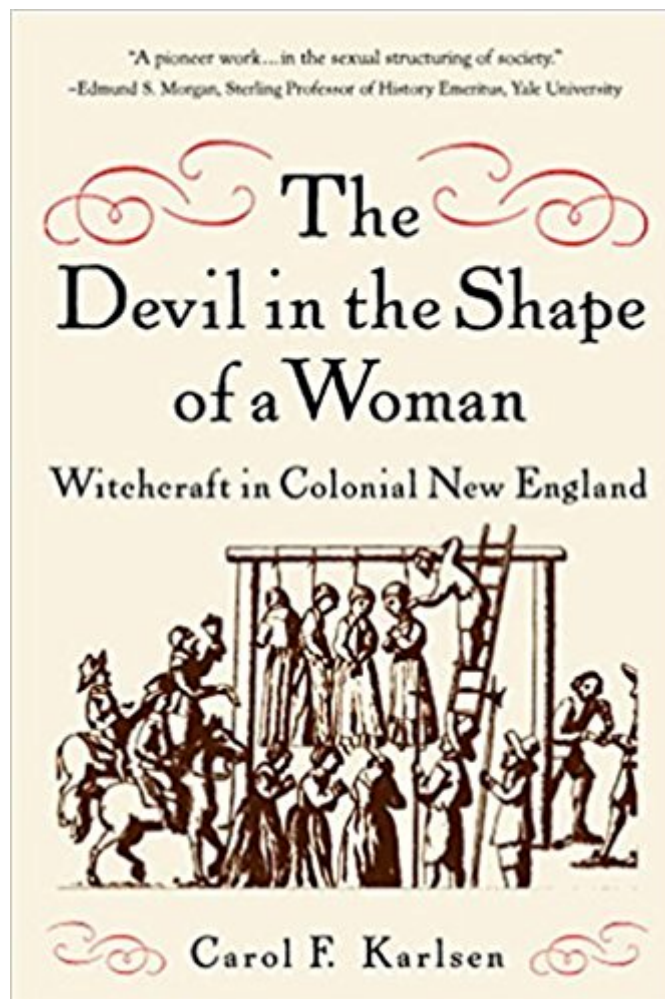




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The Devil In The Shape Of A Woman: Witchcraft In Colonial New England



Synopsis

"A pioneer work in the sexual structuring of society. This is not just another book about witchcraft." —Edmund S. Morgan, Yale University
Confessing to "familiarity with the devils," Mary Johnson, a servant, was executed by Connecticut officials in 1648. A wealthy Boston widow, Ann Hibbens was hanged in 1656 for casting spells on her neighbors. The case of Ann Cole, who was "taken with very strange Fits," fueled an outbreak of witchcraft accusations in Hartford a generation before the notorious events at Salem. More than three hundred years later, the question "Why?" still haunts us. Why were these and other women likely witches — vulnerable to accusations of witchcraft and possession? Carol F. Karlsen reveals the social construction of witchcraft in seventeenth-century New England and illuminates the larger contours of gender relations in that society.

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Customer Reviews

Karlsen has written an intriguing social history of witchcraft in Puritan New England (1620-1725). She unearths detailed evidence which demonstrates that prosecuted and accused witches generally were older, married women who had violated the religious and/or economic Puritan social hierarchy. Beyond their childbearing years and sometimes the recipients of inheritances, these women threatened the male-dominated social order and drew the ire of middle-aged men who accused them of witchcraft. A well-written, provocative addition to the recent scholarship on New England witchcraft. David Szatmary, Univ. of Washington Extension, Seattle
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—A remarkable achievement. The 'witches' come alive in this book, not as stereotypes, but as real women living in a society that suspected and feared their independence and combativeness. — Mary Beth Norton, Mary Donlon Alger Professor of American History, Cornell University

The Devil in the Shape of A Woman by Carol F. Karlsen studies witchcraft in colonial New England. The thesis of the book is to examine the different factors contributing to the witchcraft hysteria for early settlers and why most witches were women. The principal factors of determining who would be accused of witchcraft were: sex, marital status, community standing, wealth, inheritance, and relationships with others in the community. Proving her thesis, Karlsen used court documents, journal entries, and secondary sources to examine the role of women in Puritan society. Focusing on Hartford, Salem, and Fairfield, Karlsen argues that witchcraft accusations covered a broad period of time from 1620 to 1725. Karlsen defines a witch as a human being with supernatural powers using her ability to cause maleficium, harm to others through supernatural powers (6). Over the period of a hundred years, Karlsen provides evidence of suspected witchcraft activity citing examples of why there was a sudden death of livestock, how women caused men to suddenly become "bewildered when walking past the house of an accused witch," and how women were "drawn away from God and possessed by the devil" (6, 33) Central to Karlsen's study, most witches were women aligned with Satan causing maleficium. Karlsen argues, "most witchcraft suspicions in colonial New England originated in conflicts among people who knew one another" (46). Accusations of witchcraft were most common from close neighbors or people who personally knew the alleged witch. Witchcraft suspicions typically originated around property disputes where financial gain was only explained through the assistance of the Devil. Once accused, it was almost impossible for women to peruse ownership of property against their adversaries. Karlsen argues that the stigma of witchcraft accusation propagated down from mother to daughter and granddaughter. Karlsen uses this as evidence as why certain families had a higher number of accused witches. For example, in the case of Martha Carrier, "Martha Carrier's sister and brother-in-law, Mary and Roger Toothaker, their daughter, and four of Martha's children were all named as witches during the Salem outbreak" (101). Karlsen argues that inheritance was a factor in witchcraft accusations, and women who benefited the most economically from the rules of inheritance were

“prime targets for witchcraft accusations” (84).

Karlsen’s study shows that not all women accused of witchcraft were single, old women; rather women from a variety of ages, social status, and broad economic backgrounds were accused of witchcraft. A common thread of most witchcraft accusations was the exchange of property from men to women. Karlsen argues, “most accused witches were women who symbolized the obstacles to property and prosperity and they did not accept their assigned place within the [new economic order] (217). The male dominated Puritan society repressed the ability for women to gain financial stability through witchcraft accusations. In other words, men held the position as head of household and any challenge made against the authority of man was a challenge against God (164). These were central beliefs to Puritan society and any challenges against the authority of society, mostly women, were suppressed through accusations of witchcraft.

I loved this book so much more than I expected to. Going into it I thought I knew the basics of why the witch trials happened, but this book goes into so much more depth than I imagined there would be. There’s more to it than just “the Puritans were sexist and sexually repressed.” There were all kinds of economic, religious, and social pressures that aren’t nearly as obvious or well-known. In addition to talking about the witches, it also talks about the “possessed” women and that was fascinating as well. I can’t recommend it highly enough. My one complaint is with the Kindle formatting- there are tons of notes but none of them are linked. The tables were linked but that was unnecessary because the table being referred to was always within a couple pages of its mention. There were also a couple typos. My favorite was when it referred to the “Allens” (that is, a family with the last name “Allen”), as the “Aliens.”

Excellent examination of factors affecting social views of women; many relevant even today.

It gave me a better understanding of the times and the changes of the social order that was occurring. I see many parallels to today’s society and the changes that are occurring. Men are still afraid of independent women.

This book explained a lot about the mentality of the time...that so-called men of knowledge felt that women were not only a weaker sex, but craved sex more than men, and therefore were subject to the Devil’s influence. It was amazing what constituted being a “witch” in those days. A wealthy

widow, or a poor widow, either not being protected by a husband, were easy prey. Women were not supposed to inherit great sums, and so if one were declared a witch and hung, others could grab the money, and/or land. Glad to be alive in these times!

Had to buy this book for a class. Came in great shape.

Came as described

This book examines not only the trials, but the economic and social backgrounds of the accused. The conclusions reached by the author are well thought out and make perfect sense when taken as a whole. Well written and documented, this makes a valuable addition to any research library dedicated to the Salem Witch Trials.

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