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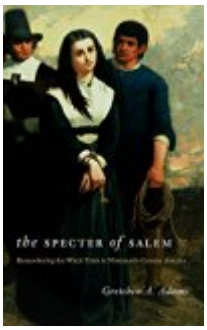

Gretchen A. Adams. *The Specter of Salem: Remembering the Witch Trials in Nineteenth-Century America.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008. xiii + 223 pp. $35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-226-00541-6.

Reviewed by Kelly A. Ryan

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Commissioned by Holly S. Hurlburt (Southern Illinois University Carbondale)

In *The Specter of Salem*, Gretchen A. Adams studies the ways nineteenth-century Americans deployed the history of the Salem witchcraft trials to influence debates over national identity, the sectional crisis, and new religious movements. Adams situates her work within a wide range of historical and sociological literature, including studies of collective memory, nationalism, and language. Her research is based on the legal records and histories written immediately after the trials, as well as nineteenth-century schoolbooks, newspapers, magazines, and printed records of regional associations. Adams argues that those who evoked the history of the Salem witchcraft trials used it to represent "persecution, intolerance, and bigotry" (p. 3). Thus, she suggests, the trials acted as a "negative symbol" to influence others to act with more disinterest, virtue, and reason (p. 5). Adams makes little mention of the persecution of women in her study, even though she believes that the best histories written about Salem focus on factors of age, economics, gender, and sexuality. After reading Adams's work, historians who center their research on the history of women and gender will be left wondering whether nineteenth-century U.S. women's rights advocates ever rhetorically connected their own situation with Salem's "witches."

Adams begins her history by reminding readers about the events in Salem in 1692, and shows that the history of the trials was immediately contested by the generations who lived through the events. Adams explores petitions of accused persons asking for pardons and restitution, as well as pamphlets published by ministers and eyewitnesses after the episode, to glimpse the way the public narrative about the witchcraft trials was crafted. Adams finds that before 1710, Massachusetts's "settled opinion" was that the judicial system had failed in 1692 and that many accused witches were actually "good people" (p. 24). For most of the eighteenth century, Adams argues, the Salem witchcraft trials were not as useful a metaphor as they would be in the nineteenth century. However, she did find that by the 1720s opponents of Cotton Mather in political and social

debates undermined him by noting his participation in the trials. Moreover, she notes that Thomas Hutchinson, Massachusetts governor during much of the imperial crisis, was among the first to claim that the trials resulted from "delusional" individuals (p. 34). Adams makes surprisingly little connection between Hutchinson's beliefs about the origins of the witchcraft trials and his contention that Massachusetts Patriots were overzealous in their repudiation of English taxes.

In the second chapter, Adams touches on her most effective theme in this book: the role of Salem in creating a "usable past" within the new nation (p. 39). Here, Adams stakes out the importance of negative symbols--like the Salem witchcraft trials and Benedict Arnold's treason--in defining nationalistic values in the early national United States. Her examination of schoolbooks is particularly valuable in this chapter, as she connects the early education system with the project of creating a national identity grounded in the history of Puritan settlements in Massachusetts. Adams traces the glorification of Puritans over the settlers of other colonies to the predominance of New England-born schoolbook writers and their interest in promoting New England as emblematic of the entire nation. Adams finds that during the early Republic, the Salem witchcraft trials were a tool to explore the progress of Americans from their superstitious and European origins to their conception of a more modern, republican, and rational United States. Salem also served as a moral lesson for students on the importance of virtue.

Adams focuses on the religious crises of the 1830s to the 1860s in the third chapter of her book, and shows how Protestants wielded the Salem witchcraft metaphor to warn Catholics, Mormons, and Spiritualists of the dangers of "fanaticism, foreign influence, and superstition" (p. 76). In response, Catholics, Mormons, and Spiritualists suggested that Protestants' criticisms were unfounded given the prosecutorial practices of Puritans. Adams concludes that Salem was an effective metaphor in revealing the limits of tolerance in the United States. Ultimately, this chapter is a little out of step with the rest of her narrative. While this chapter clearly seeks to delineate who was an insider versus outsider in the Republic, the connection she makes between this and her main theme of nationalism is tenuous. Moreover, anti-Catholic metaphors seem more important to her third chapter than the witchcraft trials as a device to discredit religious and spiritual practices

Adams returns to her study of nationalism and collective memory in chapters 4 and 5, where she demonstrates how Northerners and Southerners use the history of the Salem witchcraft trials during the sectional conflict, Civil War, and Reconstruction. Adams reveals that Southerners impugned the North by claiming that its history was filled with episodes of delusions, fanaticism, and persecution before the Civil War. Northerners defended their Puritan heritage, which they insisted made them the moral center of the Republic. However, after the Civil War, Northerners came to accept that the Puritans' intolerance--and government intolerance more generally--had deleterious effects on society. Adams astutely argues that part of the healing from the Civil War involved the North and South converging on this lesson about the Salem witchcraft trials. As part of this healing, Pilgrims replaced Puritans as the ideal New England settler because they were cast as more tolerant, simple, and less bound to European influence.

Adams's work is most successful in its examination of the relationship of history to nationalism and regionalism. She adeptly explores the ways New Englanders posited their history as the most emblematic of the development of the United States, and the way Southerners connected puritanical intolerance with New Englanders during the sectional crisis. Moreover, she shows that during the Civil War, Confederates contested New England's predominance in the writing and con-

struction of U.S. history and called on Southerners to create their own history, which pronounced the superiority of Southern Cavaliers over Puritans. In this discussion, Adams connects Southern claims that Northerners were "delusional" and "fanatical" to the Salem witchcraft trials without giving the reader enough context to reach the same conclusions. However, Adams's search for the meanings behind witchcraft metaphors often leads her to other powerful metaphors that were used to bolster or undermine religious, political, and social positions. Rather than deny the importance of these other metaphors in American society, Adams justly shows the ways these metaphors worked in tandem to define a particular political position. Had she done more to connect the gendered and sexualized meanings of these other metaphors, including the various strains of nationalism, anti-Catholicism, "fanaticism," and "delusions," to nineteenth-century Americans, these sections would have been more satisfying.

After reading Adams's narrative, one is left wondering what lesson about women, if any, nineteenth-century Americans took from the witchcraft trials. Have the witchcraft trials only been pertinent to twentieth- and twenty-first-century discussions of sexism? Did women in the nineteenth-century U.S. woman's rights movement not see a connection between the hanging of witches and the maligning of their movement? Unfortunately, Adams's book does not provide these answers. However, she shows that the Salem witchcraft trials were a serviceable metaphor for other important political and social debates in nineteenth-century United States, and that the search for a meaningful and usable past often debunks the truthful past--as in the case of Salem's residents becoming "witch-burners" (pp. 95-96).

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