

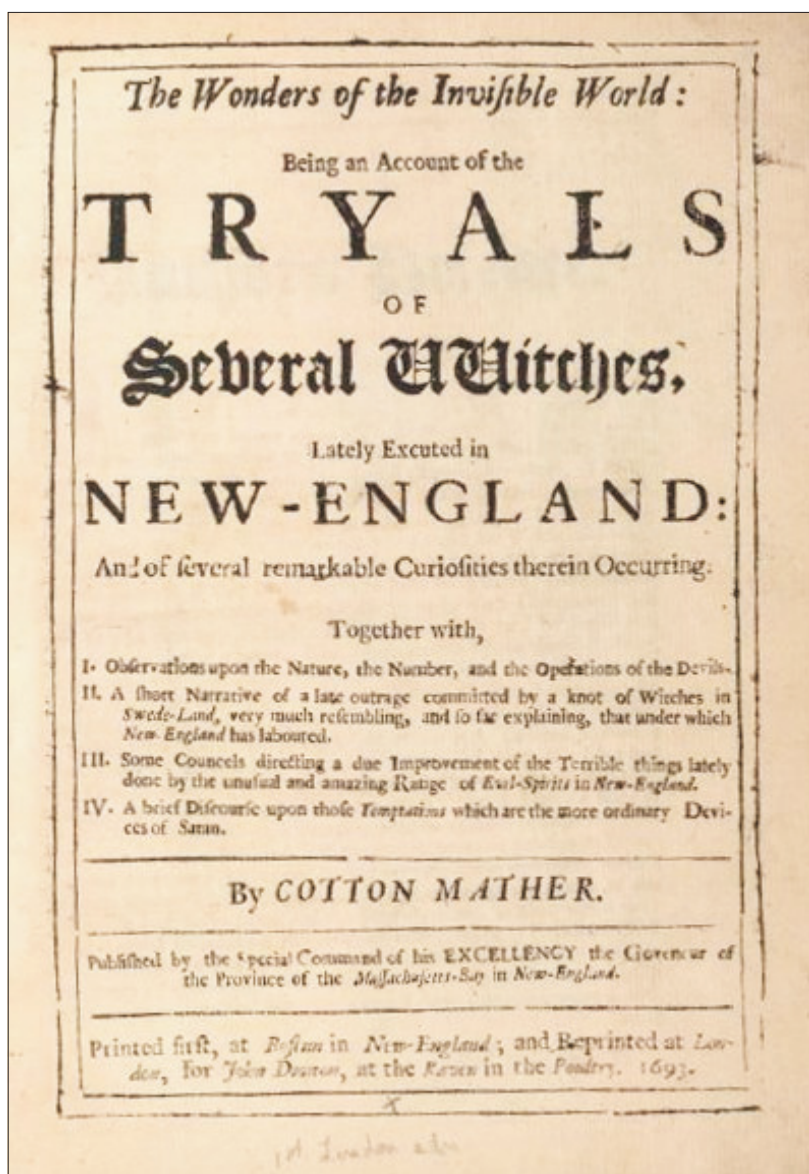
## ***The Wonders of the Invisible World: Cotton Mather's Supernatural Classic***

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Kevin J. Hayes

*Kevin J. Hayes's essay employs a historical approach to Cotton Mather's exploration of the famous Salem witch trials in his 1692 publication *The Wonders of the Invisible World*. Hayes examines the background, methods, structure, and contents of this book, showing how it was intended to be received, how it was received by its contemporaries, and how it has been evaluated by later readers and scholars. "The Wonders of the Invisible World," Hayes argues, is "the blueprint for countless supernatural horror stories in American culture." He provides many quotations from Mather's book that offer some real tastes of both its contents and its style.*

The story of the Salem witch trials remains one of the most compelling episodes in American cultural history. People still struggle to understand how intelligent, well-educated judges and ministers let themselves get carried away by the witch mania. Actually, many people at the time struggled to understand how the witch trials could have happened. The community leaders who administered the trials and conducted the executions knew they would face harsh scrutiny from people outside New England and many from within. Shortly after September 22, 1692, the day the last executions took place, Cotton Mather wrote an account of the trials at the request of Judge



Mather's Wonders of the Invisible World, via Wikipedia. [Public domain.]

Samuel Sewall and others directly involved. Sewall wanted Mather to separate fact from fiction to show that the judges exercised prudence and good judgment.

Mather agreed to write the account, but he could not get access to the official court transcripts, forcing him to use extraneous materials to reconstruct the trials. Instead of reconstructing all twenty trials, Mather wrote briefs or summaries of five of them. He recognized that those five were enough to tell an intriguing story. More trials would only make the account redundant and water down its dramatic impact.

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Together the briefs form the heart of Mather’s book-length compendium, *The Wonders of the Invisible World*, which he published in Boston in mid-October 1692, though the publication was postdated 1693 (Cook 302–03).

The book, which did little to quell the controversy, would retain its fascination among readers for years to come, though a few skeptics could not see why. Clement Shorter, for one, called *The Wonders of the Invisible World* “a turgid volume full of nauseous cant” (x). Shorter’s complaint notwithstanding, *The Wonders of the Invisible World*, largely because of the briefs, deserves recognition as a classic of supernatural American literature.

### **Softening up the Reader**

Mather arranged his contents for maximum rhetorical effect. Before the briefs, he included two sermons and two miscellaneous accounts of supernaturalism, one about a mysterious apparition and the other about an English witchcraft trial. These two accounts soften up readers, letting them know that witchy women—and men—were by no means limited to Salem, Massachusetts. Witchcraft was a universal phenomenon. *The Wonders of the Invisible World* ends with another sermon. The sermons thus bookend the supernatural accounts, safely containing the aberrant behavior of the alleged witches within the religious establishment.

“A Narrative of an Apparition Which a Gentleman in Boston, Had of His Brother, Just Then Murdered in London” is the first miscellaneous account of supernaturalism in *The Wonders of the Invisible World*. Mather bolsters his narrative’s veracity by identifying Joseph Beacon, the Boston man who witnessed the apparition, as a man of class and intellect, “a most ingenious, accomplished and well-disposed young gentleman.” Around five o’clock one morning an apparition of Beacon’s brother, who lived in London, came to him. Mather’s language and imagery would become strongly associated with the supernatural in American popular culture: “His countenance was very pale, ghastly, deadly, and he had a bloody wound on one side of his forehead!” The murderer was planning to emigrate to Boston, so the apparition implored Joseph to have him apprehended. Joseph soon learned that his brother had indeed been murdered when a man bashed in his skull with a fire-fork. Beacon himself died after telling Mather the story, meaning that the only one who witnessed the apparition was no longer alive to verify it (79–81).

As apparitions figured prominently in the Salem witch trials, Beacon’s story provides an account of an apparition separate from the trials, establishing the validity of spectral evidence and demonstrating that ghosts could appear with a righteous purpose (Wise 339). Furthermore, the account is transatlantic in scope, showing that supernaturalism is not a matter of hysterical New Englanders paranoid about being attacked by witches. “A Narrative of an Apparition” suggests that supernaturalism has no limitations in terms of geography. The instant a man is murdered in London his ghost can appear in Boston. Apparitions are not limited by time or space.

Though Mather attests to the truthfulness of Beacon’s story, the traditional motifs in “A Narrative of an Apparition” associate it with folklore. Everyone who has read *Hamlet* knows how a ghost of a murder victim can appear before a relative to implore revenge, but this legendary motif was part of folklore long before Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*. Both Shakespeare and Mather were drawing upon the same tradition. The death of the only eyewitness is another

traditional motif, which allows Mather to assert the truthfulness of “A Narrative of an Apparition” but frees him from the burden of proof.

After “A Narrative of an Apparition” Mather says he will no longer detain his readers from the story of the Salem trials, but he does delay them a little longer to assert his objectivity. Mather reassures everyone that he is a historian, not an advocate. He also supplies another miscellaneous account: “A Modern Instance of Witches Discovered and Condemned, in a Trial before that Celebrated Judge, Sir Matthew Hale.”



*Cotton Mather, ca. 1700, via Wikipedia. [Public domain.]*