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Emma Bell

Demonic Possession in the Early Modern Period

ABSTRACT

The turmoil experienced in European societies during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries fostered a widespread fear of the immediacy of the Devil, and contributed to the increasing number of demonic possession cases. This paper examines the demography of demoniacs, contemporary explanations, and the socio-cultural and religious functions possession played in the early modern period.

BIOGRAPHY

Emma Bell is in the final semester of the Bachelor of Arts degree at the University of Queensland, majoring in History and English. Her academic interests include the European witch hunts, alternative religious studies, gender studies, literature, and creative writing. She intends to undertake postgraduate studies in one of these areas in the next few years.

DEMONIC POSSESSION IN THE EARLY MODERN PERIOD

Incidents of demonic possession, the belief of being under the control or influence physically, emotionally, or mentally of the Devil or demons,ⁱ were widespread during the 16th and 17th centuries in early modern Europe. Although cases of demonic possession existed prior to this, an increase in fear of the Devil during the 16th and 17th centuries increased possession cases to epidemic proportions. This paper will examine two socio-cultural preconditions that helped foster the prevalence of possession cases during the period studied: the cultural belief that the Devil existed, and, as a byproduct, the existence of culturally-sanctioned possession behaviour. Implicit in this investigation is the discussion of the demography of early modern demoniacs, and the socio-cultural functions demonic possession served for the demoniac, including freedom from normal societal regulations and the improvement of social standing. Contemporary sixteenth and seventeenth century explanations of demonic possession will also be discussed, emphasising the early modern belief that demonic possessions were probable due to the corresponding belief in the prevalence and immediacy of the Devil.

Certain preconditions needed to exist for the belief in demonic possession to prevail as widely as it did during the early modern era. One such precondition, according to Coventry, was the cultural belief that possession was actually possible.ⁱⁱ During the early modern period the frequency of plague, war, and religious conflict created a climate of fear and doubt, which drove people to seek explanations for their misfortunes.ⁱⁱⁱ The most common explanation during the 16th and 17th centuries was the cultural belief in the immediacy of the Devil, a belief which became inextricably linked with demonic possession cases, as demonic possession was seen as 'demonstrable proof of Satan's presence and power in the world of men.'^{iv} As one contemporary source in 1634 argues, 'the corporal effect of possession is a proof which strikes the coarsest minds. It has this advantage, than an example convinces a whole assembly.'^v Against the background of this increasing anxiety, Caicola argues that 'any person displaying immoderate physical behaviours was at risk of being considered demonically possessed.'^{vi} Although there was little consensus about why demonic possession existed in the early modern period, it was usually viewed by ecclesiastic authorities as God's punishment for sin or as a result of witchcraft.^{vii} This view differed from popular explanations, however, which preferred to consider demonic possession as the result of an innocent person's bad luck.^{viii} Either way, the climate of fear prevalent during this period resulted in the number of demonic possession cases increasing from sporadic in the 13th century, to epidemic proportions by the 16th and 17th centuries.^{ix}

The second precondition which Coventry argues was necessary in ensuring the widespread belief in the reality of demonic possession was that demoniacs in the early modern period followed a set of culturally-sanctioned behaviours.^x Coventry argues that the way in which a society interprets and reacts to demonic possession is a reflection of its culture, intellectual and popular beliefs, and law.^{xi} Clark supports this theory, claiming that 'all aspects of possession behaviour are in fact highly structured, even stereotyped, in terms of a variety of cultural codes and conventions.'^{xii} One such convention of possession was the array of symptoms a demoniac portrayed. Common symptoms included body contortions, levitation, speaking in foreign tongues and voices, the ejection of foreign objects from the body such as hair, lace, feathers, pins and nails, repulsion at holy objects and words, and deprivation of the senses.^{xiii} Because women were more often afflicted by demonic possession than men, the symptoms often reflected early modern societal assumptions about female capabilities, such as their being naturally incapable of swearing and displaying physical strength.^{xiv} Many exorcism manuals from the fourteenth century, as a result, used feminine-specific terms to describe possession victims.^{xv} As Walker and Dickerman argue in their case study of the demoniac Marthe Brossier, 'as a demoniac, she was not only permitted, she was expected to act in ways which represented a complete reversal of normative female behaviour.'^{xvi} In the context of these conventions, the majority of possession cases can be seen as mimetic, whether consciously or unconsciously, and through the repeated practice of these conventions the cultural belief in demonic possession was reinforced.^{xvii}

Although technically anyone could be susceptible to possession, most victims can be identified as having certain stereotypical traits. Women, as mentioned above, were more commonly possessed than males.^{xviii} There were several prevalent cultural explanations for this during the early modern period, which were often associated with women's supposedly inherently inferior mental capabilities and moral standards. For example, while males were granted more responsibility for their beliefs and actions, females were regarded as more naturally susceptible to demonic possession because they were 'weak-minded' and inherently sexual.^{xix} The *Malleus Maleficarum*, written in 1487 by the inquisitors Kramer and Sprenger, provides many examples of common beliefs about females in the early modern period. Kramer and Sprenger argue, for example, that women 'are naturally more impressionable,' 'feebler both in mind and body' than men, and, because they are also more carnal than men, 'for the sake of fulfilling their lusts they consort even with devils.'^{xx} As a result, sexual symptoms were commonly evident in demoniac behaviour, and included fantasies of demonic rape and phantom pregnancies

that were viewed as the result of copulation with demons.^{xxi} Other characteristics of the typical demoniac include being of a young age, uneducated, and poor with 'nothing to lose.'^{xxii} As Coventry claims, 'those who became demoniacs were usually individuals with little social power or status who were hemmed in by numerous social restrictions and had few sanctioned avenues for protesting their dissatisfactions or improving their lot.'^{xxiii} However, in cases of bewitchment, when a witch was blamed for causing demonic possession, the demoniac was usually wealthier than the alleged witch.^{xxiv} In the case of the French demoniac Marthe Brossier, for example, Marthe accused her neighbour, Anne, because Anne was middle-aged and unmarried, rather than accusing her wealthier and respectably married sister whom she resented for preventing her marriage.^{xxv} There were some exceptions to this stereotype of the demoniac, however. The case of Robert Brigges, for example, can be seen as unusual in that he was male, middle aged, well educated, wealthy, and respectable.^{xxvi} Regardless of the social demography of the demoniacs, demonic possession was accepted by both the educated élite and the common people as a customary feature of social life.^{xxvii}

Demonic possession can be seen as serving several social functions, which can often be linked to the demography of the demoniacs. Because the demoniac's actions and words were thought to be controlled by the possessing demon, and therefore the person was not in control of what they said or did, the demoniac was free from normal societal regulations and moral obligations.^{xxviii} As Sands argues, 'their condition liberated them from social regulation without fear of punitive consequences.'^{xxix} The demoniac Marthe Brossier, due to her poor financial situation and consequent poor matrimonial prospects, grew desperate, cut her hair, and ran away from home dressed as a man.^{xxx} As these were regarded as signs of witchcraft, her actions brought great shame to her family, and so when she was found and returned home, Marthe, out of guilt and the fear of being accused herself of being a witch, accused her neighbour Anne instead, and began 'to play the demoniac...to recover her honour.'^{xxxi} As a supporter of Anne claimed at the time, by pretending to be possessed, '[Marthe's] fault could be explained away as the instigation of an evil spirit. Then she could be pitied, and onlookers could excuse rather than condemn her for her faults.'^{xxxii} Therefore, demonic possession served the social function of providing the opportunity for dispossessed members of society to live outside societal norms without fear of the consequences. According to Sands, demonic possession also had social functions for children during the early modern period, when children led very restricted lives. Sands argues that children during this period were controlled and restricted even in terms of facial expressions, being forbidden to puff out their cheeks, yawn, bite or lick their lips, or frown.^{xxxiii} In light of this repressive context, then, possession could be regarded as a form of social protest that 'legitimated normally unacceptable behaviour.'^{xxxiv}

Another related social function of demonic possession was that, through being possessed, the demoniac would, albeit usually only temporarily, experience an improvement in social standing and be given the ability to voice their opinions. Sands argues, for example, that women received 'attention, respect, and deference' as well as 'a degree of prestige and power otherwise unavailable to them.'^{xxxv} During this period, it was common for those who preached religion without the official consent of the church to be punished.^{xxxvi} But, because the demoniac could not be held responsible for being possessed, they were able to preach without fear of punishment.^{xxxvii} According to Coventry and de Certeau, mass possessions were often found in strict religious environments, where there was little freedom of thought or action.^{xxxviii} It should not come as a surprise, then, that it has been argued that due to their possessed status the possessed nuns of Loudun were able to voice their opinions on spiritual questions, a discourse from which they were usually excluded due to their sex.^{xxxix}

Demonic possession also served religious functions in early modern society, especially through the practice of exorcism. During the early modern period, when fear of the Devil was paramount and demonic possession was a sign of the Devil's ability to infiltrate the human world, exorcism functioned as a social reassurance and a demonstration that good will always prevail over evil.^{xl} During the Reformation, the body of the possessed became a battlefield in which tensions between Catholics and Protestants were played out. Ferber claims that the 'increasing divisions about exorcism in times of acute anxiety about the devil came to accentuate the contrasting views of the rite.'^{xli} Catholic exorcisms, for example, contained ritualistic 'weapons' to use against the possessing demons, including binding, flogging, burning, and fumigating, the use of holy potions, and the sign of the cross.^{xlii} Protestants, however, saw these practices as idolatrous, and their dispossession rituals involved only prayer and fasting.^{xliii} As a result of these differing views of exorcism, 'public displays of battles with Satanic forces became a showcase for rival strands of Christianity.'^{xliv} Catholics and Protestants also used exorcism as a means to attract converts, as 'each exorcism was a proving ground for faith, legitimizing the authority of the individual who performed it and the Church they claimed to represent.'^{xlv} Therefore, exorcism functioned not just to save individual souls, but as religious propaganda.^{xlvi} To this end, exorcisms in the early modern period were usually highly publicised, public events, which often traveled from town to town.^{xlvii}

Demoniacs also served a religious function by reinforcing church teachings by speaking out against opposing religious factions.^{xlviii} There was growing church disapproval of exorcisms toward the end of the sixteenth century, however, due to the 'public fear and disorder' that they generated, which led to the undermining of the church's authority.^{xlix} Ferber claims that the increase in public exorcisms and the 'perceived rise of fraud and collaboration' of the exorcist with the demons led to further anxiety about the Devil's prevalence.¹ The church began to see possessions and exorcisms as a threat because they 'elevated individual inspiration over the establishment's authoritative rule.'^{li} These concerns were reflected in ecclesiastic law. For example, in an attempt to outlaw 'troublesome public dispossessions' in 1604 the Anglican Convocation produced the *Constitutiones sive Canonēs Ecclesiastici*, which stated clergymen had to have their bishop's permission before attempting a dispossession.^{lii}

There were three main contemporary explanations for possession: actual possession, natural illness, or fraud.^{liiii} It is significant that, during this period, the Catholic Church insisted that all medical explanations for the behaviour under investigation be exhausted before symptoms were determined as 'religious rather than medical and demonic rather than divine.'^{liv} As Coventry explains, it was only when a physician could not cure a patient that possession was diagnosed.^{lv} It is said of the nuns at Loudun, for example, that 'after having employed the physicians of the body, apothecaries and medical men, [they] were obliged to have recourse to the physicians of the soul.'^{lvi} Common medical explanations at that time for possession-like symptoms usually involved the belief that the Devil was perpetuating an imbalance of the four elemental bodily fluids: blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile.^{lvii} For example, if the Devil perpetuated an excess of blood, this could result in fits of violent rage.^{lviii}

Despite the belief that possession could occur, however, Coventry argues that 'fraud was always a possibility in possession cases.'^{lix} Suspecting demoniacs of fraud increased towards the end of the early modern period, when knowledge of other faked possessions spread. Tests done to authenticate the possession of William Perry, for example, failed when sacred texts were recited to him in a foreign language. Because Perry failed to react with horror at the sacred texts, he was deemed to be a fraud by his contemporaries.^{lx} The English physician Edward Jorden, who examined the demoniac Mary Glover, argued that 'such examples [of true possession] being very rare nowadays, I would in the fear of God be very circumspect in pronouncing of a possession ... because the impostures be many.'^{lxi} As Caciola explains, 'Medieval people were well aware of the potential advantages that a claim of divine possession held for women's low status. Hence it is not surprising if, on the one hand, women in particular might be drawn to make claims of divine possession and, on the other, their neighbours might suspect them of lying precisely because of their sex.'^{lxii} Caciola is claiming, therefore, that because people, women in particular, understood the socio-cultural advantages of possession, they were often likely to fake one.

Modern academics often seek to explain the symptoms of demonic possession by today's knowledge of medicine and science.^{lxiii} However, as Sands argues, 'to ignore, or trivialize or apologize for earlier beliefs is not merely arrogant; it is also bad history.'^{lxiv} Therefore, although demonic possession served various social and religious functions, it is important to remember that possession was regarded as a very real phenomenon in early modern society. For example, in an account of the Loudun possessions it is evident that people really did fear the presence of the Devil. One source claims that 'the fact that they were possessed of devils drove everyone from their convent as from a diabolical residence ... even those who acted thus were their best friends.'^{lxv} Clarke also argues that 'the points at which ordinarily acquired behaviour shades into artificiality, and insincerity into deception proper, are in any case indefinable and variable, and decisions about where to place cases of possession on this continuum need to be made with subtlety.'^{lxvi} For example, although the convert Thomas Killigrew doubted that all the Loudun possessions were real, he maintained his belief in the potential reality of demonic possession and the Devil's power due to what he saw at Loudun. Killigrew claimed that: 'Indeede the things I saw her doe confirmed in me the Opinion that there are fewer Devills in London, if it be as they would have us believe, then there must be of these \Religious\ Counterfeit, & [yet] there is nothing surer then the Devill at London.'^{lxvii}

The socio-cultural preconditions that helped foster the prevalence of demonic possession cases in the early modern period ascertained the social profile of likely possession victims as women more often than men, and people of low economic and social status rather than the wealthy and influential. Demonic possession served very particular social and religious functions during the 16th and 17th centuries, including freeing demoniacs from conventionally acceptable behaviour and improving their social standing. Despite these potential benefits accessible to victims of demonic possession, however, and despite contemporary medical explanations for possession and cases of fraud, early modern society did in fact believe that demonic possession was possible, due to the prevalent belief in the immediacy of the Devil.

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