

## OLLI at DU Syllabus – Spring 2024

### *Salem Possessed*

Tuesday Afternoons Online; 8 weeks

Facilitator: Myra Rich

**Books/Materials/Supplies: Required-** Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft, Paul Boyer & Stephen Nissenbaum

### **Weekly Topics**

#### **Week 1:**

Introduction. Before attending the first class, please read the Prologue: What Happened in 1692, and Chapter 1: 1692: Some New Perspectives. How many ways are there to explain the witchcraft trials? Why does this episode continue to fascinate us? Is history “just the facts?” If not, why not?

#### **Week 2:**

Chapter 2: In Quest of Community, 1639-1687 and Chapter 3: Afflicted Village, 1688-1697. What was a New England town? How did it differ from other forms of colonial settlement? What was the role of religion in the Massachusetts Bay Colony? Why did the witchcraft trials happen in Salem in a more virulent form than in other places in the colonies?

#### **Week 3:**

Chapter 4: Salem Town and Salem Village: The Dynamics of Factional Conflict. Why couldn't people just get along? How did the people of Salem Village explain and justify their social and economic status? What external forces might help explain what happened?

#### **Week 4:**

Chapter 5: Two Families – The Porters and the Putnams; Chapter 6: Joseph and His Brothers. Do these accounts of family strife help explain the witchcraft episode? Why were the families and the Putnam brothers at odds? How did the laws of inheritance and the economic conditions of colonial New England affect family relations?

#### **Week 5:**

Chapter 7: Samuel Parris – A Pilgrim in Bethlehem. What could Samuel Parris have done differently? How did his own needs factor into the judgments he pronounced? What might his situation and his behavior tell us about the role of the clergy in colonial New England?

#### **Week 6:**

Chapter 8: Witchcraft and Social Identity. Does this explanation of the witchcraft episode satisfy you? Sharing of primary sources. All the relevant documents for the Salem episode

have been digitized. Using Google, enter “Salem Witch Trials Documentary Archive and Transcription Project.” Or: [www.salem.lib.virginia.edu/texts/transcripts.html](http://www.salem.lib.virginia.edu/texts/transcripts.html). You could also look at the Essex County Court records. ([www.salem.lib.virginia.edu/Essex/index.html](http://www.salem.lib.virginia.edu/Essex/index.html))

**Week 7:** Discussion of the Forum on Salem Possessed in the William & Mary Quarterly. The Forum was a discussion of the book on the 25th anniversary of its publication. It will be emailed as an attachment.

**Week 8:** Consideration of alternative perspectives and the difficulties of doing research. How do the multiple interpretations of the Salem episode change your view of what history is and how historians do their work? Are multiple interpretations necessarily in conflict with each other.