



Philip C. Almond. *Demonic Possession and Exorcism in Early Modern England: Contemporary Texts and their Cultural Contexts.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. x + 405 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-81323-5.

Reviewed by Richard Raiswell (Department of History, University of Prince Edward Island)

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Unclean Spirits: What You See is What You Get

The debate over religion in Elizabethan and early Stuart England was fought on many fronts, as Catholics, Puritans, and the official church sought to secure the allegiance of the English populace. One of the more important of these points of contest was over the issue of demonical possession and its potential remedies. To both Catholics and Puritans, the ability to dispossess a demoniac could serve as proof of the veracity of their brand of the faith; as such, not only was dispossession highly effective ammunition against their respective detractors, but it had the potential to win over many converts. But to the state, both Catholicism and Puritanism were potentially seditious ideologies. Thus, by the first decade of the seventeenth century, after a succession of highly public dispossessions emanating from both sides of the denominational spectrum, the Jacobean church sought to regulate dispossession, and championed a more rigorous burden of proof in cases where the preternatural was suspected. By so doing, it helped narrow the demesne ascribed to the supernatural in early modern epistemology.

Despite the fact that the issue of possession was a microcosm of the wider religious controversy of the period between 1570 and 1650, Philip Almond argues that the field still remains poorly charted. His *Demonic Possession and Exorcism in Early Modern England* attempts to redress this problem by offering modernized versions of nine contemporary tracts on demonological possession in the hope of encouraging other scholars to take up where Daniel Walker's seminal 1981 *Unclean Spirits* left off. The tracts Almond presents deal with some of the

most famous and notorious cases of possession in England between 1570 and 1650. They include the accounts of the possession of Alexander Nyndge, Agnes Brigges and Rachel Pynder, the Throckmorton children, Thomas Darling, William Sommers, Mary Glover, and Margaret Muschamp. Each of these texts is set forth with a short preface, in which Almond outlines both the chronology and idiosyncrasies of the possession, and suggests some of the strategic intentions of the tract's author. The whole book is bound together thematically by a forty-two-page introduction that addresses some of the theological and social dimensions of early modern possession.

Almond's emphasis is quite squarely on possession, its public manifestations, and its remedies. This approach has some strengths, for based on his analysis of more than a hundred references to English demoniacs in the period between 1550 and 1700, Almond is able to offer some conclusions about the kind of people who became possessed and the archetypal symptoms generally construed as diagnostic of such preternatural affliction. As was the case with witches, for instance, the majority of demoniacs were female. But in the case of possession, the ratio was not as skewed towards the feminine: only two-thirds of Almond's sample were female. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of demoniacs were children or adolescents. As Almond notes, this adds some weight to James Sharpe's arguments about the relationship between possession and adolescent rebellion. However, the Star Chamber records of the cases of Anne Gunter and Katheren Malpas, for instance, caution against tak-

ing this conclusion too far. Sometimes instances of possession could be manifestations of precisely the opposite dynamic: parents (or in Katheren's case, her grandparents) using the bodies of their daughters in an attempt to manipulate social forces beyond their immediate control.

Despite the book's subtitle, "context" here is conceived too narrowly. In the first place, Almond gives little consideration to the role of the marketplace in shaping his texts and the portrait of possession they present, nor does he assess the role of print culture in helping fix the content of possession for both audience and demoniac. This is a curious omission, for like many other authors on the subject in recent years, Almond argues that the content of possession and its apparent authenticity were a function of a mutually reinforcing dynamic between a demoniac and her audience that was enacted within the confines of a culturally defined script: the demoniac manifests certain traditionally accepted behaviors, while the audience demands that specific tests be made for other well-known symptoms. Moreover, were her performance to prove too unusual, her audience would be inclined to dismiss the possession as counterfeit. Yet precisely the same dynamic operated between the redactors of these texts and their assessment of their audience's tastes. Though each of the texts presented here purports to be written by eyewitnesses or derived from eyewitness accounts, their authors and printers needed them to sell. At one level, then, commercial necessity quite likely dictated that the accounts were embellished to capitalize on the scandalous, the titillating, the sensational, or the wondrous in the performance of a possession. Indeed, J. S. Cockburn has found this to be the case where it is possible to compare witchcraft pamphlets with extant trial records.[1]

On a more sophisticated level, though, it is also likely that these eyewitness testimonies were reworked to conform more closely to the agenda of the author's putative audience. That this seems to have been the case is particularly apparent from the print history of the account of the possession of Alexander Nyndge. As Almond points out, according to the 1573 *Booke declaringe the fearfull vexation*, Nyndge was possessed for only a single day earlier in the year. However, by the 1615 *True and fearefull vexation*, the possession had been expanded to a full six months and had been recast as a Puritan exempla story, embellished with the addition of a litany of new symptoms. Despite the fact that the later pamphlet incorporates the earlier, it is clear that they are constructed towards different ends, and might most profitably be construed as occupying different places in print culture. Un-

fortunately, Almond does not take his discussion beyond noting the differences between the two tracts. In a similar vein, Almond passes over the fact that the patron and dedicatee of the account of the possession of the Throckmorton children was Edward Fenner, the judge who was responsible for the execution of the three witches who were found to have bewitched them. Clearly this fact must have profoundly colored the content of the text. Certainly, Almond concedes that these texts may actually only describe how the demoniac *ought* to behave, but he does not consider how the demands of the intended audience may have informed the literary construction of the possessions they relate.

Second, Almond also gives scant consideration to the prime movers in the wider debate over possession and dispossession that characterized this period. As a result, people like John Darrell, Edmund Anderson, Richard Bancroft, Samuel Harsnett, and Dr. Edward Jordan inhabit only the periphery of his analysis. But more than this, Almond seems only tangentially interested in the wider intellectual, legal, and political climate in which these possessions were enacted. This is a significant omission, for many of these texts were specific responses to other pamphlets that are not reproduced here. Indeed, most of these texts participated to one degree or another in the wider controversy over possession that was a microcosm of the religious tensions of the period. In fact, Almond tends to omit lengthier polemics that explicitly enjoin this debate. He edits out, for instance, a forty-seven-page section entitled "A Discourse Concerning Popish Exorcizing" from the account of William Perry, and a twenty-five-page section appended to the account of the possession of Agnes Brigges and Rachel Pynnder that urged the afflicted to shun preternatural cures. While these invectives may seem tiresome to a modern reader, they are essential to understanding the wider context of early modern possession. As a result, Almond's expurgated versions give the modern reader a skewed sense of both text and context. When stripped of their more polemical content, the texts appear more limited in purpose than they actually were, their focus narrower.

In Almond's defense, he argues that the content of possession remains fairly consistent over the course of this period: the symptoms manifested by demoniacs did not vary according to age or sex; moreover, despite some fairly predictable denominational differences, Catholic and Protestant demoniacs tended to draw from much the same repertoire of symptoms. To some extent, though, this is beside the point, for the authenticity of a possession is only partially contingent upon the symptoms

manifested by the demoniac; it is also a social construction. To be sure, this means that it was adjudged at least in part by the physical and social context in which it is encountered: the status of the demoniac and her family within the community, their reputation and the reputation of any witches who might be implicated were all vital components of the diagnosis. But more than this, the context in which people came to attribute certain behaviors to demonic possession was also a function of the intellectual premises through which they viewed it. Though the particular fits and trances of an individual demoniac may not have differed to any significant degree from those manifested by another, the epistemological filter through which this behavior was perceived, and the significance accorded to it, did change over this period. Moreover, it came increasingly to vary according to the social status and intellectual background of the observer, as the gulf between popular and learned physics and metaphysics grew. Possession, then, is in the eye of the beholder.

This growing rift between these popular and learned discourses runs through most of the texts presented here, for most devote some space to arguing for or against the possibility of demons taking possession of an individual. Moreover, especially in the wake of the 1602 Mary Glover case, it is clear that many demoniacs and their supporters found it increasingly difficult to find doctors, lawyers, or judges to support their social diagnosis of possession, as the place afforded to the supernatural in learned discourse became increasingly qualified. Unfortunately, this growing divergence of views about possession is not something upon which Almond dwells. The result is that his sense of possession is too static, and his conception of context too narrow. Too often, Almond presents possession as a litany of bizarre but ultimately consistent symptoms that he treats as distinct from the epistemological filter through which both contemporary observers and early modern readers perceived and understood it.

To be sure, Almond's introduction is intended primarily only to open up further scholarly debate on early modern possession. In this respect, the texts he presents are integral to his agenda. These, however, are all readily available elsewhere: the Mary Glover text was printed in a facsimile edition as part of Michael MacDonald's *Witchcraft and Hysteria in Elizabethan London* (1991); the other eight are available through Early English Books Online.[2] While critical editions of these texts could have been useful, the apparatus supplied here is superficial and largely confined to identifying Biblical citations.

Moreover, Almond's versions are modernized and occasionally abridged. Thus, the spelling, punctuation, and syntax have been reworked to conform to modern usage, while archaic words and phrasing have likewise been updated. In general, most abbreviations have been silently expanded, and the thorn, ampersand, and Tironian-et replaced by their modern equivalents; curiously, though, "&c." is not expanded, and some names are left in their original contracted form (cf. p. 291). The short passages of Latin that occur occasionally are not consistently translated in the footnotes (cf. p. 324 and p. 357). Passages, phrases, and words that appear in italics in the original are not set off in the modernized text. The result of this manipulation is that these editions cannot be used as Almond intended, for they are inadequate for scholarly research.

Finally, Almond's editions are visually set off from his introductions by the fact that they are printed in Caslon Antique. Presumably, this font was chosen to give the editions at least the superficial appearance of facsimiles, for it looks something like a well-spaced sixteenth-century Roman type. Not only is this frankly annoying and anachronistic, it is misleading: only three of the texts were printed in a Roman font; the rest were printed in the usual English blackletter.

In his preface, Almond writes that he hopes that his modernized editions of these texts will ease "access into an inaccessible world while retaining the spirit of the original" (p. x) and that "these contemporary stories of demonic possession and exorcism ... will encourage others to search further" (p. ix). While I certainly join Almond's plea, in good faith, I cannot enjoin scholars to begin here. Indeed, it is difficult to conceive of a scholarly audience that could make use of abridged, modernized versions of late-sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century English texts. But equally, the weakness of the critical apparatus and the very narrow sense of context through which these texts are assessed make it problematic for students as well.

In the end, possession is more than a litany of closely defined behaviors. It is a cultural product, and as such, it needs to be understood through the lens of the culture that produces it. Almond's work catalogs the content of possession in detail; however, it does not adequately assess the context through which it was perceived.

Notes

[1]. J. S. Cockburn, *Calendar of Assize Records: Home Circuit Indictments Elizabeth I and James I* (London:

H.M.S.O., 1985), p. 98.

Elizabethan London: Edward Jorden and the Mary Glover Case (London: Routledge, 1991), n.p.

[2]. Michael MacDonald, *Witchcraft and Hysteria in*

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