

## Possession and the Senses in Early Modern England

Erika Gasser

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Résumé de l'article

*Cet article porte sur l'histoire de la possession et des interférences préternaturelles dans l'optique des sens. Comme ce genre de cas présente l'intersection de la perception incarnée et éphémère, il offre des opportunités uniques d'évaluer les conceptions de l'élite et populaires de la capacité des humains à sentir ce qui se trouve à l'intérieur et au-delà du domaine naturel. Les cas de possession offrent également une excellente occasion d'examiner comment les tentatives d'attribution d'un sens aux actes corporels ont exigé des écrivains qu'ils présentent les sens des personnes affligées et de ceux qui les assistent comme étant étroitement liés. Les textes publiés sur la possession sont donc un point d'entrée à partir duquel il est possible d'évaluer les aspects de « l'intersensorialité », lorsque les témoins semblent à la fois faire l'expérience de sens qui se chevauchent et, occasionnellement, découvrent leurs perceptions liées aux personnes affligées d'une façon qui dépasse ce qui est naturel. Cet article examine également le rôle que l'insensibilité a joué dans certains cas de propagande de possession, à la fois lorsque les sujets ont vécu des tranches complètes et lorsqu'ils ont fait preuve d'une incapacité sélective à voir, entendre ou parler en réponse à des indices culturels.*

# Possession and the Senses in Early Modern England

ERIKA GASSER

## *Abstract*

*This article addresses the history of possession and preternatural interference through the lens of the senses. Because these sorts of cases featured the intersection of embodied and ephemeral perception, they provide singular opportunities to evaluate elite and popular conceptions of humans' capacity to sense what lay within and beyond the natural realm. Possession cases also offer a prime opportunity to examine how attempts to ascribe meaning to bodily acts required that writers present the senses of afflicted individuals and those who attended them as intricately connected. Published possession texts thus provide an entry point from which to evaluate aspects of "intersensoriality," when witnesses appeared both to experience overlapping senses themselves and occasionally to find their perceptions linked with afflicted persons in ways that surpassed what was natural. The paper also examines the role that insensibility played in some instances of possession propaganda, both when subjects experienced complete trances and when they displayed selective inability to see, hear, or speak in reaction to cultural cues.*

## *Résumé*

*Cet article porte sur l'histoire de la possession et des interférences préternaturelles dans l'optique des sens. Comme ce genre de cas présente l'intersection de la perception incarnée et éphémère, il offre des opportunités uniques d'évaluer les conceptions de l'élite et populaires de la capacité des humains à sentir ce qui se trouve à l'intérieur et au-delà du domaine naturel. Les cas de possession offrent également une excellente occasion d'examiner comment les tentatives d'attribution d'un sens aux actes corporels ont exigé des écrivains qu'ils présentent les sens des personnes affligées et de ceux qui les assistent comme étant étroitement liés. Les textes publiés sur la possession sont donc un point d'entrée à partir duquel il est possible d'évaluer les aspects de « l'intersensorialité », lorsque les témoins semblent à la fois faire l'expérience de sens qui se chevauchent et, occasionnellement, découvrent leurs perceptions liées aux personnes affligées d'une façon qui dépasse ce qui est naturel. Cet article examine également le rôle que l'insensibilité a joué dans certains cas de propagande de possession, à la fois lorsque les sujets ont vécu des trances complètes et lorsqu'ils ont fait preuve d'une incapacité sélective à voir, entendre ou parler en réponse à des indices culturels.*

In England in 1584 a woman named Margaret Cooper suffered from fits and visions that resembled signs of demonic possession; interestingly, while her own suffering was greatest, many of those who witnessed it also briefly perceived the sights, sounds, and smells that troubled her. At first Margaret's affliction had appeared mainly as idle talk, which increasingly troubled her husband who encouraged her to pray so "that it would please God to send her a more quiet spirit."<sup>1</sup> When her behaviour became too erratic for him to handle, he called for her sister and others to assist him as Margaret shook violently and foamed at the mouth. Her idle talk escalated to fearful reports of apparitions, and she said "to her husbände and the rest, *doe you not see the Deuill*: whereat they desired her to remember God and to cal[*l*] for grace ... *Well* (quoth she) *if you see nothing now, you shall see something by and by.*" To the astonishment of those present, "they heard a noise in the streete as it had been the coming of two or three Carts," and then "her husbände looking vp in his bedd espied a thing come to the bedd muche like vnto a Beare, but it had no head nor no taile."<sup>2</sup> This spirit gathered Margaret up like a hoop and rolled her around the chamber, nearly tossing her from a window as the onlookers wept and prayed. Finally, they "heard a thing knocke at her feete as it had been vpon a Tubbe, and they sawe a great fire as it seemed to them at her feete, the stincke whereof was horrible."<sup>3</sup> After Margaret's husband and brother-in-law took it upon themselves to charge the devil to depart in the Lord's name, Margaret recovered herself. But soon after, she looked out at a window and said, "O Lord (quoth she) me thinke I see a little childe, but they gaue no regard to her: These wordes she spake two or three times: so at the last they all looked out at the windowe: and loe they espied a thing like vnto a little child with a very bright shining countenance, casting a greate light in the Chamber, & then the Candle burned very brightly, so that they might one see an other."<sup>4</sup> When the power of community prayer assured Margaret's deliverance, the apparition vanished, and for all of the company those sights, sounds, and smells of the beyond once again transcended human discernment.

Cases of demonic possession involved stylized performances by individuals, called demoniacs, who acted as if they were suffering spectral assaults from devils that had succeeded in entering and controlling them from within. In early modern England possession overlapped with bewitchment when subjects claimed either that witches personally afflicted them in spectral form, or had sent the devils to harm them. Like Stuart Clark, Brian Levack, and others, I see possessions

as culturally-specific performances in which participants took on roles drawn from shared scripts.<sup>5</sup> For some demonologists, a true possession suggested that the subject had revoked his or her baptism and transferred allegiance to the Devil, while innocent or ambivalent demoniacs suffered from “obsessions” in which spirits attacked from without.<sup>6</sup> On the ground, however, most demoniacs performed some of the symptoms of possession while attempting to present themselves as either resisting the Devil or as bewitched — they did so to avoid culpability that would render them like witches themselves, and in ways that revealed popular conceptions of the Devil that both complemented and contradicted those of authorities. In addition, demoniacs acted out their affliction in ways that expressed sin or faith filtered through expectations of what was possible and proper for one’s age and sex.<sup>7</sup> While possession narratives therefore reveal useful insights about popular versus elite conceptions of the preternatural, and social views of age and gender, I focus here on possessions as performances that required interpretation to have meaning, and which necessarily passed through the senses as they staked polemical religious and political claims.

This article addresses the history of early modern English possession and preternatural interference through the lens of the senses. First, it explains the centrality of the senses to the discernment of possession cases that faced increased scrutiny at the turn of the seventeenth century; second, it reviews the challenges inherent in evaluating demoniacs’ sensory capacities, especially when boundaries were blurred between demoniacs and witnesses; finally, it analyzes the problem of insensibility in an example of possession skepticism that emerged within a possession propaganda war. When possessed persons such as Margaret Cooper saw apparitions, heard the voices of tormenting or angelic spirits, smelled foul demonic odours, tasted brimstone, vomited filth, or felt a witch’s pinch, the sensory perceptions of the afflicted and of witnesses held weighty implications for questions of religious and political legitimacy. Authorities accordingly debated the reliability of the senses, and afflictions that blurred the line between the corporeal and the evanescent, as part of their broader attempts to exert control over instances of demonic interference. Because these sorts of cases offered unique opportunities to examine the intersection of embodied and ephemeral perception, they provide singular opportunities to evaluate early modern English conceptions of humans’ capacity to sense what lay within and beyond the natural realm.

Possessions were intricate cultural events that sparked fascination and controversy because of the ways they factored in debates among Puritans, Catholics, and Anglicans.<sup>8</sup> As Protestant patterns took root over the course of the long seventeenth century, ministers emphasized that clergy should use only scriptural means, specifically prayer and fasting, to petition God for the deliverance of demoniacs. They called this “dispossession” to differentiate it from Catholic exorcism. This allowed Puritans and other “hotter” sorts of Protestants to distance themselves simultaneously from what they characterized as fraudulent Catholic exorcisms, on the one hand, and the Sadducee-like skepticism of the Church of England, on the other.<sup>9</sup> The Anglican leadership, finding both responses to preternatural interference to be disruptive and superstitious, did not appreciate the distinction as Puritans would have preferred. In the years preceding the turn of the seventeenth century, several controversies were published as possession and witchcraft-possession propaganda.<sup>10</sup> Possession was enmeshed with complex questions about the boundary between natural, preternatural, and supernatural phenomena, which in turn held implications for questions about what constituted wonders as opposed to miracles.<sup>11</sup> What’s more, even after the Church of England grew increasingly skeptical of these phenomena, ministers or priests who could deliver the afflicted from their suffering made a powerful argument on their faith’s behalf that might do more to gain converts than years of preaching. After a new Witchcraft Act was passed in 1604, which included Canon 72 that outlawed attempted dispossessions without a Bishop’s approval, the stakes sharpened even more.<sup>12</sup> Those who claimed that genuine dispossessions had taken place, such as Puritan minister John Darrell and his associates in the 1590s and 1600s, characterized Anglican disapproval as “smotheringe of the worke of God.”<sup>13</sup> Given the power that possession cases had to serve as sectarian propaganda in broader struggles among Protestants and Catholics, it is no surprise that these cases sparked controversy.

As sources, witchcraft and possession narratives varied widely across the long seventeenth century, ranging from sensational broadsides in pursuit of one kind of profit to lengthy tomes written by clergy in pursuit of another. These narratives must be read with great care, both to avoid simplistic dismissals of past experiences now broadly viewed as impossible, and also to prevent religious and political propaganda from utterly occluding the relation of events. At the same time, rather than view possession narratives’ propagandistic nature

as a hindrance, in which “true” events were warped by authors’ limiting filters, it helps to recognize, as Stuart Clark points out, that propaganda was “not extraneous to possession but one of its very pre-suppositions.”<sup>14</sup> Witnesses and authors scrutinized every utterance, gesture, and manifestation for their true significance among competing meanings, and forwarded a version of events that suited their broader agendas. While the prevalence of propaganda was a constant across the period, Barbara Rosen and Marion Gibson have shown that witchcraft and witchcraft-possession narratives changed after 1590 in ways that altered subgenres, sources, authorship, and intention.<sup>15</sup> Gibson also points out that one of the greatest struggles authors faced was to account for evidence, which was the area of “most distrust”;<sup>16</sup> I believe the senses played a pivotal role in this problem, within bed-chambers and courtrooms as well as within the published texts.

Since historians are, as Alain Corbin explains, “prisoner[s] of language,” and since the published narratives that attempted to describe episodes of witchcraft and demonic possession were especially propagandistic constructions, scholars attempting a sensory history of witchcraft and possession will necessarily have to grapple with the “textualism, poststructuralism, and other creeds of reading” that Peter Charles Hoffer notes as potential obstacles to attempts to engage with the sensory past.<sup>17</sup> Rather than hinder our understanding of the experience of the past, an exploration of possession narratives’ textuality actually helps to bring readers closer to historical events that were never simply lived and perceived. It also allows us to explore how sensory experiences and attempts to ascribe meaning to bodily acts through language required that writers present the senses of afflicted individuals and those who attended them as intricately connected. Every possession was a struggle for meaning as well as a struggle to resist the devil, and it is important to note that these events and the texts that characterized them contained inherent ambiguities in part because of their central reliance upon sensory perception.

Sensory scholars have noted the role that senses played in identifying preternatural wonders, but there is still room to refine the particular angle of approach required when handling such sources.<sup>18</sup> Constance Classen’s “The Witch’s Senses” explains how the gendered Aristotelian framework in much of early modern Europe attributed to some senses greater value because of their presumed link to reason, with predictable implications for women and those who deviated from norms. From this “suspect female sensorium” Classen privileges touch

as the “most dangerous of the feminine senses.”<sup>19</sup> But Classen traces how early modern Europeans believed that witches perverted each of the senses at a time when institutions of patriarchal control found new ways to justify women’s exclusion from the proper uses to which the senses could be put. Matthew Milner’s study of the senses in the English reformation charts the centrality of affective sensory theories throughout the period. Sensory discernment was central to experiences of faith, but humans potentially risked sin by giving in to sensual appetites, on the one hand (like Eve), or demanding proof of matters of faith, on the other (like Thomas).<sup>20</sup> Milner demonstrates the insufficiency of generalizations that have posited “reformed Christianity as asensual and intellectualized in contrast to the sensual backwardness of pre-reformation English religion and Roman Catholicism,” in part by exploring reformation empiricism.<sup>21</sup> This had implications for questions of the Devil’s propensity to block or delude the senses, and provides a useful point from which to consider how conceptions of the senses bridged devotional literature and possession narratives. Close attention to these sources makes it possible to evaluate the often contradictory role the senses played in affirming or negating putative cases of demonic possession.<sup>22</sup>

Several factors contributed to the divisiveness of possession cases and their significance for sensory history. Possession was a condition diagnosed through sensory observation of a subject’s body and immediate environment; witnesses at the bedside of a demoniac held myriad competing conceptions of what demonic interference was and how to properly to discern it; nearly every element of the possession required judgement about evidence, sensed or unsensed, and both elite and popular conceptions held that the Devil was a liar who sought to deceive the senses.<sup>23</sup> Writers who published possession narratives strove to establish that they were suitably reliable authorities, that gathered witnesses had been sufficiently reasonable to determine what had taken place, and that it was appropriate to draw religious conclusions based upon what others swore to have witnessed (for example, by claiming it was impossible for the symptoms to have been counterfeited). Because natural infirmities could also affect the senses, demonologists, as Stuart Clark states, had to explain “not one but four categories of extraordinary events; real demonic effects, illusory demonic effects, real non-demonic effects, and illusory non-demonic effects. And among the non-demonic, they had to allow for both the spontaneous workings of nature and those produced by human

ingenuity.”<sup>24</sup> Given possession phenomena’s layered complexity, it was unavoidable that the senses were both of unparalleled importance to the discernment of putative cases and also a profoundly precarious foundation on which to build them.

Possession cases also provide a useful context from which to consider both what Leigh Eric Schmidt calls “multisensory complexity,”<sup>25</sup> and also the call from Mark Smith and others to attend to historical “intersensoriality” as a way to combat rigid hierarchical approaches to early modern senses.<sup>26</sup> Published possession texts provide an entry point from which to evaluate aspects of intersensoriality as it was experienced in the long seventeenth century, since the senses of demoniacs displayed demonic interference in complex and interconnected ways. In addition to the interdependent nature of *demoniacs’* senses, these cases also demonstrate ways that *witnesses* occasionally found their perceptions linked with the demoniac in ways that surpassed what was natural. Smith has explained that work on intersensoriality is perhaps premature given that so much remains to be discovered about the individual senses,<sup>27</sup> and a full account of its workings is beyond the scope of an article, but possession phenomena offer a sufficiently focused angle from which to attempt a beginning. As the following cases demonstrate, the enhanced and suppressed sensory perception of demoniacs constituted both a crucial sign of a case’s legitimacy and a pervasive weak point from which critics could attack that legitimacy.

### Sensing the Preternatural

As the aforementioned case of Margaret Cooper demonstrates, preternatural phenomena such as possessions were believed to affect the entwined senses of both demoniacs and witnesses by creating fearful physical environments that fostered shared experiences in which individuals’ sensory perceptions sometimes merged with those of others. In order for the greater meaning of the event to be more broadly known as a published text, those who had been present were compelled to stake unambiguous claims about what had taken place. The mood at the bedside of a demoniac, however, was markedly challenging to write about; its drama suited the form of propaganda, but also patently resisted attempts to convey the fullness of what the event had felt like in its sights, sounds, smells, sensations, and tastes.<sup>28</sup> Demonologists also struggled with the problem of the senses, especially because it was as much a hindrance for those who believed in the validity of



contemporary possession and witchcraft cases as for those who challenged them (or at least the methods used to discern and adjudicate them). Writers, both believing and skeptical, accepted the Devil's proclivity to attempt to deceive the senses and accordingly posited various theories about these limits throughout the early modern period.<sup>29</sup>

These questions were particularly crucial for legal or clerical authorities who had to adjudicate cases brought by people who felt sure they had witnessed a legitimate possession or bewitchment. Barbara J. Shapiro has demonstrated that the resulting epistemological challenges forced early modern authorities to struggle with many of the questions central to possession and witchcraft, such as the meaning of witness testimony versus written testimony and the viability of ordinary people to serve as witnesses and evaluators of evidence.<sup>30</sup> Shapiro traces the influential empirical strategies and attitudes toward preternatural matters of Francis Bacon, Robert Hooke, and Robert Boyle, as well as of latitudinarians who argued that religion could be proved through "matter of fact."<sup>31</sup> Because eye and ear witnesses were so crucial in many of these cases, it was not possible to avoid the question of sensory perception and its reliability in law.<sup>32</sup> While some seventeenth-century writers such as Joseph Glanvil, Henry More, and Richard Baxter emphasized that reliable witnesses were sufficient to prove facts that demonstrated true religion, others such as John Webster and John Wagstaffe refuted the idea by arguing, as Shapiro writes of Wagstaffe, that "spirits were too fine to be perceived by the senses [and] were not amenable to the proof of fact."<sup>33</sup> Battles over what constituted sufficient proof of religion, especially given the sectarian uses to which such arguments could be put, made it impossible for authors of possession publications to avoid these controversies. Because witnesses had to rely on their senses to perceive preternatural interference, questions about how properly to handle sensory evidence placed a point of contentious instability at the centre of putative possession cases throughout the early modern period.

Despite the challenges of establishing reliable evidence about what had been sensed, there was a long tradition of discerning possession according to an established set of symptoms recognizable to both common folk and authorities. Accordingly, some of the most effective possession propaganda emphasized the dramatic and unnatural senses that demoniacs gained as a result of their affliction. There were many complex ways in which the senses made a possession, but among the most common symptoms were the sighting of apparitions

usually but not always invisible to all but the afflicted persons, the hearing of voices usually inaudible to all but the afflicted, and the experience of painful convulsions and assaults, often in combination with apparitions and voices in ways that met customary expectations about resisting the Devil and attributing responsibility in cases of alleged witchcraft. If gathered witnesses could not see the spectral figures themselves they could nonetheless “overhear” the demoniac’s discourse with them, something that also happened to work well on the page not only to express the sensational aspects of the case, but also the central points of propaganda the authors saw in its resolution. The most compelling examples of this form involved an intricate combination of the demoniac’s sight, hearing, and touch (and sometimes smell and taste), conveyed by speech to the hearing of those gathered to observe.

In many ways, English cases of possession and witchcraft in the long seventeenth century continued to replicate older patterns of Catholic and continental European beliefs, even as they began to distinguish themselves by emphasizing Protestant priorities and local traditions. In a broad sampling of texts that describe apparent or putative possessions one can find a dizzying array of formulaic and inventive apparitions. In a narrative published in 1650, for example, Margaret Muschamp acted as if possessed while attempting to build a case against a neighbour she suspected of bewitching her. She saw various animal-shaped apparitions that represented both demonic and angelic spirits as she struggled to convince authorities of the veracity of her case.<sup>34</sup> A 1647 account about the experiences of John Mowlin and Thomas Lipeat blurred the line between wonders and miracles and flirted with the suggestion that two men had been called upon as prophets. They heard voices, saw visions that were ambivalently benevolent, and described a devil figure who offered money in exchange for compliance.<sup>35</sup> Many demonic appearances fit customary depictions of the Devil as a black man, sometimes well-appareled and cloven-hooved. These devils could appear solicitous or malevolent, and sometimes were both, as in the case of Thomas Sawdie whose affliction was published in 1664.<sup>36</sup> The narrative of Sarah Bower published in 1693 provided an especially well-developed depiction of apparitions that included both angelic and demonic forms; she reported another well-dressed gentleman in black who offered flattery, gold, and silver if she would provide her allegiance and blood from her arm.<sup>37</sup> Bower went on to see an angel but also “many strange Visions” that the Devil

sent to her in “the hideous Shape of a Monstrous Fiery Dragon, other whiles a Lyon; the Man of God pulling one way, and the Devil another.”<sup>38</sup> Bower’s apparitions provided a visible sign (at least to her) of the battle being waged over her own soul and, by extension, every soul. Possession’s allegorical nature and pedagogical power help to explain why these cases were so compelling to clergy as well as regular folk.

The intensity of a demoniac’s immediate environment frequently led to an intersensoriality that blurred sensory boundaries. Time and again, gathered witnesses heard noises caused by spirits’ actions, gaped at the impossible contortions of demoniacs in their fits, and expressed their willingness to attest to the wondrous things that they had seen, heard, and felt. Just as the senses of the demoniac appeared strangely enmeshed with preternatural forces that could not normally be perceived, so too did the senses of demoniacs merge ambivalently with those of the people who observed them. Thomas Sawdie’s case from the 1660s is notable in that he reacted to the touch of his attending ministers by falling into a dead fit, something more commonly attributed to the way that the touch of a suspected witch would interrupt the bewitchment and therefore affect the afflicted in ways unlike the touch of any other person.<sup>39</sup> While it was common for demoniacs to reject the speech and ministrations of clergy, to react to the ministers’ touch in this way blurred the line between the implications of touch normally attributed to the unnatural powers of a witch and the possibility that something inherently powerful resided in the touch of clergy — not a view favoured by most Protestants. It was crucial that all parties face the occasionally contradictory logic of these episodes and draw the proper conclusions, which was usually possible because of the great flexibility of the formula that made a recognizable possession and the careful pains taken by those who published them. Those who witnessed Thomas Sawdie’s suffering, like the attendants at Margaret Cooper’s bedside, also experienced a degree of slippage between the natural and preternatural realms. As the ministers tested how their touch would cause Sawdie to cease his fits and fall into a dead trance, one “felt at [Sawdie’s] Wrist a sudden vibration and quivering of the spirits within, but no part moved outwardly.” And once while Sawdie slept, “Three persons did watch by him that night, who heard a noise, as of horses running furiously into the Court, the doors unlatched and unlockt, so that they were in a very great fear.”<sup>40</sup> In such cases when the context for the possession had already been established, and particularly when the central demoniac was impas-

sioned and compelling, witnesses who were invested in the religious drama reported either sharing the same sights, sounds, or smells, or independently perceiving new preternatural phenomena. Just being in proximity to a possession could act upon observers' senses in ways that defied nature, which reinforced the permeability of natural and preternatural sensory perception.

The formulaic nature of published possession accounts highlights the ways that demoniacs and those who made meaning out of their experiences, whether sympathetically or not, shared a belief that the sensing of spirits was the primary mechanism by which the preternatural realm could make itself known to those in the natural realm. Many of the accounts contain an explicit ambivalence about the meaning of these events, as when authors appeared both to revel in the astonishing nature of the visions, and also when they expressed necessary caution about attributing divine significance to the actions of mortals. For all of those invested in controlling the meaning of these events, whether as believers or skeptics, the senses were the bedrock upon which the entire case — matter of fact or delusion — was built. Possessions owed their explanatory power in part to the newly gained sights, sounds, and sensations that the afflicted subjects exhibited, and in part because of the intersensoriality that was mutually constituted by demoniacs and witnesses.

### Insensibility in Possession Cases

Demoniacs' dramatically enhanced or altered senses heightened the effectiveness of possession narratives as propaganda, which explains why these elements frequently placed these elements at the centre of both believing and skeptical accounts. These sensed preternatural abilities shocked onlookers but also followed conventional patterns that allowed witnesses to recognize in sufferers more than just random gestures — the body produced the signs, the senses perceived the signs, the senses made meaning from the signs, and in turn reinforced bodily experience. In contrast, while claims of *insensibility* were a regular feature of possession accounts, they did not usually receive as much sustained attention within possession narratives. In such cases, believing authors faced the challenge of determining with certainty that the demonic was failing to sense, and then convincing their readers to trust their account of this failure. Attendants often tested demoniacs' stoic trances with painful physical trials, although

demoniacs frequently passed this aspect of testing even when failing others.<sup>41</sup> Nonetheless, the question of a subject's insensibility touched upon many of the complex ambivalences inherent in how possession was understood, and when skeptical authors were motivated to do so they could undermine a demoniac's claims of insensibility by attributing it to medical or psychological causes — not to mention intentional fraud — rather than preternatural ones.<sup>42</sup>

If the sighting of apparitions, hearing of disembodied voices, and suffering of painful contortions constituted some of the most important sensed elements of a possession, their *selective* insensibility was also viewed as highly significant. When demoniacs could not see some of those present or read certain words from Bibles placed in front of them, and when they could not hear or speak holy words but exhibited profane and blasphemous speech, their behaviours merged with cultural expectations about how devils might seek to encourage sin and to torment those who resisted them. These symptoms were so common to possessions as to become key markers of the phenomenon and warrant fuller discussion, especially to distinguish selective insensibility from what might be called full insensibility, when demoniacs — either while in dead trances or in thrall to invisible spirits — appeared not to be able to perceive any natural sights, sounds, or sensations in their immediate environment. In some cases, demoniacs appeared to slip between these states with considerable flexibility, and those who published the accounts were left with the challenge of providing a stable interpretation for unstable phenomena.

Demoniacs' selective insensibility changed as much in response to cues based on the episode's internal logic and witness give-and-take as to any consistent demonology. This created a very complex system of selective perception that made it possible for observers to draw different conclusions about the veracity of a case based on viewing the same behaviours. For example, demoniacs and bewitched people often had trances in which they appeared not to be able to hear, see, speak, or feel (and sometimes, eat, although cases of fasting or inedia<sup>43</sup> appear to have been a matter apart). Sometimes they were rendered entirely insensible for long periods of time, as was a man from St. Osyth in the 1580s, T. Crosse, whose wife testified "hee coulde neyther see, heare, nor speake, and his face all to bee scratched."<sup>44</sup> Those attending to eleven-year-old Elizabeth Throckmorton in Warboys in the early 1590s faced a similar predicament when she "fell into the most sorrowfull fit ... weeping with sobs and sighs most pitiful to heare, with a

strong imagination, crying, and could not be appeased (for her senses were all benumbed)."<sup>45</sup> Some could see only the person they accused of harming them, as became evident when Elizabeth confronted John Samuel, the head of the family she accused of causing her and her sisters' affliction. Samuel insisted on challenging the girl directly, even though witnesses had already determined that she could not hear when in her trance. The authors noted that while he "might perceive very well . . . that the child could not hear him nor answer to any of his speeches . . . she neither heard him nor any other in the company, yet she saw him and his daughter and not any other."<sup>46</sup> In Warboys and elsewhere, demoniacs' selective insensibility provided a powerful explanatory device both at the bedside and in published texts.

A broad reading of such cases reveals a recognizable pattern that combined adherence to customary signs of possession with individual innovation. Anne Styles' symptoms in 1653 included "lying in a trance" that alternated with foaming at the mouth, being tossed around the room, and seeing a vision of the Devil that looked at her with glittering eyes.<sup>47</sup> In 1664, James Barrow was "taken above thirty times in a day both lame, dumb and blind," a condition that persisted for quite some time as ministers, priests, and skeptics competed to control his deliverance.<sup>48</sup> That same year eleven-year-old Elizabeth Pacy's fits left her so that she "could not speak one Word all the time, and for the most part she remained as one wholly senseless as one in a deep Sleep." She and her nine-year-old sister Deborah experienced "a soreness over their whole Bodies, so as they could endure none to touch them: at other times they would be restored to the perfect use of their Limbs, and deprived of their Hearing; at other times of their Sight, at other times of their Speech . . . At other times they would fall into Swounings" that relieved them of having to answer the questions put to them about the women they accused of causing their suffering.<sup>49</sup> In a brief but complex account from 1688, young Nathan Crab spent years "much prejudiced in his Speech; sometimes he cannot speak at all, but is as one dumb for a Week or Fortnight together: He speaks plain enough between, but when he hath the Dumb Fits he can hardly move his Tongue in his Mouth; and he is generally so deprived of Reason, that he is clad, and otherwise used as a meer Idiot."<sup>50</sup> When Thomas Spatchet became afflicted in 1693 he alternated between "benumbing" fits, which seized him in stillness for hours at a time, and shaking or skipping.<sup>51</sup> The remarkable and polemical case of Richard Dugdale in 1697 included claims that he experienced, among

many other diverse symptoms, trances and dead fits in which he lay as if lifeless, periods when he was “possest with a dumb Devil, and had not spoken at all,” and fits in which he was “extreamly hurry’d and ridden about, and chafed, and besmear’d on his head, as with the foam of an Horse hard ridden, and of a very rank smell.” One witness to Dugdale’s affliction testified that “she also heard (as she and others thought) a noise out of his Belly, like as if a litter of young Dogs had been sucking there,” which was only one of the memorable instances when he made or appeared to cause alarming noises.<sup>52</sup> The selective and changeable nature of demoniacs’ insensibility left the authors of possession narratives in a difficult position when they had to translate such intense but ephemeral elements of perception onto the page.

To illustrate the ways that questions of insensibility and perception could matter in English possession cases, it is instructive to consider the case of twelve-year-old Thomas Harrison of Northwich in Cheshire at the turn of the seventeenth century. His case was notable both for its emphasis on the senses and on the role it played in ongoing conflicts between Puritans and Anglican authorities who saw Puritan dispossessions as little more than popish zealotry and dissimulation. Harrison’s case was especially noteworthy because the godly ministers were granted a license to attempt to deliver him from his possession — likely a unique circumstance in the wake of Canon 72 that outlawed such ministrations without a Bishop’s approval.<sup>53</sup> The initial account was recorded in the biography of Puritan gentleman John Bruen, who had made detailed notes about the boy’s condition while praying for his recovery, later published in Samuel Clarke’s influential martyrology.<sup>54</sup> Harrison’s affliction evoked demonic possession in many ways, such as his unnaturally alternating weakness and strength and his astonishing fits in which he would, “to the great astonishment of the hearers, howl like a dog, mew like a cat, roar like a bear, froth like a boar, [and] when any prayed with him, his passions were strongest, and his rage, and violence greatest, ready to fly in their faces, and to drown their voices by his yellings, and out-cries.” This devilish rage was enhanced if any approached him with a Bible, which Harrison would strive to destroy, and alternated with trances in which he lay insensible as a corpse, without any natural colour in his flesh, and with his mouth agape.<sup>55</sup>

While Harrison’s symptoms convinced his attendants that his was a genuine possession, those who challenged the viability of Puritan methods of dispossession, if not the viability of possession and witchcraft themselves, were less assured. Samuel Harsnett — the great

dispossession skeptic and Anglican Chaplain to the Bishop of London — solicited the godly ministers John Deacon and John Walker to join the Church of England's propaganda war already in progress against Puritan minister John Darrell, which centred on several dispossessions Darrell claimed to have facilitated.<sup>56</sup> Deacon and Walker stated that they were moved to write their text to counteract the harm done to godly Protestantism by “falsely pretended miracles,” which they contended served the interests of both atheists and Catholics at their expense.<sup>57</sup> The authors took up the question of the senses in a dialogic text with an imagined opponent allegorically represented by the name “Exorcistes,” and styled their rebuttals as coming from one “Orthodoxus.” When Exorcistes declared that Thomas Harrison was, in his fits, entirely “*senselesse* in every part, as he neither *seeth*, nor *heareth*, nor *speaketh*, nor *feeleth*: and therefore essentially *possesst* with a *Divell*,” Orthodoxus replied by stating:

How know you for certaine, that hee is . . . so *senselesse* . . . ? You are able (I confesse) to know when your *selfe* neither *seeth*, nor *heareth*, nor *speaketh*, nor *feeleth*: but that you should (in like manner) discern as soundly of any such *defect of sense* in another, it is much more (I beleeve) than you are able to demonstrate truely unto us . . . yea and (by as good reason) you may likewise very boldlie conclude, that [a] man in a *traunce is also possesst* with a *spirit* or *Diuell*: because (in all outward appearance) he seemeth no *lesse senseless* then this your pretended *Demoniake*. But (by the way) be it here graunted freely unto you, that an undoubted *true senselesnesse* doth argue (in deed) an *essentiall possession*: yet are you not able to demonstrate truely unto us, that the *boy* at *Northwich*, is (in those his pretended *fittes*) undoubtedlie and truly *so senselesse* as you beare us in hand, but that (howsoever it seemed in outward appearance) he both *sawe* and *heard*, and *spake*, and *felt*, as may very probablie be gathered thus.<sup>58</sup>

Deacon and Walker's skepticism here demonstrates the difficulty that believing authors had in defending the insensibility that provided a crucial foundation of claims to a genuine possession. Interestingly, rather than emphasize particular medical or philosophical principles for their thesis about sensibility, Deacon and Walker forwarded a simple premise that most readers would easily understand: one cannot determine with certainty the insensibility of another. They present



themselves as a sympathetic godly audience by agreeing that “true senselessness” would, in fact, prove the dispossessors’ claims, while subsequently appearing to lament their inability to extend such a judgement in this instance.

Deacon and Walker coupled this measured approach with one more explicitly skeptical, as when they repeated charges that Harrison was actually a fraud; rather than a godly young man crossing through tribulation for the sake of righteousness, they depicted him as a lewd and dissolute boy whose reactions to his environment reveal that he had, in fact, maintained his sensibility. For example, after Orthodoxus claimed that Harrison had “sensiblie heard,” he asserted that he also:

*sensiblie sawe* at that present, we prove it thus: because ... when his sister ... came to his *bed* side in a foule or *sluttish coate*, and was therefore rebuked sharpelie of her *mother*: the *boy* (both seeing his *sisters sluttishnes*, and hearing his *mothers rebukes*) hee *laughed* heartilie thereat. And thereupon, the *mother* being tolde by the one of us there, that the *boy* (it should seeme) he was not so *sensllesse* as they would beare us in hand, her answer was this: namely, that the *shrewd boy*, he would oftentimes laugh in his *fittes* at many such *knaveries*: which argueth in him no such *sensles condition* as your selfe would pretend.<sup>59</sup>

Even though there was precedent for demoniacs’ attraction to frivolous or blasphemous things, the prior claim to Harrison’s senselessness allowed Deacon and Walker to present this scene in a way that compromised the credit of Thomas Harrison, his family, and the godly ministers whom the authors contended were taken in by a fraud. They reinforced these claims by explaining that the boy’s reaction during physical struggles, when he was supposed to have been insensible, constituted proof that his senses were intact. For example, “when hee perceived himselfe to be conquered ... he forthwith *roared* and *cried out*: which argueth plainely that he *sensiblie heard*, and *saw* and *felt*; yea, and that he might also be made to speake ... if he were well *conjured* a while with a *three corded whippe*. And therefore for any thing hitherto heard, this your *new-found Demoniake*, hee was not so *sensles*, as your selfe would *senselessly* beare us in hand.”<sup>60</sup> Deacon and Walker proceeded from dismantling the case’s logic in terms of the senses, to making a dark joke about how Harrison would likely have recovered sooner if “well conjured a while” with a whip. Skeptical accounts

that emphasized fraud on the part of licentious demoniacs occasionally advocated physical punishments as a way to interrupt their dissimulation.<sup>61</sup> By raising the point here, the authors suggest not only that the attendants had been taken in, but also that their credulity revealed a compromised reason that required the intervention of a more judicious “orthodoxy.” And by playing upon the double meaning of “senseless,” Deacon and Walker positioned themselves as more trustworthy and rational narrators than those who believed Harrison, obliquely suggesting to readers that demoniacs would not be the only ones deprived of their “senses” if such accounts as these were taken at face value.

### The Senses and Possession Skepticism

Even though they emphasized themes of incorporeality that had been established much earlier, it appears that Deacon and Walker, given the particular role that their writings played in the struggle over dispossessions among Puritans, Anglicans, and Catholics at the turn of the seventeenth century, significantly reinforced *insensibility* as a questionable symptom of possession.<sup>62</sup> Echoes of their approach appear in Richard Bernard’s influential *Guide to Grand Jury-Men* (1627), which included a chapter on feigned possession and cautioned readers not to attribute preternatural meaning too readily to what might spring from natural causes. Bernard was concerned with how properly to prosecute suspected witches based on preternatural suffering or spectral evidence; like others in his position he had to strike a balance between acknowledging witchcraft as a true crime worthy of serious punishment even as he detailed the many ways that such evidence could be false or misleading. In the process, he articulated a critique related to how witnesses at the bedside of a demoniac might draw mistaken conclusions based on what they observed. He explained, “when people come to see such supposed to be possessed by a Deuill, or Diuels, some are filled with fancyfull imaginations, some are possessed with feare; so ... on a sudden, thinke they *heare* and *see* more then they doe.”<sup>63</sup> But even after providing this explanation of the limitations of perception, Bernard also included a list of the “true signes of such as bee possessed” based on Scripture. These included “When sight, hearing, and speech, is taken from one strangely, as in Math. 12. 22. [and] Mar. 9. 25.”<sup>64</sup> The senses were at the very centre of what *made* bewitchment and possession and were therefore inextricable from the process of evaluating the veracity of such cases.

Fifty years later, in 1677, John Webster's skeptical tract returned to many of the same texts to argue that whatever might have been sensed in the days of Christ, possessions and witchcraft in the post-apostolic age were delusions.<sup>65</sup> Webster replicated some of the language Samuel Harsnett had used at the turn of the seventeenth century, when he had criticized John Darrell and other Puritan "exorcists" for disturbing the peace by trying to "make a trade" out of dispossessions. Webster agreed that such people were the same as "Hocus Pocus" men who used "slight of hand, to get a livelihood by, do a labour to make the ignorant multitude believe" what "a prudent or learned person" should understand as strategies designed to "deceive the senses of the beholders."<sup>66</sup> Webster also took up the issue of the senses' role in determining preternatural episodes as matters of fact, writing that readers should require far more proof of the legitimacy of witnesses and authors of possession narratives. Witnesses "ought to be perfect in the organs of their senses, otherwise they may easily be deceived, and think the things otherwise than indeed they are; so some defects or distempers in the ears, eyes, or the rest of the sensories, may hinder the true perception of things acted or done." Like Bernard and others before him, Webster also emphasized that because the senses could be impressed upon by fears and preconceived notions, reliable witnesses must also be free of "those imbibed notions of Spirits, Hobgoblins, and Witches, which have been instamped upon their Phantasies from their very young years."<sup>67</sup> Webster's analysis of Scripture and classical tracts centred on the fact that while demons and witchcraft might delude the senses through false apparitions and fascination, the incorporeality of spirits meant that few of the customary symptoms of possession or bewitchment were possible. Nearly a century after Scot's influential skeptical text, Webster similarly rested a good deal of his thesis on devaluing the meaning of sensory perception and its implications in discerning the preternatural.<sup>68</sup>

Despite all of Webster's argumentation, he and those who followed him were obliged to qualify their disparagement of sensory evidence because the senses remained the media through which valid proofs must also pass. Possessions and witchcrafts were in Scripture, and so even the qualification that miracles had ceased in the post-apostolic age left a door open for the wonders of God's providence. Both clergy and common folk believed that God might allow devils to torment people to test their faith, and therefore it was difficult for skeptics to avoid completely the accusation that undermining the legitimacy of

dispossessions amounted to support of atheism. Webster's text reveals the ambivalent role the senses played in this conundrum:

Let them shew us any one Author of credible veracity, that ever was ear or eye-witness of the Devils making of a visible and corporeal League or Bargain with the Witches, or that he ever suckt upon their bodies, or that he had carnal Copulation with them, or that *by the experience of his senses* ever certainly knew a man really transubstantiated and transformed into a Wolf, or a Wolf into a man, and we will yield the whole Cause. But we must assert and truly affirm, that this pretence of theirs, that these things are sufficiently proved by Historians of good credit, is a meer falsity, and a lying flourish of vain words [emphasis added].<sup>69</sup>

On the surface of it, this is an especially compelling argument about the insufficiency of proof customarily applied in presumed cases of possession or witchcraft. But the problem of the proof of devils was dangerously close to the problem of the proof of God; no one but a demoniac or witch generally saw the Devil make a pact or tangibly alter the human body, and so even if it were possible to disparage the reliability of their accounts, it was not so simple to convince devout ministers and villagers that they were wrong about what they believed they had witnessed. They would retort that they did have reliable proof, *by the experience of their senses*, and thus constituted an exception to what Webster denounced. Furthermore, as Matthew Milner demonstrates in his treatment of the scriptural Thomas, they could point out that an atheist might similarly demand demonstrable proof of God and reject the workings of faith.<sup>70</sup> As a result, an uncomfortable impasse pervaded the long seventeenth century, in which both sides denounced examples of fraud or delusion, and believers argued that what they had observed would meet even the criteria laid out in skeptical tracts. Both sides were bound together by a shared logic that rested on the centrality of the senses to the process of properly discerning the preternatural.

Perhaps unexpectedly, given the astounding ways that the senses of possessed persons could appear to be enhanced, demoniacs' situational insensibility appears to have been just as important in the arguments about the viability of possession phenomena that spanned the period. The problem of the senses mattered a great deal because it touched upon central questions about the nature of evidence and of faith. This was complicated by the fact that when demoniacs emerged

within an intense godly environment, they mutually constituted the possession performance with the attending clergy. In the cases of Thomas Darling and the Seven of Lancashire in the late 1590s, Mary Glover in 1603, and Margaret Muschamp in the early 1650s,<sup>71</sup> for example, both the sufferers and those who encouraged them to resist the Devil drew upon shared cultural conventions about the sensory impact of spirits as they interpreted what appeared to skeptics merely as disordered antics. Because the participants in such cases had to make meaning together out of what their senses perceived and failed to perceive, the implications of the sensory realm for questions of evidence remained controversial throughout the early modern period and would go on to feature as well in the decline of elite support for prosecution in the eighteenth century.<sup>72</sup>

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**ERIKA GASSER** is Associate Professor of History at the University of Cincinnati where she researches the history of gender in colonial New England, early modern England, and the Anglo-Atlantic. Her book, *Vexed with Devils: Manhood and Witchcraft in Old and New England*, was published by New York University Press in 2017.

**ERIKA GASSER** est professeure agrégée d'histoire à l'University of Cincinnati où elle effectue des recherches sur l'histoire des genres dans la Nouvelle-Angleterre coloniale, l'Angleterre moderne et l'Anglo-Atlantique. Son livre, *Vexed with Devils : Manhood and Witchcraft in Old and New England*, a été publié par New York University Press en 2017.

## Endnotes

- 1 Anonymous, *A true and most Dreadfull discourse of a woman possessed with the Deuill: who in the likenesse of a headlesse Beare fetched her out of her Bedd...* (London: Printed by J. Kingston for Thomas Nelson, 1584), sig. A4v–A5r.
- 2 Ibid., sig. A5r–B1v.
- 3 Ibid., sig. B2r.
- 4 Ibid., sig. B2v.
- 5 Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 398–411; Brian P. Levack, *The Devil Within: Possession and Exorcism in the Christian West* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), ix; 29–31.

- 6 On possession as an inversion of Christianity and its rituals, see Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, 82–86, 333, 431, 478. On obsession, see David Harley, “Explaining Salem: Calvinist Psychology and the Diagnosis of Possession,” *The American Historical Review* 101, no. 2 (April 1996): 307–30; Marion Gibson, *Reading Witchcraft: Stories of Early English Witches* (London: Routledge, 1999), 27–29, and Levack, *The Devil Within*, 15–19, 95n.
- 7 See for example on age: James Sharpe, “Disruption in the Well-Ordered Household: Age, Authority, and Possessed Young People,” in *The Experience of Authority in Early Modern England*, eds. Paul Griffiths, Adam Fox, and Steve Hindle (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), 187–212. On gender, see for example Clive Holmes, “Women, Witnesses and Witches,” *Past & Present*, no. 140 (August 1993): 45–78; Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 91–178; Edward Bever, “Witchcraft, Female Aggression, and Power in the Early Modern Community,” *Journal of Social History* 35, no. 4 (2002): 955–88; Levack, *The Devil Within*, 169–85; Erika Gasser, *Vexed with Devils: Manhood and Witchcraft in Old and New England* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 23–35.
- 8 This article refers to these religious categories even while acknowledging that these labels, and the capitalization that implies the groups’ coherence, elide many differences. On the complexities of “Puritans,” see Stephen Foster, *The Long Argument: English Puritanism and the Shaping of New England Culture, 1570–1700* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), and David D. Hall, *The Puritans: A Transatlantic History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 1–39.
- 9 In Scripture, the Sadducees were a sect who denied spirits and the resurrection. Two seventeenth-century writers who linked belief in preternatural phenomena with Protestant faith were Joseph Glanvill and Henry More, the Cambridge Neoplatonist who memorably concluded a book on the subject by stating, “For assuredly that Saying was nothing so true in Politicks, *No Bishop, no King*; as this is in Metaphysicks, *No Spirit, no God*.” In More, *An antidote against atheism...* (London: Printed for Roger Daniel, 1653), 164. See also Glanvill, *A Blow at Modern Sadducism...* (London: Printed by E. Cotes for James Collins at the Kings Head in Westminster-Hall, 1668), sig. B1r–B2r.
- 10 On the controversies, see for example Michael MacDonald, ed., *Witchcraft and Hysteria in Elizabethan London* (New York: Tavistock/Routledge, 1991); James Sharpe, *The Bewitching of Anne Gunter: A Horrible and True Story of Deception, Witchcraft, Murder, and the King of England* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Marion Gibson, *Possession, Puritanism and Print: Darrell, Harsnett, Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Exorcism Controversy* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2006); Levack, *The Devil Within*. By

- witchcraft-possession I mean cases in which those who performed some of the symptoms of possession also accused a witch as the cause. See also Gibson, *Reading Witchcraft*, 186–90, and Gasser, *Vexed with Devils*, 2–6.
- 11 Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, 152–60; Stuart Clark, *Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), Chapter 4.
  - 12 On the act of 1604 and Canon 72, see Clive Holmes, “Witchcraft and Possession at the Accession of James I: The Publication of Samuel Harsnett’s *Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*,” and Tom Webster, “(Re)possession of Dispossession: John Darrell and Diabolical Discourse” in *Witchcraft and the Act of 1604*, eds. John Newton and Jo Bath (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2008), 69–90, 91–111.
  - 13 John Darrell, *A detection of that sinful, shamful, lying, and ridiculous discours of Samuel Harshnet...* (London: 1600), sig. B1v. For more on the controversy that arose between Darrell and Samuel Harsnett, see Thomas Freeman, “Demons, Deviance and Defiance: John Darrell and the Politics of Exorcism in Late Elizabethan England,” in *Conformity and Orthodoxy in the English Church, c. 1560–1660*, ed. Peter Lake and Michael Questier (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2000), and Gibson, *Possession, Puritanism and Print*.
  - 14 Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, 394–5. On the challenges of reading possession narratives that emerged within political and religious conflicts, see also Richard Raiswell, “Faking It: A Case of Counterfeit Possession in the Reign of James I,” *Renaissance and Reformation/Renaissance et Réforme*, New Series/Nouvelle Série 23, no. 3 (1999): 29–48.
  - 15 Barbara Rosen, *Witchcraft in England 1558–1618* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991), 213; Gibson, *Reading Witchcraft*, 27–29.
  - 16 Gibson, *Reading Witchcraft*, 57–76.
  - 17 Alain Corbin, “Charting the Cultural History of the Senses,” in *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*, ed. David Howes (New York: Berg, 2005), 135; Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, 394; Peter Charles Hoffer, *Sensory Worlds in Early America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 1. On the philosophical, literary, and historical approaches to the sensed past, see Holly Dugan, “The Senses in Literature: Renaissance Poetry and the Paradox of Perception,” in *A Cultural History of the Senses in the Renaissance*, ed. Herman Roodenburg (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), esp. 149–56.
  - 18 See for example Hoffer, *Sensory Worlds in Early America*; Constance Classen, “The Witch’s Senses: Sensory Ideologies and Transgressive Femininities from the Renaissance to Modernity,” and Steven Feld, “Places Sensed, Senses Placed: Toward a Sensuous Epistemology of Environments,” in *Empire of the Senses*, ed. David Howes, 70–84, 179–

- 91; C.M. Woolgar, *The Senses in Late Medieval England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006); Malcolm Gaskill, "Witchcraft and Evidence in Early Modern England," *Past & Present*, no. 198 (February 2008): 33–70; Clark, *Vanities of the Eye*; Matthew Milner, *The Senses and the English Reformation* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2011).
- 19 Classen, "The Witch's Senses," 71.
- 20 Milner, *The Senses and the English Reformation*, esp. Chapter 2.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 163–5.
- 22 For analysis of the intricate role that the senses played in demonological debates, see Clark, *Vanities of the Eye*, Chapters 4, 6, and 8.
- 23 For an overview of the Devil as deceiver of the senses, and the implications of the Devil's inability to act contrary to laws of nature for natural philosophy, see Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, 166–72; Clark, *Vanities of the Eye*, Chapter 4; Milner, *The Senses and the English Reformation*, 87–91, 171.
- 24 Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, 167.
- 25 Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusions, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 19–21.
- 26 Most scholars now acknowledge the pervasive influence of the "great divide" theory posited primarily by Marshall McLuhan and Walter J. Ong, in which the development of moveable type ushered in a period when vision became ascendant and other senses — particularly hearing — receded in importance. For a review of the evolution of these ideas in the field, see Mark Smith, *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 1–18, 125–8.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 117–118.
- 28 On the interplay between published possession narratives and claims about the delusions of "superstition," see for example Owen Davies, "Newspapers and the Popular Belief in Witchcraft and Magic in the Modern Period," *Journal of British Studies* 37, no. 2 (April 1998): 139–65; Andrew Cambers, "Demonic Possession, Literacy and 'Superstition' in Early Modern England," *Past & Present*, no. 202 (February 2009): 3–35; Gibson, *Possession, Puritanism and Print*.
- 29 Among skeptical accounts, two of the most important were by Johann Weyer and Reginald Scot. Weyer addressed the problem of discerning natural from preternatural events via the senses in *De praestigiis daemonum* (Basel: 1583), 189. In *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (London: 1584) Scot argued against the corporeality of spirits, and thus of many of the actions attributed to them and the witches and demoniacs who supposedly engaged them; much of the evidence about these interactions was gleaned by sensory perception. See also Clark, *Vanities of the Eye*.



- 30 Barbara J. Shapiro, *A Culture of Fact: England, 1550–1720* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000).
- 31 Ibid., 179–83. See also Clark, *Vanities of the Eye*, Chapter 10; Silvia De Renzi, “Medical Expertise, Bodies, and the Law in Early Modern Courts,” *Isis* 98, no. 2 (June 2007): 315–22.
- 32 On legal issues pertaining to witchcraft and preternatural crimes, see James Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness: Witchcraft in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 80–102, 213–34. See also B.P. Levack, “Possession, Witchcraft and the Law in Jacobean England,” *Washington & Lee Law Review* 52 (1996): 1613–40; Malcolm Gaskill, *Crime and Mentalities in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 3–122; Gaskill, “Witchcraft and Evidence.”
- 33 See John Wagstaffe, *The Question of Witchcraft Debated* (London: Printed for Edward Millington, 1671), 112–3, 123–4, 146. Cited in Shapiro, *A Culture of Fact*, 182–3. See also Michael Hunter, “The Decline of Magic: Challenge and Response in Early Enlightenment England,” *The Historical Journal* 55, no. 2 (June 2012): 399–425.
- 34 Mary Moore, *Wonderfull newes from the north. Or, A true relation of the sad and grievous torments, inflicted upon the bodies of three children of Mr. George Muschamp, late of the county of Northumberland, by witch-craft...* (London: Printed by T.H., 1650).
- 35 Thomas Lipeat, *The Divell in Kent, or His strange delusions at Sandwich* (London: 1647).
- 36 Anonymous, *A return of prayer: or A faithful relation of some remarkable passages of providence concerning Thomas Sawdie a boy of twelve years of age ... Who was possest with an unclean spirit, and through mercy by prayer and fasting, dispossest and delivered from the servitude and jaws of Satan* (London: Printed by R.H., 1664).
- 37 Richard Kiby, *Dreadful news from Wapping: being a further relation of the sad and miserable condition of Sarah Bower a young girl, of about fourteen years of age, who is unhappily, at present, posses'd with an evil spirit...* (London: Printed by W.D. in Bartholomew-Close, 1693), 4.
- 38 Ibid., 6–7.
- 39 See for example Classen “The Witch’s Senses,” 71–73; Carla Mazzio, “The Senses Divided: Organs, Objects and Media in Early Modern England,” in *Empire of the Senses*, 85–105; Elizabeth D. Harvey, ed., *Sensible Flesh: On Touch in Early Modern Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 1–21.
- 40 Anonymous, *A return of prayer*, 10–11.
- 41 See for example the translation of the case of Martha Brossier, in which French physicians who were confident that her possession was fraudulent nonetheless could not explain her stoicism during a trance when

she was subjected to painful trials. They wrote that “the insensibility of her body, during her ecstasies and furies, tried by the deep prickings of long pins, which were thrust into diverse parts of her hands and of her neck ... without any show, that ever she made of feeling the same ... took from us almost the suspicion of it.” See Michel Marescot, *A True Discourse, upon the matter of Martha Brossier of Romorantin, pretended to be possessed by a Devill*, trans. Abraham Hartwell (London: Printed by John Wolfe, 1599), 15–6. Another relevant kind of insensibility was attributed to suspected witches whose malice might have instigated the suffering. In one example relating to the symptoms of eighteen-year-old Mary Hill, a jury of examining women used a needle to prick spots on the skin of the suspected witch who appeared to feel no pain. See Anonymous, *Great news from the west of England being a true account of two young persons lately bewitch'd in the town of Beckenton in Somerset-shire...* (London: Printed by T.M., 1689), 2. This link between the bodies of witches and those they afflicted constitutes another angle of the sensory preternatural that deserves further exploration.

- 42 For an overview of attributed causes, see Levack, *The Devil Within*, 19–31; 115–129.
- 43 Inedia is the belief that it is possible for a person to survive without consuming food. Despite its prevailing association with hagiographies of Catholic saints, instances of inedia appeared in English witchcraft-possession cases across the period.
- 44 W.W., *A true and just recorde, of the information, examination and confession of all the witches, taken at S. Oses in the countie of Essex...* (London: Printed by Thomas Dawson, 1582), 40.
- 45 Anonymous, *The most strange and admirable discoverie of the three Witches of Warboys...* (London: Printed by the Widdowe Orwin for Thomas Man and John Winington, 1593), sig. C1r.
- 46 *Ibid.*, sig. L2r.
- 47 Anonymous, *Doctor Lambs darling: or, strange and terrible news from Salisbury; being a true, exact, and perfect relation, of the great and wonderful contract and engagement made between the devil, and Mistris Anne Bodenham...* (London: Printed for G. Horton, 1653), 6.
- 48 John Barrow, *The Lord's arm stretched out in an answer of prayer, or, A true relation of the wonderful deliverance of James Barrow...* (London: 1664), 5–11.
- 49 Anonymous, *A tryal of witches at the assizes held at Bury St. Edmonds...* (London: Printed for William Shrewsbury, 1682), 12.
- 50 Richard Baxter, *The certainty of the worlds of spirits and, consequently, of the immortality of souls of the malice and misery of the devils and the damned...* (London: Printed for J. Parkhurst and T. Salusbury, 1691), 51–52.

- 51 Samuel Petto, *A faithful narrative of the wonderful and extraordinary fits which Mr. Tho. Spatchet (late of Dunwich and Cookly) was under by witchcraft...* (London: Printed for John Harris, 1693), 5–7.
- 52 Thomas Jollie, *The Surey demoniack, or, An account of Satans strange and dreadful actings, in and about the body of Richard Dugdale of Surey...* (London: Printed for Jonathan Robinson, 1697), 3, 46, 61.
- 53 The Bishop of Chester was Richard Vaughan. On his involvement with the case, see Marcus Harmes, “The Devil and Bishops in Post-Reformation England” in *Supernatural and Secular Power in Early Modern England*, eds. Marcus Harmes and Victoria Bladen (New York: Routledge, 2016), 185–205. On the permission, and for a later skeptical take on the case, see Francis Hutchinson, *An Historical essay concerning Witchcraft: with observations upon matters of fact* (London: Printed for R. Knaplock, 1718), 46, 262–5. On the act of 1604, see Newton and Bath, eds., *Witchcraft and the Act of 1604*, esp. 69–101.
- 54 Samuel Clarke, *The second part of the marrow of ecclesiastical history; containing the lives of many eminent Christians...* (London: Printed by Robert White, 1650), 188–91. See also William Hinde, *A faithfull remonstrance of the holy life and happy death of Iohn Bruen of Bruen-Stapleford...* (London: Printed by R.B., 1641), 148–54.
- 55 Clarke, *The second part of the marrow of ecclesiastical history*, 189.
- 56 See for example Harsnett’s text ostensibly about previous Catholic exorcisms but actually aimed at Darrell: *A declaration of egregious popish impostures to with-draw the harts of her Maiesties subiects from their allegiance, and from the truth of Christian religion professed in England, vnder the pretence of casting out deuils...* (London: Printed by James Roberts, 1603).
- 57 John Deacon and John Walker, *A Summarie Answere to all the material points in any of Master Darel his bookes*, (London: Impensis George Bishop, 1601), 3. They also describe both Darrell’s actions and the publication of them as signs of Darrell’s attempts to take advantage of simple English people. Deacon and Walker, *A Summarie Answere*, 5–10; Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, 142–7.
- 58 Deacon and Walker, *A Summarie Answere*, 74–5. For an extended version of the debate in relation to perception of sensed evidence, see also John Deacon and John Walker, *Dialogicall discourses of spirits and diuels declaring their proper essence, natures, dispositions, and operations, their possessions and dispossessions...* (London: Impensis George Bishop, 1601), esp. 14–21.
- 59 Deacon and Walker, *A Summarie Answere*, 75–6.
- 60 *Ibid.*, 76.
- 61 See for example the cases of Martha Brossier, in Marescot, *A true discourse...* (1698), and of Susannah Fowles, in *The second part of the Boy of Bilson: Or, a True and Particular Relation of the Impostor, Susannah Fowles*

- ... who pretended her self Possess'd with the Devil... (London: Printed by E. Whitlock, 1698).
- 62 See for example Scot, *The discoverie of witchcraft*. On the epistemology of corporeality, see Walter Stephens, *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 58–86.
- 63 Richard Bernard, *A Guide to Grand-Jury Men, Divided into two Bookes...* (London: Printed by Felix Kingston, 1627), 39.
- 64 *Ibid.*, 49–50.
- 65 John Webster, *The displaying of supposed witchcraft wherein is affirmed that there are many sorts of deceivers and impostors and divers persons under a passive delusion of melancholy and fancy...* (London: Printed by J.M., 1677).
- 66 *Ibid.*, 28–9.
- 67 *Ibid.*, 60–1. Similar themes had been explored by Thomas Ady, *A candle in the dark shewing the divine cause of the distractions of the whole nation of England and of the Christian world* (London: Printed for Robert Ibbitson, 1655).
- 68 Webster, *The displaying of supposed witchcraft*, 181, 198, 203–5, 290, 309, 316–7. See also Clark, *Vanities of the Eye*, Chapters 4, 6, and 7.
- 69 Webster, *The displaying of supposed witchcraft*, 65.
- 70 Milner, *The Senses and the English Reformation*, 56–9, 203–6.
- 71 [I.D.], *The most wonderful and true storie of a certaine witch named Aise Gooderidge ... also a true report of the strange torments of Thomas Darling...* (London: Printed for I.O., 1597); [George More], *A true Discourse concerning the certaine possession and dispossession of 7 persons in one familie in Lancashire...* (London: Printed by Richard Schilders, 1600), 43–5; J. Swan, *A True and Breife Report of Mary Glovers Vexation* (London: 1603); Moore, *Wonderfull News from the North...* (1650).
- 72 On the decline of support for witchcraft and possession prosecution, see Ian Bostridge, *Witchcraft and its Transformations, c. 1650–1750* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1997); B.P. Levack, “The Decline and End of Witchcraft Prosecutions,” in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, eds. Bengt Ankarloo and Stuart Clark (London: Athlone Press, 1999), 1–93; Edward Bever, “Witchcraft Prosecutions and the Decline of Magic,” *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 40, no. 2 (2009): 263–93; Hunter, “The Decline of Magic.”