

# RELIGION AND AMERICAN CULTURE

A Reader

Second Edition

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*Editor*

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## 2

# A WORLD OF WONDERS

## The Mentality of the Supernatural in Seventeenth-Century New England

*David D.Hall*

### A WORLD OF WONDERS

*David D.Hall*

Historians traditionally have presented the Puritan religion of seventeenth-century New Englanders as a rational and coherent intellectual system. In breaking with the superstitions of the past, and especially Catholicism, the Puritans apparently turned away from the “magic” of sacraments and sacred places. Recent work in colonial history, however, suggests that the colonists lived within a broader, older “world of wonders.” Rather than initiating the world’s disenchantment, seventeenth-century Puritans mixed together what we in “modern” times try to separate as Christianity, on the one hand, and as magical beliefs and practices, on the other.

In David Hall’s rendering, the Europeans who settled North America brought with them a widespread belief in magic and the occult. Witchcraft, apparitions, and other unearthly phenomena as well as supernatural explanations of natural events such as comets, hailstorms, earthquakes, sudden deaths, and monster births pervaded New England culture. Unlike England, where the popular culture of the laity was frequently at odds with the “official” religion of the clergy, popular religion as described by Hall was accessible to everyone, providing a language that all groups shared. It is nothing new to assert that seventeenth-century New England was culturally homogeneous. What makes Hall’s argument revisionist is his belief that this common culture did not derive from Puritan theology. Rather, what the clergy and educated laity held in common was a far more enchanted universe laced with the “debris” of other systems of thought, some older than Christianity.

Reprinted by permission from David D.Hall, “A World of Wonders: The Mentality of the Supernatural in Seventeenth-Century New England,” in Hall and David Grayson Allen, eds., *Seventeenth-Century New England* (Boston: The Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1984), 239–274.

THE PEOPLE of seventeenth-century New England lived in an enchanted universe. There was a world of wonders. Ghosts came to people in the night, and trumpets blared, though no one saw from where the sound emerged. Nor could people see the lines of force that made a “long staff dance up and down in the chimney” of William Morse’s house. In this enchanted world, the sky on a “clear day” could fill with “many companies of armed men in the air, clothed in light-colored garments, and the commander in sad [somber].” Many of the townfolk of New Haven had seen a phantom ship sail regally into the harbor. An old man in Lynn had espied

a strange black cloud in which after some space he saw a man in arms complete standing with his legs straddling and having a pike in his hands which he held across his breast...; after a while the man vanished in whose room appeared a spacious ship seeming under sail though she kept the same station.

Voices spoke from heaven, and little children uttered warnings. Bending over his son Joseph’s cradle one evening, an astonished Samuel Sewall heard him say, “The French are coming.”<sup>1</sup>

All of these events were “wonders” to the colonists, events betokening the presence of superhuman or supernatural forces. In seventeenth-century New England it was common to speak of the providence of God as “wonder-working.”<sup>2</sup> Some wonders were like miracles in being demonstrations of God’s power to suspend or interrupt the laws of nature. Others were natural events that God employed as portents or signals of impending change. The events that Cotton Mather described in *Wonders of the Invisible World* were the handiwork of Satan and his minions. A wonder could also be something unexpected or extraordinary, like a sudden death or freak coincidence.<sup>3</sup>

In the course of the seventeenth century, many of the colonists would experience a wonder and many others tell stories of them. Either way, these events aroused strong feelings. An earthquake in New England in 1638 had caused divers men (that had never known an Earthquake before) being at work in the fields, to cast down their working tools, and run with ghastly terrified looks, to the next company they could meet withall.<sup>4</sup>

Almost a century later, as an earthquake rocked Boston, the “young people” in Samuel Sewall’s house “were quickly frightened out of the shaking clattering kitchen, and fled with weeping cries into” their father’s bedroom, “where they made a fire, and abode there till morning.” In responding to such “marvellous” events, people used words like “awful,” “terrible,” and “amazing” to describe what had happened.<sup>5</sup> Every wonder made visible and real the immense forces that impinged upon the order of the world. A wonder reaffirmed the insecurity of existence and the majesty of a supreme God.

This essay is about the wonder as the colonists would know and tell of it. At the outset, we may dispose of one false issue: the people in New England who heard voices and saw apparitions were not deluded fanatics or “primitive” in their mentality. The possibility of these experiences was widely affirmed as credible in the best science and religion of the early seventeenth century. We can never answer with complete satisfaction the question as to why some persons do see ghosts or witness apparitions. But for the people of seventeenth-century Europe and America, these were ordinary events that many persons encountered, and many more believed in.

This is an essay, therefore, about phenomena that occurred on both sides of the Atlantic, and among both Protestants and Catholics. We may speak of a lore of wonders, an accumulation of stock references and literary conventions that descended to the colonists from Scripture, antiquity, the early Church and the Middle Ages. People in the seventeenth century inherited a lore that stretched back to the Greeks and Romans. Chaucer had told of portents and prodigies in *The Canterbury Tales*, as had the author of *The Golden Legend*, a medieval collection of saints' lives. Whenever the colonists spoke or wrote of wonders, they drew freely on this lore; theirs was a borrowed language.

To speak of continuity is to raise two other questions: how did this lore pass to the colonists, and how did it consort with their doctrinal understanding of the universe? The key intermediaries in transmitting an old language to the colonists were the English printer-booksellers who published great quantities of wonder tales in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They had allies in certain writers who put together collections of this lore to suit new purposes, like the emergence of Protestantism. Protestants drew freely on the lore of wonders, adapting it to indicate the merits of their cause. To this end Luther had retold the story of a "monster" fish found in the River Tiber, interpreting it as a portent of Rome's mistakes. And the wonder could serve to reinforce the concept of God's providence, a doctrine of importance to the early Reformers.

But what of all the "superstitions" that this lore reiterated? The language of the wonder was rich in motifs and assumptions that seem at odds with the mentality of the Puritans who colonized New England. In breaking with the past, and especially with Catholicism, the Puritan movement had turned against the "magic" of the sacraments and holy relics, of sacred places and saints' days. The religion of the colonists seems, in retrospect, to have forecast and initiated a "disenchantment" of the world.<sup>6</sup> The Puritan God was a God of order and reason, interpreted by learned men in the form of systematic theology. In such statements, Puritanism assumed the shape of a coherent world view, intellectually neat and tidy and swept clean of superstition.

Such, at least, is how we characteristically understand the religion of the colonists. But the lore of wonders as repeated and developed by the colonists cannot be reconciled with so static or so modernist an understanding. We may come instead to recognize that contradiction, or a kind of intellectual pluralism, was truer of the colonists than a uniform and systematic mode of thought. So too, we may come to recognize that these people were not hostile to a folklore that had roots in paganism. Indeed, the wonder tale would introduce them to a popular culture that drew on many sources and traditions. In reiterating these tales, the colonists would affirm their own participation in this wider, older culture.

The lore of wonders was popular culture in the sense of being accessible to everyone; it was a language that all groups in society shared, known not only to the "learned" but to ordinary folk as well. It was popular in being so pervasive, and in being tolerant of contradictions. A full history of this culture and its absorption into Protestantism would lead in several directions, including that of witchcraft. My purpose is more limited, to begin upon a history of this lore as it was received by the colonists, and to trace how it provided them with a mentality of the supernatural.

Portents and prodigies were routine events in English printed broadsides of the seventeenth century. "Strange news from Brotherton," announced a broadside ballad of

1648 that told of wheat that rained down from the sky. “A wonder of wonders” of 1663 concerned a drummer boy who moved invisibly about the town of Tidworth. In “Strange and true news from Westmoreland,” a murder story ends with the devil pointing out the guilty person. Hundreds of such broadside ballads, stories told in verse and printed on a single sheet of paper, circulated in the England of Cromwell and the Stuarts. Newsheets, which began appearing with some regularity in the 1640s, carried tales of other marvels. Pamphlets of no more than eight or sixteen pages contained reports of children speaking preternaturally and offered *Strange and wonderful News...of certain dreadful Apparitions*. The yearly almanacs weighed in with their accounts of mystic forces emanating from the stars and planets.<sup>7</sup>

The same prodigies and portents would recur again and again in broadside ballads, newsheets, chapbooks, and almanacs. Tales of witchcraft and the devil, of comets, hailstorms, monster births, and apparitions—these were some of the most commonplace. “Murder will out,” as supernatural forces intervened to indicate the guilty. The earth could open up and swallow persons who tell lies. “Many are the wonders which have lately happened,” declared the anonymous author of *A miracle, of miracles*,

as of sodaine and strange death upon perjured persons, strange sights in the Ayre, strange births on the Earth, Earthquakes, Commets, and fierie Impressions, with the execution of God himselfe from his holy fire in heaven, on the wretched man and his wife, at Holnhurst....

A single ballad spoke of blazing stars, monstrous births, a rainstorm of blood, lightning, rainbows, and the sound of great guns. Others told of dreams and prophecies that bore upon the future of kings and countries. Almanacs and other astrological compendia reported similar events: comets, eclipses, joined fetuses, infants speaking.<sup>8</sup>

All of these were cheap forms of print. Hawked by peddlars and hung up in stalls for everyone to see and gape at, they reached the barely literate and the lower orders as well as readers of more means and schooling. The stories they contained would also turn up in a very different kind of book that ran to several hundred pages. Big books—perhaps in the grand format of the folio—were too expensive to circulate in quantity and had authors who announced themselves as of the “learned.” But these differences in form and audience did not extend into the contents. The lore of portents and prodigies appeared in books like Thomas Beard’s *The Theatre of Gods Judgements* as well as in the cheapest pamphlet.

Thomas Beard was a learned man, a graduate of Cambridge who practiced schoolteaching and received ordination as a minister. Born in the early years of Elizabeth’s reign, he published *The Theatre of Gods Judgements* in 1597. Three more editions followed, the last of these in 1648. That same year, Samuel Clarke, like Beard a graduate of Cambridge and a minister, brought out a rival collection: *A Mirrour or Looking-Glasse both for Saints and Sinners, Held forth in about two thousand Examples: Wherein is presented, as Gods Wonderful Mercies to the one, so his severe Judgments against the other*. Clarke’s *Examples* (to call it by the title the colonists would use) went through five editions, the final one appearing in 1671. Clarke was a non-conformist after 1662, ejected from the Church of England because he would not recant his

Presbyterianism. The sequel to his book was William Turner's folio *Compleat History of the Most Remarkable Providences, Both of Judgement and Mercy, which have hapned in this Present Age* (1697). To this series should be added another Elizabethan work, Stephen Batman's *The Doome warning all men to Judgment: Wherein are contayned for the most parte all the straunge Prodigies hapned in the Worlde* (1581). Ministers all, Batman, Beard, Clarke, and Turner had a secular competitor in the hack writer Nathaniel Crouch. His *Wonderful Prodigies of Judgment and Mercy, discovered in above Three Hundred Memorable Histories* (1682) was one of a string of works on prodigies and strange wonders that Crouch would publish in the 1680s under his pen name of Robert Burton.

As in the ballads and chapbooks, so in these books nature offered up innumerable signs of supernatural intervention:

Now according to the variety and diversity of mens offences, the Lord in his most just and admirable judgment, useth diversity of punishments:...sometimes correcting them by storms and tempests, both by sea and land; other times by lightning, haile, and deluge of waters...and not seldome by remedlesse and sudden fires, heaven and earth, and all the elements being armed with an invincible force, to take vengeance upon such as traytors and rebels against God.

Earthquakes, multiple suns, strange lights in the sky, rainbows, sudden deaths, monstrous births—these were other frequent signs or signals.<sup>9</sup>

Like the ballad writers, Beard and Batman reported esoteric, even violent, events: rats that ate a man, a crow whose dung struck someone dead, the agonies of martyrs. In one or another of these books, we hear of dreams and prophecies, of crimes detected by some form of sympathetic magic, of thieves who rot away, and of armed men in the sky.<sup>10</sup> Much too was made of Satan. He offered compacts to young men in need of money, while sometimes serving as God's agent for inflicting vengeance. Many tales revolved around the curse, "the devil take you," and its surprising consequences:

Not long since a Cavalier in Salisbury in the midst of his health-drinking and carousing in a Tavern, drank a health to the Devil, saying, That if the devil would not come, and pledge him, he would not believe that there was either God or devil: whereupon his companions stricken with horror, hastened out of the room, and presently after hearing a hideous noise, and smelling a stinking savour, the Vintner ran up into the Chamber: and coming in, he missed his guest, and found the window broken, the Iron barre in it bowed, and all bloody, but the man was never heard of afterwards.

The devil might appear in several guises. Black bears, a favorite of the ballad writers, turned up again in stories told by Beard and Batman, as did black dogs.<sup>11</sup>

In telling of these wonders, the men who organized the great collections borrowed from the broadside and the chapbook; a ballad tale of a woman who sank into the ground was reported in Clarke's *Examples*, in Crouch's *Wonderful Prodigies*, and again in Turner's *Compleat History*.<sup>12</sup> This flow of stories meant that "learned" men accorded



credibility to wonders as readily as any ballad writer. In this regard, the great folios were no more critical or selective than the cheapest forms of print. The one format was the work of learned men, the other of printers and their literary hacks. But the two shared a popular culture of portents and prodigies, a common lore that linked small books and great, the reader of the ballad and the reader of the folio.

This was a lore that other Europeans were collecting and reporting in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Sixteenth-century German broadsides told of comets, multiple suns, monster births, and armies in the air. A Lutheran who wrote an introduction to an encyclopedia of portents “attempted to define the spectrum of such ‘wonder works,’” listing “signs, miracles, visions, prophecies, dreams, oracles, predictions, prodigies, divinations, omens, wonders, portents, presages, presentiments, monsters, impressions, marvels, spells, charms and incantations.”<sup>13</sup> In Catholic France the *livrets bleus*, those inexpensive books that circulated widely in the seventeenth century, were dominated by accounts of apparitions, miracles, witchcraft, and possession. Some of these continental stories would reappear in England. Certain ballads were translated or adapted from a foreign source.<sup>14</sup> Thomas Beard described *The Theatre* as “translated from the French,” and though his source remains unspecified, his book was paralleled by Simon Goulart’s *Histories admirables et memorables de nostre temps*, of which there was an English translation in 1607.<sup>15</sup> On the continent, as in the England of Beard and Clarke, the distinction between reading matter that was “learned” and reading that was “popular” did not apply to tales of wonders. Nor was this lore of more appeal to Catholics than to Protestants. Indeed it seemed to cut across the line between the pagan and the Christian worlds.

No better demonstration of this blending exists than the eclectic sources on which Beard, Clarke, and their contemporaries drew. Aside from newsheets and ballads, whether English or imported, most of their material was culled from printed books that subsumed the sweep of western culture. The classical and early Christian sources included Vergil, Pliny, Plutarch, Seneca, Cicero, Josephus (a favorite), Gildas, Eusebius, and Bede. Then came the historians and chroniclers of the Middle Ages: Geoffrey of Monmouth, Voragine’s *The Golden Legend*. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries supplied a host of chronicles and encyclopedias: *The Mirrour of Magistrates*, the *Magdeburg Centuries*, and others by such writers as Hollingshead, Polydore Vergil, Conrad Lycosthenes, Sleiden, Camden, and Heylin. No source was more important to the English writers than John Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments*, itself a résumé of narratives and chronicles extending back to Eusebius. A final source was that great wonder book, the Bible. Its narratives of visions, voices, strange deaths, and witches lent credence to such stories of a later date.<sup>16</sup>

In plundering this great mass of materials, Beard, Batman, and their successors made modest efforts to be critical. As Protestants, they followed Foxe’s lead in dropping from their histories most of the visions, cures, and other miracles associated with the legends of the saints. But otherwise the English writers were willing to reprint the stories that descended to them from the Middle Ages and antiquity. No one questioned the legitimacy of Pliny’s *Natural History* and its kin, to which, indeed, these writers conceded an unusual authority. The parting of the ways between the “ancients” and the “moderns” lay in the future. In conceding so much to their sources, whether classical or of the early

Church or even of the Middle Ages, Beard and Clarke admitted to their pages a strange mixture of ideas and themes. This was a mixture that requires closer scrutiny, for the stories in these books were charged with several meanings.

Wonder stories were interesting in and of themselves; even now, events that seem to defy nature attract our curiosity. But in the seventeenth century, each portent carried a large burden of meaning. Much of this burden was compounded out of three main systems or traditions of ideas—apocalypticism, astrology, and the meteorology of the Greeks. Each of these systems was in decay or disrepute by the middle of the century, under challenge either from an alternative, more up-to-date science or from a growing disenchantment with prophetic visionaries. But even in decay these systems continued to give meaning to the wonder tales.

The most widely used of these traditions was the meteorology of the Greeks and Romans. In Aristotle's physics, meteorology referred to everything occurring in the region of the universe between the earth and moon. As a science it encompassed blazing stars, comets (deemed to circle earth below the moon), rainbows, lightning, and thunder as well as fanciful or misinterpreted phenomena like apparitions in the sky. After Aristotle, the key commentator on meteorology was Pliny, whose *Natural History* "embellished Aristotle's rational theory with many elements of wonder and even superstition." Pliny had become available in translation by the 1560s, and most other major Roman writers who spoke of meteors—Seneca, Plutarch, Vergil—had been made available in English by the early seventeenth century. But English readers learned of blazing stars and comets chiefly from translated versions of a dozen medieval and Renaissance encyclopedias, or from poetic versions such as *La Sepmaine* (1578), the work of a French Huguenot and poet du Bartas. His long poem, which proved immensely popular in English translation, melded Protestant didacticism with the lore of meteors as "prodigious signs."<sup>17</sup>

No less commonplace to most Elizabethans was astrology, the science of celestial bodies. Elizabethans learned their astrology from a medley of Medieval and Renaissance handbooks. These books taught a Christian version of the science, affirming, for example, that the stars and planets had no independent power but depended on the will of God. Astrology reached a wide audience via almanacs and their "prognostications" as keyed to planetary oppositions and conjunctions. Weather lore was another common vehicle of astrological ideas and images.<sup>18</sup>

A third intellectual tradition was apocalypticism. Several different strands converged to form this one tradition. The Scripture offered up a vision of the end in the Apocalypse. The Old and New Testaments told of persons who could prophesy the future on the basis of some vision, or perhaps by hearing voices: "If there be a prophet among you, I the Lord will make myself known unto him in a vision, and will speak to him in a dream" (Numbers 12:6). The legends of the saints were rich in visions, as were the lives of martyrs in Eusebius.<sup>19</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, a thirteenth-century English writer, invented prophecies that he ascribed to Merlin. These would survive into the seventeenth century in the company of other legendary sayings—of "Mother Shipton," of the Sybilline oracles, or of ob-scure Germans whose manuscript predictions were always being rediscovered.<sup>20</sup> With the coming of the Reformation, apocalypticism gained new vigor as Protestants connected their own movement to the cryptic references in

Revelation. The feeling was pervasive that contemporary history manifested the great struggle between Christ and Antichrist, and that some cataclysmic alternation was impending. In his influential explication of the Book of Revelation, Joseph Mede reaffirmed the prophetic significance of voices, thunder, lightning, hail, eclipses, blazing stars, and the rise and fall of kings. Mede regarded all the seals and trumpets in Revelation as forecasting real historical events, and in working out the parallels he made it seem that the Apocalypse would not be long postponed.<sup>21</sup>

But the more crucial contribution of the Reformation was the doctrine of God's providence. The doctrine antedated Luther and Calvin. Chaucer's Knight had spoken of "Destiny, that Minister-General/Who executed on earth and over all/That providence which God has long foreseen," and the Psalmist sang of a God who stretched out his protection to the ends of the earth. Nonetheless, the doctrine had a fresh importance in the sixteenth century. In reaffirming the sovereignty of God, the Reformers also wished to understand their own emergence as prefigured in God's grand providential design. John Foxe, the martyrologist, made providence the animating principle of his great book. In its wake, Thomas Beard would reassure his readers that God was immediately and actively present in the world, the ultimate force behind everything that happened: "Is there any substance in this world that hath no cause of his subsisting...? Doth not every thunderclap constrain you to tremble at the blast of his voyce?" Nothing in this world occurred according to contingency or "blind chance." All of nature, all of history, displayed a regularity that men must marvel at, a regularity that witnessed to the "all-surpassing power of God's will." From time to time this "marvellous" order was interrupted by other acts of providence, for God had the power to suspend the laws of nature and work wonders that were even more impressive than the routine harmony of things. The providence of God was as manifest in the swift and unexpected as in the "constant" order of the world.<sup>22</sup>

Beard, Clarke, and Turner were aggressively Protestant in pointing out the significance of God's providence, especially as it affected evil-doers, papists, and persecutors of the Church. In doing so, they continued to rely on astrology, apocalypticism, and meteorology for motifs and evidence. No one viewed these systems as in contradiction with each other. Indeed they seemed to reinforce the patterns of a providential universe. Astrology taught men to regard the heavens as infused with law and order. The meteorology of the ancients rested on assumptions about natural law. Science, whether old or new, was still allied with religion,<sup>23</sup> and the synthesis of Christianity and classical culture remained intact. Then too, the sciences of Greece and Rome were rich in possibilities for disruption and disorder. The conjunction of two planets could send shock waves through the universe. Stars could wander out of their ordained paths, and storms arise as nature fell into imbalance. The world as pictured by astrologers and scientists was prone to violent eruptions. This sense of things was echoed in apocalypticism, and writers on the Apocalypse would cite comets and eclipses as signs of the portending end. Meanwhile Satan raged incessantly against God's kingdom, leading many into sin and tormenting seekers after truth. Sin, injustice, persecution—these disorders of the moral universe were mirrored in the conflict and disorder of the heavens. An angry God was the supreme agent of disruption. Astrologers, the Hebrew prophets, the oracles of Greece and Rome, all spoke alike of doom portended in the turmoil of the heavens and the earth. A

teleological universe yielded incessant signals of God's providential plan and his impending judgments.

As emblem of God's providence in all of its variety, the wonder had a rich significance. Still more possibilities for meaning were provided by a set of themes that circulated widely in Elizabethan England. One of these was the theme of decay or dissolution. It was a commonplace assumption among Elizabethans that the world was running down and soon would be exhausted. Portents never seemed to hint at progress or improvement but at impending chaos.<sup>24</sup> Another theme was *De Causibus*, or the rise and fall of great men. In Beard, as in books like the *Mirroure of Magistrates*, Elizabethans read of kings and princes, of men of greed and overreaching ambition, who seemed propelled by some inevitable force to fall from their high rank.<sup>25</sup> A third theme concerned evil as a power operating almost on its own. Evil was not distant or abstract but something always present in the flow of daily life. A book like Beard's, with its grand metaphor of "theatre," made good and evil the main actors in the drama of existence.<sup>26</sup> Yet another motif was fortune, its symbol a great wheel that swept some people up and others down.<sup>27</sup> A final theme was the interpenetration of the moral and the natural orders. Disruptions of the moral order had their echo in nature, and vice versa. This sympathy or correspondence was why Elizabethans assumed that corpses bled when touched by guilty persons. Hence too this correspondence meant that ills of the body, like sickness and death, betokened spiritual corruption. All of the natural world was permeated by forces of the spirit, be they forces working for good or for evil.<sup>28</sup>

The wonder books incorporated all these themes without concern for how they might seem contradictory. Fortune and providence were, after all, competing if not antithetical interpretations. But the wonder books were remarkably tolerant. They made room for decayed systems of belief; in their pages the pagan coexisted with the Christian, the old science of the Greeks with the new Protestant emphasis on providence. The "learned" may have preferred more distinctions, and a man like Thomas Hobbes found the whole body of this lore distasteful.<sup>29</sup> But in the first half of the seventeenth century, the lore of wonders remained generously eclectic both in its themes and in its audience. Everyone in Elizabethan England had some access to this lore. Writers such as Shakespeare and Milton availed themselves of references and motifs that also were the stock of ballad writers. Conventional, familiar, tolerant and open-ended, the lore of wonders was a language that everyone could speak and understand.

To trace the uses of this language for two or three examples is to trace them for the whole repertory of signs and signals. For Beard and his contemporaries, comets were perhaps the most widely publicized of all the meteors described in ancient science. It was a commonplace of Renaissance discussions to view comets as portending drastic change if not disaster—"drought, the pestilence, hunger, battels, the alteration of kingdomes, and common weales, and the traditions of men. Also windes, earthquakes, dearth, landfloods, and great heate to follow." Du Bartas summed up this wisdom in his *La Sepmaine*:

There, with long bloody Hair, a Blazing Star Threatens the World with Famine,  
Plague & War: To Princes, death; to Kingdomes many crosses: To all Estates,  
Inevitable Losses....<sup>30</sup>

His idiom came straight from Pliny, who, in viewing comets as “a very terrible portent,” had noted their appearance “during the civil disorder in the consulship of Octavius, and again during the war between Pompey and Caesar.”<sup>31</sup>

Thunder and lightning were other portents that drew on ancient sources for their meaning. In Scripture, they were repeatedly the instruments of an avenging God: “Cast forth lightning, and scatter them: Shoot out thine arrows, and destroy them” (Psalm 144:6). The prophecies of St. John in Revelation evoked the “voice” of thunder, lightning, and earthquakes (8:5; 10:4). Pliny had viewed thunderbolts as “direful and accursed,” associating them with many kinds of wonders such as prophecy. To writers of the Renaissance, lightning seemed especially to betoken destructive violence. But the prophetic context could be invoked in plays like Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine*, where the hero saw himself as the scourge of “a God full of revenging wrath, From whom the thunder and the lightning breaks.”<sup>32</sup>

As for apparitions in the sky, the would-be scientific description in writers such as Pliny yielded to interpretation of such sights as portents of impending conflict or defeat. Among Beard, Clarke, and their contemporaries, a much repeated apparition story concerned the fall of Jerusalem. Recounting the destruction of Jerusalem, Josephus had described at length “the strange signes and tokens that appeared” before the city’s fall. “One while there was a comet in form of a fiery sword, which for a year together did hang over the city.” There were voices, and a man who cried out, “Wo, wo unto Jerusalem.” Iron chariots flew through the air, and an army became visible in the clouds. All of this seemed credible to Elizabethans, and no less so, as we shall see, to the people of New England.<sup>33</sup>

Apparitions were credible on the authority of Josephus and Pliny, but they also figured in the folk belief of the English people. Folk belief is not easily distinguished from popular culture in an age when both could circulate by word of mouth. Where such beliefs arose and how they were transmitted—and whether they were fragments of some “primitive” mentality—are questions that are difficult to answer. What remains clear is that the wonder books made room for folklore also: stories of the devil as black dog or bear, the legends of the saints and their “white magic,” tales of fairies, ghosts, and apparitions, of “murder will out,” of curses and their consequences.<sup>34</sup>

So many sources; so many possibilities for meaning! In their tolerance, the great collections ended up without a unifying order of their own. Clarke verged off into sensationalism. Ballads recounted fables of serpents and dragons. Writers such as Crouch felt free to invent stories—as if most ballads were not fiction to begin with.<sup>35</sup> This playfulness was nowhere more amusingly revealed than in a chapbook of the 1640s that mated the predictions of the legendary “Mother Shipton” with the prophecies of a radical Puritan. The new and the old lay side by side without apparent contradiction.<sup>36</sup>

But were the colonists this tolerant, or did they order and discriminate in keeping with their Puritanism?

The same wonder tales that Englishmen were buying circulated in the colonies, often via books imported from the London book trade. As a student at Harvard in the 1670s, Edward Taylor had access to a copy of Samuel Clarke’s *Examples*, out of which he copied “An Account of ante-mortem visions of Mr. John Holland.”<sup>37</sup> In sermons of the 1670s, Increase Mather quoted frequently from Clarke and Beard.<sup>38</sup> Imported broadsides

made some of Beard's stories familiar to New England readers; the Boston printer, John Foster, published in 1679 a facsimile of a London broadside, *Divine Examples of Gods Severe Judgments against Sabbath-Breakers*, a set of warning tales drawn mostly from *A Theatre of Gods Judgements*. Hezekiah Usher, a Boston bookseller, was importing copies of Nathaniel Crouch's *Wonderful Prodigies of Judgment and Mercy* in the 1680s,<sup>39</sup> and another of Crouch's books, *Delights for the Ingenious*, came into the hands of the children of the Goodwin family.<sup>40</sup> Many more such books and broadsides must have crossed the Atlantic in the seventeenth century, though leaving no specific trace of their presence.

In the absence of such evidence we may turn to books and pamphlets that the colonists were writing. Almanacs appeared each year as soon as the colonists had established a printing press. As in England, these local products included references to portents and wonders. The almanac for 1649 offered its readers a lengthy "prognostication" that played on the theme of earthquakes as a portent of impending catastrophe:

Great Earthquakes frequently (as one relates)  
Forerun strange plagues, dearths, wars and change of states,  
  
Earths shaking fits by venomous vapours here,  
How is it that they hurt not, as elsewhere!

Like its European counterpart, the New England almanac contained cryptic clues to what the future held:

The morning Kings may next ensuing year,  
With mighty Armies in the aire appear,  
By one mans means there shall be hither sent  
The Army, Citty, King and Parliament...  
A Child but newly born, shall then foretell  
Great changes in a winding-sheet; Farewell.<sup>41</sup>

The almanac for 1648 tucked portents and prodigies into a "Chronological Table" that later almanacs would update:

Mr. Stoughton and all the souldiers returned home, none being slain.  
  
Mrs. Dier brought forth her horned-foure-talented monster.  
The great and generall Earth-quake.<sup>42</sup>

Soon enough, moreover, the colonists were writing commentaries on meteors. The first to appear was Samuel Danforth's *An Astronomical Description of the late Comet or Blazing*

*Star... Together with a brief Theological Application thereof* (1665). The comets of 1680 and 1682 stirred the Reverend Increase Mather to publish *Heavens Alarm to the World... Wherein Is Shewed, That fearful Sights and Signs in Heaven are the Presages of great Calamities at hand* and *Kometographia or A Discourse Concerning Comets*. In 1684, Mather undertook a more ambitious project, a compendium that resembled Clarke's *Examples. An Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences* was at once a collection of wonder tales and a plea for greater efforts among the colonists to preserve such stories.

Reiterating the commonplaces of a literary tradition, these books—the almanacs, the works of meteorology—are proof of the transfer of culture. It should be noted that Danforth and Mather were learned men who had become aware of scientific challenges to Aristotle's meteorology, challenges that jeopardized some aspects of the portent lore. Yet the two men put aside these alternatives to address a general audience, using an old language and familiar references, and insisting that “blazing stars” remained portents of God's providence.<sup>43</sup>

This message had wide credibility in seventeenth-century New England. We have some measure of its popularity in the record-keeping that went on. Certain public bodies, like the churches in Dorchester and Roxbury, incorporated references to “remarkable providences”—fires, storms, eclipses, victories, sudden deaths—into their records.<sup>44</sup> Each of the Puritan colonies summoned their people repeatedly to days of fasting and thanksgiving, and the calling of these days was cued to the perception of God's providence.<sup>45</sup> Early on, William Bradford, Edward Johnson, and John Winthrop wrote works of history that were richly providential in their narratives of how the colonists had overcome adversity and conflict. These books noted the usual array of signs and portents—eclipses, monster births, strange deaths and storms, miraculous deliverances and reversals—while telling also of more puzzling events, like the lights in the form of a man that were seen in Boston harbor, followed by a voice “calling out in a most dreadful manner, boy, boy, come away, come away.”<sup>46</sup> Second- and third-generation historians would reiterate many of these stories, notably in Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702).

All of this public record-keeping or public history was paralleled in private journals that functioned as individual “memorials” of “remarkable providences.”<sup>47</sup> The most extensive of these diaries were kept by John Hull, a Boston merchant and the mint master for Massachusetts Bay, and the magistrate Samuel Sewall, who was Hull's son-in-law. Hull seemed almost overwhelmed at times by the flow of prophetic signals, as in his entry for a year—1666—itself accorded apocalyptic significance because 666 was the mark of the beast (Revelation 13:18).

At New Haven was distinctly and plainly heard the noise of guns, two, three, five at a time, a great part of the day, being only such noises in the air. The same day, at evening, a house at Northampton [was] fired by lightning; a part of the timber split; a man in it killed... At Narriganset, in Mr. Edward Hutchinson's flock of sheep, were several monsters. In July were very many noises heard by several towns on Long Island, from the sea, distinctly, of great guns and small, and drums.

Early on in Samuel Sewall's record-keeping, he responded strongly to an eclipse: "Morning proper fair, the weather exceedingly benign, but (to me) metaphoric, dismal, dark and portentous, some prodigie appearing in every corner of the skies." For more than fifty years he kept track of many kinds of portents, from thunderstorms and rainbows to sudden deaths and disturbing sounds. A faithful buyer of each year's almanac, he inserted notes on deaths and weather portents in each monthly calendar.<sup>48</sup>

Hull and Sewall had witnessed many of the portents they took note of in their diaries; news of many others reached them secondhand. Travellers dropped by to tell of strange events, and Sewall heard of more from correspondents. A fierce hail storm that struck while he was having dinner with Cotton Mather led to an exchange of stories; Sewall remembered that a hail storm coincided with the Duke of Monmouth's ill-fated invasion of England in 1685, and Mather knew of other houses that had been struck by hail or lightning. The stories that reached Hull and Sewall were being told and listened to all over New England.<sup>49</sup>

This trade in stories is revealed with unique vividness in two places, a notebook Edward Taylor kept at Harvard and the correspondence passing in and out of Increase Mather's household. In his notebook Taylor recorded the story of "magical performances by a juggler." He had heard the story from Jonathan Mitchel, the minister in Cambridge, who in turn had learned it from Henry Dunster, the president of Harvard, "during recitation." Dunster had it from the Reverend John Wilson—and here the chain is interrupted. In his notebook Taylor wrote down the essence of another story passed along by word of mouth. A minister and Harvard president, Urian Oakes, had done the telling:

A child that was born at Norwich last Bartholomew-Day...being in the nurses arms last Easterday...being about 30 weeks old spake these words (This is a hard world): the nurse when she had recovered herselfe a little from her trembling, & amazement at the Extraordinariness of the thing, said Why dear child! thou hast not known it: the child after a pause, replied, But it will be an hard world & you shall know it.

To this same notebook Taylor added his extracts out of Clarke's *Examples* and, from some other printed source, the prophetic scaffold speech of an Englishman executed in 1651.<sup>50</sup>

The traffic in wonder stories was crucial to the making of Increase Mather's *Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences*. In the early 1680s Mather was soliciting his fellow ministers for contributions to his impending book. John Higginson of Salem, an older man who came to Boston as a student in the 1630s, responded to this call for stories by sending him word of the Reverend Joshua Moody's collection of annotated almanacs, "so that I doubt not but besides those [stories] he hath sent you, you may have many more from him. For instance,—he speaks of 26 men thereabouts, dying or cast away in their drunkennes which calls to mind some such case here."

The following year, having learned from Mather that he did not "confine" himself "to things done in N.E.," Higginson wrote out and dispatched two wonder stories attributed to "persons credible," and of events "I believe...to be certain." Both concerned the devil, the one a story of a book that acted strangely on its readers, the other of a man who



covenanted with the devil to insinuate “that there was neither God nor Devil, no Heaven nor Hell.” The informant who told Higginson of the magical book, a man no longer living, had been a ruling elder of the church in Salem. Long after the experience—it happened back in England—he could still remember that

as he read in [the book], he was seized on by a strange kind [of] Horror, both of Body & minde, the hair of his head standing up, &c. Finding these effects severall times, he acquainted his master with it, who observing the same effects, they concluding it was a Conjuring Book, resolved to burn it, which they did. He that brought it, in the shape of a man, never coming to call for it, they concluded it was the Devil.

The other story Higginson had collected in his days as minister at Guilford “from a godly old man yet living.”<sup>51</sup>

As Higginson predicted, Joshua Moodey had stories to pass on. One was of a house inhabited by evil spirits, as told by the man who lived there. All was relatively quiet now; “the last sight I have heard of,” Moodey added, “was the carrying away of severall Axes in the night, notwithstanding they were layed up, yea, lockt up very safe.” From a “sober woman” Moodey also had a story of a “monstrous birth” that he described at length, concluding with an offer to “goe up and discourse with the midwife” if Mather wanted more details.<sup>52</sup>

Meanwhile Mather had heard from several informants in Connecticut. The minister in Stamford, John Bishop, had written him some years earlier to answer his inquiries about “the noise of a great gun in the air.” In his new letter, Bishop poured out a flood of stories:

We have had of late, great stormes of rain & wind, & sometimes of thunder & lightning, whereby some execution hath been done by the Lord’s holy Hand, though with sparing mercy to mankind. Mr. Jones his house at N[ew] H[aven] broken into, & strange work made in one room thereof especially, wherein one of his daughters had been a little before; & no hurt to any of the family, but the house only... A little after which, at Norwalk, there were nine working oxen smitten dead in the woods, in a few rods space of ground, & after that, at Greenwich (a small town neer us, on the west side) on the 5 mo. 13, (when we had great thunder & lightning), there were seven swine & a dog smitten all dead, & so found the next morning, very near the dwelling house, where a family of children were alone (their parents not then at home) & no hurt to any of them, more then amazing fear.<sup>53</sup>

More such stories came to Mather from other hands—a narrative of Ann Cole’s bewitchment, together with the story of a man who drank too much and died, accounts of providential rainstorms and remarkable deliverances, and of “two terrible strokes by thunder and lightning” that struck Marshfield in Plymouth Colony.<sup>54</sup>

From his brother, finally, came a letter of encouragement. Nathaniel Mather had moved to England in the early 1650’s and remained there. But he remembered many of the stories he had listened to while growing up in Dorchester, or as a Harvard student:

Mrs. Hibbons witchcrafts, & the discovery thereof, as also of H.Lake's wife, of Dorchester, whom, as I have heard, the devil drew in by appearing to her in the likeness, & acting the part of a child of hers then lately dead, on whom her heart was much set: as also another of a girl in Connecticut who was judged to dye a reall convert, tho she dyed for the same crime: Stories, as I heard them, as remarkable for some circumstances as most I have read. Mrs. Dyer's and Mrs. Hutchinson's monstrous births, & the remarkable death of the latter, with Mr. Wilson's prediction or threatenng thereof, which, I remember, I heard of in New England.

Flowing from the memories of a man long since departed from New England, these stories reveal how much was passed along in conversation, and how rapidly a stock of native wonder tales had been accumulated.<sup>55</sup>

Most of these local stories had counterparts in stories told by Clarke and Beard or by the ballad writers. Many of these older stories passed among the colonists as well, enriching and legitimizing their own testimonies of the supernatural. We may speak again of all this lore as constituting a form of popular culture. Everyone knew this lore. Its circulation was not limited to print, as the Mather correspondence indicates so clearly. Nor was it something the rude multitude but not the learned could appreciate. When presidents of Harvard told wonder tales in class, when ministers retold stories of "magical" books and freakish bolts of lightning, we can be sure that we are dealing with a culture shared, with few exceptions, by all of the colonists. One other aspect of this culture deserves emphasis. Its cast was thoroughly traditional, employing the same mix of intellectual traditions, the same references and conventions, as the lore in Beard, Clarke, and the ballad writers.

Consider Danforth and Mather's descriptions of the comets they had witnessed. Like so many other commentators before them, Danforth and Mather relied on the meteorology of the ancients, as mediated via medieval and Renaissance encyclopedias. In proving that comets were "Portentous and Signal of great and notable Changes," Danforth drew upon du Bartas while citing, as parallels, events such as the death of Julius Caesar, which, according to tradition, had been prefigured by a comet.<sup>56</sup> Mather cited Josephus, Cicero, du Bartas, Mede, and Scripture as authorities when preaching on the comet of 1680. The description he gave of a comet that appeared in 1527 was entirely derivative:

On the eleventh day of August, a most terrifying Comet was seen, of an immense longitude, and bloody colour. The form of it, was like a mans arm holding an huge Sword in his hand with which he was ready to strike. Such terrour and horroure surprized the Spectators of this Prodigy, as that some died away with dread & amazement.<sup>57</sup>

So, too, the references in diaries and in histories to lightning and the phenomenon of three suns repeated elements of an old code of reference. All of the traditional associations between lightning, disorder, and prophecy lay in the background of Sewall's frequent diary entries on thunder and lightning, Cotton Mather's *Brontologia Sacra: The*

*Voice of the Glorious God in the Thunder*, and Samuel Arnold's description of a storm that struck the town of Marshfield, in which "the most dismal black cloud...that ever" anyone had seen had passed overhead, shooting forth its "arrows."<sup>58</sup> The phenomenon of three suns, remarked on in Shakespeare's works and by medieval chronicles as signalling the overthrow of kings, remained a "wonder" to Edward Johnson, who linked the "unwonted sights" of "two Parlii, or images of the Sun, and some other strange apparitions," with the "desperate opinion" of persons who in New England "would overthrow all the Ordinances of Christ."<sup>59</sup>

From medieval handbooks the colonists also borrowed the language of astrology. For them it was a Christian science; the stars were signs not causes. New England almanacs retained the old combination of weather lore and astrological prediction, as in an essay Israel Chauncey inserted in his almanac for 1663 on "The Natural Portents of Eclipses, according to Approved Authors."<sup>60</sup> Just as commonplace were the allusions to the consequences of certain planetary motions: "On October the third will be celebrated a famous conjunction of Saturn and Mars, and wherein they are deemed the two Malevolent and Infortunate Planets, the conjunction thereof (say Astrologers) Imports no good."<sup>61</sup> The mixture of astrology and political prediction that had flourished amid civil war in England also reached the colonies in 1690, when a printer newly disembarked from London published an abridged edition of John Holwell's fiercely anti-Tory, anti-Catholic *Catastrophe Mundi: or, Europe's Many Mutations Until the Year 1701*.<sup>62</sup>

Even more appealing to the colonists was the apocalyptic tradition. Visions, dreams, unseen voices—all these were almost everyday experiences, talked about in private and, remarkably, in books. Little children who spoke preternaturally were, as in the ballad literature, accorded special notice, as Taylor indicated by preserving the story of the child who told his nurse it was "an hard world." Nathaniel Morton reported an unseen "voice" that had alerted the beleaguered colonists at Plymouth to arson in their storehouse.<sup>63</sup> The Reverend Noadiah Russell

heard of a man in Connecticut...who was taken with a sudden shivering after which he heard a voice saying that four dreadful judgments should come speedily upon the whole world viz: sword, famine, fire and sickness which should, without speedy reformation prevented, begin at New England.<sup>64</sup>

To interpret dreams as prophecy was to participate in a long-established tradition. John Winthrop, to whom a minister had told a dream of his, responded with another of his own:

[C]oming into his chamber, he found his wife...in bed, and three or four of their children lying by her, with most sweet and smiling countenances, with crowns upon their heads, and blue ribbons about their eyes. When he awaked, he told his wife his dream, and made this interpretation of it, that God would take of her children to make them fellow heirs with Christ in his kingdom.<sup>65</sup>

The *Magnalia Christi Americana*, a veritable encyclopedia of New England wonder tales, included many dreams and other acts of prophecying. The Reverend John Wilson had prophetic dreams as well as a "certain prophetic afflatus" that made his prayers affect or

forecast the future. Another minister, John Eliot, was gifted with “forebodings of things that were to come,” and a third, John Brock of Marblehead, could predict success for fishermen and locate missing boats!<sup>66</sup>

Here we sense ourselves approaching folk belief. The wonder tales that passed among the colonists were openly folkloric in certain of their themes and motifs. Stephen Batman had incorporated the folk tradition of spectral, shape-shifting black dogs into *The Doome warning to Judgemente*.<sup>67</sup> A century later, people in New England testified that they had seen the devil in the shape of a black dog. William Barker, Jr., a confessing witch at Salem in 1692, had seen “the Shape of a black dog which looked Very Fercly Upon him” as “he was Goeing into the Woods one Evening” in search of cows. Sarah Carrier, enticed into witchcraft by members of her family, was promised “a black dog.”<sup>68</sup> Many of the witnesses at Salem had been visited at night by apparitions of persons crying out for vengeance on their murderers. Such stories were a staple of folk legend and also of the ballad literature.<sup>69</sup> Another folk belief expressed at Salem was the power of white—or in this case, black—magic to keep persons dry in rainstorms. A witness had become suspicious of a visitor whose clothes showed no signs of passing through a storm on muddy roads. Many centuries before Salem witchcraft, the legend had grown up of a saint who remained dry in spite of rain. His was the power of white magic. In some fashion that defies analysis, the colonists were able to repeat this story, though modifying its details and making it a devil story.<sup>70</sup>

Where many of these strands converge—folklore, apocalypticism, white magic, the meteorology of Pliny and Aristotle—is in Increase Mather’s *Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences*; because it built upon the wonder tales that people told as stories, the *Essay* has something of the quality of a folk narrative. Yet it is also a “learned” book. Between his own books—he owned the largest private library in New England—and those he found at Harvard, Mather could pillage most of western culture for his lore of portents. In keeping with its bookish sources, the *Essay* borrowed widely from the ancients and their mediators of the Renaissance. It borrowed also from the English collectors, especially Samuel Clarke and his *Examples*. And since Mather was committed to the mystery of the supernatural, he spent portions of the *Essay* arguing the validity of wonders against contemporary Europeans who were growing skeptical. As proof of the reality of witchcraft, he would repeat the story of the invisible drummer boy of Tidworth, taking it as true on the authority of the English minister and proto-scientist Joseph Glanville, though knowing that the story was denounced by others as a fable.<sup>71</sup>

The man on the receiving end of stories from his fellow clergy made use of some of them but not of others. The book bears signs of haste, as though his printer were impatient and his own control of what he wished to do imperfect. Chapter one told of “sea-deliverances,” some of them native, others taken from an English book. In chapter two, a potpourri of stories, Mather reached back to King Philip’s War for a captivity narrative and two related episodes; after telling of another “sea-deliverance,” he opened up his Clarke’s *Examples* and began to copy from it. In chapter three, on “Thunder and Lightning,” he quoted from John Bishop’s letter and added several other stories of lightning in New England. But the chapter ended with two German stories, some references to Scripture, and several bits of pedantry. Chapters four, six, seven, and eight were meditations and general arguments on providence, using European sources. Chapter

nine demonstrated how thin the line was between the wonder and the curiosity, for here he told of persons who were deaf and dumb but learned to speak.<sup>72</sup> Chapter ten, “Of remarkable tempests,” covered hurricanes, whirlwinds, earthquakes, and floods; chapter eleven, “concerning remarkable judgements,” related how the enemies of God—Quakers, drunkards, and other enemies of New England—had been punished. Mather added a letter from Connecticut as chapter twelve, and in chapter five drew together several stories of “things preternatural”—demons, apparitions, and evil spirits.

The many layers of the *Essay* included the esoteric. Like Beard and Clarke before him, Mather had an eye for the unusual event. Some of his stranger stories were borrowed from a manuscript, presumably of English origin, that he had inherited from John Davenport, the long-time minister of New Haven. From it he drew a Faust-type story of a young student who contracted with the devil for money. But the black magic of the devil yielded to the higher powers of a group of faithful ministers, whose prayers forced Satan

to give up that contract; after some hours continuance in prayer, a cloud was seen to spread itself over them, and out of it the very contract signed with the poor creatures blood was dropped down amongst them.

From this manuscript Mather drew an even more sensational story of a minister who drank too much, went to a cockfight on the Lord’s Day, and while “curses...were between his lips, God smote him dead in the twinkle of an eye. And though Juxon were but young...his carcase was immediately so corrupted as that the stench of it was insufferable.”

From the same collection, finally, Mather copied out a “strange passage” concerning a man suspected of stealing sheep who swore his innocence and

wished, that if he had stolen it, God would cause the horns of the sheep to grow upon him. This man was seen within these few days by a minister of great repute for piety, who saith, that the man has a horn growing out of one corner of his mouth, just like that of a sheep; from which he hath cut seventeen inches, and is forced to keep it tyed by a string to his ear, to prevent its growing up to his eye.

Here again we sense ourselves confronting folk belief. This story of the sheep’s horn had its parallel or antecedent in a medieval legend of a man who stole and ate a sheep, and then found a sheep’s ear growing out of his mouth. The story of a student who compacted with the devil had roots in legends of the saints and, more remotely, in lore of eastern cultures.<sup>73</sup>

How like it was for wonder tales to build on folk or pagan legends! With its mixture of motifs and sources, *An Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences* reaffirmed the traditional tolerance of the genre. The tolerance of the *Essay* was mirrored in broader patterns of response. As readers and book buyers, the colonists were caught up in the wonder tale as it appeared in Beard and Clarke. As storytellers, they repeated to each other a growing stock of local wonders. And in their almanacs and diaries they recorded the prodigies and portents that were the stuff of everyday experience—the voices and strange sounds, monster births and lightning bolts, apparitions in the sky and doings of

the devil. In confirming the validity and significance of all of these phenomena, Mather's *Essay* summed up a popular culture that the colonists shared in common with most other Europeans. His book epitomized the transfer of old ways of thinking to the New World.

But still we need to ask what kind of worldview was it that accepted the reality of evil spirits and of sheep's horns growing out of someone's mouth? The answer to this question lies elsewhere than in the theology of John Calvin or William Perkins. We are so accustomed to inflating the significance of Puritanism that we easily forget how much else impinged upon the making of beliefs among the colonists. Indeed, the historians who have commented on Mather's *Essay* have actively resisted its complexity. A century ago, the rational-minded Moses Coit Tyler was irritated by Mather's "palpable eagerness...to welcome, from any quarter of the earth or sea or sky, any messenger whatever, who may be seen hurrying toward Boston with his mouth full of marvels." Tyler deemed the stories in the book variously "tragic, or amusing, or disgusting, now and then merely stupid," and in one sweeping statement he condemned the book as "at once a laughable and an instructive memorial of the mental habits" of the colonists. Fifty years later, Kenneth Murdock tried to rescue the *Essay*, and by implication, Puritanism, by insisting that Mather was up to date in his science and in his efforts to weigh and judge the evidence for marvels. Dismissing this interpretation, Perry Miller politicized the book, while admitting that it "seems a collection of old-wives tales and atrocity stories, at best hilariously funny and at worse a parade of gullibility." This indifference to the texture of the *Essay*—Miller did acknowledge that its roots lay "in a venerable tradition, stretching back to the medieval exempla"—was symptomatic of a larger indifference to traditional belief and popular culture in early New England.<sup>74</sup> Center stage was wholly occupied by the complexities of Puritanism as an intellectual system, and if certain other beliefs, like witchcraft, lingered in the wings, they could safely be ignored since they were headed for extinction.

But the mental world of the colonists was not really fashioned in this manner. High or low, learned or unlearned, these people had absorbed a host of older beliefs. A modern critic who has written on Milton and science remarks that everyone in the early seventeenth century relied on a body of common knowledge that stemmed from Pliny, Aristotle, and the encyclopedists. This old lore was being challenged by new theories of the planets; yet like Mather and the colonists, Milton "was not ever seriously interested in a contest of cosmological theories." As a Christian and a Puritan, Milton believed that the universe was theocentric and teleological. He was also quite at home with a "popular science" that included astrology, finding "no incompatibility between" this science and the doctrines of free will and providence. This eclectic synthesis supported a view of the everyday world as hovering between anarchy and order. Decay and corruption were constant, and disorder in the moral sphere of things was echoed in the disorder of nature. Such a mixture of science and religion in Milton was formed out of intellectual, or popular, traditions that long antedated Puritanism.<sup>75</sup> It is not important to give dates or exact boundaries to these traditions. The point is rather that certain deeper layers of belief—call them folklore, call them "popular"—flowed into Milton's worldview as into Increase Mather's.<sup>76</sup>

Armed with this insight, we come finally to understand that the mentality of the supernatural in seventeenth-century New England encompassed themes and motifs that

owed little to formal theology or to Puritanism. The people of New England viewed the world about them as demonstrating pattern and order. This was the order of God's providence; their world, like Milton's, was theocentric. It was also teleological, its structure the grand scheme laid out in the Apocalypse, the war of Antichrist against the godly. The forces of evil were immensely strong and cunning, in such sort that the providential order could seem to be "overthrown and turned upside down, men speaking evill of good, and good of evill, accounting darkness light, and light darknesse."<sup>77</sup> Disorder was profound in other ways. The world was rife with violence—with wars and persecution, pestilence and famine, pride, greed and envy. A righteous God could strike with terrible swiftness, disrupting natural law to punish evildoers or afflict the godly. The devil too had powers to wreak havoc. Each kind of violence was attuned to every other, as were the forms of order. This correspondence enriched the meaning of portents and prodigies, making them more terrifying. The plan and order of the universe was, after all, not always visible or readily deciphered. If there were purpose and plan, there were also the marvelous, the inexplicable, and the wonderful:

One providence seems to look this way, another providence seems to look that way, quite contrary one to another. Hence these works are marvellous. Yea, and that which does add to the wonderment, is, in that the works of God sometimes seem to run counter with his word: so that there is dark and amazing intricacie in the ways of providence.<sup>78</sup>

There was mystery at the heart of things. Death could strike at any moment, the devil could mislead, the earth begin to tremble. In dramatizing all these possibilities, the wonder tale evoked the radical contingency of a world so thoroughly infused with invisible forces.

This mentality of the supernatural reflects the syncreticism of the Christian tradition. Early in its history Christianity had come to terms with the pagan notion of the prodigy and with such systems as astrology. The mixture that resulted cannot arbitrarily be separated into distinct spheres, one "magical" or pagan, the other orthodox or Christian.<sup>79</sup> As one modern historian has noted, the early modern European was receptive to the wonder tale because he "believed that everybody, living or inanimate, was composed of matter and a spirit. This idea was shared by eminent minds right up to the scientific revolution in the seventeenth century; it underlay the neo-Platonic belief of the Renaissance in the souls of stars and justified the persistence of astrology." In this same period no one could "make a clear distinction between nature and supernature" or view the world as simply "ruled...by laws" and not "caprice."<sup>80</sup> This way of thinking made its way across the Atlantic with the colonists. Theirs too was a syncretic Christianity. In tolerating the wonder tale and all its underlying themes, the colonists demonstrated the capacity to abide contradiction and ambiguity. So too they demonstrated their attachment to an old mentality, a popular culture transmitted through the lore of wonders.

Before the century ended, this mentality began to fall apart. Witchcraft, prophecy, and portents came under attack from a coalition of scientists, freethinkers, and clergy (especially Anglicans) who wanted to discredit them as "superstitions." The world lost its enchantment as the realm of nature became separate from the realm of spirit. Comets lost

their role as portents; a Harvard graduate of another generation spurned this old belief in an essay published in 1719. Wonder tales, and the mentality embedded in them, lived on but now more clearly in the form of fringe or lower-class beliefs.<sup>81</sup> No learned man dared take the point of view that Increase Mather had assumed in 1684. In its own day, the wonder tale united what became sundered in the eighteenth century. Living as we do on the further side of disenchantment, it is not easy to reenter a world where matter and spirit were interlinked, where “superstitions” remained credible. But therein lies the challenge of the wonder.

## NOTES

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1. See footnote 6; George Lincoln Burr, ed., *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases* (New York, 1914), 175; Increase Mather, *Remarkable Providences, illustrative of the earlier days of American colonisation* (London, 1856), 101, cited hereafter as *Essay*; “The Diaries of John Hull,” American Antiquarian Society, *Transactions and Collections*, III (1897), 218; Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, 2 vols. (Hartford, Conn., 1853–1854), I, 84; “The Diary of Noahdiah Russell,” *New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, VII (1853), 53–54; Nathaniel Morton, *New-Englands Memoriall* (Cambridge, Mass., 1670), 52; *The Diary of Samuel Sewall*, M. Halsey Thomas, ed., 2 vols., (New York, 1973), I, 281.
2. Edward Johnson, *The Wonder-Working Providence of Sions Saviour*, ed. J. Franklin Jameson, *Original Narratives of Early American History* (New York, 1910); John Sherman, “To the Reader,” in Cotton Mather, *Wonders of the Invisible World* (Boston, 1692).
3. Kitty Scouler, *Natural Magic: Studies in the Presentation of Nature in English Poetry from Spenser to Marvell* (Oxford, 1965), 5; Increase Mather, *The Latter Sign Discoursed of*, bound with *Kometographia* (Boston, 1682), second pagination, 7–11; Michael McKeon, *Politics and Poetry in Restoration England: The Case of Dryden’s Annus Mirabilis* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975), 155–161.
4. Johnson, *Wonder-Working Providence*, ed. Jameson, 185.
5. *Letter-Book of Samuel Sewall*, 2 vols., Massachusetts Historical Society, *Collections*, 6th Ser., I–II (1886–1888), II, 229; *Diary of Samuel Sewall*, Thomas, ed., I, 369; II, 796.
6. Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London). This complex, subtle book depicts seventeenth-century Protestants, and especially the more radical of the Puritans, as hostile to “magic”; and argues that the rural poor preferred the older beliefs that Puritans were opposing. But Thomas also provides much evidence of



- beliefs, e.g., astrology, that were not limited to the rural poor, and he is quite aware that Protestantism remained in touch with prophecy, exorcism, and even certain folk beliefs. My argument inevitably runs counter to the main emphasis of his book, but much of what I have to say is also present in his pages, and I am deeply indebted to the references he provides to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century sources.
7. Hyder Rollins, ed., *The Pack of Autolyucus or Strange and Terrible News of Ghosts, Apparitions...as told in Broadside Ballads of the Years 1624–1693* (Cambridge, Mass., 1927), 36, 114, 162, and passim; Joseph Frank, *The Beginning of the English Newspaper 1620–1660* (Cambridge, Mass., 1961), 17; Bernard Capp, *English Almanacs 1500–1800* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1979), chap. 6; *Strange and wonderful News from Chippingnorton... Of certain dreadful Apparitions* [London, 1679].
  8. Rollins, ed., *Pack of Autolyucus*, 37, 62, 139, 82, 23; *A miracle, of miracles* [London, n.d.], 5; John Gadbury, *Natura Prodigiorum or, A discourse touching the nature of Prodigies* (London, 1660).
  9. *The Theatre of Gods Judgements* (London, 1648), 409; Stephen Batman, *The Doome warning all men to the Iudgemente* (London, 1581), 317, 379, 390, 397.
  10. Beard, *Theatre of Gods Judgements* 37, 48, 195; Batman, *Doome warning all men to the Iudgemente*, 403; [Nathaniel Crouch], *Admirable Curiosi-ties, Rarities, & Wonders in England* (London, 1682), passim; Rollins, ed., *Pack of Autolyucus*, 219. Here as elsewhere in this essay, the references could run into the hundreds in imitation of the dense texture of the great collections.
  11. Samuel Clarke, *A Mirrour or Looking– Glasse both for Saints, and Sinners*, 2nd. ed., (London, 1654), 92–93; Beard, *Theatre of Gods Judgements*, Bk I, chapter 30; Rollins, ed., *Pack of Autolyucus*, 75.
  12. Rollins, ed., *Pack of Autolyucus*, 62.
  13. Miriam Chrisman, *Lay Culture, Learned Culture: Books and Social Change in Strasbourg 1480–1599* (New Haven, Conn., 1982), 257, 369ff; R.W.Scribner, *For the Sake of Simple Folk: Popular Propaganda for the German Reformation* (Cambridge, U.K., 1981), 125–127, 131, 184.
  14. Rollins, ed., *Pack of Autolyucus*, 81.
  15. Simon Goulart, *Admirable and Memorable Histories containing the wonders of our time* (London, 1607). The original French edition appeared in 1547. Batman's *Doome* was largely a translation of Lycosthenes' *De prodigiis liber*.
  16. The best guides (in English) to the lore of wonders are the literary historians whom I came to refer to as “the Shakespeareans,” the men and omen who have patrolled the sweep of English literary culture from Chaucer to Shakespeare and Milton, and who were very conscious of Shakespeare's roots in medieval and classical culture. A book of great practical utility, as my citations from it indicate, is S.K.Heninger, Jr., *A Handbook of Renaissance Meteorology* (Durham, N.C., 1960), which opens with an important survey of the encyclopedias that codified and transmitted so much of the wonder lore. No less important is Kester Svendsen, *Milton and Science* (New York, 1969), with its superb discussion in Chapter 1 of “The Compendious Method of Natural Philosophy: Milton and the Encyclopedic Tradition.” The notes and across references in Hyder Rollins's *Pack of Autolyucus* remain the best guide to the print culture I describe briefly. Other studies of importance include: Don Cameron

- Allen, *The Star-Crossed Renaissance: The Quarrel about Astrology and Its Influence in England* (New York, 1966); Willard Farnham, *The Medieval Heritage of Elizabethan Tragedy* (Berkeley, 1936); J.S.P. Tatlock, *The Scene of the Franklin's Tale Revisited* (London, 1914), and his *The Legendary History of Britain* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1950); Robert W. Hanning, *The Vision of History in Early Britain from Gildas to Geoffrey of Monmouth* (New York, 1966); Paul H. Kocher, *Science and Religion in Elizabethan England* (New York, 1969); George Lyman Kittredge, *The Old Farmer and His Almanac* (Boston, 1904); and Henry A. Kelly, *Divine Providence in the England of Shakespeare's Histories* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970). An exhaustive survey is Lynn Thorndike, *A History of Magic and Experimental Science*, 8 vols. (New York, 1923–1958), esp. vols. IV–VII.
17. Heninger, *Handbook of Renaissance Meterology*, 12, and chaps. 2–3.
18. *Ibid.*, 30–32; Allen, *Star-Crossed Renaissance*, chap. 5; Capp, *English Almanacs*, chap. 5.
19. Eusebius, *The Ancient ecclesiastical histories* (London 1619), 64, 80; Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors, eds. (Oxford, 1969), 141, 361–363; G.R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* (Cambridge, U.K., 1937), 129–130.
20. Tatlock, *Legendary History of Britain*, chap. 17; Rupert Taylor, *The Political Prophecy in England* (New York, 1911); Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, chap. 13.
21. Scribner, *For the Sake of Simple Folk*, 116–117, 140–147, 184; Katharine R. Firth, *The Apocalyptic Tradition in Reformation Britain, 1530–1645* (Oxford, 1979); Joseph Mede, *The Key of the Revelation, searched and demonstrated out of the Naturall and proper characters of the Visions* (London, 1643), Pt. 1, 88, 94.
22. Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, trans. Nevill Coghill (Baltimore, 1952), 70; Peter Lake, *Moderate Puritans and the Elizabethan Church* (Cambridge, U.K., 1982), 119–120; Beard, *Theatre of Gods Judgements*, 88; Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, chap. 4.
23. As Kocher proves at length in *Science and Religion in Elizabethan England*. The close ties between science and religion are evident in the letters that Cotton Mather sent to the Royal Society; many of them report events that previously had been described as “wonders” in his father's *Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences*. Cf. George L. Kittredge, “Cotton Mather's Scientific Communications to the Royal Society,” *American Antiquarian Society, Proceedings*, N.S. XXVI (1916), 18–57.
24. Capp, *English Almanacs*, 165; Hershel Baker, *The Race of Time* (Toronto, 1967) 57–63; Joseph J. Morgan, Jr., *Chaucer and the Theme of Mutability* (The Hague, 1961); Victor Harris, *All Coherence Gone* (Chicago, 1949), chaps. 4–5.
25. Farnham, *Medieval Heritage of Elizabethan Tragedy*, chap. 7; Scribner, *For the Sake of Simple Folk*, 117; Beard, *Theatre of Gods Judgements*, 80.
26. Michael MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam: Madness, Anxiety, and Healing in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge, U.K., 1981), 175, 202. “There hath ever been from the beginning an inveterate antipathy between Satan and his instruments, and the children of God.” (Clarke, *Examples*, 35.)

27. Howard R. Patch, *The Goddess Fortuna in Medieval Literature* (Cambridge, Mass., 1927); J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, 1975), 349–350.
28. E.M.W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (New York, n.d.), chap. 7.
29. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Michael Oakshott (Oxford, 1957), Pt. IV. Hobbes was almost sui generis; but there was widespread criticism in seventeenth-century England of astrology and apocalypticism, as well as an awareness that portents and prodigies were often manipulated for political benefit. This politicizing is evident in the flood of publications in 1679 and 1680, most of them anti-Catholic, anti-Stuart tracts in disguise, and in books like *Mirabilis Annus Secundus; Or, The Second Year of Prodigies. Being A true and impartial Collection of many strange Signes and Apparitions, which have this last Year been seen in the Heavens, and in the Earth, and in the Waters* (London, 1662), which, despite its title, is a radical Puritan onslaught against the restored monarchy. We are dealing with a series of contradictions, or better, of paradoxes: belief in portents, joined with skepticism about them; a conviction that some portents were not really significant, and that others were. For examples of this selectivity at work in the late sixteenth century, cf. L.H. Buell, “Elizabethan Portents: Superstition or Doctrine,” in *Essays Critical and Historical Dedicated to Lily B. Campbell* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1950), 27–41.
30. Heninger, *Handbook of Renaissance Meteorology*, 87–91; du Bartas, *La Sepmaine*, quoted on the reverse of the title page of Samuel Danforth, *An Astronomical Description of the late Comet or Blazing Star* (Cambridge, Mass., 1665).
31. Pliny, *Natural History*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, Mass., 1949), I, 235 (Bk II. xxiii).
32. *Ibid.*, I, 275 (Bk II. liii); Heninger, *Handbook of Renaissance Meteorology*, 72–87.
33. *The Famous and Memorable Workers of Josephus... Faithfully Translated... by Thomas Lodge* (London, 1620), 738; Heninger, *Handbook of Renaissance Meteorology*, 91–94; Rollins, ed., *Pack of Autolycus*, 38.
34. Katherine M. Briggs, *The Anatomy of Puck: An Examination of Fairy Beliefs among Shakespeare's Contemporaries and Successors* (London, 1959); C. Grant Loomis, *White Magic: An Introduction to the Folklore of Christian Legend* (Cambridge, Mass., 1948); Kittredge, *Old Farmer and His Almanac*, chap. 6; T.F. Thiselton Dyer, *Folk Lore of Shakespeare* (London, 1884).
35. As Rollins, ed., *Pack of Autolycus*, points out repeatedly.
36. *Twelve Strange Prophecies, besides Mother Shiptons. With the Predictions of John Saltmarsh* (London, 1648).
37. William P. Upham, “Remarks,” *Massachusetts Historical Society, Proceedings*, 2d Ser., XIII (1899–1900), 126–127.
38. Increase Mather, *Wo to Drunkards* (Cambridge, Mass., 1673), 28; “The Diary of Increase Mather,” *Massachusetts Historical Society, Proceedings*, 2d Ser., XIII (1899–1900), 345.
39. Worthington C. Ford, *The Boston Book Market, 1679–1700* (Boston, 1917), 149.
40. Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, I, 205.
41. Kenneth B. Murdock, ed., *Handkerchiefs from Paul being Pious and Consolatory Verses of Puritan Massachusetts* (Cambridge, Mass., 1927), 109–111.

42. [Samuel Danforth], *An Almanack for the Year of Our Lord 1648* (Cambridge, Mass., 1648). Mary Dyer's monstrous birth was perhaps the first New England wonder to receive international attention. Cf. *Newes from New-England of A most strange and prodigious Birth* [London, 1642].
43. "My chief design, is to inform and edifie the ordinary sort of Readers. Yet considering that God hath made me a debter to the wise as well as to the weak, I have added some things of the nature, place, motion of Comets, which only such as have some skill in Astronomy can understand" ("To the Reader," in *Kometographia*).
44. *Records of the First Church at Dorchester in New England 1636–1734* (Boston, 1891); Roxbury Land and Church Records, Boston Record Commissioners, *Reports*, VI (Boston, 1881), 187–212.
45. William Deloss Love, Jr., *The Fast and Thanksgiving Days of New England* (Boston, 1895).
46. James Kendall Hosmer, ed., *Winthrop's Journal History of New England, 1630–1649*, 2 vols. (New York, 1953 [orig. publ. New York, 1908]), II, 156.
47. A very large number of such journals or brief autobiographical sketches survive, and their authors include artisans and farmers as well as ministers and merchants. Two diaries kept by ordinary people are John Dane, "A Declaration of Remarkable Proudenses in the Corse of My Life," *New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, VIII (1854), 147–156; and Charles F. Adams, Jr., "Abstract of [John] Marshall's Diary," *Massachusetts Historical Society, Proceedings*, 2d Ser., I (1884–1885), 148–164, and its continuation, Samuel A. Green, "Remarks," *ibid.*, 2d. Ser., XIV (1900–1901), 13–34.
48. *The Diaries of John Hull 217–218*; *Diary of Samuel Sewall*, Thomas, ed. I, 12. I have analyzed this diary at greater length in "The Mental World of Samuel Sewall," *Massachusetts Historical Society, Proceedings*, XCII (1980), 21–44.
49. *Diary of Samuel Sewall*, Thomas, ed., I, 330–331.
50. Upham, "Remarks," 127–128. Taylor had access to one of the several versions of Christopher Love's scaffold speech; e.g., *The true and perfect Speech of Mr. Christopher Love* (London, 1651).
51. *Mather Papers*, 282–287.
52. *Ibid.*, 360–362.
53. *Ibid.*, 306–310.
54. *Ibid.*, 466–481. The Marshfield episode, told in a letter from the Rev. Samuel Arnold, was later published by N.B. Shurtleff as *Thunder & Lightning; and Deaths at Marshfield in 1658 & 1666* (Boston, 1850).
55. *Mather Papers*, 58–59. The Mary Dyer story had long since passed into print in several places; cf. note 6, p. 258 above.
56. Danforth, *An Astronomical Description*, 16–21.
57. Mather, *Kometographia*, 96. Quoting again the familiar lines from du Bartas, *La Sepmaine*, Mather also spoke approvingly of apparitions in the air. In keeping with tradition, the colonists were sensitive to the shape and direction of comets; cf. Johnson, *Wonder-Working Providence*, ed. Jameson, 40; *Mather Papers*, 312.
58. Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, II, 363–372; Shurtleff, *Thunder &*

*Lightning*. 13–15.

59. Johnson, *Wonder-Working Providence*, ed. Jameson, 243. Cf. “The Diaries of John Hull,” 208; *Mather Papers*, 349; and for the tradition, Rollins, ed., *Pack of Autolytus*, 38; Batman, *Doom warning to Judgemente*, 304.
60. Israel Chauncy, *An Almanack of the coelestial motions for... 1663* (Cambridge, Mass., 1663).
61. Noadiah Russell, *Cambridge Ephemeris. An Almanac...for... 1684* (Cambridge, Mass., 1684).
62. *Holwell's Predictions: of many remarkable things, which probably come to pass* (Cambridge, Mass., [1690]).
63. Morton, *New-Englands Memoriall*, 52.
64. “The Diary of Noadiah Russell,” 54. The references to such experiences were many; and I mean to write about them elsewhere, as the discussions of millennium and eschatology in New England Puritanism do not pay adequate (if any) attention to the everyday experience of prophecying. Anne Hutchinson was gifted with prophetic sight and visions; cf. David D.Hall, ed., *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636–1638: A Documentary History* (Middletown, Conn., 1968), 271–273.
65. Winthrop, *Journal*, I, 84, 121.
66. Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, I, 314–316, 544; II, 37–38. As with visionary prophecying, I must pass by many other instances, as well as avoiding the stories provided by Beard, Clarke, and Turner.
67. The folklore of black dogs is summarized in Katharine M. Briggs, *British Folk Tales and Legends: A Sampler* (London, 1977), 115–120.
68. Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, eds., *The Salem Witchcraft Papers*, 3 vols. (New York, 1977), I, 74, 202–203; III, 742; II, 568.
69. *Ibid.*, I, 166, 246–247.
70. *Ibid.*, II, 578. Cf. Loomis, *White Magic*, 39.
71. Joseph Glanville, *A Blow at Modern Sadducism in some Philosophical Considerations about Witchcraft*, 4th ed. (London, 1668); Rollins, ed., *Pack of Autolytus*, 115.
72. The same generosity is characteristic of Bread and Clarke, and has medieval precedents; Tatlock, *Legendary History of Britain*, 276–277.
73. Mather, *Essay*, “Introduction”; H.L.D. Ward, *Catalogue of Romances in the Department of Manuscripts in the British Museum*, 3 vols. (London, 1883–1910), I, 257, II, 595.
74. Moses Coit Tyler, *A History of American Literature during the Colonial Time*, rev. ed., 2 vols. (New York, 1897), II, 73; Kenneth B. Murdock, *Increase Mather: The Foremost American Puritan* (Cambridge, Mass., 1925), 170–174; Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge, Mass, 1953), 143; but for apparent approval of Murdock’s arguments, cf. 180.
75. Svendsen, *Milton and Science*, 5, 44, 84.
76. In trying to account for attitudes toward the Negro in early America, Winthrop Jordan was driven to speaking of “deeper” attitudes that somehow formed and were perpetuated in Elizabethan culture: Jordan, *White over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Baltimore, 1969), viii–ix, and chap. 1. My problem

is akin to his, in that the popular culture I am describing was remarkably tenacious and encompassing, even though its exact sources and lines of influence cannot readily be specified.

77. Beard, *Theatre of Gods Judgements*, 2.

78. Increase Mather, *The Doctrine of Divine Providence Opened and Applied* (Boston, 1684), 43, 30–32, 34, 81, 133; and for the figure of the wheel and the rise and fall of kings, cf. pp. 9, 16–17. The image of the wheel derives from Ezekiel 1:15–16, et seq.

79. As is suggested by Jon Butler, “Magic, Astrology, and the Early American Religious Heritage, 1600–1760,” *American Historical Review*, LXXXIV (1979), 317–346, an essay that seems almost perverse in its refusal to acknowledge the syncretism of seventeenth-century religion and the common interest of both clergy and laity in such “superstitions.” The most important description of intellectual tolerance and syncretism in seventeenth-century England is MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, which in this regard serves to correct the impression that arises from Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, of a clear line between the two. Anthropologists struggle to define the difference between magic and religion; literary and cultural historians by and large agree in de-emphasizing the distinction. “Our hard and fast distinction between the natural and the supernatural was unknown in the middle ages; there was no line between jugglery...and magic, most people not knowing how either was performed; indeed any remarkable performance with a secular background...might be called a miracle.” Tatlock, *Legendary History*, 362–363. “It is of course notoriously difficult...to say where religion becomes magic: the genuine Middle English charms (like many of their predecessors in Old English) use much religious imagery.” Douglas Gray, *Themes and Images in the Medieval English Religious Lyric* (London, 1972), 34. See also Jean-Claude Schmitt, “Les Traditions Folkloriques dans la Culture Médiévale,” *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions*, LII (1981), 5–20, a reference I owe to Keith Thomas.

80. Jean Delumeau, *Catholicism between Luther and Voltaire: A New View of the Counter-Reformation* (London, 1977), 63.

81. Thomas Robie, *A Letter to a Certain Gentleman, ec.* (Boston, 1719), 8; J.F.C. Harrison, *The Second Coming: Popular Millenarianism, 1780–1850* (London, 1979), chap. 3.