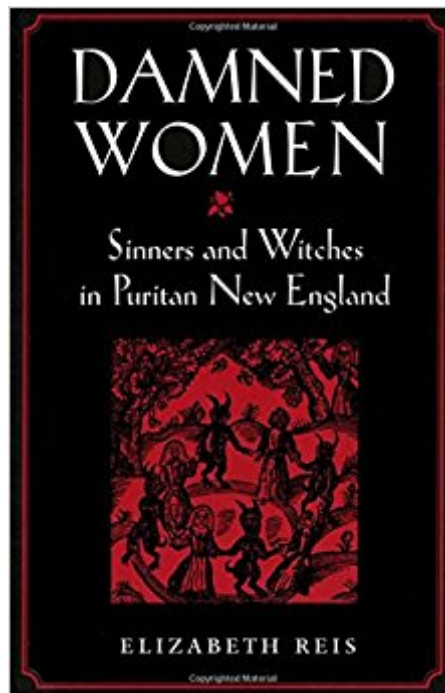




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Damned Women: Sinners And Witches In Puritan New England



Synopsis

In her analysis of the cultural construction of gender in early America, Elizabeth Reis explores the intersection of Puritan theology, Puritan evaluations of womanhood, and the Salem witchcraft episodes. She finds in those intersections the basis for understanding why women were accused of witchcraft more often than men, why they confessed more often, and why they frequently accused other women of being witches. In negotiating their beliefs about the devil's powers, both women and men embedded womanhood in the discourse of depravity. Puritan ministers insisted that women and men were equal in the sight of God, with both sexes equally capable of cleaving to Christ or to the devil. Nevertheless, Reis explains, womanhood and evil were inextricably linked in the minds and hearts of seventeenth-century New England Puritans. Women and men feared hell equally but Puritan culture encouraged women to believe it was their vile natures that would take them there rather than the particular sins they might have committed. Following the Salem witchcraft trials, Reis argues, Puritans' understanding of sin and the devil changed. Ministers and laity conceived of a Satan who tempted sinners and presided physically over hell, rather than one who possessed souls in the living world. Women and men became increasingly confident of their redemption, although women more than men continued to imagine themselves as essentially corrupt, even after the Great Awakening.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"When trying to explain the timing and course of events at Salem, historians almost never turned to

the assumptions about genderâ •maleness and femalenessâ •embedded within a Puritan cosmology. Elizabeth Reis' rich-minded (and delightfully titled) *Damned Women* takes great strides toward addressing these omissions. . . . Reis shifts the inquiry away from the attributes and interests of individuals, toward radical Protestantism, gender ideologies and male-female internalization of these powerful intellectual systems. She seeks to understand, first, how gender systems cut across religious belief, both during and after the trials; in the process, she is able to draw the history of witchcraft trials into the intellectual history of Puritanism."

•Women's Review of Books" In this thoughtful and stimulating book, Reis has reintroduced religion and the Devil into the discussion of 17th-century New England witchcraft, reminding readers that despite factors such as psychology, property, class distinctions, economic differences, and geography, New Englanders understood witchcraft to be a contest between God and the Devil. . . . Reis argues that men saw their sin as specific ungodly actions, easily overcome, while women interpreted their sin as inherent in their very natures, far less easily resisted. . . . She concludes that the Salem episode changed society's view of the Devil, in that the 18th century came to view the Devil less as a physical presence and more as a spiritual tempter, much easier to resist. Strongly recommended."

•Choice" Reis makes a complex and persuasive argument that men and women defined their relationship to sin in different ways. . . . Reis has offered a richly textured and deeply informed study. . . . This is an important and valuable book, one that broadens our understanding of a variety of issues, particularly those related to matters of gender. Reis has presented a major contribution to the scholarship of seventeenth-century New England which also opens avenues for investigation that go beyond her splendid treatment of the 'witchcraft' issue."

•Bernard Rosenthal, *The New England Quarterly* " In this interesting book, Elizabeth Reis argues that ordinary Puritans were as much concerned about damnation as they were about sanctification. . . . In its attention to popular ideas about supernatural reality and their role in constructing gender, this book is an important contribution to our understanding of American religious thoughtâ •and a timely one, given the resurgence of supernatural beliefs today. Moreover, Reis's emphasis on the power of religious belief is enlightening, as is her skillful return to Puritan culture as a basis for understanding the historical development of American religious thought."

•Amanda Porterfield, *Catholic Historical Review* " *Damned Women* reflects the new cultural history in its exploration of magic, folk religion, and Puritan ideology at the interstice of the Salem witch trials. Through her concentration upon the ideological constructions of Satan and evil, Reis charts the transition from pre-Enlightenment to rationalist thoughtâ •her discussion enhanced by the incorporation of literary texts and striking visual images. . . . Intrigued by women who confessed to witchcraft and women who accused other

women, Reis embarks upon a sophisticated exploration of the gendered language and interconnected ideology that constructed witchcraft, Satan, evil, and the human self. . . . Reis's arguments are intriguing . . . Damned Women is exciting and provocative. . . . Damned Women makes a significant contribution to the scholarship about gender and religion."â •Journal of Interdisciplinary History"A reader unfamiliar with Puritan doctrine or its subtle deviation from Calvinism will quickly become informed. All key terms are clearly defined in context, and the book is heavily footnoted with early and modern sources. Most striking are the confessions by the unfortunate accused."â •EBSCO Publishing/EBSCOhost and Northern Light"An impressive book from which I learned a great deal."â •John M. Murrin, Princeton University

ELIZABETH REIS is Assistant Professor of Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Oregon. She is the editor of *Spellbound: Women and Witchcraft in America*, *American Sexual Histories*, and *Dear Lizzie*.

This book has been used in graduate courses that I took as a student, specifically for a Religion in Colonial America graduate lecture/discussion. The author presents a thoughtful consideration of gender and the ways in which it shapes religious experience, eschewing a lengthy analysis of Salem itself in favor of a fascinating study of Puritan theology of the seventeenth century and the ways in which it intersected with understandings of gender to structure the lives of New England Puritans. The most fascinating aspect to me was the evidence for different responses to sin - men tended to externalize their bad behavior as something committed but not an integral aspect of their inward character, while women tended to internalize their sins as a sign of their soul's depravity. When mixed with the fatalistic/nihilistic aspects of Calvinist predetermination this created an atmosphere of desperation and a crisis of salvation and faith that helps understand the passionate affirmations of bewitchment that accompanied the court confessions of women accused of witchcraft. This text is useful for anyone interested in Puritans, religion in the 1600s, and gender. I will be using this book in the undergraduate course that I am teaching in the fall as a more specific study of gender's influence on colonial British society and religion. A good companion text to read regarding the confessional relationship and power dynamics inherent in these confrontations, though in a different context, is Carlo Ginzburg's "The Cheese and the Worms," which is a microhistorical treatment of an obscure Italian Inquisition case brought against a radical miller named Menocchio that also addresses common beliefs that are often in opposition to, or differ from, institutional religious doctrine.

Ordered for school.

Reis manages to make us look at the Salem trials as a religious event that takes place in a religious society. Rather than concentrating upon the petty squabbles that may (or may not) have provided the immediate catalyst for accusations, she shows us how Puritan women were taught to view sin and how they increasingly thought of themselves as inherently sinful. Somehow, she manages to make us understand the terrible torment that the accused women suffered in their trials but also in their souls. I highly recommend this book to anyone who has an interest in the Salem episode or women and religion.

I've always been fascinated by the Salem witchcraft trials, read all the books, seen all the movies. I didn't think there was much new to be said that I hadn't already heard, but I got this book anyway. And it was fabulous! Reis has a whole different take on the witchcraft trials. It was always puzzling to me why these women, who obviously weren't guilty, gave such convincing confessions in their trials. Reis put this all in the context of how the Puritans thought about religion and about gender. Great book.

Although i learned new facts that i had never knew about the salem trials, i found my self nodding to sleep several times and reading the same points over and over.

all this book has done is denounce women and witches. the writer should review how her "subjects" really are before she strikes them down! VERY DISTATSEFUL

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