look, too, at the second sentence in the first paragraph, in which Cotton Mather worries about the effects of Increase's book: 'I did, in *my* Conscience think, that as the Humours of this people now run, Such a Discorse going Alone,' would have dire effects. If published in company with *The Wonders of the Invisible World*, however, Increase Mather's book would not bring a mob's wrath against the court that had tried the witches, nor would it necessarily 'Stifle any further proceedings of justice.'

Precisely because historians have credited Increase Mather's book with everlastingly stifling further witchcraft proceedings, they have found it too easy to overlook the evidence that *Cases of Conscience* and *The Wonders of the Invisible World* concur. I have no doubt that Increase Mather's attack on spectral evidence did help to prevent further executions and convictions in Massachusetts and elsewhere. Yet no scholar known to me has met Increase Mather's challenge to find any disagreement between the Ministers' Return and his book. And in *Cases of Conscience* itself we find unmistakable declarations that it is still possible to convict a person justly of witchcraft. Even before the notorious postscript, which Messrs Miller and Silverman dismiss as a sop to Cotton Mather, *Cases of Conscience* describes two grounds for conviction: The first is 'a free and Voluntary Confession' (p. 59); the second, the sworn testimony of 'two Credible Persons . . . that they have seen the Person accused doing things which none but such as have Familiarity with the Devil ever did or can do.' That testimony, Increase Mather declares, is 'a sufficient Ground of Conviction' (p. 65). He then offers a list of rhetorical questions to show that 'Wizzards . . . have very often been known to do' supernatural tricks 'in the presence of credible witnesses.' 'How often,' he exclaims, have wizards 'been seen by others using Inchantments? Conjuring to raise Storms? . . . And to shew in a Glass or a Shew-stone persons absent? And to reveal Secrets which could not be discovered but by the Devil? And have not men been seen to do things which are above humane Strength that no man living could do, without Diabollicall Assistances?' When two real, credible people—not specters—testify that a defendant has done such things, Mather says, 'it is proof enough' of witchcraft, and 'he or she, whoever they may be, ought to be exterminated from amongst men' (pp. 66–67).

Of course it is right here, just after his strongest endorsement of convictions and executions for witchcraft, that Increase Mather says 'It were better that Ten Suspected Witches

should escape, than that one Innocent Person should be Condemned.' He even declares that he 'had rather judge a Witch to be an honest woman, than judge an honest woman as a Witch' (p. 67). But even in the main text of his book, before the postscript, his scruples concerning reasonable doubt do not cancel his plain rule that the sworn testimony of two credible witnesses to feats of superhuman strength or magic should suffice to justify the extermination of a defendant.

I have insisted that Increase Mather propounded this rule in the body of his text, before adding the postscript. The location is not merely academic, for the specific cases cited in the postscript satisfy the rules that he had prescribed and his fourteen colleagues had endorsed. Echoing his son's words, Mather begins the postscript by denying that he has ever wished to appear as 'an Advocate for Witches,' and he says he has written another essay, which he may well publish later, 'proving that there are such horrid Creatures as Witches in the World; and that they are to be extirpated and cut off from amongst the People of God.' He declares himself 'abundantly satisfied that there are still most cursed Witches in the Land,' for several persons 'now in prison have freely and credibly acknowledged' their guilt directly to him, including 'the Time and Occasion, with the particular circumstances of their Hellish Obligations and Abominations' (p. [70]).

But it is in the second paragraph of the postscript, disclaiming an intent to criticize the judges, that Increase Mather persuades me most conclusively of his agreement with his son. Here Increase Mather calls the judges 'wise and good men' who 'have acted with all Fidelity according to their Light, and have out of tenderness declined the doing of some things, which in their own Judgments they were satisfied about.' Because the cases were so difficult, Mather says, they deserve our 'Pity and Prayers rather than Censure. . . . On which Account I am glad that there is Published to the World (by my Son) a Breviate of the Trials of some who were lately Executed,

whereby I hope the thinking part of mankind will be satisfied, that there was more than that which is called *Spectre Evidence* for the Conviction of the persons Condemned.' (p. [71]). Whether or not Increase Mather really believed that the convictions were based on better evidence than the spectral, he at least says here that he hopes his son's book will persuade the thinking part of mankind to the belief.¹² That statement in itself would suffice to endorse one major purpose, however insincere, of Cotton Mather's *Wonders*: to avoid attacks upon the court. But in my judgment Increase Mather's very next sentences, in the same paragraph, clinch the case. From the mere hope that we will see more than spectral evidence in Cotton Mather's narratives, Increase turns immediately to his own judgment of the one trial that he himself attended, the trial of George Burroughs, the only minister convicted of witchcraft and the first convict whose trial is summarized in *The Wonders of the Invisible World*. Even more important here than Increase Mather's statement that if he had been one of Burroughs' judges, 'I could not have acquitted him,' is the reason that he gives. It is precisely the same kind of evidence endorsed in the body of *Cases of Conscience*: 'For several persons did upon Oath Testify, that they saw him do such things as no Man that has not a Devil to be his Familiar could perform' (p. [71]). Not until two pages later, after more discussion of unacceptable

¹² Increase Mather's language here does not prove that he, rather than his son Cotton, is the person referred to as 'Mr. Mather' in an important entry (dated August 19) in *The Diary of Samuel Sewall*, 2 vols., ed. M. Halsey Thomas (New York, 1973), 1:294. But the diction is strikingly similar. Recording the execution of George Burroughs and others in Salem on a day when Sewall himself was in Watertown, Sewall says that 'All of them said they were innocent, [Martha] Carrier and all. Mr. Mather says they all died by a Righteous Sentence. Mr. Burrough by his Speech, Prayer, protestation of his Innocence, did much move unthinking persons, which occasions their speaking hardly concerning his being executed.'

Scholars have usually treated Sewall's entry as corroboration for Robert Calef's report (eight years later) that Cotton Mather, mounted on a horse, made an impromptu speech that prevented the unthinking persons from blocking the execution. Increase Mather's appeal to the thinking part of mankind may combine with Sewall's absence from Salem and Sewall's use of the past tense ('died') to undermine the corroborative value of Sewall's report.

ways of fighting the devils, does Increase Mather answer the rumor of disagreement between himself and his son.

When Increase Mather wrote his version of his own part in these events, several weeks or months after both books had been published, he retained for his autobiography only five or six lines, which condense everything into one entry, dated May 14, 1692—the day of his return from England with a copy of the new Massachusetts charter in one pocket and the new governor, nominated by himself, in another.¹³ Here Increase Mather says not a word about having approved the extermination of every defendant whom two credible persons swear that they have seen doing things which only witches ever did or can do. He says nothing about having heard free and credible confessions in the prison, nothing about his belief in George Burroughs's guilt, nothing about having written another discourse to prove that witches exist and that they ought to be extirpated. Instead he remembers only his doubts and the humanitarian influence for which some contemporaries and many historians have justly given him credit. Increase Mather's selective memory has its counterpart in the selective narratives of Perry Miller and Kenneth Silverman. Miller does at least chide Increase Mather for neglecting to mention his endorsement of George Burroughs's conviction. Silverman not only fails to mention that endorsement, but actually declares that Increase Mather would not have approved of Burroughs's conviction. And then he declares that the Mathers 'undeniably' disagreed.¹⁴

Several lesser items remain to be examined before we turn to the significance of these recondite details. Cotton Mather's

¹³ See the following passage taken from *The Autobiography of Increase Mather*, ed. M. G. Hall (Worcester, 1962), p. 344: 'I found the Countrey in a sad condition by reason of witchcrafts and possessed persons. The Judges and many of the people has espoused a notion, that the devill could not Represent Innocent persons as afflicting others. I doubt that Inocent blood was shed by mistakes of that nature. I therefore published my Cases of Conscience dè Witchcrafts etc—by which (it is sayed) many were enlightned, Juries convinced, and the shedding of more Innocent blood prevented.'

¹⁴ See Miller, *From Colony to Province*, p. 200, and Silverman, *Life and Times*, pp. 110, 113-14, 117.

refusal to sign the fourteen ministers' preface to his father's book would be more important if the Mathers had been in the habit of endorsing each other's books. I see no reason to doubt Increase Mather's statement that only his relation to the author kept him from endorsing Cotton's *Wonders*, for (so far as I know) he endorsed none of Cotton's many other books in the 1690s, and he did not even join the other ministers who wrote testimonials to introduce Cotton's church history of New England, *Magnalia Christi Americana*. In 1693, meanwhile, both Mathers endorsed Charles Morton's *Spirit of Man*, for which Cotton Mather wrote the preface.¹⁵

If the Mathers were cooperating in the late summer and autumn of 1692, they wrote their books to serve complementary purposes. Although I admire Increase Mather's eloquent statements in *Cases of Conscience*, it seems clear to me that the book deliberately left room for further trials and convictions of witches. I cannot agree with Perry Miller that Increase Mather, 'and he alone,' stopped the executions (p. 195), or that by merely adding the postscript Increase Mather betrayed his conscience and the body of his book, turning what might have been 'a bold stroke' into 'a miserable species of double-talk' (p. 199). Before either of the two Mathers' books was completed, a strong popular revulsion against the executions and the spreading accusations had alarmed the authorities. I agree with Robert Middlekauff that both father and son wanted to protect the innocent, slow down the rate of accusations and convictions, and yet give no comfort to the Devil, to scientific rationalists, or to political opponents of the court and the incumbent administration. Instead of doubletalk, I hear genuine perplexity.¹⁶

Just as overstating Increase Mather's criticism of the court makes him either too nearly heroic or at last too hypocritical,

¹⁵ See Holmes, *Cotton Mather*, 2:834.

¹⁶ Robert Middlekauff, *The Mathers: Three Generations of Puritan Intellectuals 1596-1728* (New York, 1971), pp. 153-55.

so overstating Cotton Mather's submission to William Stoughton and the other judges makes *The Wonders of the Invisible World* seem too simply obsequious. If the Mathers were cooperating with each other, the son certainly drew the nastier assignment. I do not mean to defend him. A wiser man would have argued at least that no sound basis for conviction could be found, and a better man would have written less defensively about himself, less fulsomely about the court, more charitably about the defendants, less shrilly about the Devil's threats. Yet insistence that the two Mathers disagreed, or that the two books about the witchcraft trials were both dishonest as they argued, respectively, for opposite conclusions, may neglect the complexity of Cotton Mather's *Wonders*.

The wonder about Cotton Mather's political achievement here, costly as it was to his later reputation, is not in his submission to William Stoughton but in his acquisition of Stoughton's support. Everybody who has looked into the story of the trials knows that Stoughton insisted on the value of spectral evidence, and that he even stormed out of the court one day in the winter of 1692-93 after his death sentence against three confessed witches had been overturned by Governor Phips.¹⁷ Yet here is Stoughton in October 1692, less than three weeks after the last executions—and while he still hopes to send other convicts to the gallows—here is Stoughton endorsing a book that repeatedly admits to grave doubts about the value of both spectral evidence and the confessions of accused witches. In 'Enchantments Encountered,' the first section of the book after the 'Author's Defense,' Cotton Mather concedes that 'the Delusions of Satan' may well be mixed into some of the many confessions, even as he argues that we have little choice but to believe 'the *main Strokes* wherein' the 'many Voluntary Harmonious Confessions, made by Intelligent Persons of all Ages,

¹⁷ Letter of Sir William Phips to the Earl of Nottingham, February 21, 1693, David Levin, ed., *What Happened in Salem?*, (New York, 1960), p. 94.

in sundry Towns, at several Times, . . . all agree' (p. 7). Cotton Mather admits that some of the witches have actually confessed that they conspired to project spectral representations of innocent persons in order to save themselves (p. 9). And he insists that since 'the best man that ever lived' was denounced as a witch, specters must sometimes appear in the shape of 'a person that shall be none of the worst' (p. 9). Cotton Mather admits in a backhanded way that 'disputed Methods' have been used in the witch-hunt, and that 'there are very worthy Men, who are not a little dissatisfied at the Proceedings.'¹⁸ He insists that the Devil's chief purpose is to inflame us 'one against another' (p. 13), and that hereafter the methods of trying the defendants must be 'unquestionably safe, lest the latter end be worse than the beginning' (p. 13).

Cotton Mather's success in gaining the endorsement of Stoughton and Sewall may well be connected to his decision not to join the other ministers in signing the preface to his father's book. Cotton Mather had been seeking Stoughton's approval for such a book ever since September 2, 1692, three weeks earlier than the date on which Thomas J. Holmes and Perry Miller say that Mather began to slap the book together. And the outline that Mather sent to Stoughton says plainly that the first part of the book had already been written more than a month before Increase Mather read *Cases of Conscience* to the ministers. Perry Miller is therefore mistaken in attributing the opening section to Cotton Mather's compulsive need to fill up pages while awaiting the transcripts of trials (promised around September 20) to arrive in Boston (p. 201). In the letter of September 2, Cotton Mather admits privately to Stoughton that in the manuscript 'I have Lett fall, . . . once or Twice, the Jealousies among us, of Innocent people being Accused.' But of course he promises 'humbly [to] Submitt all

¹⁸ Here Mather quotes from the Ministers' Return. See Mather, *Wonders*, p. 12.

those Expressions unto your Honours Correction; that so there may not bee one word out of Joint.¹⁹

After all this analysis, you may well ask the implicit question with which we began: 'What difference does it make whether the Mathers agreed or disagreed?' Aside from ironing out one wrinkle in the record, this little study may remind us that there were no heroes in 1692, except for Mary Easty and several of the other people who were executed—convicts who went to the gallows protesting their innocence, praying for the judges, and pleading for more charitable procedures that might save the lives of others who were wrongly accused. Increase Mather not only read and approved of his son's book, but prescribed two explicit and unqualified ways by which the court could still justly condemn witches. I believe Perry Miller is correct when he declares that the ministers who did not condemn the executions were betraying the best principles of Puritan tradition in their own time; they fell short of their own best standards. But Perry Miller does not advance our understanding of the characters or the time, then, when he proceeds on the assumption that both Mathers knew they were justifying 'murders' (p. 204). I see no reason to disbelieve Increase Mather's statement that he considered George Burroughs guilty and justly convicted. I see no reason to ignore Increase Mather's vehement denunciations of the Devil, no reason to ignore Increase Mather's participation in his son's examination of a bewitched young woman in Boston in the autumn of 1693, long after the last execution had taken place in Salem. Even if we reject Robert Calef's libelous claim that he saw both Mathers fumbling under that young woman's bedclothes in search of de-

¹⁹ This letter was available only in typescript when Kenneth Silverman edited *Selected Letters of Cotton Mather* (Baton Rouge, 1971) and when I wrote *Cotton Mather: The Young Life of the Lord's Remembrancer, 1663-1703* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978). But the original holograph has since been acquired by Boston College. The last word that I have quoted is misprinted as 'Point' in Silverman, *Letters*, p. 44. I am grateful to Boston College for permission to read a photocopy of the manuscript, and for permission to quote it here.

mons (and the pleasure of fondling her breast and belly),²⁰ and even if we reject the tradition that President Increase Mather had Calef's book burned in the Harvard College Yard, we should hesitate to portray Increase Mather as the voice of unqualified reason and charity. We should applaud Robert Middlekauff's perceptive reminder that Increase Mather continued to insist on the limits of human reason and the power of the supernatural.

If we recognize the major points of agreement in the two Mathers' books about the Salem trials, we may not only avoid the temptation to find heroes and villains. We may re-imagine minds that believed simultaneously in strengthening the Congregational ministers' power, in resisting the Devil during his last assault upon the people of God, in protecting the rights of the accused, in deploring the witchcraft court's unjust procedures, in the justice of many of the convictions, in sympathetic appreciation of the judges' difficulties, and in the grave necessity of maintaining popular respect for the newly established government. We cannot avoid judging those minds for the choices they made. We will judge them more fairly as we come closer to perceiving their full complexity.

²⁰ Robert Calef, coll., *Salem Witchcraft: Comprising More Wonders of the Invisible World* [London, 1700], reprinted as volume 2 in Samuel G. Drake, comp., *The Witchcraft Delusion in New England*, 3 vols. (Boston, 1866; reprint, 1970), p. 49.

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