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0521813239 - Demonic Possession and Exorcism in Early Modern England: Contemporary Texts and their Cultural Contexts - Philip C. Almond

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DEMONIC POSSESSION AND EXORCISM IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

This is the first book exclusively devoted to demonic possession and exorcism in early modern England. It offers, for the first time, modernised versions of the most significant early modern texts on nine cases of demonic possession from the period 1570 to 1650, the key period in English history for demonic possession. The nine stories were all written by eye-witnesses or were derived from eye-witness reports. They involve matters of life and death, sin and sanctity, guilt and innocence, of crimes which could not be committed and punishments which could not be deserved. The nine critical introductions which accompany the stories address the different strategic intentions of those who wrote them. The modernised texts and critical introductions are placed within the context of a wide-ranging general introduction to demonic possession in England across the period 1550 to 1700.

PHILIP C. ALMOND is Professor of Studies in Religion at the University of Queensland. He is the author of a number of books including *Adam and Eve in Seventeenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge, 1999); *Heaven and Hell in Enlightenment England* (Cambridge, 1994); *Heretic and Hero: Muhammad and the Victorians* (1989); and *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (Cambridge, 1988).

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It is the easiest thing, sir, to be done.
As plain as fizzling: roll but wi' your eyes,
And foam at th'mouth. A little castle-soap
Will do't, to rub your lips: and then a nutshell,
With tow and touchwood in it to spit fire.
Did you ne'er read, sir, little Darrel's tricks,
With the boy o'Burton, and the seven in Lancashire,
Sommers at Nottingham? All these do teach it.

Ben Jonson
The Devil is an Ass

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Preface

In 1981, in his introduction to *Unclean Spirits*, Daniel Walker wrote of taking a step into a largely unexplored field, that of demonic possession and exorcism in early modern France and England. Over twenty years later, it remains still largely unexplored. This book is intended to continue the work then begun. It hopes to open up further territories then merely glanced at, and to provide new maps of terrains thus far merely sketched. It is my hope that the modernised versions of nine of the most significant contemporary stories of demonic possession and exorcism offered below will encourage others to search further.

The introduction proceeds from the assumption that the meaning of demonic possession and exorcism is to be found within the context of the social, political, and religious life of early modern England. More specifically, it argues that possession and deliverance is a cultural drama played out by all the participants within the confines of a cultural script known to all of them. And it suggests that the experiences of demonic possession had by demoniacs, exorcists, and audiences are shaped and configured by their cultural setting. Thus I hope that we come closer to a comprehension of how this aspect of popular religious belief and practice was lived out and experienced in the context of early modern English life and thought.

But this book aims too to bring its readers closer to the events it describes. More than anything else, the texts themselves enable the reader to enter the alien world of the demonically possessed. The nine stories transcribed below were all written by people who were eye-witnesses, or were derived from their reports. They reflect lives lived in radically different ways to ours. They involved matters of life and death, of sin and sanctity, of guilt and innocence, of crimes which could not be committed and punishments which could not be deserved, in ways difficult for us to grasp. Unlike in our world, the numinous Other, the divine and the demonic, are here in every part of the everyday.

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Yet, for all that they reflect a common world quite different to ours, these stories are more than that. For they reflect too social conflict and ideological division within the culture of early modern England. They are all written with different strategic intentions to serve the interests of those who wrote them, or compiled them and put them into their final forms. They are intended to persuade the reader of the merits or otherwise of the participants – demoniacs, exorcists, judges, bishops, Catholics, Puritans, Anglicans. They strive to prove the authenticity of demoniacal actions, the propriety of exorcisms performed, the legitimacy of executions for bewitchment, the piety of Puritans and the credulity of priests. They serve the interests of villagers as well as kings, cunning men as well as physicians, demoniacs as well as divines.

For ease of reading, I have modernised early modern spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Place names and personal names have been modernised and made consistent where appropriate. Notes in square brackets reflect marginal notes in the originals. Except as indicated in the notes, the stories below are complete. A little to my surprise, the modernisation of these texts became a much more complex task than I had envisaged. It was an exercise in translation and interpretation and much less one of mere cosmetic work. Needless to say, I trust I have eased access into an inaccessible world while retaining the spirit of the originals.

I am grateful to the University of Queensland for continuing to provide a congenial framework in which to pursue research. I am grateful to Ms Katie Stott for transcribing the original texts onto computer. I wish especially to thank my colleagues, Ed Conrad, Michael Lattke, and Peter Harrison for their continued friendship and support over the twenty years we have all worked together. My partner Patricia Lee has been a continual source of support throughout this project, and I thank her for it. This book is dedicated to my father with happy memories of his love, generosity, and kindness to me over the first half-century of my life.