

Introduction: Possession, Gender, and Power

In 1596, thirteen-year-old Thomas Darling, in Burton, England, became dramatically unwell in a way that defied diagnosis. His convulsive fits and vomiting suggested illness, but when he pointed out apparitions of angels and a green cat, bystanders knew that his was more than a natural distemper. Darling later lost the use of his legs and alternated between ardent prayer and violent contortions. He also suffered when he strove to read from the Bible, and writhed and groaned as he conducted one-sided conversations with the devil that tempted him to turn away from God. Some suspected he might be bewitched, and witnesses closely questioned and tested the woman he named as a suspect. In time, after Darling spoke in the strange voices of his invading devils, Puritan ministers managed to deliver the boy who rapturously recommitted himself to a godly life. The accused witch made a partial confession but died before she could be tried.¹ Witchcraft-possession cases like Thomas Darling's, by which I mean cases in which those who suffered the spectral torments associated with demonic possession also named a witch as the cause, were strongly grounded in specific conditions of the homes, congregations, and courts where they originated. At the same time, however, they depended upon shared cultural scripts in order to have reliable meaning. This book tells a transatlantic story of some of the people in early modern England and colonial New England who acted as if they were possessed, and the ways that demoniacs—as people purportedly possessed by devils were called—were handled within and beyond their communities. When

published possession accounts documented their subjects' symptoms, they reinforced customary notions of possession and expanded the precedents that shaped officials' new judgments. Thus these sources became conceptual primers both for those who needed to discern a true possession and for those who needed to perform one. Ultimately, the fate of demoniacs and accused witches appears to have depended as much on the cultural and discursive realm as on particular interactions with neighbors, ministers, and magistrates.

After the English Reformation, when acts by King Henry VIII and Parliament brought about a separation of English rule and law from Rome in the 1530s, the Church of England grew distinctly Protestant. While the extent of this transformation fluctuated, Protestantism was firmly entrenched—if nonetheless hotly and continuously debated—by Elizabeth I's ascension to the throne in 1558. Yet even as England developed a singular brand of Protestant rule, both common folk and elites continued to draw upon traditional cultural views of the preternatural realm.² By the mid-sixteenth century concerns about witchcraft as a threat to church and state had increased, and England's first secular statute against witchcraft was passed in 1542. While the statute did not articulate a vision of witchcraft as a pact with the Devil, it named practices such as conjuring, divination, and the use of magic and malefic—or harmful—witchcraft as punishable by death. The act was repealed as early as 1547, however, and no new statute addressed witchcraft as a crime until 1563. That new statute continued to define witchcraft as a crime primarily in terms of the harm it caused, and set out levels of punishment based upon the severity of the damages; only those who had allegedly killed by witchcraft were to be hanged for that felony crime. A subsequent statute, passed in 1604, extended the death penalty to those convicted of having harmed people, goods, or animals as a first offense, and to any form of witchcraft upon a second offense.³ Fewer witches were accused and executed in England than in western Europe, in part because England's accusatorial legal system prevented the kinds of inquisitorial trials that configured witchcraft as heresy. Nonetheless, widespread religious, economic, and political upheavals contributed to the kind of social instabilities that led both England and its Continental counterparts to experience an increase in prosecutions during the turbulent decades before and after 1600.

Demonic possession cases, which centered on individuals who appeared to suffer from stylized fits, convulsions, and torments brought on by preternatural malice, shared to a certain extent a related trajectory

in law and custom. In the aftermath of the English Reformation, as the Church of England displaced Catholics and sought to centralize its authority, the Anglican leadership struggled to maintain control of the style and substance of religion. By removing the Catholic ritual of exorcism from the second edition of the Edwardian prayer book in 1552, the established church left Protestant England without the official means to cast out devils.⁴ Possessions continued to occur, nonetheless, and a church that could offer no viable response appeared at a competitive disadvantage. Protestants had rejected ritual exorcism in part because it maintained that individuals could adjure the Devil to depart from a person's body. Over time Puritans, the "hotter" sort of godly Protestants who were determined to purge from the Church of England what they saw as the vestiges of popish extravagances,⁵ nonetheless developed a strategy to *dispossess* those suffering from demonic assaults. Dispossession, they noted, relied only upon the methods used in Scripture: prayer and fasting. Ministers could petition God's mercy, but not command devils to depart in His name.⁶ In the 1580s, when tensions about a potential Catholic threat ran high, some Puritan ministers sparked controversies with the Anglican establishment by putting these premises into action. Ultimately, both possession and witchcraft were difficult for authorities to discern because they involved humans actuated, whether willingly or helplessly, by demonic power. Throughout early modern England, most people wholeheartedly accepted the prospect of authentic possession and witchcraft cases while also subjecting instances of both phenomena to testing and debate.

This book analyzes published cases of demonic possession and witchcraft-possession in England and New England from 1564, when the first English possession narrative was published, through the period when godly Puritans on both sides of the Atlantic stood their best chance of substantively directing the rhetoric surrounding witchcraft-possession cases, until around 1700.⁷ Possession and witchcraft overlapped considerably, and given that approximately 80–90 percent of Anglo-American accused witches were female,⁸ the book explores what new perspectives on power can be offered by analysis of the varied implications of gender for men. Specifically, it examines the role of gender in published accounts about men and women who performed the symptoms of possession and analyzes particular cases of men who were accused of witchcraft by possessed accusers or who published possession propaganda. Despite the overwhelming association of witchcraft with women, I argue that manhood was a crucial factor in the articulation of judgment upon both the

women and men who were implicated in these incidents. For possession and witchcraft to work, participants had to rely upon customary scripts in which images of honorable and degraded womanhood and manhood operated intricately alongside other concerns. Anglo-American possession cases thus provide a lens through which to see how people—powerful and lowly, godly and worldly—invoked gendered power, both explicitly and implicitly, to do the cultural work necessary to compete and survive in early modern society.

A second component of the argument aims to differentiate this work from existing scholarship by emphasizing transatlantic links, and continuity rather than change. Although many early modernists have turned their attention to a circum-Atlantic world and globalization, recent scholarship on European and American witchcraft has aimed to update long-standing generalizations by emphasizing geographic specificity.⁹ This has resulted in some necessary corrections of past assumptions, but it also indirectly reinforces an analytical separation between witchcraft-possession in England and colonial New England. There were important differences between witchcraft-possession cases in the two regions over this period; most notable among these was the presence of Native Americans both in the physical realm of New England's colonial project and in colonists' imaginings of their wars with Indians as part of the war between godly and demonic forces. Nonetheless, English people on either side of the Atlantic in the seventeenth century, despite the differences between their communities and institutions, drew upon shared foundational beliefs about gender, power, and the preternatural even as they vigorously disputed them. In addition to the convention of viewing the regions separately, both scholarly and popular treatments of demonic and witchcraft-possession cases emphasize change over time and decline. That impulse is accurate; although belief in these phenomena persisted, and indeed persists, the likelihood that cases could gather the necessary momentum to goad magistrates to action unraveled in the first half of the eighteenth century. Nonetheless, focusing on differences and declension obscures the remarkable degree of continuity in meanings of manhood, possession, and witchcraft in the Anglo-Atlantic. Rather than understand the decline of official confidence in demonic and witchcraft-possession cases primarily as change, we can see it as an indication of continuity in patriarchy, that mechanism for the ordering of power—kings over subjects, and fathers over dependents—to which both early modern England and colonial New England remained committed.¹⁰