

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Demonic Assault, Providence, and the Search for Salvation in Early Modern Reformed English Protestant Theology

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During the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries—the height of European demonological interest—England experienced a series of demonic possession cases that gained substantial attention from the clergy and laypeople alike. Reported across sensationalist pamphlets and learned demonological treatises, these cases were presented as extraordinary tokens of God’s providence intended to be interpreted and responded to by those involved. English Calvinists during this period were largely interested in demonic possession for three primary reasons: what providential meaning this spiritual affliction offered, what action God was compelling them to carry out, and, more importantly, what profit they could gain in fulfilling their godly duties. The profit cited by these Calvinists was a glimpse into their predestined fate. This article argues that demonic affliction was fashioned as an emblematic phenomenon by English Calvinist communities with dispossession (exorcism) cast as a definitive form of spiritual warfare designed to provide comfort for the faithful and guide them toward a blessed conclusion. In this context, possession functioned as a providential catalyst: a call to carry out dispossession that, once fulfilled, brought the entire act to completion. Examining four possession textual accounts in detail, with a particular focus on the exploits of the controversial Puritan exorcist John Darrell, this article examines the intellectual construction of spirit possession and exorcism within an aligned Calvinist providential and eschatological framework. These cases exemplify many of the prevailing interpretations of spirit possession in the early modern English context and illustrate how this affliction offered individuals a potential salve to the vexed nature of Calvinist predestination.

Keywords: Demonic possession; Exorcism; Predestination; Providence; Calvinism

I. Introduction

In his 1600 treatise, *A True Narration of the Strange and Grevous Vexation by the Devil*, the Puritan exorcist John Darrell outlined his “Doctrin of Possession and Dispossession of Demoniakes Ovt of the Word of God.” Reflecting on his successful and highly controversial exorcism ministry, he declared that this “extraordinarie worke of God [demonic possession] . . . calleth for an extraordinarie vse,” establishing that it was a

“double sinne to faile therein.”¹ He declared that God ordained demonic possession and thereby called upon Christians to act. During this period—the height of European demonological interest—Calvinist clergymen such as Darrell were particularly concerned with what providential meaning this spiritual affliction offered, what action God was compelling them to carry out, and, more importantly, what profit they could gain in fulfilling their godly duties.

England experienced a series of possession cases in the latter half of the sixteenth and the opening years of the seventeenth centuries, reported across sensationalist pamphlets and learned demonological treatises, that attracted substantial attention from the wider populace.² Demonic possession in this historical context, as Richard Raiswell explains, was understood to be a “temporally and spatially circumscribed intervention by the Devil with the consent of the creator intended to be read and glossed by the faithful.”³ This was a condition that was largely socially constructed with its meaning intrinsically tied to the religious identity of the community wherein it manifested.⁴ Demonic possession in early modern England thus functioned as a providential and revelatory phenomenon, offering individuals a chance for spiritual reflection while also guiding them toward a desired conclusion: “By this rare worke of him, and serious meditation thereof,” a man may “be brought to that faith the end whereof will be the saluation of his soule.”⁵ The succession of demonic possession cases in this period was thus brought into alignment with the Calvinist doctrine of predestination as theologians, demonologists, and learned clergymen framed this spiritual affliction within a providential paradigm. This article hence argues that demonic possession was fashioned as a providential and soteriological phenomenon in the early modern English Calvinist spiritual tradition. It illustrates how individuals and communities accommodated inexplicable phenomena such as demonic possession into their lived spiritual experiences with the intention of achieving assurance in their predestined fates.⁶ Through

¹John Darrell, “The Doctrin of the Possession and Dispossession of Deminoiakcs Ovt of the Word of God. Particularly Applied Vnto Somers, and the Rest of the Persons Controverted Together. With the use we are Make of the Same,” in *A True Narration of the Strange and Grevovs Vexation by the Devil, of 7. Persons in Lancashire, and VVilliam Sommers of Nottingham Wherein the Doctrine of Possession and Dispossession of Demoniakcs out of the Word of God Is Particularly Applied Vnto Sommers, and the Rest of the Persons Controuerted: Togeather with the Vse We Are to Make of These Workes of God* (England: s.n., 1600), 67.

²James Sharpe has argued for the existence of a “popular demonic” in early modern English print: pamphlets, broadsides, and chapbooks that occupied a middle ground between “popular” and “elite” demonological works. James Sharpe, “English Witchcraft Pamphlets and the Popular Demonic,” in *Demonology and Witch-Hunting in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Julian Goodare, Rita Voltmer, and Liv Helene Willumsen, Routledge Studies in the History of Witchcraft, Demonology, and Magic (London: Routledge, 2020), 127–146.

³Richard Raiswell, “Edward Terry and the Demons of India,” in *Knowing Demons, Knowing Spirits in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Michelle D. Brock, Richard Raiswell, and David R. Winter, Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 194.

⁴The social construction of demonic possession is brilliantly outlined in Brian Levack’s *The Devil Within: Possession & Exorcism in the Christian West* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013).

⁵John Darrell, *An Apologie, or Defence of the Possession of William Sommers, a Yong Man of the Towne of Nottingham: Wherein This Worke of God Is Cleared from the Evil Name of Counterfaytinge, and Therevpon Also It Is Shewed That in These Dayes Men May Be Possessed with Devils, and That Being So, by Prayer and Fasting the Vncleane Spirit May Be Cast Out* (Amsterdam: s.n., 1599), sig. fiiiir–fiiiiv.

⁶By Calvinist, this article denotes the subscription of English Protestants to the doctrine of double predestination. According to Leif Dixon, this definition is largely agreed upon in contemporary scholarship. Leif Dixon, *Practical Predestinarians in England, C. 1590–1640* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), 9.

examining the intellectual construction of spirit possession and exorcism within an aligned Calvinist providential and eschatological framework, this article further historicizes the multifaceted role that this spiritual experience played in early modern England.

However, the correlation between predestination and demonic possession in early modern English Protestantism is one that has received insufficient attention in the scholarship.⁷ Scholars have certainly recognized the providential mechanism that demonic possession fulfilled in Calvinist theology, yet have not considered how this spiritual affliction engaged with the most pressing question of this period: one's fate after death. In his groundbreaking *Thinking with Demons*, Stuart Clark established that demonic possession was primarily interpreted as an eschatological marker in which the demoniac functioned as an allegory for the condition of human society as it moved into its final stage.⁸ Through the lens of Calvinist providential thinking, this functionality was broadened to provide profound soteriological meaning. Providence heavily informed all aspects of spiritual life and, within this providential schema, demons were believed to play an active role in earthly affairs; understanding their explicit function could possibly reveal key aspects of the divine plan to a culture anxiously seeking signs of salvation.⁹ Accordingly, this article addresses how demonic possession, and also its remedy, were interpreted by some Calvinist communities as providential markers revealing their eternal fates. To demonstrate this, I examine the sermons, treatises, pamphlets, and accounts of possession most influential in perpetuating this reading of demonic activity. Printed works were integral to the proliferation of this providential paradigm, as it was contemporary cases that individuals looked to when experiencing or confronting demonic possession. This article thus examines four possession narratives from this period: Robert Briggs in 1574, Thomas Darling in 1596, William Sommers and Mary Cowper in 1597–1598, and Mary Glover in 1602. These cases exemplify many of the prevailing interpretations of spirit possession in the early modern English context and illustrate how dispossession was conceptualized as a form of spiritual warfare within a providential schema.

In mounting this argument, it must be noted that the available dataset is rather limited. Demonic possession was a rare experience in Calvinist territories, and the number of cases during this period pales in comparison to that of Catholic countries.¹⁰ England

⁷Michelle D. Brock writes that the relationship between the Devil and predestinarian theology is “yet to be thoroughly unpacked by historians,” despite this being a defining component of experiential piety throughout the Reformed Anglophone world. Michelle D. Brock, “Internalizing the Demonic: Satan and the Self in Early Modern Scottish Piety,” *Journal of British Studies* 54 (Jan. 2015): 24. Brian Levack acknowledges that manifestations of demonic possession could be accommodated within a Calvinist soteriological framework but does not go into detail about the spiritual justification for this belief. Levack, *The Devil Within*, 161–164.

⁸Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999), 393.

⁹Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999), 2; Michelle D. Brock and David R. Winter, “Theory and Practice in Early Modern Epistmologies,” in *Knowing Demons, Knowing Spirits in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Michelle D. Brock, Richard Raiswell, and David R. Winter, *Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 6.

¹⁰Possession was relatively scarce in Calvinist areas of Europe, as Continental Calvinism tended to downplay this spiritual phenomenon in favor of a more metaphoric understanding of demonic incursion. Francis Young, *A History of Anglican Exorcism: Deliverance and Demonology in Church Ritual* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018), 18, 44.

is no exception to this trend. In 1600 there were only twenty-five recorded demoniacs (out of a population of 4 million people) that lived in communities where Calvinism flourished.¹¹ Furthermore, many of these possession cases unfolded over a relatively short space of time—the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries—and are centered on one reoccurring figure: John Darrell. Because of this, there are only a handful of texts that can be examined. It also must be acknowledged that these texts obscure the “true” possession experience and do not necessarily represent the voice of the demoniacs (who were generally young and in varying states of vulnerability).¹² Rather, such accounts relied on generic traditions and were constructed with a specific didactic objective in mind by the learned and authoritative figures that oversaw the ordeal.¹³ These figures thereby configured the afflictions of the demoniac to reflect their spiritual convictions and, in negotiation with the prevailing socio-political dynamics of the community in which the possession manifested, determined the appropriate response. All of this, however, only serves to strengthen the central thesis of this article. This dataset presents a reading of demonic possession that is entirely unique to the Calvinist context, as it is with such cases that this condition was represented in print as a providential and soteriological experience.

Many of these cases thus involved communities of Puritans, as these groups fervently subscribed to this providential reading of demonic possession, and it is in these communities that many of these cases unfolded. This article defines Puritans, or the “Godly” as they termed their selves, in the Collinson mold and uses the descriptive markers provided by Michael P. Winship. Puritans were the “hotter sort of Protestants”: individuals who were the staunchest defenders of England’s fledging Protestantism, the most determined seekers of salvation, the most concerned with God’s providence, and the most committed activists for moral and spiritual reform.¹⁴ This is an apt description for Darrell, who embodied a form of moderate Puritanism, albeit expressed with the utmost enthusiasm. He received ongoing support from leading Godly figures with his exorcism ministry sanctioning fundamental Puritan practices and dogmas.¹⁵ The influential Puritan congregation at Ashby-de-la-Zouch (East Midlands), where he resided for many years, never questioned his probity and only took issue with his zeal in particular instances.¹⁶ This Puritan community was by no means separatist, nor totally conforming, and was evidently far more ingrained in the broader spiritual culture than its

¹¹Levack, *The Devil Within*, 261.

¹²Anna French, *Children of Wrath: Possession, Prophecy and the Young in Early Modern England* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2015), 2–3.

¹³As Marion Gibson forwards, possession pamphlets were similar in form and structure to witchcraft pamphlets yet adopted a more ideological standpoint that reflected a distinction in their overall purpose. Marion Gibson, *Reading Witchcraft: Stories of Early English Witches* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 6–7.

¹⁴Patrick Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (London: Cape, 1967); Michael P. Winship, *Hot Protestants: A History of Puritanism in England and America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 1–2.

¹⁵Thomas 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), 35–36.

¹⁶Marion Gibson, *Possession, Puritanism and Print: Darrell, Harsnett, Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Exorcism Controversy* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2006), 36. For a study on Ashby-de-la-Zouch and the prominent figures who resided there, see Lesley A. Rowe, *The Life and Times of Arthur Hildersham: Prince among Puritans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2013).

seventeenth-century counterparts.¹⁷ Here, Darrell's talents were nurtured as the Ashby leadership clearly recognized the proselytizing potential of his dispossessions. Darrell, his allies, and those that sympathized with his exorcism ministry account for a substantial number of possession texts published in late sixteenth and early seventeenth century England. Thus, it is with these polemical texts that this article turns to in establishing the relationship between providence, predestination, and demonic possession in early modern Reformed English Protestant demonology.

II. To Trie and Proue His People

In chapters sixteen to eighteen of his seminal *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Jean Calvin outlines the doctrine of providence.¹⁸ Here, providence is described as God's control over human history within the broader schema of creation, designating that his will is behind every single inexplicable and wondrous occurrence¹⁹:

But faith ought to perce deper, that is to say, whom it hath lerned to be the creatour of al things, by and by to gather that the same is the perpetual gouernor & preseruer of them: and that, not by stirryng with an vniuersall motion as wel the whole frame of the worlde, as all the partes therof, but by susteynyng, cherishing & caring for, with singular prouidence euey one of those thinges ye he hath created eue[n] to ye least sparow.²⁰

Extraordinary phenomena, such as natural disasters, comets, strange births, famine, and demonic possession, were signs that God was constantly remaking the world by realigning its spiritual and elemental properties. However, as Calvin explains, the meaning of God's providence is often hidden from plain sight and unable to be fully grasped by the human mind. God's plan is not always clear, in that "sometyme it woorketh by meanes, somtyme without meanes, and somtyme agaynst all meanes."²¹ God provides glimpses as he cares for each and every human soul, yet all that his servants can do is profess their unyielding faith in the divine plan. Christians were thereby directed toward scripture, as this is where providence is revealed. Passages such as Romans 1:20 thereby function as a guide: "For the inuisible things of him, that is, his eternal power and Godhead, are seene by ye creation of the worlde, being considered in his workes, to the intent that they should be without excuse."²² Armed with such wisdom and a faithful disposition,

¹⁷In 1617, Darrell would publish a work attempting to shepherd separatists back into the fold of the English Church. John Darrell, *A Treatise of the Church VVritten against Them of the Separation, Commonly Called Brownists. Wherein the True Doctrine of a Visible Church Is Taught, and the Church of England, Proued to Be a True Church. The Brownists False Doctrine of the Visible Church Is Conuinced; Their Shamefull Peruerting of the Holy Scriptures Discouered, Their Arguments to Proue the Church of England a False Church Answered* (London: Printed by William Iones, Dwelling in Red-Crosse Streete, 1617).

¹⁸Jean Calvin, *The Institution of Christian Religion, vvyrtten in Latine by maister Ihon Caluin, and translated into Englysh according to the authors last edition. Seen and allowed according to the order appointed in the Quenes maiesties iniunctions*, trans. Thomas Norton (Imprinted at London: By Reinolde VVolfe & Richarde Harison, Anno. 1561 [6 May] Cum priuilegio ad imprimendum solum).

¹⁹A distinction is usually made between "general providence," which denoted God's continuous upholding of the natural law, and "special" or "divine" providence, which describes direct interventions. The latter was generally classed as miraculous by Calvinists.

²⁰Calvin, *The Institution of Christian Religion*, I. xvi. 56.

²¹*Ibid.*, I. xvii. 61.

²²Romans 1:20 (1599 Geneva Bible).

they were then encouraged to examine the world around them for divine meaning. Every providential occurrence, therefore, is a direct message from God: intended to elicit the “proper” response from the faithful. Acts of providence are to be “read” and responded to with more extraordinary events offering profound meaning. To this effect, manifestations of demonic incursion require particularly close inspection, as it is through the bewildering physical and spiritual torments of the demoniac that God reveals his judgments to humanity.²³

Calvin’s theorization of providence thereby established a theodicean paradigm that emphasized the total sovereignty of God.²⁴ Through this the Devil and his minions were fashioned as instruments of God, implemented for a divine purpose. This conception of diabolic instrumentality became a central theme in Calvinist demonological works of the successive period. William Perkins, a prominent Puritan theologian, and the most frequently reprinted English author between 1590 and 1620, explains in his (posthumous) 1610 *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft* that God “doth oftentimes vse Satan as his instrument, for the effecting of his intended workes, and the executing of his iudgements vpon men.”²⁵ As Perkins puts forth, the instrumentality of the Devil was but a means of conveying God’s unbridled power. In the “Doctrin of Possession and Dispossession” section of his 1600 treatise *A True Narration*, Darrell outlines five divine attributes that possession reveals:

1. *the justice of god* in punnishing or correcting sinne
2. *the omnipotencie and power of God in the powere and strength of the deuil* which God permietteth him to exercise against sinners
3. *the mercye of God* is to be seene in this worke in deliuering them
4. *the wisdom & incountabilitie of God* as being the same who neuer changeth
5. *the faithfulness of God* in the performance of his promyse offeth. . .[to] deliuer the partie from beinge any further vexed be Satan.²⁶

Theologians of Darrell’s ilk were adamant in illuminating the divine presence behind demonic agency, encouraging those that experienced it to take comfort in God’s power. There were two primary reasons for the manifestation of demonic possession that emerged in Calvinist spirituality. In his 1597 *Daemonologie*, the Scottish Calvinist King James VI labels the Devil as “Gods hang-man,” the instrument through which the Lord punishes “the wicked for their horrible sinnes” and tested “even some of the best, [so] that their patience may bee tryed before the world.” James proceeds to explain that the faithful are “tempted or troubled” by the Devil to “waken them vp the faster” to their internal “sinnes and infirmities.”²⁷ The Devil’s instrumentality

²³Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, 403, 419–422.

²⁴See Chapter 18 for Calvin’s explanation of the Devil’s instrumentality. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.18. 232.

²⁵William Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft So Farre Forth as It Is Reuealed in the Scriptures, and Manifest by True Experience. Framed and Deliuered by M. William Perkins, in His Ordinarie Course of Preaching, and Now Published by Tho. Pickering Batchelour of Diuinitie, and Minister of Finchingfield in Essex. Whereunto Is Adioyned a Twofold Table; One of the Order and Heades of the Treatise; Another of the Texts of Scripture Explained, or Vindicated from the Corrupt Interpretation of the Aduersarie* (Cambridge, UK: Printed by Cantrell Legge, Printer to the Universitie of Cambridge, 1610), 61–62.

²⁶Darrell, “The Doctrin of the Possession and Dispossession,” 68.

²⁷James I, King of England, *Daemonologie, in Forme of a Dialogue, Diuided into Three Bookes* (Edinburgh: Printed by Robert Walde-graue printer to the Kings Majestie, An., 1597), Preface: 5, 33, 47.

thus carried powerful soteriological implications. How an individual responded to demonic assault, be it a punishment or trial, was indicative of his or her eternal fate. Calvin summarizes that “Nowe that the ministry of Sathan is vsed to pricke forward the reprobate, so oft as the Lorde by his prouidence appointeth them to this or to that, may sufficiently be proued, though it were but by one place only.”²⁸ This is drawn from Paul’s lines in 2 Thessalonians 2:11–12: “And therefore God shall send them strong delusion, that they should beleuee lies, That all they might be damned which beleueed not the trueth, but had pleasure in vnrighteousnes.”²⁹ Conversely, as God’s will was being communicated through every demonic manifestation, an individual could obtain some assurance of his or her election if this experience was deciphered correctly and acted upon. Perkins echoes this point. The Lord ordains demonic phenomenon “to trie and prooue his people, whether they will cleaue to him and his word, or seeke vnto Satan and wicked spirits.”³⁰ Possession was hence emblematic in a myriad of ways: punishing the wicked, testing the faithful, and evaluating how individuals reacted in the face of this demonic affliction.

Predestination was a related yet distinct concept from providence in that it addressed matters of individual salvation or damnation within the broader schema of creation. The Calvinist doctrine of Predestination (Double Predestination) decreed that God had designated both the elect and the reprobate at the time of creation. However, this doctrine developed into an enduring fault line in the early modern English Church: *Article Seventeen (Of Predestination and Election)* of the 1571 *Thirty-Nine Articles* was the subject of fierce debate, as it could be read as implying that God was the “author of sin.”³¹ The greatest adherents of the Calvinist doctrine of predestination were Puritans. Puritanism was the most active carrier of the “predestinarian virus strain” in that its adherents incorporated this doctrine most thoroughly into their spiritual narratives.³² This doctrine bred self-scrutiny and an intense fascination with salvation, consuming the life of the Puritan with the pursuit for signs of election or reprobation. The extraordinary proliferation of demonic possession in England during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries thus developed into a primary focus of this predestinarian belief. Darrell, like many of his contemporaries, was convinced that the increasing number of demons being set loose on the world signaled the coming of Judgement Day.³³ The faithful were being prepared for this final battle, and every skirmish with the Devil, enacted through demoniacs, functioned as a type of trial or sanctification that brought them closer to God. Embedded in this eschatological paradigm was the established concept of spiritual warfare—perpetual battle against the Devil’s temptations—and it is through this lens that the providential implications of demonic possession were conveyed.³⁴ Spiritual warfare was fully embraced by, and became a

²⁸ Calvin, *The Institution of Christian Religion*, II. iv. 25–26.

²⁹ 2 Thess. 2:11–12 (1599 Geneva Bible).

³⁰ Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, sigs. VIr–VIv.

³¹ This controversy persisted into the seventeenth century despite continued attempts by the episcopacy to address this issue (i.e., the 1595 Lambeth Articles). For more on the development of the Lambeth Articles, see Debora Shuger, “The Mysteries of the Lambeth Articles,” *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 68, no. 2 (2017): 306–325.

³² Dixon, *Practical Predestinarians in England*, 3.

³³ Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, 393.

³⁴ For a brief history of this concept, see Chapter 3 of Katherine Allen Smith’s *War and the Making of Medieval Monastic Culture*, *Studies in the History of Medieval Religion* 37 (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 2011).

defining characteristic of Puritan piety; it provided the framework in which to conceptualize individual and collective conflict with the Devil.³⁵ Such a framework was required, as the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity decreed that every individual was compromised and thus vulnerable to demonic assault.³⁶ Even the most pious Christian was deserving of demonic torment, and this complicated the matter of the demoniac's moral culpability. It was thus expected that every person would be subjected to some form of demonic assault during his or her lifetime with the more extraordinary incursions (possession) carrying significant providential implications. In defiance of this inevitability, diabolic assault could be fashioned as a sign of an individual's piety, as demons would not waste time on those who were already damned. Indeed, the Puritans' sense of election indicated that the Devil's malice would naturally be concentrated on the most devout Christians, as it was their duty to endure and overcome such assaults.³⁷ Achieving victory over the Devil thereby offered insight into the divine plan and the role of the individuals wherein, preparing their souls for the approaching end times.³⁸

Examining the providential reading of demonic possession in the English Calvinist context highlights that this condition had no fixed theological definition. There was no single model of demonic possession in early modern Europe but rather a large repertory of signs that could appear in different combinations.³⁹ Possession, by its very nature, was emblematic with its precise meaning constructed by the community in which it took place. This condition was thereby highly unstable and only became more so in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England as theologians began to emphasize the Devil's scriptural role as a tempter. The image of a spiritual Devil who invaded minds with temptations to entice individuals into committing sin and forfeiting their soul was thus conflated with the physical Devil who subjected his victims to unbearable bodily torments, perpetuating an image of unrelenting demonic assault across all fronts.⁴⁰ The prevalence of bewitchment in English demonic cases also further muddled these demonological boundaries and made it increasingly difficult to distinguish between different forms of demonic assault.⁴¹ This was a shift away from a strict systematic typography of demonic assault to an all-encompassing one centered on perpetual conflict with the Devil. One notable attempt to demarcate different types of demonic assault is with the formal introduction of "demonic obsession" into English spiritual discourse by Puritan ministers John Deacon and John Walker with their 1601 treatise *Dialogicall Discourses of Spirits and Divels*.⁴² Responding to Darrell's

³⁵Frank Luttmer, "Prosecutors, Tempters and Vassals of the Devil: The Unregenerate in Puritan Practical Divinity," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 51, no. 1 (Jan. 2000): 46.

³⁶Levack, *The Devil Within*, 206–208.

³⁷Nathan Johnstone, *The Devil and Demonism in Early Modern England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 61.

³⁸Levack, *The Devil Within*, 68–69.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁰Johnstone, *The Devil and Demonism in Early Modern England*, 6–8.

⁴¹James Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness: Witchcraft in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 190.

⁴²John Deacon and John Walker, *Dialogicall Discourses of Spirits and Divels Declaring Their Proper Essence, Natures, Dispositions, and Operations, Their Possessions and Dispossessiones: With Other the Appendantes, Peculiarly Appertaining to Those Speciall Points, Verie Conducent, and Pertinent to the Timely Procuring of Some Christian Conformitie in Iudgement, for the Peaceable Compounding of the Late Sprong Controuersies Concerning All Such Intricate and Difficult Doubts* (London: George Bishop, 1601).

controversial exorcism ministry, Deacon and Walker conceptualized demonic obsession as an entirely external form of demonic assault on the mind, soul, or body established as the “true” interpretation of scriptural possession episodes.⁴³ They define obsession as either “an outward assaulting and vexing; or in an inward suggesting and tempting,” resulting in such afflictions as “ungodly motions, affections, lustes . . . and carnall practices.”⁴⁴ The pair sensationally denied the possibility of demonic occupation altogether and argued that all possessions were, in fact, obsessions. Demonic obsession quickly developed into an established demonological category in seventeenth-century England, but Deacon and Walker’s definition was by no means universally accepted. Many clergymen subsequently recognized obsession as an external form of diabolic assault, usually analogous with demonic temptation, while also maintaining a belief in demonic occupation. The introduction of this category of demonic assault thus did little to establish distinct theoretical boundaries in English Protestant demonology.

Demonic temptation neatly encapsulated this notion of all-encompassing demonic assault and was thus elevated into the single most important aspect of satanic activity in Calvinist spirituality. It also became intrinsically intertwined with the possession experience, as the grotesque physical symptoms produced by demonic occupation were cast as the external manifestation of the internal conflict with demonic temptation.⁴⁵ One 1597 possession pamphlet explains that demonic assault “is not to be understood onely [by] the temptations of the Diuel, but euen [by] Sathans verie person.”⁴⁶ This struggle against demonic temptation further imbued Calvinist possession narratives with providential and soteriological meaning. The late sixteenth-century Puritan preacher George Gifford, invoking James 1:12, illustrates this confluence in his 1593 *A Dialogue Concerning Witches and Witchcraft*: “As if thou feare God, and Satan afflict thee, stand fast in faith and patience, and waite vpon God for thy deliuerance. If thou endure temptation, thou art blessed, and shalt be crowned.”⁴⁷ The boundaries between these different forms of demonic assault were thus porous in Calvinist theology, compounded by the descriptive language employed throughout demonological literature. Notably, the term “possession”—denoting demonic occupation—was often presented as interchangeable with “temptation” or “vexation.” A contextualist reading, informed by knowledge of generic conventions, is thus required. The 1574 Briggs possession manuscript, for example, never even uses the term possession or any variant of

⁴³Demonic obsession, while having clear precedents in medieval demonology, was not defined in English theological discourse until the early seventeenth century. King James VI and I outlined in his *Daemonologie* that there are two types of possessing spirits: “whereof the one followes outwardlie, the other possesses inwardlie the persones that they trouble,” and Calvinist theologians used this framework to develop the category of demonic obsession. James I, *Daemonologie*, 62.

⁴⁴Deacon and Walker, *Dialogicall Discourses of Spirits and Diuels*, 226–227.

⁴⁵Johnstone, *The Devil and Demonism in Early Modern England*, 102.

⁴⁶Jesse Bee et al. *The Most Wonderfull and True Storie, of a Certaine Witch Named Also Gooderige of Stapenhill, Who Was Arraigned and Convicted at Darbie at the Assises There. As Also a True Report of the Strange Torments of Thomas Darling, a Boy of Thirteene Years of Age, That Was Possessed of the Deuill, with His Horrible Fittes and Terrible Apparitions by Him Uttered at Burton Upon Trent in the County of Stafford, and of His Marvellous Deliverance* (Printed at London: For I.O., 1597), 33.

⁴⁷George Gifford, *A Dialogue Concerning Witches and Witchcrafts. In which is laide open how craftely the Diuell deceiueth not onely the witches but many other and so leadeth them awrie into many great errors* (London: Printed by Iohn Windet for Tobie Cooke and Mihil Hart, and are to be sold [by Tobie Cooke] in Pauls Church-yard, at the Tygers head, 1593), sig. H3v.

it and instead designates him as “tempted” or “vexed.”⁴⁸ However, Briggs’s symptoms—including intense physical pain, fits, trances, harrowing visions, falling senseless, and suicidal ideation—clearly infer the presence of a demonic spirit. The 1593 *Witches of Warboys* pamphlet adopts a similar approach in how it labels the demoniacs of the Throckmorton household.⁴⁹ Darrell too demonstrates this linguistic fluidity, as his demonological treatises describe demoniacs as “vexed with euill spirits” and profess that witches could afflict individuals with demons.⁵⁰ Godly individuals were evidently more concerned with the overwhelming threat that the Devil posed to their souls rather than the exact nature of his assaults, and thereby turned their attention to the providential meaning that could be glimpsed from such experiences.

Consequently, it is largely in Puritan communities that possession manifested and was documented during this period. This correlation, however, led to conflict as tensions between different factions within the Church of England reached a flashpoint during the closing years of the sixteenth century. Contemporary cases of demonic possession came under fierce scrutiny by the ecclesiastical authorities during this period, typified by the John Darrell Exorcism Controversy.⁵¹ Darrell’s rise as a Puritan exorcist, culminating in the dispossession of William Sommers in Nottingham over 1597–1598, brought him to the attention of the Archbishop of Canterbury, John Whitgift; the Bishop of London, Richard Bancroft; and his chaplain, Samuel Harsnett. These individuals were decidedly anti-Puritan and displayed a general skepticism toward post-apostolic demonic possession. Using the excessive legislative powers of the High Commission, the ecclesiastical authorities brought Darrell to trial and stripped him of his ministry in 1599. The High Commission decreed that Darrell had “taught 4. [people] to counterfeite” demonic possession over a ten-year period, fashioning himself into a miracle worker for the purposes of furthering his fame and proselytizing the masses.⁵² Darrell’s High Commission hearings were fiercely contested by his Puritan allies, and in this space a whole host of demonological works emerged. At the center of this is the textual exchange between Darrell and Harsnett.⁵³

⁴⁸Kathleen R. Sands, *An Elizabethan Lawyer’s Possession by the Devil: The Story of Robert Briggs* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002), 38–39.

⁴⁹See Richard Raiswell, “Writing Demon Possession: The Case of the *Witches of Warboys*,” *Preternature: Critical and Historical Studies on the Preternatural* 10, no. 2 (2021): 163–194.

⁵⁰Darrell, “The Doctrin of the Possession and Dispossession,” 1.

⁵¹For a detailed examination of John Darrell’s exorcism ministry, see Brendan C. Walsh, *The English Exorcist: John Darrell and the Shaping of Early Modern English Protestant Demonology* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

⁵²Anon., *The Triall of Maist. Dorrell, or A Collection of Defences Against Allegations not Yet Suffered to Receiue Convenient Answers Tending to Cleare him from the Imputation of Teaching Sommers and Others to Counterfeit Possession of Diuells. That the Mist of Pretended Counterfetting Being Dispelled, the Glory of Christ his Royall Power in Casting Out Diuells (at the Prayer and Fasting of his People) May Evidently Appeare* (Middelburg: R. Schilders, 1599), 14.

⁵³Samuel Harsnett, *A Discouery of the Fraudulent Practises of Iohn Darrel Bachelor of Artes: In His Proceedings Concerning the Pretended Possession and Dispossession of William Somers at Nottingham: Of Thomas Darling, the Boy of Burton at Caldwell: And of Katherine Wright at Mansfield, & Whittington: And of His Dealings with One Mary Couper at Nottingham, Detecting in Some Sort the Deceitfull Trade in These Latter Dayes of Casting out Diuells* (London: Imprinted by [John Windet for] Iohn Wolfe, 1599); John Darrell, *A Detection of That Sinful, Shamful, Lying, and Ridiculous Discours, of Samuel Harshnet. Entitled: A Discouerie of the Fravvdulent Practises of Iohn Darrell Wherein Is Manifestly and Apparrantly Shewed in the Eyes of the World. Not Only the Vnlikelihoode, but the Flate Impossibilitie of the Pretended Counterfaying of William Sommers, Thomas Darling, Kath. Wright, and Mary Couper,*

Many demonic possession pamphlets and treatises from this period, including those analyzed later in this article, are thus predicated on proselytizing Puritan spirituality and combatting polemical attacks against demonic possession. Furthermore, because of the contested nature of demonic possession texts, the ecclesiastical authorities introduced censorship measures that prevented the proliferation (at least through the legal channels) of these works following Darrell's conviction at the High Commission. Alongside this, Canon 72 of the Church of England was legislated in 1604, which decreed that all ministers seeking to perform a dispossession required episcopal permission. Dispossessions were seldom, if ever, approved in England from this point onward.⁵⁴ Demonic possession pamphlets based on contemporary cases thus declined after this period, leaving behind a limited but well-defined dataset. Indeed, based on the controversy surrounding Darrell's exorcism ministry, such works were immensely popular in this period. In advocating the providential implications of this spiritual condition, the authors of the demonological works featured in this article were highlighting the significance that demonic possession held for all that bore witness to and struggled against it.

III. God Hath Set Forth This Image Before Their Eyes

Within the Calvinist paradigm of divine providence, demonic possession was conceived as a condition to be interpreted and responded to by those that witnessed it. The Lord, according to Darrell, instructs individuals "not onelie by his worde, but also by his worke (which sometimes prevaileth a litel with man when his worde will not)."⁵⁵ Possession was an experience that encapsulated the dire stakes of spiritual warfare and brought the constant inner battle with demonic temptation to the surface in an overtly dramatic fashion for others to witness and participate in. By this, the bodies of demoniacs were sites of eschatological conflict—the battleground between demonic forces and the divine—where the possession was enacted and then (possibly) resolved for all the world to see.⁵⁶ In his 1561 *The Worlde Possessed by Devils* (later translated to English in 1583), the Swiss Calvinist Pierre Viret exclaims: "Because men can not well perceive how the Deuil hurte their soules by meanes of sinne, God hath set forth this Image before their eyes in the persones of the possessed."⁵⁷ The signs of demonic possession were well-established through biblical descriptions and contemporary accounts, yet discerning the providential purpose of this condition necessitated examining the moral culpability of the demoniac. Calvinist theology set two primary justifications for the proliferation of possession: to punish and correct the sin of the demoniac, along with the broader community, or as a test of faith. The sin of the demoniac did not necessarily compromise his or her salvation as every individual was already in a depraved state. Perkins provides some justification on this front, writing that the elect may for a time "be holden in the snares of Satan, yet at length in mercie he

Togeaether with the Other 7. In Lancashire, and the Supposed Teaching of Them by the Saide Iohn Darrell (England: s.n., 1600).

⁵⁴See Walsh, *The English Exorcist*, Chapter 8 for the status of post-1604 English demonic possession cases.

⁵⁵Darrell, *An Apologie*, sig. Giir.

⁵⁶Philip C. Almond, *Demonic Possession and Exorcism in Early Modern England: Contemporary Texts and Their Cultural Contexts* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 14–15.

⁵⁷Pierre Viret, *The Worlde Possessed by Devils* (Imprinted at London: [By John Kingston] for Ihon Perin, and are to be sold in Paules Churchyard at the signe of the Angell, 1583), sig. E1r.

[God] reclaims them.”⁵⁸ Demonic possession, by its very nature, was a revelatory phenomenon and not intended to act as a final judgment on the soul. The good Christian, Calvin writes, “wyl not doute that the singular Providence of God doeth watche for his preservation, whiche Prouidence will suffer nothyng to happen, but that whiche shall tourne to his good and saluation.”⁵⁹ As long as the individual remains faithful and understands that their torments are by design, then they could direct their attention to the broader implications of this condition.

One of the earliest recorded possession cases in Protestant England to illustrate the providential meaning of this spiritual affliction is the manuscript *Master Brigges Temptation* (1574).⁶⁰ This text outlines the demonic torments of aspiring barrister Robert Brigges in London, culminating in his triumph over temptation with the clerical mediation of famed clergyman John Foxe. The Brigges case was predicated on Calvinist soteriological themes: the young man’s prolonged dialogues with the Devil centering on his eternal fate. After attending a theological lecture in London by the Dutch Calvinist Lassilers Villers about blaspheming against the Holy Spirit, Brigges became convinced that he was wretched and had left his soul exposed to demonic incursion. Fearing that “he was a reprobate and therefore prayed in vayne,” the young man succumbed to despair.⁶¹ He began to act erratically, oscillating between trances and terrible fits that left him “destitute of his perfect memory . . . hearing, syghte, and felinge.”⁶² With his speech intact, he entered into lengthy dialogues with an unseen and inaudible force that tempted him with riches in return for his soul. The bystanders quickly realized that he was speaking to the Devil and that God had “layed then upon him a new visitaton beyonde the works of nature or manes wisdom.”⁶³ Raised in a Catholic family, Brigges came to acknowledge that his demonic vexation was an explicit sign that he needed to completely embrace Calvinism and abandon the erroneous opinions of “certayne old writars.”⁶⁴ His struggle against the Devil’s temptations therefore served both as a punishment for his Catholic *superstitio* and as a spiritual awakening. Kathleen Sands writes that this type of conversion was “essential to salvation, constituting a sinner’s necessary transition from the state of nature into which he had been born into a state of grace.”⁶⁵ Conversions of this nature were quite common in the literature of this period, owing to the large recusant population, yet the stakes are far greater in this account. The extraordinary phenomenon of demonic possession greatly expanded the scope and consequences of this conversion narrative, illustrating the different means through which God’s providence was enacted.

This conversion narrative not only outlines Brigges’s successful refutation of the Devil’s advances but his gradual embrace of Calvinism. Brigges’s dialogues with Satan, as recorded in *Master Brigges Temptation*, were erudite in nature and served to justify the theological foundations of Calvinism. Through this, the demoniac was fashioned as the Lord’s mouthpiece while also providing a vivid example of Calvinist doctrine in practice. This is evident with the text’s treatment of predestination.

⁵⁸Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 216–217.

⁵⁹Calvin, *The Institution of Christian Religion*, I. xvii. 63–64.

⁶⁰British Library Manuscripts, “Master Brigges Temptation,” in *Harley 590*, Item 3. See Sands, *An Elizabethan Lawyer’s Possession by the Devil*.

⁶¹“Master Brigges Temptation,” sig. H. 7.

⁶²*Ibid.*, sig. H. 8.

⁶³*Ibid.*

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, sig. H. 7.

⁶⁵Kathleen R. Sands, *Demon Possession in Elizabethan England* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), 63.

During one exchange the Devil attempts to convince Briggess that he is damned, forwarding the standard theological attack against Calvinist predestination. Satan remarks that Briggess “is predestinate & therefore maye do what he liste” as his behavior has no bearing on the Lord’s designation. To this, Briggess counters that refraining from sin is a mark of the elect and he will not run that course: “No, no, I will not tempte my Lord my God soe.”⁶⁶ Briggess also further rejects Catholicism by specifically denying the doctrine of assurance of salvation through good works (albeit in the author’s interpretation of this). Calvinism decreed that salvation could only be obtained by faith alone, and Briggess reiterates this point in his godly speeches. “Must I show thee my faith by my good works?”⁶⁷ Fundamental to Calvinist possessions was the power of faith, as this was cited as the only means through which God would grant deliverance. Briggess’s demonic torments encapsulate this point and provoke his enemy to commit even greater sacrilege. Most disturbing of all, the Devil then attests that everything occurs “by course of nature,” in that events follow some blind, random pattern of natural law rather than through God’s providence.⁶⁸ This amounted to a denial of God altogether. Briggess vehemently refutes such blasphemy and redoubles his resistance. By faith alone he knew that God reigned in heaven and was guiding him through this ordeal to a blessed conclusion. Overall, this possession case set a precedent in England, as it came to shape succeeding demonic narratives. It circulated widely as a manuscript and was known to many of the figures involved in the succession of late-sixteenth-century demonic possession cases. This reason lies in its exceptionality. For one, the demoniac was represented as an articulate and insightful individual, who was able to precisely encapsulate the Calvinist themes that characterized his demonic conflict. Second, his struggle against the Devil exemplified the sanctification dimension of Calvinist possessions. Briggess’s sanctification, however, is somewhat unique in comparison to later English demoniacs, as this possession experience was predicated on conversion during a period in which recusancy was still prevalent. His journey toward salvation was only just beginning, and many struggles lay on the road ahead. In facing down the Devil and resisting his temptations, Briggess could find solace that God’s blessing was upon him.

Conversely, the 1596 possession of Thomas Darling in the Midlands was predicated on illustrating the faith of the demoniac and the Puritan community of Burton-upon-Trent. The demoniac’s extraordinary conflict with the Devil, at once a chastisement and a blessing, was undoubtedly an indication to the Burton Godly that they were religiously favored.⁶⁹ Darling’s possession begins with a rather generic witch encounter in the woods, prompting the townsfolk to seek spiritual guidance from the Puritan congregation at nearby Ashby. The Ashby leadership sent John Darrell and his spiritual confidant Arthur Hildersham—one of the leading Godly ministers of this period—to assist. Darling was a pious young man, and his speeches “were such as might well haue beseemed one of riper years; wherein he shewed the fruites of his education, which were religious and godly.”⁷⁰ He had been designated by the Lord for a special task, and his resistance against Satan was a trial that the Burton Godly eagerly undertook. This entire narrative of subsequent events was published in the

⁶⁶“Master Briggess Temptation,” sig. H. 14.

⁶⁷Ibid., sig. H. 43.

⁶⁸Ibid., sig. H. 20; Sands, *Demon Possession in Elizabethan England*, 62.

⁶⁹Gibson, *Possession, Puritanism and Print*, 55.

⁷⁰Bee et al., *The Most Wonderfull and True Storie*, 2.

1597 pamphlet *The Most Wonderfull and True Storie, of a Certaine Witch Named Also Gooderige of Stapenhill* written by prominent members of the Burton community. It is important to note that this text was a didactic construction—drawing many elements from the *Master Brigges Temptation* manuscript—intended to herald the victory that Darling and the Burton community had achieved over the Devil.⁷¹ More so, this pamphlet highlights Darrell's use of prayer and fasting as the most effective means of dis-possession. Darling was fashioned in *The Most Wonderfull and True Storie* as a pious Christian bravely enduring Satan's assaults, and this is a role that he performed admirably. The preacher John Denison, one of the contributors to the Darling possession narrative, established that the boy's spiritual struggle against demonic incursion was a sign that John's prophecy in Revelation was coming to fruition: "*The Deuil* (saith he) *hath great wrath, knowing that he hath but a short time.*"⁷² In this light, the possession and exorcism of Darling was constructed as a dramatic conflict between the forces of good and evil, with the fate of this one boy mirroring the increasingly unstable state of the world as it approached the final days.⁷³ This treatise thus exemplifies "the outrageous fury that Satan vseth in raising persecution against Gods Saints" and the means by which to combat such attacks. All of this, according to Denison, is by the design of God: "The Holie ghost hath left such conflicts for the spiritual warfare of his children, so hath he not left them without weapons."⁷⁴ Publications such as *The Most Wonderfull and True Storie* thereby offer a powerful example of the Lord's providence at work while also providing insight into the expressive purpose that spirit possession served for early modern Puritan communities.

Young, well-educated, highly religious, and articulate, Darling plays a far more active role in shaping this possession narrative than other Calvinist demoniacs. He was evidently well versed in the cultural and spiritual theatrics of possession, fashioning himself not as a crazed instrument of demonic intrusion, but as an agent of godly authority.⁷⁵ Throughout this possession, Darling invokes rhetoric and gestures aimed at conveying his piety:

As I know at this present for a certaintie, that I have the spirit of God within mee: so do I with the like certaintie believe, that in my dialogues with Sathan, when I alleadged sundry places of scripture, to withstand the temptations he assaulted me with: I had the spirit of God in me, and by that spirit resisted Sathan at those times, alleadging the scriptures to confound him.⁷⁶

As this passage reveals, Calvinist demoniacs could be presented as vessels of piety or possibly even martyrs, bravely battling the Devil (and their own innate sinfulness) with their possession constructed as a trial of faith. Darling, for example, refers to his "brother" Job throughout his visions, invoking the all-too-familiar theodicean implications of this parable. By this, Darling fashions his resistance to the Devil's advances as

⁷¹Sands, *Demon Possession in Elizabethan England*, 51.

⁷²Bee et al., *The Most Wonderfull and True Storie*, sig. A2r; Revelation 12:12 (1599 Geneva Bible).

⁷³Almond, *Demonic Possession and Exorcism in Early Modern England*, 13–14.

⁷⁴Bee et al., *The Most Wonderfull and True Storie*, sig. A2r.

⁷⁵French, *Children of Wrath*, 88–89.

⁷⁶Harsnett, *A Discouery of the Fraudulent Practises of Iohn Darrel*, 290. It must be noted that this passage is taken from Darling's testimony during the High Commission of John Darrell, thus meriting further consideration.

a form of sanctification with God blessing his efforts: “Dost thou say my sinnes are great, Satan? The Lamb of God hath taken them awaie.”⁷⁷ This concern with the conquest of sin and demonic temptation explains why the authors of possession narratives celebrated deliverance from the Devil as a spiritual victory that brought them closer to God.⁷⁸ To this effect, Darling exclaims his elect status during his demonic torments, using this spiritual trial as confirmation of his fate in the next life: “Ayoude sathan, I have vpon my head the helmet of saluation, and I am girded about with trueth.”⁷⁹ This is a reference to “spiritual armour” or the “whole armour of God” from Ephesians 6:13–17, a passage that was frequently cited in resisting demonic temptation.⁸⁰ Imagery of this nature was employed all throughout this possession narrative: “in all manner of temptations of Sathan, they [demoniacs] haue the whole armor of God, yea and those weapons that are able to overthrow the Deuil’s strongest holdes.”⁸¹ As the Suffolk preacher Thomas Carew wrote in his 1603 *Ceryaine godly and necessarie sermons*, donning the armor of God was “what every man doth if he be a Christian” with this as an integral part of the sanctification process.⁸² Within the dramatic and theological framework of demonic possession narratives, the paradigm of spiritual warfare was thus elevated from a rhetorical device to a tangible exemplar that individuals could readily grasp and enact. Not only were the stakes of this battle clearly established, but the rewards as well. Puritan communities such as Burton were thus eager to engage in spiritual warfare, as they were all too aware of the glory that victory would bring them.

Darling’s possession ordeal was lengthy, featuring interactions with individual demonic spirits, the infernal prince Beelzebub, and Satan who presented him with a series of offerings in exchange for his soul.⁸³ He was tempted to renounce God and devote himself to Satan in exchange for women, riches, a grand palace, a crown, and a great kingdom to rule. Darling resists such offerings with much fervor, exclaiming: “My faith is so strong, that I will worship none but the living God.”⁸⁴ The Devil’s tactics in this instance, according to Darrell, were how “he delt with these possessed persons . . . and after this manner he dealeth with vs all in the temptatio[n]s wherwith he continually assalteth vs: somtimes yea vsually settinge before our eyes the pleasure of the sinne he intiseth us unto.”⁸⁵ Yet, these demonic assaults were not constant. The struggle ebbed and flowed, with the demoniac’s faith enabling him to momentarily come to the fore before retracting back inside to resume battle against the Devil. This was an indication

⁷⁷Bee et al., *The Most Wonderfull and True Storie*, 29.

⁷⁸Levack, *The Devil Within*, 163.

⁷⁹Bee et al., *The Most Wonderfull and True Storie*, 28.

⁸⁰Ephesians 6:13–17 (1599 Geneva Bible). 6:13: “For this cause take vnto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to resist in the euill day, and hauing finished all things, stand fast.” 6:14: “Stand therefore, and your loynes girded about with veritie, and hauing on the brest plate of righteousness,” 6:15: “And your feete shod with the preparation of the Gospel of peace.” 6:16: “Aboue all, take the shielde of faith, wherewith ye may quench all the fierie dartes of the wicked.” 6:17: “And take the helmet of saluation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the worde of God.”

⁸¹Bee et al., *The Most Wonderfull and True Storie*, sig. A2r.

⁸²Thomas Carew, *Certaine godly and necessarie sermons, preached by M. Thomas Carew of Bilston in the countie of Suffolke* (At London: Printed [by R. Read] for George Potter, dwelling in Paules Church-yard, at the signe of the Bible, 1603), sig. 17v; Luttmer, “Persecutors, Tempters and Vassals of the Devil,” 45.

⁸³In medieval and early modern demonology, Beelzebub is either depicted as one of the seven princes of Hell or another guise of the Devil. The classification of demons varies greatly between demonological treatises, learned theology, and popular print in this period.

⁸⁴Bee et al., *The Most Wonderfull and True Storie*, 12.

⁸⁵Darrell, “The Doctrin of the Possession and Dispossession,” 80.

that the demoniac was successfully fighting off this demonic incursion. It was consequently vital for those suffering Satan's torments to realize that this was all part of God's providence. Individuals were not powerless against evil, as God never subjected Christians to demonic assaults that they could not overcome.⁸⁶ Darling, aware of this, proclaims during one particularly fierce assault: "Away Sathan, thou canst not enter into me, except the Lorde give thee leave."⁸⁷ Pious demoniacs could consequently expect some form of divine intervention during their possession. For instance, a "mild-white dove" appeared before Darling during his possession as a sign from God that Satan was powerless against his devotion.⁸⁸ As Christ had died for the collective sins of humanity, his protection was available to those who believed and by this the demoniac could successfully refute the Devil's advance and achieve sanctification.

The other primary justification for the manifestation of demonic possession in the Calvinist spiritual tradition was to punish and correct sin. Demoniacs, as instruments of God's providence, were portrayed as spiritual barometers of sorts, signaling the state of sin in a community or broader society. Throughout the 1597–1598 possession of William Sommers and his sister-in-law Mary Cowper, Darrell declares that Sommers was "not punished so much for his owne sinnes, or for the sinnes of his parents, as for the sinnes that rained in Nottingham."⁸⁹ The pair were believed to be bewitched with demonic spirits, as the depraved nature of the townfolk allowed evil forces to prosper in the region. Sommers's possession was thus predicated on communicating the deep-rooted sinfulness that consumed Nottingham. One of his first acts, after securing an audience, was performing a pantomime of various sins representing "brauling, quarriling, fighting, swaring, robbing by the high wayes, picking and cutting of purses, burgularie, whoredom, prid both in men and women . . . drunckennes, glotinye."⁹⁰ The Devil, speaking through Sommers, rejoices that "Nottingham and Lenton [a nearby agricultural village] are jolie townes for me," justifying the need for the Godly's presence.⁹¹ During his time in Nottingham, Darrell came into conflict with Robert Aldridge, preacher at St. Mary's Church. Darrell criticized Aldridge of being neglectful of his parish, failing to reprimand the townspeople for their sinful ways: "His people . . . haue hearde his voice oft times but once in a monneth, sometimes sildome."⁹² Aldridge (as reported through Harsnett) argues that he had provided proper spiritual guidance to the townspeople on this matter; it is just that they had not heeded this advice and therefore must suffer the consequences: "*Affirming that forasmuch as they in Nottingham, notwithstanding the admonitions of many godly Preachers, did still continue in their sinnes: God hath sent the Deuill to reprove them, and to make them ashamed of their former obstinacie.*"⁹³ While the town was in a state of sin, those involved in resolving the vexation of an afflicted individual could demonstrate their piety. Demonic possession provided a means to demarcate these individuals from the

⁸⁶Johnstone, *The Devil and Demonism in Early Modern England*, 85.

⁸⁷Bee et al., *The Most Wonderfull and True Storie*, 41.

⁸⁸Ibid.

⁸⁹Harsnett, *A Discouery of the Fraudulent Practises of Iohn Darrel*, 112.

⁹⁰Darrell, *A True Narration*, 18.

⁹¹Anon., *A Breife Narration of the Possession, Dispossession, and, Repossession of William Sommers and of Some Proceedings against Mr Iohn Dorrell Preacher, with Aunsweres to Such Obiections as Are Made to Prove the Pretended Counterfeiting of the Said Sommers. Together with Certaine Depositions Taken at Nottingham Concerning the Said Matter* (Amsterdam: s.n., 1598), sig. Er.

⁹²Harsnett, *A Discouery of the Fraudulent Practises of Iohn Darrel*, 112.

⁹³Ibid., 119.

rest of the reprobate that made up the general populace. Sommers himself would later be marked by Darrell and his Puritan allies as an unrepentant sinner after he provided “false” testimony while under duress that he was simulating his condition. However, this did not challenge Darrell’s spiritual objective, as the providential purpose of Sommers’s possession had indeed been fulfilled. By this “the Lord teacheth us to take heed of sinning against him, lest either the same or a worse euil come to us.”⁹⁴ In this case it was the townsfolk of Nottingham, with the Puritan community at the center, who were the intended recipients of God’s providential message.

However, even after Darrell performed a successful dispossession, the Lord was not done with this young man. Sommers was repossessed after a few weeks, this time joined by his kin Mary Cowper. While in the throes of possession, the demoniacs made the extraordinary claim of being able to discern the identities of nearby witches. As spirit possession was a divinely ordained phenomenon with significant providential implications, prophetic proclamations such as this were not without precedent in possession narratives.⁹⁵ The claims of demoniacs were always treated with caution, yet the identification of witches was one of the few instances in which ecclesiastical authorities were willing to accept such testimony.⁹⁶ Sommers and Cowper consequently became witch-finders. The witches named were summoned before the demoniacs, and those who elicited reactions from the pair were taken into custody. Darrell understood this development as a providential message—a commandment from the Lord to root out the transgressions responsible for incurring his wrath. Harsnett writes that one of Darrell’s allies “*maketh this discovery of witches, to be one of the worthie fruites of that admirable worke of dispossessing of Somers: telling vs, that witches are the Lordes chiefest enemies: that God would not have them suffered to live.*”⁹⁷ A witch hunt of sorts was underway in Nottingham, resulting in the arrest of thirteen individuals and the interrogation of many more. It appears that the demoniacs were left untreated during this time; their witch-sensing powers were deemed more important than any sort of spiritual remedy. This decision exemplifies that the Godly were eager to purify the world around them, thereby strengthening themselves against demonic intrusion and demonstrating their righteousness.⁹⁸ The implications of using the pair as witch-finders extended even beyond the confines of the town. Darrell, in the words of Harsnett, was adamant that he could “detect all the witches in England,” and it was with this mentality that he carried out this crusade against evil in Nottingham.⁹⁹ Despite Harsnett labeling Darrell as a fraud with this remark, the prosecution of witches was a fundamental aspect of Darrell’s exorcism ministry. It functioned as a divinely ordained duty, albeit with less theological clarity owing to the thorny nature of human agency. Perkins explains that the Lord “for iust causes, permitteth the Arts of Magicke & Witchcraft . . . in his prouidence, either for the trial of his children, or for the punishment of the wicked.”¹⁰⁰ Sommers and Cowper were employed in this purpose with their witch-finding abilities presented in print as a providential development. As this illustrates, possession in the

⁹⁴Darrell, *An Apologie*, sig. Giir.

⁹⁵Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, 433.

⁹⁶Levack, *The Devil Within*, 189.

⁹⁷Harsnett, *A Discouery of the Fraudulent Practises of Iohn Darrel*, 142.

⁹⁸Brock, “Internalizing the Demonic,” 28.

⁹⁹Harsnett, *A Discouery of the Fraudulent Practises of Iohn Darrel*, 141.

¹⁰⁰Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 38.

English Calvinist tradition could serve explicit purposes, configuring the demoniac as a vessel through which the divine will was enacted.

Last, this article turns to the 1602 possession of the young Puritan woman Mary Glover, granddaughter to the Protestant martyr Robert Glover. This possession served two primary functions: sanctifying Glover through her struggles with the Devil and defending the providential nature of demonic agency in the face of mounting skepticism. Unfolding over a few months in their home on the bustling Thames Street (London), this ordeal was the first high-profile demonic possession event in the wake of Darrell's High Commission. Despite the fiercely contested nature of demonic possession in this period, London's Puritan community embraced Darrell's providential reading of demonic possession. The series of possessions that plagued England at this time, as stated in the published account *A True and Briefe Report of Mary Glouers Vexation and of Her Deliuerance by the Meanes of Fasting and Prayer*, is clear evidence of God's divine will: "The strange works of God in these our dayes, who hath of late rayseed vp in diuers quarters & coasts of the land (yea, and brought them home to our doors) a great many of examples as prints of his presence."¹⁰¹ Puritan minister John Swan, author of *A True and Briefe Report*, subsequently performed a dispossession with a coalition of Godly ministers, employing Christ's "ordinance of prayer and fasting" in the manner that Darrell established.¹⁰² This text was a didactic construction of Puritan spirituality, written in response to the English episcopacy's campaign against exorcism and Darrell's High Commission.¹⁰³ In his preface, dedicated to the newly crowned King James VI and I, Swan even argues that the continued manifestation of demonic possession in England stems from the ongoing controversy over this subject: "Thus, while these, and other more weightie controversies continewe vndecided amongst vs, God hath ben provoked at last to begin a controversie with vs, by sending a contagious sicknes, that hath turned our triumphs into dayes of heavines: the which, when and where it will cease, he onely knoweth."¹⁰⁴ Swan was adamant in refuting the skepticism of clergymen like Whitgift, Bancroft, and Harsnett, regarding their blatant dismissal of God's divine providence as a sin unto itself. In failing to take heed of his divine message, these fools were incurring God's wrath and leading the populace away from the truth.

A True and Briefe Report shares many similarities with *The Most Wonderfull and True Storie*, particularly as Glover's afflictions invoked Darling's pious demonstration of resistance to the Devil's assaults. Glover's ordeal was presented as an act of providence that communicated the notion of spiritual cleansing through enduring and overcoming Satan's torments. The theme of martyrdom also underlines much of this narrative. Glover's possession was modeled in the tradition of earlier Protestant martyrs—such as her grandfather Robert Glover—and this spiritual experience was a means in which to shape this martyrdom.¹⁰⁵ Warfare imagery therefore permeates the text with Glover deploying this rhetoric in her godly speeches. During one episode she prays to God for the strength to "confound his malice, distroye his worke, and darken

¹⁰¹ John Swan, *A True and Breife Report, of Mary Glouers Vexation and of Her Deliuerance by the Meanes of Fasting and Prayer*. Performed by Those Whose Names Are Sett Downe, in the Next Page (London: s.n., 1603), 70.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁰³ Swan denounced Samuel Harsnett in the preface of this text, claiming that he had "disputed and preached dangerous poyntes . . . as if there were no Witches at all" and "is of a minde ther is no Deuill at all." *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, sig. A4r.

¹⁰⁵ French, *Children of Wrath*, 89–91.

the power of Satan. . . and lett him bee trodden under feete as dyrte."¹⁰⁶ In her torments, Glover became the vessel through which God conveyed the potential for spiritual redemption: "But the instrument that hath ben (by that serpent) abused, o Lord haue mercie upon her, and forgive her all her sinnes."¹⁰⁷ Glover is heralded by her dispossessors as both an inspiration to the Godly and a warning to the sinful, a pious young woman who was cleansed of her sins and reborn into the Christian covenant through overcoming demonic temptation.¹⁰⁸ The ministers present prayed that God "make perfect the good worke which he had most graciously begune, that with comfort we might depart in the end, every man to his home."¹⁰⁹ They acknowledged "the Justice of God, in punishing the world with bodely and sperituall chastiments" and performed their clerical duties for "the glorie of his owne name, the profite & comfort of vs all ther assembled, and the afflicted partie."¹¹⁰ Ultimately, this was "for the comfort of all distressed soules, who hearinge of God his goodnes to his children, should see that it is not in vayne to goe vnto him, in trouble, and to cast our cared vppon him."¹¹¹ This sentiment encapsulates the dual purpose of demoniacs: illustrating the wrath of God while also demonstrating his capacity for mercy. Demoniacs in the English Calvinist tradition were thus fashioned as vessels through which God enacted his judgments. Demonic possession was set before the eyes of humans as a revelatory phenomenon, prompting individuals to act. "As in a glass," Darrell writes, the demoniac exemplifies the "justice of God" to all that hear of and behold their torments.¹¹² Arthur Hildersham frames possession as "but a temporall correction, & such as whereby both the glorie of God and the saluation of the partie may be furthered."¹¹³ Both the righteous and the wicked, according to one preacher involved in Mary Glover's dispossession, are plagued by God yet "the troubles of the one and of the other, doe greatly differ": "For the one proceede from a Iudge, the other from a father: the one are light and momentarie, the other durable and the begininges of greater woe, the one to correct, to purge, and refine, the other to confound, to make more obstinate and in excusable."¹¹⁴ Calvinist preachers emphasized the didactic function of possession, convincing their audiences to reflect on what divine meaning this phenomenon offered. In addition to the five primary aspects of God that demonic possession reveals, Darrell outlines that there are "seuerall vses concerning man, and the profite he otherwise is to make hereof":

1. This great and wonderful worke of the lord serueth to *conuince and stope the mouths of the papistes*, who as they are always *boastinge* of their miracles . . . (as they terme it) of casting out of diuils.
2. To *informe our judgement in the discerning of the possessed*.
3. To learne *what to do in case we seen possessed* what counsell & aduise to giue when and such thing shal fall out.
4. *The baites Satan ordinarily vseth to catch men with are here to be obserued by the way*: which eyther are some *fare promises, or fearful threat*.

¹⁰⁶Swan, *A True and Briefe Report*, 33.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 27.

¹⁰⁸French, *Children of Wrath*, 93.

¹⁰⁹Swan, *A True and Briefe Report*, 29.

¹¹⁰Ibid., 30.

¹¹¹Ibid.

¹¹²Darrell, *An Apologie*, sig. Giir.

¹¹³Bee et al., *The Most Wonderfull and True Storie*, 26–27.

¹¹⁴Swan, *A True and Briefe Report*, 20.

5. Here is shadowed out vnto us the *greate diligence Satan vseth to recouer such as be once deliuered out of his power.*
6. Hereby we may perceiue *whervnto they diuels are naturally giuen: or caried by the instinct of their nature now corrupted,* euen to blasphemie against God.
7. It serueth excellently to confound *our atheists,* whoe say not only with the foole in their hart, that there is no god.¹¹⁵

Hence, Darrell presents a reading of demonic possession that emphasizes its providential and soteriological implications. Calvinist theologians such as Darrell could not simply accept that tragedies befall humankind without divine consent and actively reframed demonic encounters as a revelatory phenomenon. Darrell's exorcism ministry, while predicated on healing those afflicted by the Devil, was also focused on bringing individuals closer to God. For in these dark times, when one stood on the precipice looking down into the face of their damnation, so too did the shining light of salvation appear on the horizon.

IV. For the Glorie of God and the Benefit of Man

Calvinist theologians such as Darrell thus conceptualized possession as a divine intervention intended to "teacheth all of vs our dutie": a duty that he fulfilled during his exorcism ministry.¹¹⁶ The "extraordarie work" of dispossession serves two primary purposes: magnifying "the glorie of God" and for "the benefit of man, and good he may receiue thereby."¹¹⁷ Darrell preaches that God would not allow possession to manifest without providing the spiritual weapons to "preuaile against Sathan."¹¹⁸ However, not all Puritans were entirely set on the necessity of dispossession. During the Darling possession, Hildersham expressed a contrary providentialist view "that there is a good vse of praier in such a case, and of fasting also" but warned that possession "can not without sinne be absolutely prayed against."¹¹⁹ He was implying that praying against possession may in fact be challenging God's intention, as this affliction could be the full extent of the providential act and designed to resolve on its own accord after the revelatory meaning was communicated. Gifford expresses a similar concern in his *A Dialogue Concerning Witches and Witchcrafts*.¹²⁰ Conversely, Darrell forwards that possession functioned as a providential catalyst: a call to carry out dispossession that, once fulfilled, brought the entire act to completion. Despite these diverging opinions, Hildersham and the Ashby Godly actively supported Darrell's interpretation throughout the course of his exorcism ministry. Collaboration was a prominent aspect of the dispossession spiritual exercise, exemplified by George More's involvement in the 1597 Lancashire Seven episode. Writing in *A True Discourse*, More endorses Darrell's approach: "As therefore the good providence of God may be discerned in the disposing of all things, so also it sheweth it selfe most clearelie in the wel ordering of this whole

¹¹⁵Darrell, "The Doctrin of the Possession and Dispossession," 69, 78, 79, 80, 82, 83, 87.

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*, sig. A3v.

¹¹⁷*Ibid.*, 68.

¹¹⁸*Ibid.*, 64–65.

¹¹⁹Bee et al., *The Most Wonderfull and True Storie*, 26–27.

¹²⁰Writing as the pious character Daniel, Gifford ponders: "[Satan] is the Lords executioner, he hath sent him, wee may intreat the Lord to remouoe him, but what authority haue we to command him to depart, where God hath sent him?" Gifford, *A Dialogue Concerning Witches and Witchcrafts*, sig. I2r.

action, if it be well obserued.”¹²¹ He attests that the efficacy of prayer and fasting was evident in the relief that it afforded the demoniac and the renewed piety they exhibited following their deliverance. However, as Darrell ruminates, the call to perform this duty is not always readily apparent, and only the most faithful individuals—the Godly—can discern the providential intention: “Now when God sendeth any judgement therby he calleth men, and therin secretly commandeth them to fast and praye.”¹²² This is but another indication that the Christians “called & appoynted” to “perform this service” are divinely favored.¹²³ More too shares this sentiment, exclaiming that dispossession “is no extraordinarie gifte, peculiar to any one man, but common to all the faithfull.”¹²⁴ Furthermore, Darrell understood this moment in history as the time when God had elected to reveal such spiritual gifts. He contends that “if it be so that the doctrine of possession, and of dispossession, and of the means thereof, etc doe lye in a manner hid & not knowne nor acknowledged almost by any: Is it not high time it were revealed and brought to light? Is it not parte of the counsel of god, to the reuelation of all which wee are debtors?”¹²⁵ Possession and exorcism fulfilled different functions in different historical settings, and Darrell was convinced that clergymen like himself were now needed more than ever.¹²⁶ It is thus in these troubled times, wherein the “antichrist of Rome extremely rageth,” that the Lord has so decreed to unleash demonic possession on the populace while simultaneously arming the faithful to combat this existential threat.¹²⁷

Darrell and his Puritan allies embraced dispossession through prayer and fasting as the only sanctioned means through which humans could cast out demons. The truth of this matter, in their eyes, was present for all to see in scripture. Biblical possession cases, Darrell exclaims, were recorded “to giue a rule and leaue a direction, to his [God’s] church, whereby to discerne of possession in the time to come.”¹²⁸ This direction was taken from Christ’s proclamation to his disciples in Mark 9:29: “And he saide vnto them, This kinde can by no other meanes come foorth, but by prayer and fasting.”¹²⁹ Prayer and fasting were both effective and innocuous spiritual exercises, each fundamental to the broader Christian traditions of self-reflection and sanctification. Moreover, because Calvinists subscribed to the doctrine of the cessation of miracles, dispossession was established as *mirandum* (a wonder). Darrell wrote in his

¹²¹George More, *A True Discourse Concerning the Certaine Possession and Dispossession of 7 Persons in One Familie in Lancashire, Which Also May Serve as Part of an Answer to a Fayed and False Discoverie Which Speaketh Very Much Evill, as Well of This, as of the Rest of Those Great and Mightie Workes of God Which Be of the Like Excellent Nature. By George More, Minister and Preacher of the Worde of God, and Now (for Bearing Witness Unto This, and for Justifying the Rest) a Prisoner in the Clinke, Where He Hath Continued Almost for the Space of Two Yeares* (Middelburg: Printed by Richard Schilders, 1600), 71–72.

¹²²Darrell, “The Doctrin of the Possession and Dispossession,” 66.

¹²³Darrell, *A True Narration*, sig. **v.

¹²⁴More, *A True Discourse*, 77. Another pro-Darrell publication provides a similar qualification: “He tooke upon him no greater power in such cases, then was incident to any godlie minister, or other person; which only was to intreat the Lord in the name of Christ Jesus to dispossess the wicked spirit out of the possessed person.” Anon., *A Breife Narration*, sig. Br.

¹²⁵Darrell, *A True Narration*, sig. **v.

¹²⁶Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, 403.

¹²⁷John Darrell, *The Replie of Iohn Darrell, to the Answer of Iohn Deacon, and Iohn Walker, Concerning the Doctrine of the Possession and Dispossession of Demoniakes* (England: s.n., 1602), sig. Cr.

¹²⁸Darrell, “The Doctrin of the Possession and Dispossession,” 19.

¹²⁹Mark 9:29 (1599 Geneva Bible).

polemics against Harsnett that “to cast Sathan forth, is *mirandum, non miraculum*.”¹³⁰ In this paradigm, demons are only cast out through two means: either “by absolute authority, as by Christ being God: or by an authoritye committed and given of Christ to men.”¹³¹ Dispossession was consequently established as the work of the Lord, exercised through the agency of humans, as “we see God perfourming his promise: the scripture before our eyes fulfilled.”¹³² This spiritual exercise could only be fulfilled by humbly petitioning God to intervene, as it was presumptuous to believe that the Devil could be driven out by any earthly power.¹³³ According to Perkins, if an individual reflected upon their transgressions, displayed genuine devotion, and performed the duty required of them, then their dispossession would be successful:

After this Examination, the same parties must shewe forth their faith, whereby they depend on the free fauour and mercie of God for their deliuerance. How may this be done? by heartie prayer vnto God, joyned with fasting that the same may be more earnest. In which prayer the maine desire of the heart must be absolutely for the pardon of their sinnes, and then for deliuerance from the hurts and torments of diabolicall persons: yet not absolutely, as for the other, but with this condition, so farre forth as it stands with Gods glorie, and their owne good.¹³⁴

Their role was therefore reduced in this process with faith and devotion cited as the primary markers of success. In explaining failures and ineffective attempts at exorcism, exorcists could simply confess to their own lack of faith, the weakness of the demoniac, or acknowledge the outcome as God’s will.¹³⁵

Protestant dispossession involved the sufferers overcoming demonic temptation with the support of clerical mediation, culminating in the decisive moment in which they took upon themselves the responsibility for procuring deliverance.¹³⁶ This is very much the case in the Brigges possession. Unfolding before prayer and fasting were established means of deliverance, this case only briefly engages with the application of exorcism. *Master Briggs Temptation* focuses on the demoniac’s struggles against Satan with his deliverance largely earned through his successful refutation of temptation. John Foxe performed an exorcism of sorts, making use of a traditional imperative conjuration associated with Roman Catholic spirituality, yet his principal role was in providing the spiritual tools for the demoniac to endure the demonic torments.¹³⁷ Guided by Foxe, Brigges was able to triumph over the Devil, exclaiming that “my soule ys nott myne, though I wolde geve it? How can I geve that which is not myne? . . . The Lorde Jhesus hathe bought it.”¹³⁸ Brigges successful refutation of Satan’s temptations and his embrace of Calvinism signaled that God’s will had been carried out, serving as a

¹³⁰Darrell, *A Detection*, 6.

¹³¹Darrell, *A True Narration*, 38.

¹³²Darrell, “The Doctrin of the Possession and Dispossession,” 106.

¹³³Gibson, *Possession, Puritanism and Print*, 4.

¹³⁴Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 230.

¹³⁵Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 116.

¹³⁶Johnstone, *The Devil and Demonism in Early Modern England*, 104.

¹³⁷Young, *A History of Anglican Exorcism*, 30.

¹³⁸“Master Briggs Temptation,” sig. H. 47.

very explicit statement of the Protestant doctrine of salvation by grace.¹³⁹ Sommers's dispossession, on the other hand, was handled by a pious minister employing prayer and fasting. Darrell's exorcism of Sommers invokes the biblical encounter between Jesus and the "deaf and dumb boy" with Darrell's lines taken almost verbatim from the scriptures.¹⁴⁰ *A True Narration* is not forthcoming with details as the actual dispossession is carried out without issue. Darrell simply writes that "I came vnto him [Sommers], & being ther, carried my selfe in this present an action."¹⁴¹ A second dispossession usually followed as, according to scripture: "When the uncleane spirit is gone out of a man, he sayeth to himselfe, I will returne into myne house from whence I came."¹⁴² However, due to the political climate within Nottingham, Darrell was unable to perform another dispossession after the young man again fell under the Devil's influence. Nor did it seem like he attempted to deliver Cowper from her demonic torments. Their spiritual function as witch-finders was being enacted, and a dispossession was not performed in time: Sommers was taken into custody by the Nottingham town council on suspicion of counterfeiting his possession. Because of this, Darrell was unable to carry out his duty. Nottingham thus continued in its sinful ways as "there are such as haue banished the worde of God out of there towne."¹⁴³ In this case it was Darrell's prevention from carrying out an exorcism that was significant, as it elicited further consequences. God's message had not been heeded and sin continued to proliferate in Nottingham and further abroad.

The possession of Darling and Glover both unfolded in Godly communities, with the victory of these two demoniacs over the Devil signifying the piousness of all involved parties. As is articulated in *The Most Wonderful Storie*, the faith of the demoniac was integral to his or her dispossession. Darling's deliverance was an irrefutable sign that the Burton Godly had withstood "the fury of their enemies" and "all manner of temptations" to "overthrow the Diuels strongest holdes."¹⁴⁴ This community had proven to be quite vocal in advocating its Puritan beliefs and the possession of one of its own emerged as an ideal opportunity to proselytize. It could even be said that throughout the Darling possession the demoniac assumed the role of the exorcist. Darrell was content to provide instructions and not be present for the actual dispossession: "I am perswaded that the faithfull prayers of the parties friends may prevaile with God in this case: though no Preacher be present."¹⁴⁵ Darling fashioned himself as an aspiring Puritan saint battling the Devil through his own devotion, rather than as a sinner afflicted with this condition, which was the more conventional archetype.¹⁴⁶ The boy procured his deliverance twice, and the demonic spirits inhabiting his body were continually met with fierce resistance. *The Most Wonderful Storie* reports that these spirits, speaking through Darling, cried out in despair that "we cannot prevaile, his

¹³⁹Harman Bhogal, "Rethinking Demonic Possession: The Impact of the Debates About the Darrell Case on Later Demonological Thought, with Particular Reference to John Deacon and John Walker" (PhD diss., University of London, 2013), 75–76.

¹⁴⁰Mark 9:14–29, Matthew 17:14–21, and Luke 9:37–43 (1599 Geneva Bible).

¹⁴¹Darrell, *A True Narration*, 20.

¹⁴²Ibid. This is in reference to Matthew 12:43–45 and Luke 11:24–46 (1599 Geneva Bible).

¹⁴³Darrell, *An Apologie*, sig. Kiiiir.

¹⁴⁴Bee et al., *The Most Wonderfull and True Storie*, sig. A2r.

¹⁴⁵John Darrell, *A Brief Apologie Prouing the Possession of William Sommers. Written by Iohn Dorrell, a Faithful Minister of the Gospell: But Published without His Knowledge, with a Dedicatorie Epistle Disclosing Some Disordered Proceedings against the Saide Iohn Dorrell* (Middelburg: R. Schilders, 1599), 31–32.

¹⁴⁶Levack, *The Devil Within*, 149.

faith is so strong, and they fast and pray, and a Preacher prayeth as fast as they.”¹⁴⁷ Following his first deliverance, Darling ventured into “the towne, that it might appeare what Jesus had done for him, to the praise of his glorie, and admiration of those that had been acquainted with this maruelous visitation.”¹⁴⁸ This triumph needed to be broadcast, as it is by such dynamic examples that others are inspired to take up arms against the Devil. This was a command from God: “The same Spirite which armed hym with faith and patience in the time of his torments, instructed him how to giue thanks and pray.”¹⁴⁹ Darling’s second deliverance was just as harrowing yet unfolded over a much shorter period. The assembled party was now familiar with Satan’s treachery and was able to help the boy cleanse himself of this demonic scourge: “And so (thanks be to God) he hath remained ever since, which the Lord continue to his own glorie, the ioy of the godly, and the childes comforte.”¹⁵⁰ Darling was now a shining exemplar of God’s mercy and power, with the sight of him prospering intended to bring comfort to those afflicted with despair.

A True and Breife Report also communicates the faith of everyone involved in Glover’s dispossession. Calvinist dispossession did not only necessitate the demoniac humbling his or her soul before the Lord, but also required those attending and performing the dispossession to fulfill their Godly duties. According to one unnamed preacher featured in the text, the dispossession would be successful if those present demonstrate an “earnest humiliation of their soules and bodies before the Lord, that he seeing them (especialye those that were most interested in the distressed) truley humbled; he might in mercy and goodnes lift them vp, by givinge deliuerance and granting comfort in his good time.”¹⁵¹ Glover fulfilled these conditions, and her piety was on full display throughout the possession, conveyed through her fleeting periods of lucidity in which she astonished the assembled party with fervent prayer. In these moments she was casting back the Devil and subsequently cleansing herself of sin. During the climax of her deliverance, as she was experiencing divine euphoria, Glover thanked God for “*workinge in me sanctification, and newnes of life, to walke worthy so great a mercy, that so glorifyinge thee in this life, I may see and enioye thy glory in the life to come.*”¹⁵² Her faith was so impressive that one preacher remarks: “Let her alone, you shal see shee will doe it her selfe, she will procure her owne deliuerance.”¹⁵³ And thus she did. Glover’s resistance was an exemplar in itself as “Sathan is often times overtaken in his craft: for by makinge his match thus to rage in and vppon little ones (as was this poore creature in respect of her sex & age) his foile should be the greater, when such a worme should be inabled to withstand his mallice, and prevaile against his strength, but to returne.”¹⁵⁴ At the conclusion of this entire ordeal, once she had been successfully delivered from the Devil, Glover had now proved her devotion and affirmed God’s blessing. To this effect, Swan interprets her deliverance as a sign that he is divinely favored: “For my parte, I thanke God with all my heart that I was present at this worke, and had an hand, (though very little and simple) in it: For I finde (I prayse

¹⁴⁷Bee et al., *The Most Wonderfull and True Storie*, 34.

¹⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁴⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁵¹Swan, *A True and Breife Report*, 5.

¹⁵²*Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁵³*Ibid.*, 23

¹⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 56.

God) therein, a labour of his loue towards me, provoakinge, nay vrginge me the more, thereby to performe a poynt.”¹⁵⁵ This great trial had been overcome and what follows would be far easier: “If shee should againe be assaulted: feare not. . . the mayne battle is fought, the other will be but a light skirmish (if there be any at all).”¹⁵⁶ Glover had now returned to God’s covenant, and her healing was heralded as a powerful rebuttal to those that doubted the validity of demonic possession, and therefore God’s divine will, in England.

As these possession cases exemplify, exorcism functioned as a form of proselytizing that illuminates God’s divine authority as executed through the most faithful of his servants. Dispossession in the Calvinist tradition served as a means of revealing the “true” word of God, bringing individuals back to the spiritual roots of Christianity. Consequently, Darrell presented his exorcism ministry as illustrating the evangelizing potential of this demonic affliction: casting out demons furthered the “glorie of God” and fulfilled the requirements of spiritual warfare.¹⁵⁷ This was done not “for the best wages that men wold give mee” but for the “saluation of your soules.”¹⁵⁸ Demonic possession consequently played a central role in Darrell’s intellectual construction of Reformed Protestant demonology, not only justifying his exorcism ministry, but also his conception of early modern religious life. Darrell believed that God ordained demons to possess humans for a specific purpose and thereby provided humanity with the spiritual tools (prayer and fasting) to engage in spiritual warfare. Figures like him were therefore motivated to perform dispossessions as a way of affirming their Puritan spirituality—with its fixation on demonic activity—and designating their brethren as religiously favored.¹⁵⁹ As Michelle Brock states, “In the search for assurance amidst this unknowability, active resistance against Satan was often perceived not only as an inherent duty, but also a metric of one’s predetermined election.”¹⁶⁰ Darrell was adamant that it was actually a sin to not attempt dispossession “because it was a breach of a Commandment, *Resist the diuell*.”¹⁶¹ Every victory over the Devil that Darrell delivered was presented as further evidence that he, and his Godly brethren, were designated as the elect. This was a contributing factor to the controversy surrounding his exorcism ministry, despite Darrell’s aspirations of remaining humble in his treatises. Calvinist dispossession can thereby be construed as exercises of self-assurance, with spiritual anxieties concerning salvation motivating individuals to devise processes in which to ascertain their own eternal fates. The Devil’s temptations were perceived as a constant threat to Christians, and diabolic affliction was one means by which temptation could be experienced, and refuted, in full.¹⁶² To Darrell, Christians were required to do everything in their power with the spiritual tools at their disposal to combat the demonic. This was but one means in which the innate depravity of humans could be briefly eclipsed by feelings of divine elevation, perhaps suggesting that there was indeed hope for eternal bliss.

¹⁵⁵Ibid., 64.

¹⁵⁶Ibid., 51.

¹⁵⁷Darrell, “The Doctrin of the Possession and Dispossession,” 68.

¹⁵⁸Darrell, *An Apologie*, sig. Jiiiv.

¹⁵⁹Bhagal, “Rethinking Demonic Possession,” 142.

¹⁶⁰Brock, “Internalizing the Demonic,” 29.

¹⁶¹Bee et al., *The Wonderfull and True Storie*, 33.

¹⁶²Johnstone, *The Devil and Demonism in Early Modern England*, 61.

V. Conclusion

The Most Wonderfull and True Storie was submitted to the Stationers' Register for publication on June 6, 1597, less than a year after Darling's dispossession. Its multiple authors had worked diligently to bring this narrative to light, celebrating their collective victory over the Devil as evidence of their righteousness. Meanwhile, Darling continued to be a mouthpiece of Puritan spirituality, his conquering of demonic temptation granting him a unique spiritual status. Texts such as *The Most Wonderfull and True Storie* provide profound insights into the nature and function of spirit possession in early modern England. Calvinist spirituality fashioned this phenomenon as a providential process by which one was brought closer to God. Possession was a revelatory experience, communicated through vivid examples, ordained by God with the purpose of being interpreted and responded to. Demoniacs were thereby cast as instruments of God's judgments: exemplifying the torments that the Lord enacted upon the wicked along with the faith required to overcome this condition and achieve sanctification. This was a theological interpretation that reconciled demonic possession with Calvinist providentialism, providing a theodicean and soteriological basis for its manifestation. In turn, this providential paradigm dramatically heightened the scope and stakes of this spiritual condition while offering a potential salve to the vexed nature of Calvinist predestination. This was a sign of God's love and mercy, prompting individuals to take solace that the divine plan was in motion. Consequently, extraordinary acts such as demonic possession were inspected closely, as it could potentially assist and comfort individuals in their pursuit of salvation.

In the textual legacies of early modern theologians such as John Darrell, the providential consequences of possession were explored in detail. Darrell cast exorcism as the definitive form of spiritual warfare, positioning victory over demonic temptation as a sign that God was guiding those involved in the ordeal towards a blessed conclusion. This was the "necessarie dutie" of every Christian when presented with a undeniable token of God's providence.¹⁶³ As Frank Luttmer summarizes, "The very experience of spiritual struggle was a sign of God's saving grace" and through this process "Christians could find comfort and assurance."¹⁶⁴ Along with fulfilling an explicit didactic and eschatological role, spirit possession flourished in Puritan communities during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries precisely because it could potentially alleviate spiritual anxieties concerning their eternal fates. Individuals were encouraged to take solace in the face of evil, rather than despair, as this was another opportunity to reflect upon and correct their inadequacies. Spiritual self-reflection and the search for assurance of salvation had developed into a central theological tradition in early modern English Reformed Protestantism as Puritans became increasingly anxious about their eternal fates. The Lord's providence was at work in every single manifestation of demonic possession and, in recognizing this, individuals could find comfort that they played a role in the divine plan. This was another means for these Puritan communities to address the spiritual anxieties that plagued their sinful lives, providing hope that salvation was obtainable.

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¹⁶³Darrell, *A True Narration*, sig. *v.

¹⁶⁴Luttmer, "Persecutors, Tempters and Vassals of the Devil," 66–67.

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