

**Colonising the Devil's Territories: The Historicity of Providential New England Folklore
in *The VVitch***

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In the opening sequence of Robert Eggers' folk horror film, *The VVitch: A New-England Folktale* (2015), the patriarch William and his family stand at trial awaiting judgement. William faces banishment from their colonial settlement for the preaching of what he claims is 'Christ's true gospel'. He is defiant, asking why the community had left their homes in England if not for the promised land? His opening dialogue is taken directly from Matthew 11:7: 'What went we out into this wilderness to find?' Faced with repenting, William instead announces that his family will gladly leave this colony of 'false contented Christians' to fend for themselves. Bundling their possessions onto a single cart, the family leaves the settlement and ventures out into the unexplored lands of the North American continent.

As this opening sequence establishes, *The VVitch* is largely concerned with the fears and anxieties of early modern Puritans in the New World,¹ and it explores these themes through the tradition of early modern New World Puritan 'folklore'.² This article contextualises the historical and demonological beliefs prevalent in the early modern setting of *The VVitch*.³ It argues that early modern folklore is invoked in this film to convey the experiences and worldview of the New World Puritans, illustrating how Robert Eggers has used fantastical source material to achieve a certain historical authenticity. This focus on the 'historicity' of the New World setting, as it was established in early modern demonological tracts, is central to the construction of *The VVitch*. Eggers states that he spent almost five years researching material for the film, poring over early modern texts in order to effectively recreate the historical tone of the era (Rife 2016). The closing text of the film communicates that it 'was inspired by many folktales, fairy tales and written accounts of historical witchcraft, including journals, diaries and court records. Much of the dialogue comes directly

from these period sources'. This array of sources, taken from different English, New England, and even broader Continental textual formats, are used to craft a seemingly authentic piece of Puritan folklore. As such, Eggers employs early modern folklore and English Protestant demonological traditions in *The VVitch* to reconstruct the formative years of the New England colony and to establish a historical window into the 'supernatural reality' of the Puritan worldview. Eggers clarifies that 'because witches don't exist today, I felt it was essential to create an utterly believable 17th century world where witches really did exist' (Young 2016). *The VVitch* thus provides insight into how folklore (specifically supernatural folklore) can be adapted by writers and directors to encapsulate an authentic historical tonality within the folk horror cinematic subgenre.

In drawing on this source material, *The VVitch* manages to strike a balance between its almost slavish adherence to historical detail and its use of fantastical, 'blatantly imaginary spaces and figures' (Walton 2018). This seemingly contradictory approach of aiming for historical 'authenticity' mediated through the textual tradition of supernatural folklore is central to *The VVitch*'s success, both as a period piece and as a folk horror film. The cinematic subgenre of 'folk horror' is defined by scholar and filmmaker Adam Scovell as a combination of haunted landscapes and unsettling isolation, from which a skewed belief system or moral code develops (2017: 17-19). In folk horror, and especially in *The VVitch*, historical setting is paramount. As Chloé Germaine Buckley surmises, *The VVitch* 'ventriloquizes many of the ideas about witchcraft formed in the early modern period, repackaging the words of 17th century settlers for modern audiences' (2019: 36). Like other folk horror films, *The VVitch* expresses a desire to focus on the historical essence of place without the presence of modernist intrusions (Young 2010: 17-18). Folk horror is also embedded in historical cinema in that it strives to engage with and construct a relationship to the past (Stubbs 2013: 42-3). In this, *The VVitch* succeeds in creating what Mattias Frey

describes as the ‘Authenticity Feeling’, a ‘felt, sensual, even embodied historicity’, despite its engaging with a subject matter that is purely fictional and overtly fantastical. For most historical film makers and audiences, ‘authenticity signifies a realistic historical experience, an effective suspension of temporal-spatial disbelief’ (Frey 2018). In *The VVitch*, however, suspension of disbelief is achieved by committing totally to a ‘grounded’ and material historical tonality derived entirely from early modern demonological works.

An Early Modern Puritan Folktale

William, his wife Katherine, his children Thomasin, Caleb, Mercy, Jonas, and baby Samuel, are the very image of an archetypal early modern Puritan family. The film presents their experiences as representative of the broader Puritan diaspora, as Eggers explicitly states in an interview: ‘A famous Puritan rhetorical phrase is “a family is a little church—a little commonwealth” [. . .] and I could explore society as a whole in this microcosm’ (Halperin 2016). The family of *The VVitch* most likely sailed over in the Winthrop fleet of 1630, joining the mass migration of Puritans travelling to the New World in search of the ‘promised land’. The notion of a ‘city on the hill’, taken from Matthew 5:14 and famously introduced into the American lexicon by John Winthrop during his 1630 sermon *A Model of Christian Charity*, epitomised the mindset of many of these migrants (Winthrop 1931: 293). This utopian ideal is cruelly dispelled throughout the course of the film, however, as the family’s spiritual beliefs drive them apart rather than uniting them. The contours of this plot, with its focus on fundamental Christian principles, draws on the archetypes of morality tales that comprised the Puritan folklore of this era. The character of the New England landscape, with its dark woods and unexplored territories, profoundly shaped the nature of this folklore. English tales of encounters with witches and demonic entities were frequently situated on the periphery of civilised society. Such folkloric beliefs, imported from England, became a

powerful boundary marker for the New World Puritan communities, separating godly society from the untamed lands blighted by supernatural phenomena (Haring and Bendix 2012: 287). Set against the backdrop of this hostile landscape, New England morality tales emphasised the need for individuals to band together, abandon their pride and follow the 'divine' laws of this fledging society.

The VVitch reconstructs the early period of the North American frontier through folklore. The particular folklore of *The VVitch* includes accounts of witchcraft, demonic possession, and other supernatural occurrences that featured in different English and New England textual formats. To the New World settlers, the Devil's agency was discernible all around them, and this notion of perpetual demonic affliction permeated their sermons, theological treatises, and popular pamphlets (Johnstone 2006: 61). The folklore of the Puritans (particularly in the historical context of *The VVitch*) is therefore difficult to delineate from the other forms of literature that they consumed. Following in this tradition, the folklore highlighted in this film is somewhat of an historical amalgamation in that it draws on broader literary traditions. This point further emphasises *The VVitch*'s appeals to a historical tonality, rather than to total period accuracy. Eggers presents New England folklore as a composite of British, Continental, and even Scandinavian demonological beliefs; he synthesizes the different archetypes of the early modern witch present in these varied textual traditions. Continental folktales and demonological traditions involving witches were certainly far more lurid in nature than their Protestant counterparts, full of Satanic orgies, infanticide, and even cannibalism (Zika 1997: 81). Various aspects of these beliefs had appeared in English and New England accounts separately, yet rarely all in any one place. Eggers performs an act of historical conflation in this instance, sewing together different elements into a cohesive narrative that vividly encapsulates the fears and anxieties of New World Puritans.

New England Puritan folklore had one preeminent genre – the ‘providence’, which was a particular event conveying a divine message (Haring and Bendix 2012: 288). Providence was a central doctrine in Reformed Protestantism, designating that God’s will was behind every single inexplicable occurrence (Walsham 1999: 2). In many ways, New England folklore *is* a ‘providence’, as the primary didactic function of folktales was to give meaning to inexplicable events. The early period of the Puritan migration to North America was profoundly shaped by conceptions of providence with settler communities desperately seeking signs that affirmed their hardships. Increase Mather, a prominent Puritan clergyman in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, was particularly concerned with providential acts. In his 1684 *An Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences*, Mather collected a series of strange occurrences, including ‘Divine Judgements, Tempests, Floods, Earth-quakes, Thunders as are unusual, strange Apparitions or what ever else shall happen that is Prodigious, Witchcrafts, Diabolical Possessions, Remarkable Judgments upon noted Sinners: eminent Deliverances and Answers of Prayer’ (Preface). New World Puritans subscribed to the idea that their lives were dictated by a divine plan, and any misfortune that befell them, be it natural or supernatural, was simply a trial that God had prepared for them. William Perkins, a leading Puritan Cambridge theologian, set out in his 1610 *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft* that God ‘doth oftentimes vse Satan as his instrument, for the effecting of his intended workes, and the executing of his iudgements vpon men’ (618). In the New World Puritan worldview, demonic activity was therefore something to be closely inspected for divine meaning.

Early modern demonological pamphlets, derived from more learned theological works, were intended to illustrate a moral point concerning demonic activity as a spiritual trial or a punishment from God (Suhr 2012: 130). These textual formats did not adhere to strict genre boundaries, existing as a combination of first-hand accounts, court records,

sermons, and sensationalist entertainment. Witchcraft and demonic possession texts were in fact a means of packaging 'elite' demonological views for the masses. There is therefore little difference between these textual formats as they were all predicated on communicating the providential meaning of demonic activity (Gibson 2007: 34-5). Puritans proved to be especially theologically literate, so it is even more difficult to distinguish between elite and popular discourse in this historical context. New England folklore, moreover, is similar in form to English witchcraft and demonic possession pamphlets, featuring the same tropes and character archetypes. As Eggers himself puts it, 'we looked at fairy tales and folk tales, but also diaries and accounts of real witchcraft and court records, and you see the same tropes throughout, the same witch' (Young 2016). *The VVitch* thus relates the historical experience of the New World Puritans as mediated through the demonological texts that they consumed, depicting a worldview in which the natural and the supernatural are intertwined.

The Spectre of The Witch

Following the opening sequence, *The VVitch* jumps forward to revisit the family almost a year later. A small homestead has been established consisting of rickety buildings, farming implements, and a meagre selection of crops. On all sides the settlement is blanketed by woodland marked by deep autumn colours. For these scenes Eggers and his crew recreated a seventeenth-century frontier homestead using period accurate materials, striving for a sense of material historicity. Jonathan Stubbs explains that period films accumulate visual evidence and foreground material details to create an authentic connection with real events (2013: 31). In *The VVitch*, Eggers fashions an authentic connection to a historical time and place (the seventeenth-century colonisation of North America) while tempering this experience with a pervading sense of the supernatural. These two elements converge in the densely forested landscapes of the film, shaping this woodland as a dark force unto itself. As a folk horror

film, *The Witch* presents the supernatural as a ‘material if not fully visible force in the film’s rural environment’, designating the landscape as hostile (Walton 2018). An intertwined spectre of the witch and landscape, then, threaten the film’s protagonists. In conveying this looming presence, Eggers frames his exterior shots against a dense wall of twisted wood and dark foliage, faintly lit by the oppressive New England skyline. On-screen, the forests tower over the human characters, bearing down on them with imposing will. These choices in cinematography go a long way to creating an authentic atmosphere, placing viewers in the mentality of the New World Puritans. In this setting the family seems to live out a humble existence, tending to their farmland and attempting to find happiness in their covenant with God. All is not well, however, and the mood of the family has grown increasingly dour. Their crops have withered, and the coming winter only promises further troubles.

It is in such states of anxiety that witchcraft and other supernatural phenomena began to manifest. Historically, witchcraft and demonic possession flourished in periods of civic and political unrest (Raiswell 2012: 27-28). Disorder of the state was often reflected in the manifestation of the Devil and his minions. That is not to say that witchcraft was not present in times of stability (the ‘Golden Age’ of Elizabethan England had many notable cases) but just that it was more prevalent when the state was facing adversity. This correlation is most vividly illustrated in the Salem Witch Trials (1692-93), notably detailed in the works of Increase Mather and his son, Cotton Mather. Eggers continually invokes Salem throughout his film, essentially presenting a microcosm of this historical event within the confines of a single Puritan family (Halperin 2016). The historical fears and anxieties of the Puritan diaspora can thus be considered as the ideal context for a film in which witchcraft (either real or imagined) manifests.

The Calvinist tradition that dominated English Protestantism placed emphasis on the lurking presence of the demonic, with Puritan spirituality advocating an even more radical

position. It was the Puritans who left the most detailed accounts of diabolic experiences as these spiritual sentiments were central to their everyday lives (Johnstone 2006: 107). Many Puritans were confronted with evil everywhere they turned, constituting trials of faith for God's chosen people in which they had the opportunity to conquer demonic temptation and further prove their devotion (Luttmer 2000: 46). Even in New England—which was heralded as the promised land—witchcraft and demonic possession were still ever-present. Cotton Mather remarked in his 1693 *Wonders of the Invisible World* that, 'The New-Englanders, are a People of God settled in those, which were once the Devils Territories; and it may easily be supposed that the Devil was Exceedingly disturbed, when he perceived such a people here' (7). Rather than attempt to frame early modern beliefs in witchcraft with modern conceptions of psychology or medical terminology, *The VVitch* presents seemingly supernatural occurrences as the Puritan family perceived them—as real. There is no doubt that witchcraft exists in the world portrayed in this film, and it is a profound threat to Christian society. Drawing on the relevant source material, this film attempts to capture early modern perceptions of witchcraft and the demonic and the ways they were profoundly intertwined with the religious experiences of laypeople.

The titular witch is revealed to the audience in the opening act and appears in various guises throughout the film, constantly shifting between the periphery and the centre of events. She is depicted as almost omnipresent, her dark influence discernible in almost every scene. In this context the supernatural spectre of the witch represents the constant fight for survival in the hostile environment of the New World. The first supernatural occurrence is when Thomasin, the eldest child, is playing peek-a-boo with baby Samuel. The camera lingers on Thomasin's face as Samuel suddenly disappears from her view, followed by a rustling in the tall grass beyond their homestead. In their grief, the family attributes Samuel's disappearance to a wolf. However, the film quickly dispels all assumptions about his fate by revealing that

Samuel has fallen into the hands of a malignant witch. The death of an unbaptised child was one of the greatest fears in early modern society, understood to be a victory for the Devil. Beliefs in Protestant notions of predestination, if taken to their logical conclusions, implied that children who died without being baptised (or being old enough to beg forgiveness for their sins) could be damned to hell (French 2015: 23-24). Many clerics and Protestant writers would not have adhered so literally to notions such as these, but for a Puritan family as devout as that in *The VVitch*, this fear was very much a reality. The death of Samuel lingers over all the characters in the film, with Katherine being particularly affected by the belief that 'our Sam is in Hell'.

Once Samuel is taken, the film delves into the horrors that witchcraft narratives perpetuated. These horrors are both real and fantastical, centred on the tragic death of infants that was all too common in the early modern period. The sacrificial sequence plays out in a harrowing fashion, set against a crescendo of strings and vocal chanting. In her hovel, the witch caresses baby Samuel with what seems like affection before reaching for a knife. The next scene shifts to her grinding bone and blood into a fine paste, preparing some sort of potion to enhance her powers. This was a standard feature of early modern witchcraft accounts as it established that the witch had access to a host of magical abilities through their blood rituals (Almond 2014: 120-21). Consequently, the next time the witch is on screen she has been transformed into a seductive young woman. Caleb, having been led deep into the woods by the witch's familiar, approaches her cabin tentatively until she emerges from inside. Clothed in a striking red cloak and a black dress with revealing bodice, the witch now appears as the very embodiment of lust. Chanting builds in the background, rising in intensity as Caleb approaches her. Clearly terrified but powerless to resist her charms, the boy steps forward to receive her embrace. This scene is infused with the implication of sexual violence, with the witch depicted as a predator. The threat of sexual violence was a common motif in

sixteenth-century witchcraft narratives as it served to challenge the traditional sexual order and reinforced the theme of demonic inversion (Zika 1997: 97). This encounter also has notable cannibalistic overtones, especially in the wake of the earlier sacrificial scene with baby Samuel. As the witch hungrily takes the boy in her arms and presses her lips to his, the camera focuses on her hands which morph into gnarled claws reaching for his flesh. The scene is then cut abruptly short, leaving the viewer with the image of Caleb and the witch in this death embrace. Sequences such as this illustrate exactly how Eggers invokes early modern beliefs to establish a credible sense of historicity within the thematic framework of supernatural folkloric textual traditions.

Bewitched

As it is soon revealed, Caleb returns to the plantation in the throes of bewitchment or demonic possession (these two terms were interchangeable in early modern England and its colonies). He is discovered naked and raving in the rain by Thomasin. The following day he is gripped by the madness of demonic possession, writhing in agony and crying about sin and the afterlife. Caleb's sudden possession after his encounter with the witch highlights the close relationship between witchcraft and the demonic in early modern demonological narratives. In England throughout the 1590s, there were numerous high-profile possession cases involving the Puritan exorcist John Darrell in which witchcraft was cited as the catalyst. This paradigm of witchcraft-induced possession carried over to the New World. As agents of the Devil, witches were tasked with spreading his influence throughout the Christian populace, possessing people with dark spirits—perhaps the most powerful tool at their disposal. This could be achieved either through witchcraft, or through direct (sometimes sexual) contact. For example, in the earlier scene, the witch could be interpreted as actually breathing a demonic spirit into Caleb, with the implication that some sort of sexual act took place.

Battling against dark forces was a seemingly never-ending struggle for many Puritans, and *The VVitch* uses the sufferings of Caleb to reflect the Puritan fixation with demonic evil.

Caleb's language draws closely from early modern accounts of demonic possession, with Eggers revealing that he used certain phrases verbatim from English and New England source material (VanDerWerff 2016). Adherence to the 'objective' perspective of recorded language, communicated through the dialogue of the characters, is an essential element by which Eggers achieves historical authenticity (Frey 2018). While this source dialogue is framed through the supernatural phenomenon of demonic possession and mediated through a demonological textual narrative, its usage in *The VVitch* is effective in encapsulating the tone of its historical setting. In this instance, the 1596 possession of the young Puritan Thomas Darling in England is a probable inspiration. Darling's possession and subsequent exorcism by John Darrell influenced Puritans in the New World. Specifically, Darling's rhetoric and attempts to fashion himself as an aspiring Puritan saint established a performative model for other demoniacs to follow. More relevant to the immediate historical context of the film are the possessions that manifested during the Connecticut Witch Trials (1643-63) and the Salem Witch Trials. Similar to *The VVitch's* invoking of the image of the early modern witch, it also draws on the figure of the demoniac. Eggers constructs the demoniac from various early modern possession narratives, presenting a figure that is archetypal in nature and thus effectively capturing an authentic historical tone rather than recreating any one individual possession experience.

Caleb's possession is not a prolonged ordeal, as he succumbs to his illness within a day of returning home. It was rare that a demoniac would die simply by virtue of being possessed in the early modern period; the ordeal was often a prolonged affair rather than the rapid decline that beset Caleb. There are accounts of possessed individuals living with their condition for years, for instance, unable to shake off the lingering presence of the Devil. For

the sake of *The VVitch*'s narrative, Caleb's possession and death unfolds over a far shorter period of time. At one point during his torment, after a series of convulsions, he suddenly grows still, and blood begins to drip from his mouth. His parents force his jaw open and a small red apple is spewed forth (a standard trope of early modern English witch tales and Continental folklore). Caleb succumbs to his illness shortly thereafter, entering into a sort of divine euphoria in his final breaths in which he—drawing on the rhetoric of John Winthrop—beseechs the Lord to 'take me to thy lap'. The boy has ultimately been sent back to the plantation to die, this spectacle intended to sow further discontent within the family. As a result, suspicion that Thomasin is a witch grows, and the family's unravelling is all but ensured. Demonic possession thus serves multiple purposes in *The VVitch*; it advances the plot while also revealing the persistent fear of the Devil that underwrote New World Puritan folktales.

The Devil and The Witches' Sabbath

In all his varied depictions, Satan functions as a poignant metaphor for evil and temptation, thereby fulfilling an important didactic role in the film's narrative. Appearing for most of the film as the family's goat, 'Black Phillip', the Devil represents the pervasive threat of annihilation and the loss of human identity to the 'demonic' landscape. Black Phillip seems to hold influence over the twins (Mercy and Jonas), whispering secrets and planting suspicions in their minds. A viewer may initially be tempted to conclude that the goat is another of the witch's familiars, but it is later revealed that this creature is in fact her master, the Devil. Although the Devil was constructed by Christian theologians as a powerful being, he was largely forbidden from actively causing harm in the earthly realm, having to intrust his malice to witches (Clark 1999: 241). The Devil's power, as William Perkins outlines, lay in his ability to 'discerne and judge of hidden causes in nature' and in his subtle skills of

manipulation (1610: 609-11). Aside from depicting Satan in his traditional role as the master of temptations, *The VVitch* provides this figure with an active role more in line with modern horror conventions. In one of the most dramatic scenes of the film, Black Phillip impales William with its horns and sends him crashing into a pile of timber. William's downfall and the destruction of his family, implied as being punishment for his sins, culminates in this sequence—with Satan cast as executioner. This execution (and the Devil's role in it) could even be read as a form of divine justice, with God punishing William through the machinations of Satan.

The goat reveals its true form during the climax of the film. As the plantation lies in ruins and most of the family are dead or missing, Thomasin is beckoned into a darkened room by Black Phillip. In an almost continuous take, the camera fixes on Thomasin's visage, and we see her conversing with the goat. She 'conjures' Black Phillip to speak, and he answers in a drawn-out whisper: 'Wouldst thou like to live deliciously?' His voice is low and menacing, each syllable drawn out. It is at this point in the scene that a subtle revelation takes place. Footsteps ring out on the floorboards, no longer the steady clap of hooves but the heavy impact of boots and jangling spurs. A figure, garbed in the attire of an early modern English gentleman, emerges beside Thomasin. He remains mostly in the shadows, towering above the girl. 'Remove thy shift', he orders. The sexual implications in this act are all too clear, copulation with the Devil being a fundamental element of both the Witches' Sabbath and demonic pacts (Almond 2014: 101-103). This demonic figure then implores Thomasin to sign his 'black book', signalling a turning point in the narrative. This act establishes that redemption is no longer possible for Thomasin, as her soul has now been promised to the Devil for eternity.

The final scene of *The VVitch* depicts the Witches' Sabbath, a central theme in early modern witchcraft narratives and iconography. After establishing a pact with the Devil,

Thomasin—now stripped bare—strides into the woods with Black Phillip (as a goat) at her side. After some time, chanting is heard, reaching a crescendo as Thomasin steps into a clearing where a group of naked witches are writhing in the grips of ritual. With the Devil looking on, the witches begin to levitate. The concluding images of the film are of Thomasin rising up into the air, smiling and basking in her new-found powers. Modern sensibilities, shaped and informed by feminist ideals as they are, may be conflicted about this conclusion. However, as Laurel Zwissler posits, *The Witches* stands out for its counter-project of portraying early modern fears as accurately as possible, depicting the historical diabolical witch rather than the contemporary feminist witch (2018: 1). Thomasin's descent into evil would have been viewed as a clear parable by Puritan audiences, with this scenario presented as a warning for those who failed to remain vigilant against the temptations of the Devil. Fear of damnation was the prevailing fear amongst Puritans, and Eggers presents this fear through a stylised depiction of the demonic pact.

The Witches' Sabbath is deeply embedded in European folklore traditions and demonology, and its imagery has profoundly shaped Western understandings of witchcraft. It was depicted as a meeting of dark forces, an inverted Catholic mass in which the Devil assumed the position as preacher and witches partook in hedonism of every imaginable sort. Old and New England, however, did not share this tradition. In New England, Witches' Sabbaths, 'assemblies', or 'meetings' were rather demure affairs. In reporting on a witchcraft case in Boston, Cotton Mather simply outlined that one of the accused witches 'us'd to be at meetings, which her *Prince* [Satan] and *Four* more were present at' (1689: 11). In the Connecticut and Salem Witch Trials, there were reports of witches' meetings, but without elaborate descriptions. The first notable account of a Witches' Sabbath on English soil that involved both infanticide and cannibalism was the 1612 Lancashire Witch Trials. Thomas Potts' *Discovery of Witches: The Wonderfull Discoverie of Witches in the Countie of*

Lancaster detailed these trials along with the lurid acts that the witches purportedly committed. In the related trials a number of individuals (including a few men) from the Pendle Hill region of Lancashire were charged with the murder of ten people, resulting in the execution of eleven of these witches. Fourteen-year-old Grace Sowerbutts gave testimony of the accused witches travelling to a site on the back of ‘blacke things’ with monstrous faces, engaging in sexual congress with these creatures, and later breaking into houses to drain children of their blood (Potts 1613: sig. L2v.). Further gruesome details also emerged throughout the proceedings and it is evident that this event helped shape the perception of English witchcraft in the seventeenth century. Eggers is again carrying out some historical conflation by drawing together disparate English and colonial Protestant witchcraft beliefs with Continental traditions. *The VVitch* thus attempts to suspend the viewer’s disbelief by committing to a material depiction of the Witches’ Sabbath as presented in the numerous demonological texts that it invokes.

Providences

New England Puritan folktales were primarily concerned with parables concerning Christian principles, and *The VVitch* echoes this purpose with its plot functioning as a morality tale or providence. In the historical context of colonial America, folktales were intended to instil moral values that would regulate behaviour and preserve social cohesion against the perceived supernatural threats inherent in the landscape (Haring and Bendix 2012: 287). Therefore, *The VVitch* is fashioned as an early modern morality tale wherein the characters, in failing to maintain their familial and spiritual unity, are seemingly punished for their transgressions. The destruction of the family in *The VVitch* is largely shaped by historical readings of the Salem Witch Trials and the concept of ‘witch-hysteria’.⁴ This is a historical phenomenon in which a community was driven to commit heinous acts due to fears of

witchcraft. These witch trials were also viewed as providential events. The trial and execution of twenty people in Salem (fourteen of them women) along with the death of several in prison was a watershed moment in the New World Puritan colonies. These trials encompassed many of the central concerns of New England society in the late seventeenth century, but they also revealed lingering anxieties that had plagued this community from its founding (Boyer and Nissenbaum 1974: 180-81). Witchcraft was initially viewed as responsible for the sufferings of the colony, but following the acquittal of numerous individuals, the false accusations against them were then taken as a warning from God. In her 1706 confession, Anne Putnam Jr. stated, 'I desire to be humbled before God for that sad and humbling providence that befell my father's family in the year about '92; that I, then being in my childhood, should, by such a providence of God, be made an instrument for the accusing of several persons of a grievous crime' (Hill 2000: 108). What the New England Puritan encountered in these lands was actually what they left behind in England: religious persecution, political strife, and civic tensions. In this untamed frontier, all colonists could rely upon was the mercy of God and their shared Christian ideals. Yet, as Salem demonstrated, and what *The VVitch* invokes, fear and anxiety could quickly drive the most pious of Christians to the breaking point.

The VVitch's commentary on witch-hysteria is encapsulated in the family's suspicion of Thomasin. These suspicions, and the hysteria created by a string of misfortunes, deliver the girl into evil. As Jane Kamensky notes about early modern witchcraft beliefs, 'to cry witch was to create a witch'. Accusations, regardless of their 'accuracy', created a context wherein witchcraft could be transported from the imagined realm into reality (1997: 155). The first accusations of witchcraft are cast by the twins, who declare that Black Phillip has revealed Thomasin's sins to them. Evidently, Satan is actively attempting to undermine the sanctity of the family by planting doubts in its most vulnerable members. These doubts later take hold as the witch's influence on the family crystallises. The twins blame Caleb's

possession on Thomasin, even breaking out into fits and claiming that she bewitched them. Katherine, driven to hysterics by the grief of losing her unbaptised child and their current predicament, turns on her daughter once the plantation begins to fall into disarray. Thomasin seems initially to emerge as the one figure able who escapes punishment, but, as the ending indicates, she is led astray and succumbs to the Devil's temptations. Thomasin's eventual end and damnation to hell is ensured with her emergence as a witch. This is implied rather than openly stated, as the film ends with Thomasin alive and now in a position of power. The New World Puritan context in which this film is set, however, and the deaths wrought at the hands of the titular witch, clearly indicate that Thomasin's punishment is inevitable and will surely be the cruellest of any to befall the family.

Perhaps the most prominent transgression within the narrative of *The VVitch* is William's pride. This sinful pride is the catalyst for the events of the film, with his hubristic decision to turn away from the settlement effectively condemning his family to a life of suffering. Only at the precipice does he realise his error: 'It is my fault. I confess it. . . . O my God, I am foul. I am bemired with the filth of pride'. With the unravelling of familial bonds, the destruction of the plantation, and the death (literal or metaphorical) of his family at the conclusion of the film, William's folly is complete. Further transgressions can be identified in Caleb and Katherine. Caleb is a devout Christian but is undone by his earthly desires. He is depicted as a boy on the cusp on puberty—and, early on, his eyes linger on Thomasin's breasts. This theme is further emphasised when Caleb is confronted with the witch's enchanted beauty, giving in to his temptations and accepting her embrace. He returns home naked without shame in a bewitched state, bemoaning his sinfulness: 'I am thine enemy, wallowing in the blood and filth of my sins'. Katherine's sins are many, shaped by the darkness that continually visits the family. She is gripped by a growing hysteria following the death of baby Samuel and increasingly projects her despair onto her family, namely

Thomasin, whom she believes to be a witch. Katherine's grief is understandable but manifests in unhealthy ways, making her susceptible to the machinations of the Devil and his minions. She confesses to her husband that she has lost the ability to sense God's presence and 'feel that same measure of love again', believing the whole family is cursed. Finally, in her grief she attempts to strangle Thomasin who retaliates by killing her with a cleaver. The fate of the twins is never explicitly revealed as they disappear shortly after the death of Caleb. Yet, it is likely that they too meet their end, as they have unknowingly entered into the service of the Devil. Through these deaths, *The VVitch* encapsulates Eggers' commitment to the New World Puritan providential worldview and the literary genre of New England folklore. The destruction of the family at the conclusion of the film accurately reflects the source material that the film draws on, establishing a sense of authenticity by depicting an accurate historical setting that is beset—and doomed—by the spectre of the witch.

Conclusion

Robert Eggers' *The VVitch: A New-England Folktale* stands as a visceral and unsettling piece of historical re-construction. The film is a manifestation of four-hundred-year-old fears, depicting the experiences of the Puritan diaspora in the New World. It places audiences in the context of a devout Puritan family, following their confrontations with true evil in the desolate wilds of the North American continent. *The VVitch* is intended to be both familiar and alien, presenting a supernatural Christian world stripped of the trappings of modern society and dominated by a total unquestioning belief in the word of God. The reality of *The VVitch* is one of absolutes, a clear sense of good and evil with very little ground between them. Fear of hell, damnation, and suffering are placed side by side with total submission to divine providence, driving the characters of the film between spiritual extremes.

The themes and tone of *The VVitch* have been largely moulded, then, on the framework of an early modern Puritan folktale. Following in the traditions of folk horror and the historical film, Eggers has created an archetypal tale of Puritan morality and supernatural horror that anchors itself in the context of colonial New England. Underlined by diligent attention to a range of textual traditions and aesthetics rooted in Old and New England, the film manages to remain largely faithful to the spirit of the literary form from which it draws. *The VVitch*'s central objective is to capture a distinct historical tone—an 'Authenticity Feeling' in the words of Mattias Frey—rather than the seemingly impossible task of demonstrating total period accuracy. The historical and narrative immersion that Eggers crafts from these early modern texts is exactly why this film is such an innovative entry in the folk horror genre. As Saige Walton asserts, '*The VVitch* rediscovers and reworks folk horror filmmaking' by emphasising the physicality of this world and supernatural depictions of witchcraft (2018). It is because of this close engagement with the source material, moreover, that *The VVitch* seems particularly cruel. There is no redemption or happy ending permitted to these characters, with the bleak outcome of the film one of the very few that the spiritual landscape of the New World offered. This context is one in which real and imagined horrors exist side by side, where the protagonists see evil where it is not and yet are blind to the 'Devil' right in front of them. *The VVitch* is thus a film that demands close attention from its audience, forcing them into this historical period and the early modern Puritan providential worldview.

Notes

¹ The term 'Puritan' has been contested in scholarship. For the sake of simplicity, this article uses Patrick Collinson's definition. Collinson defines Puritans as the 'hotter sort of Protestants', using the rhetoric of early modern theologian Percival Wilburn in describing individuals who subscribed to a more evangelical interpretation of the scriptures than what

was being espoused by the English ecclesiastical authorities (1967: 13, 27). By Calvinist, this article denotes the total subscription of English Protestants to the doctrine of double predestination (Dixon 2014: 9).

² This article describes ‘folklore’ as the overarching ethnographical concept that holds together numerous different aspects of vernacular culture and cultural traditions. Folklore, as both a label and a discipline, is a nineteenth century invention.

³ Stuart Clark defines demonology as a ‘composite subject consisting of discussions about the workings of nature, the processes of history, the maintenance of religious purity, and the nature of political authority and order’ (1999: viii).

⁴ For a very brief sample of the scholarly texts on the Salem Witch Trials, see Boyer and Nissenbaum 1974; Hill 2000; Roach 2004; and Adams 2008.

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