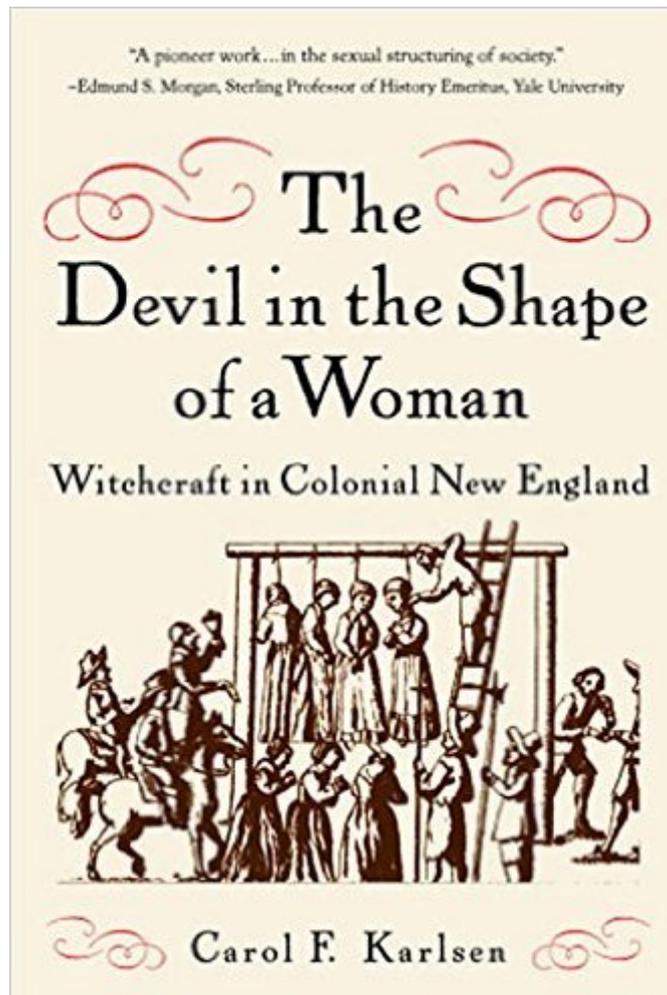


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# The Devil In The Shape Of A Woman: Witchcraft In Colonial New England



## 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. In 1662, Ann Cole was "taken with very strange Fits" and fueled an outbreak of witchcraft accusations in Hartford a generation before the notorious events in Salem took place. More than three hundred years later the question still haunts us: Why were these and other women likely witches? Why were they vulnerable to accusations of witchcraft? In this work Carol Karlsen reveals the social construction of witchcraft in seventeenth-century New England and illuminates the larger contours of gender relations in that society.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The Devil in the Shape of a Woman is a study of New England witchcraft during the 17th and early 18th centuries and its interconnectedness with womanhood. While most studies on colonial witchcraft are concerned with the Salem outbreaks in the late 17th century, Carol Karlsen's approach is to examine New England witchcraft as a whole and argue, persuasively, for its particular influences on colonial women. To appropriately grasp the history of New England witchcraft, Professor Karlsen argues, it is imperative to understand the role of women in colonial society (xiii). Karlsen further argues that past historians have scarcely noted the misogyny of the witchcraft craze in New England. Rather than continue this practice, Professor Karlsen gains a

greater understanding of these witch crazes, through the study of women in Colonial New England society. Karlsen asserts: "Only by understanding that the history of witchcraft is primarily a history of women, however, can we confront the deeply embedded feelings about women". Karlsen uses a great deal of primary and secondary sources to support her thesis. With nearly one hundred pages of supportive details, Karlsen provides a wealth of documentation. She uses first hand accounts of witch trails. A good example is her use of Cotton Mather's personal writings. Mather provides interesting insight regarding the attitudes towards women commonly held by the colonial elites. Her next major types of sources are court records. These records detail court proceedings, depositions and court rulings. Furthermore, statistics, drawn from these records, provide the basic arguments for Karlsen's book. While she relies mainly on primary sources, Karlsen does use secondary sources on woman's history, colonial society and recent witchcraft scholarship. In addition to her sources, Karlsen provides an excellent research tool in her appendix. Here she includes an alphabetical listing of accused witches and their brief history describing their cases. This addition makes, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman*, more manageable for her readers. The book begins with a brief history of the colonial witchcraft. Each chapters is structured with an orientation, presentation of evidence and her conclusion. A good example of her structure is in chapter two, on the demographics of witchcraft, here she summarizes the importance of age and marital status in witchcraft accusations--The essential arguments of chapter 2. Following this summary, she provides a good transition into the her next chapter [Chapter 3: The Economic Basis of Witchcraft] in the final sentence of chapter two, "A closer look at the material conditions and behavior of the accused reveals other characteristics-intimately related to their sex, age, and marital status-that set witches apart from other older women in their community." In substantiating her claim about the importance and the interconnectedness of colonial womanhood and witchcraft, Karlsen examines the colonial beliefs on witchcraft and the rampant misogyny of the period. In this study she addresses the accused and the accusers, the young, the old, the poor and the elite. She even constructs an interesting analysis and statistically significant interpretation of those females who were possessed and why these particular females responded to their possession in Puritan society-[see Chapter Seven: Brand Plucked out of the Burning.]In order to prove her case, Professor Karlsen mainly uses statistical evidence associated with those who were the accusers and the accused during the witchcraft trails. Through the use of statistical evidence, Karlsen produces her most historically significant findings linking colonial witchcraft and colonial womanhood. On the whole, Karlsen proves that women who were out of the social norms of colonial society were more likely to be suspect of witchcraft. In Puritan New England this mainly meant non-married women, widows and

nonconformist females. These distinctive behaviors and demographics were seen as potential threat to New England society, especially during period of great change or social upheaval. In addition, Karlsen has established, statistically, that women who were married, but had no children, women who were married, but had only daughters, and finally, women who were daughters of parents who had no male offspring were more vulnerable to calls of witchcraft (pg. 101). What this shows is the clear linkage of economic interest and the importance of inheritance in witchcraft accusations in colonial society. Karlsen argues, "Inheritance disputes surface frequently enough in witchcraft cases, cropping up as part of the general context even when no direct link between the dispute and the charge is discernible, to suggest the fears that underlay most accusations". Karlsen goes on to assert that women with inheritance rights were more susceptible to accusation of witchcraft throughout the entire history of Colonial New England witchcraft than those women who did not have inheritance privileges. While statistics were effectively used in several areas of Karlsen's book, I had to keep asking myself an important and relevant question. Is Professor Karlsen an historian or a statistician? Surely she has added significant insight into colonial woman and the history of witchcraft, but it also seems probable that she has, on occasions, overused statistics. Would it not be an historical fallacy to assume something purely based on statistics? While Karlsen does include other forms of evidence to prove her arguments besides statistics, they are, unfortunately, in need of further development. By over-emphasizing statistics, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman* undermines its otherwise, excellent argument. While Carol Karlsen has argued that other historians has neglected the influences of women in Colonial New England witchcraft history, she has done just the opposite. Rather, she has focused her study specifically towards the role of women in colonial society. Since *The Devil in the Shape of a Women* is aimed towards the women's role in colonial witchcraft history, it is not a complete history of witchcraft in Colonial New England. In view of that, I can only recommend, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman* with reservations. Rather, I would recommend that *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman* be read with other works on colonial society in order place its history in a broader viewpoint. Only through a more comprehensive understanding of the social, political, religious, environmental and generational factors that shaped colonial society can we truly come to terms with the impact women had on New England society and their particular relevance to their witchcraft accusations and the subsequent witch craze.

This book does have an academic tone and it is extremely well researched. It is the first book that, for me, made sense of the crazy behavior known as the Salem witch trials. If you are looking for

hocus pocus, this is not the book. If you want to understand why neighbors would condemn neighbors to die, read this book. The Salem community comes to life through court records and the author's meticulous research as people who had conflicts, strong wills, and were swayed, consciously or unconsciously, through self-interest.

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 purchased this book because I am doing some genealogy work and found one of my ancestors was accused of witchcraft. She was later released after her husband paid 50 pounds sterling because they could not prove she had harmed anyone. Her story is in this book and the story of so many others. A great book!

Quality work but has problems. This is a quality work on the Salem phenomenon. It makes great points about the "systemic oppression" of women yet it has a tendency to be dismissive of the the executions of men convicted of witchcraft. The author has a point to make and does so, but more analysis beyond a feminist interpretation would have helped the work reach 5 stars. As it stands, it is an excellent book that presents an original argument and ought to be commended for critical original analysis, but it is easy to overstate its value. It is not an "answer" but merely a perspective, far more factors were at play in Salem than found in these pages.

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