ABSTRACT

SEEKING THE SUPERNATURAL: THE EXORCISMS OF JOHN DARRELL AND THE FORMATION OF AN ORTHODOX IDENTITY IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

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In the 1590’s a puritan minister named John Darrell performed a series of miraculous exorcisms in the English midlands. His actions were highly controversial, sparking a national debate over the nature of demonic possession and the appropriate methods of healing. Darrell believed that he had an orthodox approach to divine powers, but he was met with strong opposition. The Bishop of London, Richard Bancroft, thought that Darrell’s exorcisms were an attempt to win converts to the puritan cause. Both sides worked feverishly to defend their ideas. They published multiple pamphlets, articulating their beliefs for or against the possibility of demonic possession. This thesis will examine these pamphlets in an attempt to ascertain the ways in which people understood the phenomena. It will focus on the question of identity, and John Darrell’s attempt to legitimize his role as an exorcist within the Church of England.
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THE EXORCISMS OF JOHN DARRELL
AND THE FORMATION OF AN ORTHODOX IDENTITY
IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

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Sometimes it takes a controversial event to bring mounting tensions into the open. Such was the case in the 1590’s, when a minister named John Darrell performed a series of exorcisms in the English Midlands. His actions, and the ensuing controversy over their veracity, mark a shift in the way English people thought about themselves and their relationship to the divine. The events reveal a time when people began to question their basic assumptions about the world, and started to integrate a range of ideas to form new systems of belief. The various interpretations of Darrell’s exorcisms show a point of convergence between purely religious explanations for events and an emerging scientific discourse that sought medical and naturalistic explanations. They reveal a fluid environment in which no single ideology or institution could accommodate all the emerging religious ideas, allowing individuals to combine ideas to form new identities. At the same time, the controversy over Darrell’s exorcisms exemplify the ways in which various powerful entities attempted to manipulate the “truth” of the events in order to perpetuate and enhance their ideological control. This thesis examines the questions raised by Darrell’s exorcisms and the ways in which they were shaped by relations of power. I hope that it will shed new light on the ways in which people formed their religious and ideological identities in this pivotal period in English history.

In recent times, modern scholars have looked back at England’s Reformation and painstakingly attempted to evaluate the successes of reform. One way to measure change was by looking at the attitudes displayed by clerical and political elites. Protestantism could only spread once it had the support of those who wielded the power to change official church doctrine and eradicate Catholicism. Furthermore, efforts at reform needed the state’s willingness to enforce conformity and punish recalcitrance. Another way to access the spread of the Reformation is to look at changes at the parochial level. By combing parish archives, it is possible to see each church’s efforts to integrate the standard elements of Protestantism such as the buying of vernacular bibles, the removal of Catholic iconography, and the imposition of the liturgy prescribed by the Book of Common Prayer. Historians have found that in most places, reform
was a long and difficult process that met constant resistance and setbacks at all levels. Recent revisionist historiography -spearheaded by Eamon Duffy\textsuperscript{1} - has emphasized the sheer disruptiveness of reform. It has shown that Protestantism posed a radical break from the Catholic past, an assault on a vital and rich Catholic heritage that showed no signs of decay. Far from being an organic movement, Protestantism came from above. It was imposed by elite authorities who attempted to eradicate “superstition” and break local tradition, replacing it with a newly formed religion that could be more easily controlled by central authority.

This is a sound thesis for the early Reformation, but I argue that it needs to be augmented when scholars look at a longer timeframe. Despite the initial resistance to reform, most people were proud to call themselves Protestants by the end of the sixteenth century. Slowly, as the second and third generations of Protestants came of age, they began to integrate new beliefs into their hearts and minds. Somehow, after initial reform efforts, Protestantism ceased to be an obtrusive doctrine imposed from above, and began to be a positive and creative force in the hands of English laity. This shift, which came at the end of the sixteenth century, was more subtle than the initial iconoclastic assault in earlier decades, but it is probably more telling of the form and character of the greater changes of the Reformation era. The problem for historians is how to measure belief in the post-reformation era when “Protestantism” became an increasingly fluid system of beliefs in the hands of a growing number of believers. When dealing with this post-reformation era, it is no longer effective to look for indicators that differentiate “Protestants” from “Catholics,” as Protestantism became the heading that encompassed nearly everyone in late Elizabethan England. Instead -I propose- it is necessary to use other markers to gauge religious sentiments after the Reformation.

In the late sixteenth century, England brewed with religious and political tension. Decades earlier, the country had officially broken away from Rome and attempted to create a new Church of England in its place. Nevertheless, as the sixteenth century drew to a close, the country was far from united on questions of religion. In fact, the departure from Catholic orthodoxy allowed for a proliferation of new religious ideas. The crown and the allied Church of England advocated a “middle path” that integrated a moderate Calvinist theology into a

\textsuperscript{1} Eamon Duffy, \textit{The Stripping of the Altars} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).
traditional Episcopal structure, but they found it to be difficult to accommodate the burgeoning range of religious impulses. Some people yearned for religious reform, and found the Church of England’s approach to be overly conservative, while others were happy with traditional religion and found reform movements to be offensive and obtrusive. Furthermore, there was no consensus on what reform actually entailed. English presses churned out translations of Calvinist theological tracts, but these ideas diffused unevenly among the populace. The earliest advocates of reform tended to be educated gentry who consumed Calvin’s complex theology and embraced it wholeheartedly, but the reformation eventually moved beyond elite circles. Other groups appropriated new beliefs in strategic and often unexpected ways, reformulating old forms of religious expression and introducing new modes of piety. There was widespread disagreement, however, on how reformed ideas should be introduced into the existing church structure. Religion was deeply engrained within social structures, and change could threaten delicate balances of power. Virulent debates broke out over seemingly innocuous issues such as clerical vestment and kneeling during communion. The Church of England attempted to lay the groundwork in matters of belief through foundational texts such as the Book of Common Prayer, but the meaning and application of their mandates varied greatly depending upon social circumstances. Their goal of extending orthodoxy among the laity continually faced implicit resistance and explicit criticism from both progressive and conservative factions.

Traditionally, historians have affixed the term retrospective term “puritan” to those Protestants who were the most outspoken advocates of reform. At the time, however, there were no distinct boundaries between “puritans” and mainstream members of the Church of England. In fact, the term was rarely used. Reform movements centered upon multiple goals, and only occasionally reached a level of organization that could justify a separate term for its advocates. “Puritan” was usually only used as a derogatory term to mock the reformers who attempted to “purify” the church from within. The reformers themselves preferred to call themselves the “godly” if they chose to differentiate themselves at all. This thesis seeks to further problematize these terms, showing the fluid boundaries that existed within the Church of England in the decades following the Reformation. It will focus on the exorcist John Darrell, who was certainly part of a semi-organized reform movement, but opted to avoid referring to himself as either “puritan” or “godly.” Instead, he simply called his movement “the cause,” which questioned
some of the tenants of the church, but remained part of it. In the following pages, I will use “puritan” as a broad term to refer to Darrell, and others who were part of England’s post-reformation reform movement, but I hope to highlight the unstable nature of this category, showing how the reform movement changed over time.

One of the greatest contrasts between reformers and their mainstream counterparts was their understanding of the divine intervention. For example, Darrell’s exorcisms and the demonic possessions that they treated, can represent a particularly volatile element in the debate over religious providentialism that became increasingly contentious in England at the end of the sixteenth century. Providentialism was a sentiment that posited a frequent and discernable influence of God’s power in everyday events. While nearly everyone would have agreed that God had a strong influence on the world, there was much disagreement on the form of divine providence. Strong providentialists saw God as being far more than a detached observer or mechanical operator; He was an energetic and omnipresent deity whose influence could be seen in every unexplainable event. He regularly stepped in to reinforce people’s belief, reward the righteous, and punish sinners. God’s providence took a variety of forms, from subtle influence on everyday events to spectacular manifestations of supernatural power. Rightly, many scholars have identified the puritans to be the most zealous proponents of providential religiosity. These Christians took the position that God’s influence could be continually seen in and around themselves. Too often, though, historians assume that these sentiments were confined to a small and fervent puritan minority. This study, however, will take the position that puritans were not qualitatively different from the majority of English Protestants in terms of their beliefs. To use the phrase famously popularized by Patrick Collinson, they were simply the “hotter sort of Protestants.” They were advocates of a strong divine influence, but they were not unique in their beliefs.

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In the sixteenth century, print became an important medium to popularize notions of the divine. Tales of God’s intervention were a common trope in popular mentalities. They had long been a part of local traditions and oral culture that could be an important element of a community’s heritage. Many places, for example, had tales of miraculous healings associated with particular relics or shrines. The introduction of the printing press created a new written culture, which allowed miraculous stories to reach wider audiences. Cheap chapbooks containing “wonderful tales” and “true revelations” made up one of the most popular genres of early modern writing. They were enthusiastically received among the literate, and quickly diffused among all classes as they were read aloud and integrated into sermons. Many contained uplifting tales of God’s benevolence, but they also dealt with the darker side of supernatural intervention. Stories of witchcraft and demonic possession provided the perfect fodder for these tracts. Such occurrences could capture the popular imagination, powerfully displaying real-world examples of the eternal battle between good and evil.4

Demonic fears reached their peak in the late sixteenth century, but they had deep roots in Europe’s ancient past. They were part of a mentality that understood the world to be animated by a host of supernatural entities. Britain’s pre-Christian Celtic heritage included the impulse to understand malevolent forces to be responsible for maladies ranging from illness to inclement weather. These sentiments continued in an adapted form when Christianity arrived in the Middle Ages, and malevolent forces transformed into Christian demons. Officially, to avoid the heresy of Manichaestic dualism, medieval theologians always treated demons as being subservient to God. In practice, however, demonic beliefs were a fluid element of the rich syncretism of medieval religion that adapted and employed Christian beliefs in conjunction with local tradition. The influence and power of demons varied greatly depending on the religious impulses of a particular community. They remained a local construct and a substratum of official Christian doctrine until the early modern era when demonic fears swept the continent, taking on a new and frightening presence. In a relatively short time period, roughly 1550-1650, demonic beliefs

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peaked in intensity, fueling thousands of witch-hunts and countless cases of demonic possession.⁵

There is no scholarly consensus on why and how demons became so pervasive at this time. Functionalist explanations point to the utility of demonism in expressing the types of concerns that existed in the post-reformation world. In such a tumultuous environment, religious uncertainty could take an enormous psychological toll on people. Periodically in England, and throughout Europe, religious conflict erupted into violence, but in most places, tensions remained latent. Instead of turning against their neighbors, many people channeled their angst in various other forms including placing blame on malevolent supernatural forces. Demons had long been an important construct of Christian (and pre-Christian) culture, but in the mid-sixteenth century the concept of demons solidified into a pervasive and immediate threat. People used demons to express a variety of concerns. They suspected that witches hid within their communities and used demonic power to inflict ills ranging from death to crop failure. Some felt the influence of demons within themselves, leading them to sin. In some extreme instances, demons took a frightening corporeal presence as people felt themselves to be completely “possessed.”

Amidst these conditions, writers actively produced a vast amount of intellectual work to give demons their prominent status in the era. Beginning with the infamous *Malleus Malificarum* in 1487, a growing number of theologians and scholars tackled the problem of demonology, and for a long time, they framed the problem in a way that gave demons an ever more important position. They developed complex and sophisticated theories that attempted to reconcile demonism with the demands of contemporary logic. It was a dynamic process in which elite thinkers took popular beliefs, shaped them, and then redistributed them among the populace through the machinations of religious institutions and secular courts. However, there was never a unified cultural consensus on demons among either the theologians or the laity. The reception of

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demonic beliefs always depended on how well they meshed with an individual’s understanding of the natural and supernatural world. Because of this, I will argue, demons serve as a useful barometer for understanding the ways in which early modern people thought about their world, and drew upon cultural influences to form identities.

In England in the 1590’s, the idea of demons was pervasive, but it was often uncertain where demons fit within the spectrum of available religious identities. Ostensibly, demonic fears were enveloped in a popular mentality that envisioned the world to be animated with supernatural forces. They were originally the province of uneducated lay people of relatively low social status—a religious culture conventionally depicted as “semi-pagan,” “superstitious,” and “magical.” However, the various religions found ways to integrate demonic beliefs into their official orthodoxy. After the Reformation, it was the Catholic Church that most readily integrated demonic possession and exorcism into its liturgy. Protestant theology was based on the word of God, emphasizing faith and personal devotion. It tended to reject such ritualized interactions with the supernatural, but this did not squelch lay demand for exorcism in Protestant countries. At the center of every demonic possession laid a tortured soul, and exorcism often proved to be a therapeutic procedure. Curiously, in England, it was the most austere of Protestants, the puritans, that seized authority on demonic possession most readily. At the end of the sixteenth century, puritans began presiding over dramatic public exorcisms. They found that by adapting reformed religiosity to include impulses such as demonism, they could reach broader audiences. They drew large crowds and could convey religious messages to individuals who were unable to access the austere and cerebral elements of reformed theology. They also displayed the efficacy of a religion in a direct interaction in which ministers literally overcame demonic power. In response, the Anglican Church found puritan exorcisms to be extremely threatening. They were unruly affairs that were antithetical to the state’s interest in maintaining order and control. They became unacceptable when puritans utilized them for their powerful polemical value.

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In the 1590’s, the tension between the Anglican Church and puritan exorcists erupted into a major conflict surrounding the activities of a puritan minister named John Darrell and his exorcisms in the English Midlands. Darrell’s final exorcism in the autumn of 1597 ended in disaster, and Anglican authorities mounted a campaign to put an end to puritan exorcisms. Their battleground was public opinion, and both sides published feverishly to control the discourse. The debate began as a conflict over the veracity of Darrell’s exorcism in Nottingham, but it soon devolved into a national controversy over politics, medicine, and the boundaries of supernatural intervention.

Demons in Nottingham

The debacle began when a series of strange and disturbing events occurred in 1597 in the town of Nottingham, initiated by the inner torments of an unruly fourteen-year boy named William Sommers. He was the son of a widow, and lived as a servant in the household of a local musician and artisan named Thomas Porter. Apparently, Sommers was unhappy in Porter’s household. Twice he tried to run away, and when he was returned to his master’s house the second time, he began having violent outbursts. At times, he became so enraged that he curled up in a ball at the foot of his bed and beat his head against the floor. He screamed and laughed manically. Master Porter attempted to control the boy by whipping him, but it was to no avail, as Sommers inflicted even more pain upon himself. During his fits, he gnashed his teeth, and intentionally burned himself on the fireplace. Soon, the outbursts became so frequent that the adults kept him confined to a bedroom from which they had removed knives, furniture, and even his bed sheets, so that he could not try to strangle himself with them. Friends from the community came to help Porter with the boy, as he needed supervision day and night. At first, “he was suspected to be madd,” but soon they began to see the work of the devil when he began “filthy and blasphemous” speeches, saying things such as “there is no god,” and inserting “lead us into temptation” into the Lord’s prayer where he was supposed to say “lead us not into temptation.” Then, he began uttering things that did not seem to come from him at all, but were “spoken by an evill spirit possessing him.” When they questioned him, the voice would reply that “he was the prince of darkness.”

As Sommers’s fits continued, more people in the community became concerned and they began to seek help. Naturally, they looked to religious leaders for guidance, but the town’s minister, Mr. Alderidge, found no way to remedy the situation. In turn, he sought the advice and support of colleagues in adjoining towns. He sent letters to “the most learned ministers” in the area, including a minister named John Darrell who was known to have experience with cases of demonic possession.\textsuperscript{8} Perhaps for political reasons, each minister was disinclined to be of assistance, so the town beseeched Darrell again, this time with a letter from the Mayor of Nottingham. When Darrell arrived on November 5\textsuperscript{th}, 1597, he found a crowd of sixty people around Sommers, who was in the midst of “one of hys accustomed fytes.”\textsuperscript{9} After a short time observing the boy, Darrell gave his official opinion that the boy “was possessed with an unclean spirit.”\textsuperscript{10}

By this time, Sommers’s outbursts grew to an unprecedented fervor, and two days later, after some initial planning, Darrell set forth to exorcise the boy. According to Darrell’s report, he assembled with three other ministers and a hundred and fifty other people to engage in “prayer and fasting,” to “entreat the Lord” on Sommers’s behalf. They congregated in the largest room in the house, while six or seven strong men pulled Sommers into room and held him down on a couch. For the full day the boy was “vexed and tormented by Satan,” contorting his body in strange ways and displaying supernatural strength. Then, that night, as Darrell read scripture, the event reached its climax. Everyone broke from their silent prayer and cried out for God to have mercy on the boy. Sommers screamed one last time, then turned face down and laid motionless, “the unclean spirit being gone out of [him].”\textsuperscript{11} Darrell called the event a “work of god,” but not everyone agreed. When news of the event circulated throughout Nottingham, there were many who could not accept the veracity of the possession or exorcism. Some of the town’s authorities

\textsuperscript{8} They might have heard of Darrell’s earlier work through a report of one of his previous exorcisms, published earlier that year: \textit{A True Report of of the Strange Torments of Thomas Darling, a Boy of Thirteen Years of Age, that was Possessed by the Devil, with his Horrible Fits and Terrible Apparitions by him uttered at Burton on Trent in the County of Stafford, and of his Marvellous Deliverance} (London: 1597). Apparently Mr. Alderidge also sent letters to a Mr. John Preton and Mr. John Gronne. John Darrell. \textit{An apologie, or defence of the possession of William Sommers, a young man of the towne of Nottingha...} (Amsterdam: 1599), 1.

\textsuperscript{9} Darrell, \textit{A True Narration}, 17-18.

\textsuperscript{10} Darrell, \textit{Apologie}, 2.

\textsuperscript{11} Darrell, \textit{A True Narration}, 20.
perceived Darrell’s efforts to be an elaborate display of histrionics used to pull followers away from the established church. They alleged that the boy was a counterfeit and Darrell was a fraud, and they were willing to fight bitterly to prove it.

Possession and Repossession of the Narrative

Now, just over five centuries later, it is impossible to know the precise “facts” of what happened in Nottingham on November 7. The preceding narrative is based upon Darrell’s later recollections, constructed years later for his own purposes. At the time of the exorcism, however, meaning had not yet been attributed to the strange confrontation with the supernatural. Exorcisms, by their very nature, were dramatic and unruly affairs where human emotions were at their peak and there was often no consensus on what exactly occurred. Each participant and observer understood the event in his or her own unique way and there were probably many people who were unsure exactly what he or she saw. The observers came for a variety of reasons. Some were concerned neighbors who came with pious motives to support the Porter family. Others must have come for the spectacle of monstrosity. That day, over a hundred people came to witness Darrell’s “miraculous” work. This number must exceed that of neighbors and friends who were worried about William Sommers, the lying, and by all accounts unlikable, musician’s apprentice who had succumbed to the devil. Most likely, many came out of curiosity, and stayed when they saw Somers writhing on the ground, choking, and running into walls. Perhaps they came to see if they could get a glimpse of the supernatural. Many later said that they had seen a genuine “work of god,” a true confrontation between powerful and omnipresent deities. 12

After the exorcism had occurred and the crowds dispersed, the only traces that remained were the fragmented and imprecise memories of those in attendance. Most likely, memories of Sommers’s exorcism would have soon faded, but for many reasons discussions about the exorcism persisted, and continue to this day. Soon after Darrell’s initial exorcism, the controversy over its veracity spiraled into a national debate. Darrell and his supporters wrote feverishly to defend the doctrine of demonic possession in the face of church authorities who sought to prove Darrell’s actions to be fraudulent. Over the course of the next several years, both

12 At the subsequent hearing, seventeen people testified on Darrell’s behalf, saying they saw things that “neither art nor nature” could explain.
sides devoted immense time and resources to controlling the public discourse on demonic possession. Between 1597 and 1603, at least eleven major works appeared on the topic. The controversy began with the troubles of teenage children and Darrell’s desire to heal them, but as it continued to escalate, the possessions took on a range of new meanings. The stories of the demoniacs were recycled to make arguments about religion and political issues that were far beyond the experience of demonic possession itself. Each person that discussed the case redefined it in a way that fit within his or her understanding of the world, often with a specific agenda in mind. Their arguments show how easily a religious disagreement could polarize a community. Opposition was crafted at the crucial intersection of religion and politics, and attacks on Darrell took several forms:

Some politicized demonic possession, seeing it as a part of a puritan agenda to challenge the authority of the established church. Immediately in Nottingham, conservatives and conformists began speaking out against Darrell, and news of the case soon spread throughout the country. Darrell represented a radical element within the church, and many saw him as a threat to the country’s delicate religious settlement. The threat reverberated in the minds of London officials, and powerful individuals seized the chance to use the case as an outlet for political propaganda. William Bankroft, Bishop of London, assigned his chaplain Samuell Harsnett, who later became Archbishop of York, to write a major work decrying Darrell’s exorcisms. Harsnett characterized Darrell as a deviant and a lunatic. At this high level, church authorities wielded considerable political might, and they had a vested interest in maintaining the power of the existing hierarchy. They were worried by elements such as Darrell who looked to move religion away from the church and into private chambers, taking emphasis away from official ritual and putting it on preaching and unmediated interaction with the divine. They remembered the destructive power that religion had after Henry VIII’s initial break with the Catholic church and the chaos it caused when his son Edward VI furthered reform, only to be reversed when his Catholic daughter Mary I took the throne in 1553. The Darrell controversy began in 1598, the fortieth year of Elizabeth I’s long reign, and officials were determined to extend the relative tranquility of her moderate Protestantism. It was expedient to eliminate potential threats such as John Darrell to keep the existing hierarchy intact.
Others contested the exorcisms on theological grounds, arguing against the possibility of such spectacular demonic/divine intercession. Harsnett, and later polemicists, emphasized the elements of Darrell’s theology that they saw as unsound. They used the affair to discredit Darrell’s views on the prevalence of miracles and the nature of divine providence. Official protestant doctrine held that miracles had ceased after the time of the apostles, making contemporary revelations of divine power, such as exorcisms, suspect. They met Darrell with the hope of squelching his theology, but as they did so, they refined their own beliefs. They used the case to discuss tricky issues such as the precise nature of divine providence and the role of intermediaries such as demons. They used Darrell’s case to fill in gaps and deepen the official orthodoxy of the adolescent Church of England. Their persecution of Darrell moved the church in a direction that understood God’s power to be ubiquitous, but also steady and predetermined. Opponents employed powerful language to characterize Darrell as a theological radical. They likened Darrell to evil sorcerers found in the Old Testament and “miracle mongering papists.”

Yet, Darrell continued to defend his doctrine of demonic possession in spite of his critics who characterized it as being “magical,” “popish,” and antithetical to the orthodoxy of the Church of England. Perhaps the most interesting thing about Darrell is his resistance to easy categorization. While various administrators and church officials attempted to characterize him as an “other,” he continually redefined himself, attempting to show that his beliefs fit seamlessly into Protestant philosophy. He was an advocate of reform, but he strongly disagreed with any attempt to paint him as a radical puritan. His identity was a multifaceted one that combined and synthesized seemingly divergent beliefs, accommodating demonic possession into reformed Protestantism. The controversy presented him with the task of making space for himself within the intellectual edifice of the church.

Using the power of print, Darrell strove to highlight the benefits that the church would enjoy if it accepted his understanding of demons and an allied theology that supported it. First, he believed in the therapeutic power of exorcism. Even if the Church did not officially recognize demonic possession, he argued, there continued to be individuals like William Sommers who were tormented by inner demons. Officializing Darrell’s exorcism by prayer and fasting would grant the church an effective pastoral tool to serve its laity. Second, Darrell believed that narratives of demonic possession should be used to proclaim the glory of God. For him, demonic
possession was a display of God’s omnipotence and divine justice. A demonic possession could act to purge the sins of an individual or community, inspire faith among believers, and “confound atheists.” Third, Darrell too saw the political power invested in possession narratives by directing his rhetoric against the threat of Catholicism. At the time, Catholic priests were the most prolific exorcists, having officially adopted exorcism into Catholic orthodoxy. Darrell hoped to publicize narratives of possession to show that Protestants too had the power to cast out demons using methods of prayer and fasting.

During Darrell’s life, his exorcisms and the discussion they provoked were at the center of England’s concerns. It was a time when the Church of England was struggling to define itself, and it was forced to confront controversial issues such as demonism in the 1590’s, a peak of both demonic possession and witch trials in England and the wider European world. Nearby Scotland saw one of its largest witch-hunts in 1597, just one year before the Darrell controversy broke. It centered on suspicions of magical debauchery when King James VI repeatedly faced strangely inclement weather on the North Sea as he was bringing home his new wife, Anne of Denmark. Supposedly, a gang of witches on the shore collaborated with the Devil, harming their community with maleficent power, and creating great storms that blew the king off course. The resulting panic led to over sixty people being accused as witches, several of whom were sentenced to death. King James personally participated in the trials, and afterward wrote his own *Demonologie* (1597). The Scottish case would have put pressure on English officials to deal with demons, as James was the presumptive heir to the English throne, crowned James I of England in 1603. Darrell’s exorcisms served as the perfect outlet for mounting pressures to bring a discussion of demons into English discourse.

In the 1590’s, Darrell represented a dangerous element in the Church’s struggle to enforce conformity, fusing demonism with puritan impulses, but the debate shifted after Darrell’s time, and the importance of his narrative waned in the seventeenth century. The new poles of the theological debate became Arminianism and separatism, and Darrell’s critique of the church became less poignant. As Darrell aged, his views moved closer to the center of English

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Protestantism. In 1617, he wrote his first and only book to be officially authorized, entitled *A Treatise of the Church*. In it, he found common ground with the established church and advocated moderate reformism, attempting to retain the fellowship of potential separatists. After Darrell’s death, his works saw a brief revival as the godly regrouped and responded to Charles I’s conservative efforts in the 1630’s and 1640’s. His final appearance in print was a republication of his account in *A True Narration* of Sommers’s dispossession as *A True Relation of The grievous handling of William Sommers of Nottingham* in 1641. Once again he was cast in a revolutionary light as the Civil War broke out.14

By the end of the 17th century, Darrell’s narrative began to fall into relative obscurity. Political divisions shifted permanently, and Darrell’s critiques of the established church no longer carried the polemical might that they once had. Furthermore, after the flood of witch trials and demonic possessions in Darrell’s time, their numbers slowed to a trickle in the seventeenth century. Notwithstanding the brief flare up of North American witch persecutions in the 1690’s, demonic beliefs were mostly relegated to superstition and folklore by the eighteenth century. Intellectually, they were no longer tenable after the stream of intellectual tracts, such as Reginald Scot’s *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584) and Thomas Ady’s *A Candle in the Dark: A Treatise Concerning the Nature of Witches and Witchcraft* (1656), created a climate where belief in demons was discouraged in elite circles. Gradually, Darrell’s story faded into darkness as Enlightenment thinkers scorned the idea of demons and professional historians of the nineteenth century saw them as a setback on the path to modernity.

Eventually, in the early twentieth century, discussions of demons reentered the scholarly discourse and historians rediscovered Darrell’s story. In this early period of academic analysis on the topic, there was a struggle over how early modern demonism should be explained. The American historian and Catholic priest, Montague Summers, was one of the first to do a serious study on the topic in English.15 His book, *The History of Witchcraft and Demonology*, researched and catalogued the once obscure literature on the topic, but it often tended toward

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sensationalism. Summers took a hard line defending Catholic doctrine, and at points he showed a deep seated fear of occultism, even bordering on being an apologist for witch hunters. He regarded Darrell as a “third-rate Puritan minister” who lacked “both appropriate ordination and training” for exorcism. Mostly, he used Darrell’s story to snub his nose at Protestant exorcism, characterizing his actions as an attempt to “win cheap notoriety.” Fortunately, more sober and evenhanded analyses of Darrell’s case soon followed. C. L’Estrange Ewen’s 1933 *Witchcraft and Demonism* proved to be a deft compilation of witchcraft and possession narratives including a thoughtful discussion of the Darrell case. In 1961, Corrine Holt Sawyer’s published the title, *The Case of John Darrell: Minister and Exorcist*. Her treatment of the case was the fullest rendering that had appeared in centuries, but can be somewhat disappointing in its factual errors and lack of analysis.

Recent historiography has treated Darrell’s narrative more carefully and with stringent methodological standards, and has found it to be useful as evidence in several different historical arguments. In the nineteen sixties and seventies, when serious research on witch trials began, investigation into demonic possession became an ancillary topic that received a modest amount of associated scholarly attention. Some used Darrell’s story in conjunction with witchcraft narratives to discuss manifestations of early modern demonic beliefs. In a similar vein, Sir Keith Thomas’s seminal *Religion and the Decline of Magic* included a brief discussion Darrell’s demonism in conjunction with a vast array of other supernatural beliefs, tracing their slow but seemingly imminent demise. Others have taken a very different approach, and used Demonic possession as a category in discussions of madness and mental illness. Still others have seized on the religious and political elements of Darrell’s story and found them to be useful in studies of puritanism and its antagonistic relationship with the Church of England. Recently, Marion

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16 It should be noted that until very recently, Sommers’ translation of the *Malleus Malificarum* has been used as a standard. However, it has been shown to have several misleading inaccuracies. See Walter Stephens, *Demon Lovers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), ch. 2; and the new translation by Christopher S. Mackay ed. *Malleus Malificarum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).


Gibson has given the Darrell affair its second full-length study with her 2006 book, *Possession, Puritanism, and Print: Darrell, Harsnett, Shakespere and the Elizabethan Exorcism Controversy*. In it, she offers the most deeply researched account of Darrell’s career, focusing on local politics and godly networks. Also, she uses the book to enter into a discussion with other literary scholars on how Darrell’s contemporary, William Shakespeare, used possession narratives when writing *King Lear*.\(^{22}\)

With this study, I stand on the shoulders of these great historians to revive Darrell’s narrative once again in an effort to further their work and make new historical inquiries. Darrell’s unique place in England’s history makes him a perfect lens to examine and refine our understanding of religion, politics, and early modern demonic beliefs. My goal will be to contextualize Darrell’s place within these larger themes, but the emphasis will remain on Darrell and the ways he constructed his identity. In historical studies, it is important and necessary to fit the past into schemes of development, but by honing in on a single individual such as Darrell, it is possible to see how these larger cultural movements were able to take hold at a local level. The value of a microhistorical approach is the ability it grants us to complicate our grandiose schemes. In Darrell’s writings, we see an individual who pulled upon many different ideas to cobble together a particular understanding of the world and God’s place in it. He resists easy classification as he was both a conservative and a radical, depending on the issue. Like all of us, Darrell actively constructed his own identity, but he only had the options granted to him by his culture. His writings offer us both a window into how one person dealt with competing ideas, and an example of a polemic that attempted to push those ideas on the wider public.

Each of the following sections will refract Darrell’s story through different lenses to draw new meanings out of the case. Section two discusses Darrell’s early life and the early interactions with demoniacs that would shape his understanding of the phenomena of demonic possession. It looks at the possible causes of demonic possession, and the treatments available in early modern society. Section three sketches the puritan movement in England, and attempts to place Darrell in this larger context. It seeks explanations as to why his exorcisms proved to be so threatening.

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Section four returns to our narrative in Nottingham and looks at how Darrell’s exorcism turned into a divisive issue at the local level. Finally, section five is a deep analysis of Darrell’s attempts to extend English theology to include his beliefs.

II

*John Darrell, Small-Town Preacher and Healer*

Very little is known about John Darrell’s life before his exorcisms. He offers few biographical details in his writings, and the archival records are sparse. Reportedly, he was twenty-three or twenty-four when he performed his first exorcism, putting his birth sometime in the early 1560’s. He was probably the son of Henry Dorrell, a farmer and miller from the town of Mansfield, but his first appearance in records is not until the fall of 1575 when he matriculated at Queens’ College, Cambridge. After Cambridge, he returned to the midlands where he married Joan Gadsbery in 1584. Shortly thereafter he decided to resume his studies and went to London to study law at the Inns of Court, which tended to attract radical preachers, and may have been were he picked up his godly sympathies. After only a brief stint studying law, he decided that it did not suit him. He tells ups that when he attempted to study law he felt a “strange and extraordinary sluggishness” fall upon him. Instead, he said: “it were much better for me to spende my days and strength in the studie of the devine then humane lawe, and to be occupied and worke upon the soules of men, encouringe theire eternall salvation.” He left London for his wife’s hometown of Mansfield, which tended to be reformist. Its churches had a large appetite for preaching, which allowed Darrell to begin his career as a freelance preacher.

Darrell encountered his first demoniac in 1586 when a teenage girl named Katherine Wright arrived in Mansfield from nearby Eckington. The girl came from a troubled family. She lived with her mother and a step-father who, according to court records, was often in trouble with

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24 Harsnett, *Discovery*, 1.
25 John’s name is also occasionally spelled “Dorrell.” However, he seems to have adopted “Darrell” as his preferred spelling.
the law for transgressions such as letting his animals stray (1579), not using the lord of the manor’s mills (1583, 1584), trespassing, and debt (1581, 1585). Wright complained that he beat her, and she began to act out. Reportedly, she began displaying typical signs of possession, including visions, trances, supernatural strength, and self-inflicted harm. It is unclear how Darrell became involved in the case, but he must have developed a reputation in Mansfield, as a concerned neighbor brought Katherine Wright the seventeen miles to see him. Darrell, having no previous experience with demoniacs, haphazardly developed a method to treat the girl. He joined with a small group of supporters, and prayed for the devil to leave the young woman.

After his experience with Katherine Wright, it would be another eleven years until Darrell had further contact with demonic possession. In the meantime, he lived a quiet life in the town of Ashby de la Zouch where he made strong connections with a godly community and became an assertive preacher. It is probably through this puritan network that he met a gentleman named William Walkden who had a grandson that was displaying signs of possession. In May 1596, Darrell agreed to visit the boy in Burton. He confirmed the suspicion that Thomas Darling was possessed, and organized a day of prayer and fasting to treat him. Darrell himself, however, refused to be present during the dispossessions, saying he wanted “to avoid note of vainglory.” Darrell left town and allowed his colleagues to conduct the dispossessions, which was a success, “marvellously delivering” Darling from his demons.

Katherine Wright and Thomas Darling exemplify many of the most common characteristics for demoniacs. As with most people who were afflicted with demons, they were both distressed adolescents. Wright’s source of anxiety was her family. For her, demonic possession served as outlet for her frustration and an avenue to escape an abusive home life. Darling also had a stressful home life, but in his case it was due to intense religious pressures.

27 Marion Gibson, Possession, Puritanism, and Print, 24.
28 According to the pro-Darrell pamphlet by an anonymous author, The triall of Maist. Dorrell, or A collection of defences against allegations not yet suffered to receive convenient answere Tending to cleare him from the imputation of teaching Sommers and others to counterfeit possession of divells (Middleburg, 1599).
29 John Denison, A True Report of the Strange Torments of Thomas Darling, a Boy of Thirteen Years of Age, that was Possessed by the Devil, with his Horrible Fits and Terrible Apparitions by him uttered at Burton on Trent in the County of Stafford, and of his Marvellous Deliverance (London: 1597) republished in Demonic Possession and Exorcism in Early Modern England, Philip Almond ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pg. 155-175.
30 Convents were the most common sites of demonic possession on the continent. See Moshe Sluhovsky, “The Devil in the Convent” The American Historical Review, Vol. 107, No. 5 (Dec., 2002), 1379-1411.
Sometimes, in such environments, demonic possession could offer a channel for religious angst. Like mystic rapture, it was an intense spiritual encounter that gave people a direct interaction with the divine.  

This was certainly an element of Darling’s possession. He came from a strong puritan family, and he was highly devout. He wished “that he might live to be a preacher, to thunder out the threatening of God’s word against sin and all abominations, wherewith these days do abound.”

When he began having fits, he asked for family members to read scripture to him, especially the passages from the gospels that recounted Christ’s temptation by the Devil. For Darling, like many other demoniacs, possession gave him a way to express his deep fears of sin and guilt. As Erik Midelfort says, “Demonic obsession and possession provided a kind of madness in which [people] could experience the spiritual and mental conflicts within themselves, the contradictory voices and gestures that they could hardly admit existed beneath their Christian appearance.”

It gave them agency to be recognized in their communities and have their voices heard when they otherwise would be condemned to silence.

When Darrell visited the demoniacs he came as a healer, but he was not the first or the only expert that their families turned to. Darling’s family initially looked for natural explanations to his ailments, which included vomiting and delusional visions. When his fits became more frequent and violent, his aunt took a sample of his urine to a physician, but “he said that he saw no signs of any natural disease in the child, unless it was the worms.”

Some thought it might have been “the falling sickness” (epilepsy), since it was not a “continual distemprance,” but his problems continued to get worse and more religious in nature. Next the family called upon a local “cunning man” named Jesse Bee for assistance. Bee came to the boy’s bedside, read scripture, and tried to council him. It was at this time that it was decided that the boy was bewitched, and when the fits continued they sought clerical assistance. Darrell’s reluctant involvement in the affair shows the ambiguous place that religious officials had in caring for ailments. Darrell would later argue that since Darling’s troubles were supernatural in nature, he

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needed the assistance of a religious leader. His opponents disagreed, arguing that religious explanations should not be placed upon individuals like Darling. In part, the controversy was over the role of protestant clerics and whether healing fell within their range of responsibilities or if these duties should remain in the hands of physicians and cunning men/women.

After the Thomas Darling affair, Darrell gained a certain degree of renown when a group of the boy’s relatives published an account of the possession. The *True Report*, published in 1597, offered a detailed account of Sommers’s experiences based on notes taken by people who were present. It includes seemingly verbatim exchanges between Darling and his visitors, and Darling and his “demons.” How and why the family converted their notes into a printed pamphlet is unclear. Perhaps they simply wanted to share their story of divine interaction, or perhaps they sought the monetary rewards that could come with a well-selling pamphlet. Marion Gibson suggests that it may have been intended to create a shared sense of puritan identity and community, likening it to other godly works such as Foxe’s *Acts and Monuments* and Clarke’s *Lives.* Whatever the intention, we can be certain that the *True Report* was successful in giving John Darrell a reputation as an expert on demonic possession among the godly. The records tell us that in both of his subsequent exorcisms, Darrell was summoned by people who had heard of him through the pamphlet. Yet, despite its resonance among the puritan community, the *True Report* did not seem to have any overt political intentions. It was approved by government censors who had no idea how controversial the puritan exorcisms would become in the following year.

**III**

*Unruly Puritans and Anglican Regulation*

When Darrell emerged as a player in national politics in the 1598, he entered into a much larger debate over religious reform that had begun decades earlier. After Elizabeth I ascended to the throne in 1558, the country was reeling from decades of religious uncertainty capped by the disastrous reign of her half-sister, nicknamed “bloody Mary,” who had attempted to enforce strict adherence to Catholicism. Elizabeth considered herself a Protestant, but her religious

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sensibilities resembled those of her father, Henry VIII. She rejected papal primacy and accepted the faith-based tenets of Protestantism, but many of her religious impulses remained conservative. For example, she kept a crucifix and candles in her royal chapel despite the horror these objects would have inspired in her more reform-minded subjects. The solution she proposed to the country’s vexing religious situation was to introduce a moderate Protestantism that implemented reformed piety into existing ecclesiastic structures. Her policies officially took hold in 1559 when a divided parliament passed the Act of Supremacy and the Act of Uniformity. The Act of Supremacy reestablished the English monarch as the head of the church, making Elizabeth the “supreme governor of this realm…as well in all spiritual or ecclesiastical things or causes as temporal.”37 The Act of Uniformity implemented the Protestant liturgical manual developed during Edward VI’s reign known as the “Second Book of Prayer.” At the same time, though, it incorporated controversial measures to mollify Catholics, including language to imply real presence in the Eucharist, and a clause to retain clerical vestments.

The “Elizabethan religious settlement” was purposefully broad, but its attempt to accommodate it left many people dissatisfied. Catholics felt betrayed by the reversion to Protestantism and refiend their displeasure in the “Northern Rising” of 1569, in which the Catholic earls of Westmorland and Northumberland led a revolt against the government and its attempt to impose “new found religion and heresie” upon its northern inhabitants.38 Elizabeth’s army was able to suppress the rebellion quickly, but the Queen remained vigilant against dissenters. Perhaps her greatest challenge came from within Protestantism itself. Many felt that the reforms fell short of their ideal vision for the church – earning them the label “puritan” for their attempts to purify the church. Initially, the puritan movement included a radical wing that included various kinds of outspoken Protestants who had returned from exile in Calvin’s Geneva or other continental strongholds. These radical puritans felt that the English church was in blatant opposition to true faith, and they hoped to strip the church of what they believed to be remaining popish traces, especially the episcopacy. Generally, they advocated for a presbyterian church structure, which would have eliminated hierarchy in favor of “gathered” churches of believers.

38 The Proclamation of the Earls (1569), Edited and reproduced in Anthony Fletcher and Diarmaid MacCulloch ed. Tudor Rebellions (Harlow: Pearson, 2004), 162.
They envisioned the church as a community of people who shared a direct relationship with God, without intermediaries.

Early conflicts between the Church of England and radical puritans would set the tone of a relationship that would last into Darrell’s time. In 1570, a Cambridge professor of divinity named Thomas Cartwright brought puritan grievances into the open through lectures that criticized the church and questioned royal supremacy. He harshly denounced the system of bishops and archbishops, which he claimed had no biblical precedent, and called for it to be replaced by a church structure based on the Geneva model, where congregations elected their own ministers and doctrine was decided by councils of elders. He was met with strong opposition from his Cambridge colleague, John Whitgift, who thought his lectures to be inappropriate. Whitgift, along with Cambridge’s Chancellor, William Cecil, convinced the heads of the colleges to oust Cartwright from his position in December 1570, forcing him to flee to Geneva.39

Facing criticism from both Catholics and the radical puritans, Elizabeth made attempts to repress dissenters. She had little trust in efforts of innovation and education within the church, especially the new premium that many placed on preaching. Even though Protestantism was a religion of “the word,” which included a heavy emphasis on both Bible reading and preaching, Elizabeth was worried about the subversive potential of preaching, and made efforts to regulate it. The 1559 injunctions called for a minimum of four sermons a year, but they were often left unpreached by the lack ministers, who had to be specifically licensed by their bishops before they were allowed to preach. The queen also made efforts to suppress “prophesysings” that had become popular throughout the country. These meetings, led by learned ministers, consisted of scriptural exegesis and theological debate. They proved to be useful in teaching uneducated clergy, but Elizabeth perceived them to be a threat to the established church. Like preaching, they could be used by reformers to mount criticism upon the church. They also moved crucial theological debates from the hands of church officials into local control. Elizabeth could not stand for any efforts for religious decentralization, and in 1577 she ordered that they be discontinued. However, the Archbishop of Canterbury and moderate puritan Edmund Grindal

refused to take action against them, thinking them to be “both profitable to increase knowledge among the ministers and tendeth to be edifying of the hearers.” And therefore he could not “with safe conscience and without the offence of the majesty of God give my assent to the suppressing of the said exercises.”

In response, Elizabeth removed him from his position and made the fateful decision to replace him with John Whitgift, who had been such a steadfast voice of support for the Church during the conflict with Cartwright.

As Archbishop, Whitgift showed great skill in combating the most vocal and dangerous elements of the puritan movement using both coercion and force. The 1570’s and 1580’s proved to be the height of the radical puritan movement, but Whitgift was able to implement various measures to ward off the worst threats. In 1583 his target was insubordination among the lower clergy, as he forced all ministers to subscribe formally to the statement that the Prayer Book “containeth nothing in it contrary to the word of God.” Among puritan leaders, the most immediate danger was probably the reform-minded leaders in parliament, and he made every effort to block their attempts to debate reform in the House of Commons. In 1587, puritan leaders attempted their strongest parliamentary coup when they introduced, and almost passed, legislation to restructure the church based on the Genevan model. But royal power proved to be too strong, as Elizabeth and Whitgift arrested the leaders, Peter Wentworth and Anthony Cope, and quieted all further debate on the subject. Intellectually, Whitgift combated puritan arguments through published tracts that defended the church against invectives such as John Field’s *Admonition to Parliament*. Whitgift’s formidable theological background allowed him to make strong arguments, but one of the greatest strengths in his campaign was his ability to delegate polemical duties to more efficient managers.

One of Whitgift’s most steadfast and unwavering pillars of support was a man named Richard Bancroft, a skilled writer who was devoted to maintaining the established church under royal governance. As F.W. Brownlow puts it, “Bancroft’s successful career, in fact, was based on the detection, exposure, and removal of threats to the English religious establishment, an

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avocation in which he had no rival.” Bancroft railed against non-conformists in his 1588 sermon at St. Paul’s Cross, calling them “schismatics,” and “perverters of Christ’s true meaning.” Later, he refined his opinions even further in two books published in 1593: *Dangerous Positions and Proceedings, Published and Practiced in this Land of Brytaine* and *A Survay of the Pretended Holy Discipline*. Bancroft also led the investigation and prosecution against the vituperative puritan attack known as the *Marpilate Letters*. As the name implies – literally they were an attempt to “mar the prelates” – the letters were an outright attack on the episcopate, published clandestinely and circulated throughout the country. The writer, under the pseudonym Martin Marprelate, used the secret press to deploy the most extreme attack on the establishment to date. At first, church officials were paralyzed by the unknown providence of the pamphlets, but eventually Bancroft and company were able to track down the presumed author, John Penry, and execute him along with three of his accomplices in 1593.

After the Marprelate affair, the radical wing of the puritan movement was essentially finished. Decades of Whitgift/Bancroft’s repressive measures proved to be effective, as many of the early puritan leaders were either imprisoned or exiled, and the lower clergy had begun to at least outwardly conform. Furthermore, Marprelate’s appalling sedition soured much of the remaining support for the separatist and presbytrian causes. Parliament once housed a great deal of radical puritan supporters, but in 1593, they showed how far their opinion had shifted by passing the Conventicle Act, ordering all who belonged to a puritan conventicle into exile or face execution.

Although the radical puritan movement had been mostly decimated, the state’s apparatuses to combat them were still in place. The Elizabethan government remained vigilant against threats, and was still quite weary of reform efforts. Whitgift and Bancroft persisted as powerful players in the church’s hierarchy, and they continued their fight against the puritan movement. In 1591 they found a new type of threat embodied in a London maltmaker by the

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name of William Hacket. He proclaimed himself to be the second coming of Christ, whose second coming aimed to reestablish the gospel and introduce presbyterian discipline to England. Early one Friday morning in July, two of his followers stood on a makeshift podium and declared Hacket supreme king of the earth. Their message was highly political in character, claiming that the queen had forfeited her crown by “giving credite and countenance to the Bishops.” They prayed that God would strike down the lord chancellor, Christopher Hatton, and the archbishop of Canterbury, John Whitgift, whom they denounced as traitors and cursed “to the pit of hell, as Opposers of the sincere Religion.” The group gained a small following, but the authorities were unimpressed. Within weeks of his divine proclamation, Bancroft and company tracked Hacket down and convicted him of treason. On July 28, he was hung, drawn, and quartered “near the spot by Cheapside Cross where his inglorious reign had begun less than a fortnight before.”

In some ways, John Darrell’s case contains striking parallels to both the Marprelate and the Hacket controversies. Like Marprelate, Darrell was involved in a protracted pamphlet campaign against Whitgift, Bancroft, and the Church of England. He too used clandestine publishers to spread illegal works that showed his wit and a degree of theological sophistication. Hacket, on the other hand, did not attempt to challenge the authorities through theological sophistication or cunning prose. He was both illiterate and poor, and sought to appeal to people’s hearts rather than their minds. Like Hacket, Darrell’s greatest appeal was to the urban middling and lower classes, promising them a grand spectacle displaying supernatural intervention.

Despite the similarities, Darrell differed from Marprelate and Hacket in one key respect: he was not a radical or even a presbyterian. He represented the heart of the moderate puritan

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45 Walsham reconstructs this narrative using a detailed narrative contained in: Richard Cosin, Conspiracie, for pretended reformation: viz. presbyteriall discipline. A treatise discovering the late designments and courses held for advancement thereof, by William Hacket yeoman, Edmund Coppinger, and Henry Arthington gent. (London: 1593), esp. 55-57, supplemented by Richard Bancroft, Dangerous positions and proceedings, published and practiced within this island of Brytaine, under pretence of reformation, and for the presbiteriall discipline (London: 1593) and William Camden, The historie of the most renowned and victorious princesse Elizabeth, the late queene of England (London: 1630).
47 For Bancroft as the chief architect of the campaign against Darrell, see Darrell, Detection, 7-8.
movement that remained vital after the early dissenters had faded away. He was part of the first generation to come of age after Elizabeth established her brand of protestantism, and had, in some ways, internalized the Church’s teachings. He was both baptized and married by Anglican ministers, and just before his final exorcism he had his fifth child baptized into the church. He identified with the church in a way that his predecessors could not. He always called The Church of England “our church,” and was adamant that he was not a dissenter or a “schismatic.” His goal was not to challenge the views or the hierarchy of the church, but simply to extend orthodoxy to include his understanding of the divine and his doctrine of demonic possession.

In fact, Darrell devoted very little time and effort to political matters, and used most of his writing to discuss possession and exorcism. At times, he seemed annoyed by Bancroft’s efforts against him, but his language was never defamatory, and he always expressed his utmost respect for the queen. In one of his early works, he said that he hoped his words would reach her majesty, so that she would know of the “wonderful worke in her land,” and even in “her accustomed clemencie…send her messenger in our behalf.” 48 Rhetorically, he feigns not to understand why he was being prosecuted. He says, “I desire to know why men…are so highlie offended with me, so given to be displeased, and so hott aginst mee.” 49 Darrell’s colleague, the anonymous editor of a work on his behalf, wrote a more accurate assessment of the forces against them. In his introduction, he said, “It will be (perhaps) obiected, that by publishing this treatise, I goe about to raise mutinies among ye Queenes subiects, or to discredite the Ecclesiasticall State.” He is adamant that his intention is not to ‘raise mutinies,’ though. He expresses that he “detests in his heart” anyone who would work against the queen, and would condemn them to “the lowest hell.” 50 Like Darrell, he is trying to work for change within the established church.

Yet, despite Darrell’s lofty speech and his seemingly sincere intentions, his exorcisms still posed a real threat to the establishment. They embodied many of the threatening elements of puritanism that the church had so bitterly opposed. For a church that found preaching and “prothesyngs” to be bothersome, Darrell’s exorcisms were repugnant. They were instances of

48 Darrell, Apologie, epistle.
49 Darrell, Apologie, 19.
50 Anon, A Brief Apologie, epistle.
unbridled religiosity in the hands of relatively uneducated commoners. In typical puritan fashion, the exorcisms included long sessions of preaching. Puritan preachers could sometimes attract such a fervent following that they threatened to move beyond ecclesiastical control, and Darrell’s ability to combine fiery preaching with exorcism made him doubly threatening. Before he dispossessed Sommers, he convened the session with a prayer session followed by Mr. Aldridge’s (Darrell’s colleague) interpretation of Hosea: 4, and his own discussion of Mark: 14-30. These biblical exegeses were dangerously similar to the prothesyzing that Elizabeth banned in 1577. Even their physical location was threatening. They moved congregations away from the church to witness religious interpretations in a private home.

Exorcisms also served as a dramatic example of puritan fasting. Darrell insisted on both prayer and fasting as part of the formula for his dispossessing rituals. Fasting was a cornerstone of puritan faith, and in Patrick Collinson’s words, “a powerful engine of puritan religion.” Unlike Catholic and Anglican fasting, they were not tied to specific days of the liturgical calendar. They were extemporaneous events that could be used flexibly to serve a community’s purposes, and they too were threatening to the establishment. On May 2nd 1581, Archbishop Sandys of York admonished Bishop Chaderton of Chester:

My Lord you are noted to yield too much to general fastings, all the day preaching and praying. Verily a good exercise in time and upon just occasion, when it cometh from good authority. But when there is none occasion, neither the thing commanded by the prince or the synod, the wisest and best learned cannot like it, neither will Her Majesty permit it. There lurketh matter under that pretended piety. The devil is crafty; and the young ministers of these our times grow mad.

Fasting was yet another occasion where puritans moved religion away from the hands of authorities, and into the private sphere. In the hands of the exorcist, John Darrell, they became exceedingly powerful and an outright threat.

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53 *Certain mineral and metaphysical schoolpoints* (Coventry, 1589), STC 17455, no pagination. Quoted in Thomas Freeman, “Demons, Deviance and Defiance,” 42.
It was well known that exorcisms could be powerful instruments of propaganda. Exorcism was well known to be a powerful tool of propaganda. It has been well documented that demonic possession and exorcism occurred most frequently in hotly contested bi-confessional and multi-confessional zones. Catholic priests in France often wielded their crosses and holy water over the possessed, showing the power and efficacy of their church in the face of their Huguenot foes. Likewise, in England, exorcisms seem to have been most common in unstable religious environments. In 1585-6, the same year of Darrell’s first exorcism, Catholic Jesuits were able to perform a rare exorcism in England, treating six demoniac recusants in the town of Denham in an attempt to win converts. The priests were eventually arrested, but not before performing their politically charged ceremony in front of large crowds. Puritans prior to Darrell also made use of the power of exorcism. John Foxe, author of *Acts and Monuments*, conducted a well publicized exorcism of a law student named Robert Brigges in 1574. Manuscript accounts of this event circulated widely among the godly community which would shape the symbols and language used in later puritan possessions and exorcisms.

Darrell was aware of the propagandistic value of his exorcisms, but attempted to frame them in a way that did not put them at odds with the established church. Instead of acknowledging the prospective boon they would be to puritans, he discussed how the church could use them against Catholics. He reveled in the idea of topping the propaganda of the hated Catholics. Darrell resented them for mocking Protestant impotence in exorcism, saying, “wee poore heretickes have no such power in our Church.” He wanted to prove that Protestants could possess the same power as the Catholics without the superstitious methods used by their rivals. Also, Darrell believed that exorcism could make people aware of God’s power. He hoped that it would “confound the Atheists in England, and eyether make them more inexcusable, or els bring them to a better minde.” The Anglican Samuel Harsnett, on the other hand, thought it was ridiculous that every church attempted to use exorcism for its propaganda value. If Darrell was

56 These manuscripts have been edited and reproduced, along with an insightful introduction, in Kathleen Sands, *An Elizabethan Lawyer’s Possession by the Devil* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2002).
not dealt with, he wrote, “we should have had many other pretended signs of possession: one Devil would have been mad at the name of the Presbyter, another at the sight of a minister that would not subscribe, another to have seen men sit or stand at the Communion.”

Darrell’s pamphlets give us insight into England’s puritan movement which had changed greatly since the early days of Elizabeth’s reign. Initially, the puritan impulse was fueled by theological dissatisfaction. Vehement reformers such as Thomas Cartwright pushed for change at the university and in parliament, but as time progressed, the movement became more mild, but also more widespread. Puritan ideas diffused among the populace, creating growing communities of godly individuals who pushed for change within the church. Darrell was part of this movement, attempting to broaden the appeal of puritanism by making it accessible, packaged in spectacular confrontations with the Devil. Thanks, in part, to the repressive efforts of Whitgift and Bancroft, the church overcame the efforts of the radical puritanism, but continually had to fight people like Darrell who made attempts to push reforms that would destabilize Episcopal control of the church.

IV

Nottingham’s Political Polarization

At the national level, religious and political divisions can seem to be clearly defined, but at the local level, it is easier to see that not everyone can easily be categorized. Older, traditional histories of England’s Reformation tended to focus only on the Cartwrights and Marprelates of the puritan movement, too often creating puritan/conformist binaries that could obscure the nuances of religious sentiments among the general populace. Instead, looking at cases like Darrell’s grant a richer understanding of how reform actually worked. Orthodoxy and dissent are seen here as contested boundaries that were re-established and re-defined. Most people were not clearly puritans or conformists in the 1590’s. They held a combination of eclectic beliefs, and often did not choose a “side” unless a controversial event forced them to do so. With this in mind, I would like to return to our exorcism narrative in Nottingham to see how Darrell’s

59 Harsnett, Discoverie, 35.
exorcism created new borders of orthodoxy, polarizing the town and forcing people to fit into more narrowly defined religious and political identities.

If things had gone smoothly after Darrell dispossessed Sommers in 1598, Nottingham would have soon been pacified and life would have gone along as normal. Far from going smoothly, they turned out to be a disaster for nearly everyone involved. Initially, the town held Darrell in regard and offered him his first permanent post as a preacher at St. Mary’s Church. It was his first full-time appointment as a minister, but he did not have time to enjoy it. Within weeks, Sommers began having fits again. His torments lasted for months, and Darrell’s efforts to fight the demons became a public spectacle. Soon, the case entered the legal system when Sommers accused a local woman of using witchcraft to send demons into him. Once again, Sommers drew Nottingham’s attention, but this time the townsfolk regarded him with suspicion as well as concern. The mayor and town council took the boy from his home and put him in custody, where, according to Darrell, they subjected him to torture until he confessed that he had faked the possession.60 This revelation reflected poorly upon Darrell who was then accused of being a manipulator and a counterfeit.

While some quickly turned against Darrell when Sommers admitted counterfeiting, the godly network in town showed their solidarity and canvassed the town, going door to door on a “hartburning campaign”61 to drum up support for him. “The case being thus,” Darrell said, “my selfe with others thought good to procuer a commission from the Archbishop of York for the examining [of those who] had sene Sommers do or suffer sundry things impossible to be counterfeted.”62 The commission was formed in March, but immediately drew criticism from conformist citizens who thought it partial to Darrell. Their criticisms were not entirely unfounded either, as many of the men on the commission were the same officials who had written to Darrell

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60 Darrell, Apologie, 2.
61 The words of Samuel Harsnett A Discovery of the Fraudulent Practices of John Darrell 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 Caldwall: 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 devils (London: 1599), 6.
and asked him to come to town. The commission was reshuffled, this time including men that were “known to have disliked of Mr. Darrell’s proceedings.”

The seemingly balanced commission commenced their hearing on March 20, 1598. They heard dispositions from seventeen of Darrell’s supporters, all of whom attested that they saw things “suffered by Sommers which nether natur nor art can [explain].” Then, the commission called William Sommers. Because he had denounced his possession in custody, the conformists might have considered Sommers to be their star witness, but everything changed when he arrived at the hearing. According to Darrell’s *True Report*, the devil returned to Sommers’s body when he saw Darrell and the supporting godly community. The boy violently crashed to the ground and began one of his most terrible of fits. He continued, “miserably tormented by the divil, until both himself to the commissioners acknowledged that he had not counterfeited.” According to Darrell, even the biggest skeptic, the Archdeacon of Darby recognized that it was the “finger of god” at work. After this dramatic scene, the commission ended, allowing both Darrell and Sommers to go free. Darrell’s contingent poured out onto the street, “telling their friends with great joy” that Darrell had escaped prosecution.

After the hearing, the controversy soon escalated once again. Sommers returned home and resumed his demonic fits. This time, his sister, Mary Cowper also joined in, and once again, the town was intrigued by the possibility of supernatural intervention in their town. Sommers made matters worse, though, when he chose to accuse a woman named Alice Freeman of bewitching him. In some ways, Freeman might have fit the profile of possible witch. She was, according to Darrell, “a very ougly, old, lame woman.” But she had connections. She was the relative of a Mr. Freeman who was an alderman and Justice of Peace in the town of Nottingham.

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63 Harsnett, *Discovery*, 7.
67 John Darrell, *A detection of that sinnful, shamful, lying, and ridiculous discours, of Samuel Harshnet. entituled: A discoverie of the fravdulent practises of Iohn Darrell wherein is manifestly and apparantly shewed in the eyes of the world not only the vnlikelihooode, but the flate impossibilitie of the pretended counterfayting of William Somers, Thomas Darling, Kath. Wright, and Mary Couper, together with the other 7. in Lancashire, and the supposed teaching of them by the saide Iohn Darrell* (English Secret Press?: 1600), 201. Quoted in D.P. Walker’s excellent, though brief, assessment of the case *Unclean Spirits* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1981), 64.
His associate, the Chief Justice of Common Pleas, John Popham, took Sommers back into custody and once again forced him to admit counterfeiting.

The ongoing catastrophe polarized the once religious culture of Nottingham as people chose alliances based on their personal and ideological networks. The godly united with Darrell while the skeptics tended to ally with the Anglican conformists. Darrell’s Anglican opponent, Samuel Harsnett would later argue that the exorcism was extremely divisive. He said, “the parts taking on both sides beganne to be more violent, and the town became to be extraordinarily devided.”68 He depicted fights breaking out on the street and people so frightened that they refused to go out at night. He speaks of the debate playing out in public debate, as “The pulpits rang of nothing but Divels and witches.”69

Once Justice Popham had Sommers in his custody again, he contacted higher Anglican officials to aid in the calamity in Nottingham. He wrote to John Whitgift, the Archbishop at Canterbury, who in turn summoned Darrell to Lambeth Palace in London, to come before the supreme religious court in the country, the Royal Ecclesiastical Commission. This time, Darrell was powerless in front of the highest church officials, including Whitgift and London Bishop Richard Bankroft, who were known for their recent campaigns to enforce conformity among puritans. Before the trial, he sat imprisoned at the Westminster Gatehouse, uncertain of the charges brought against him as the commission prepared its case. He knew that the commission consisted of “manie and open adversaries to the cause and myself.” He said, “What was donne at [its] sitting, I know not. Onely I imagine that no good can come of it.”70 He worried that he would remain in jail indefinitely, or even be hanged.

Darrell’s only recourse was to write. While in jail, and between hearings, he produced a work entitled An Apologie, or Defense of the Possession of William Sommers. He knew that writing it would be dangerous. He said, “If I had never attempted this…I might have escaped the rod that is (as it were) held over my back, and is (almost) sure to be layd on me for the same.” Yet, he wrote anyway, hoping the work would travel “far and wide” and “come into the hands of

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68 Harsnett, Discovery, 8.
69 Harsnett, Discovery, 8.
70 Darrell, Apologie, 35. It is interesting to note that Darrell always referred to his coterie as ‘the cause,’ not ‘the godly,’ or ‘puritans.’
all” so that they may “see the goodness of our cause, and innocence hereyn.” His goal was to clear his name and gain his freedom, but he also had greater intentions. The Apologie was the beginning of an ideological battle and an attempt to re-define the terms of English Protestantism. Darrell wanted to prove that Sommers’ possession was legitimate, and his dispossession was a “work of God.” His Apologie argued for England to accept a theology that would recognize the possibility of demonic possession.

Darrell’s ability to write the Apologie and get it published shows the widespread support he had among the godly. In fact, Darrell’s imprisonment galvanized the community. First, supporters were able to smuggle a greatly truncated version of the Apologie into the Dutch Republic where they published it in the provincial town of Middleburg. The introduction of this work, written by an anonymous supporter, was dedicated to members of the Lambeth commission, in an attempt to sway their judgment. Second, sympathizers found a way to publish Darrell’s full Apologie in Amsterdam. As word spread, more supporters came to London and “exclaimed bitterly against his committing to prison, justifying by many devises his former accusations.” They engaged in a letter writing campaign, beseeching powerful acquaintances on his behalf. They also published their own works on Darrell’s case. Sometime in the early months of 1599, A briefe narration of the possession, dispossession and repossession of W. Sommers was published. The anonymous author of the tract, who simply identified himself as “G. Co.” declared that the purpose of the work was to defend the authenticity of the possession of Sommers against those who denied it. It included detailed descriptions of the depositions given by Darrell’s supporters in Nottingham. All of this support clearly demonstrates that Darrell was not a fringe figure, but had a wide-ranging network that could mobilize in his defense.

In spite of all his support among the godly, the hearing in front of the Royal Commission in May 1599 did not go in Darrell’s favor. Records of the hearing did not survive, but all later accounts indicate that the proceedings where meticulously planned by the commission. Sommers appeared as a witness, and this time he did what he was told, refrained from hysterics, and testified that he had acted out the possessions with Darrell’s coaching. In addition, the court

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71 Darrell, Apologie, 3.
72 A brief apologie proving the possession of W. Sommers. Written by J. Dorrell, but published without his knowledge (Middleburg, 1599).
73 Harsnett, Discovery, 10.
called Katherine Wright, who Darrell had exorcised in 1586, and Thomas Darling, exorcised in 1596. Both also confessed to being frauds. In the end, Darrell “was by the full agreement of the whole court, condemned for a counterfeyte.” He and his associate George More were “desposed from the Ministery, and committed to close prison,” to await further punishment.74

After the trial, the battlefield moved from the courtroom to the realm of public discourse. Each side struggled to attribute meanings to the case that would benefit their interests. Darrell’s camp had struck the first blow with their 1598 pamphlets, but after the trial in the spring of 1599, Bancroft moved to mobilize a campaign to smear Darrell’s reputation. Later that spring, Bancroft’s chaplain William Barlow (future bishop of Lincoln) was the keynote speaker at Cambridge’s commencement ceremony, and he used the platform to denounced the possibility of demonic possession. In November, one of Whitgift’s chaplains, Abraham Hartwell, took the opportunity to publish a translation of a critical account of the recent possession of a French demoniac named Marthe Brossier.75 In the introduction, Hartwell dedicated the work to Bancroft, discussed the “imposture and cozenage” of the Sommers possession, and told how “the judgment of the best French physicians” was that natural causes should be used to describe demonic behaviors.

Immediately after the Marthe Brossier piece was published, Bancroft finally got what he thought would be the decisive reproach against Darrell and his puritan exorcisms. Written by his chaplain, Samuel Harsnett (future Archbishop of York), The Discovery of the Fraudulent Practices of John Darrell was a comprehensive and erudite attack on every aspect of Darrell’s exorcism. Harsnett deeply researched each one of Darrell’s exorcisms and attempted to explain how each element could have been counterfeited. Also, he added an extended discussion of theology, arguing that the possibility of exorcism had ceased after the apostolic era. Surprisingly, after publishing this, Bancroft freed Darrell from prison. Perhaps he thought that the book would be a final blow against Darrell, ending the threat he posed. Darrell tells us plainly “fourteen days after the pbulishinge of the booke made against me, they offered me libertie upon the condition I would promise not to preach of possession nor dispossession, nor in my publike preaching justife

74 Harsnett, Discovery, 8-9.
75 Michel Marescot, A true discourse, vpon the matter of Martha Brossier of Romorantin pretended to be possessed by a deuill. trans. Abraham Hartwell (London: 1599)
the possession and dispossessinge of the persons controverted, nor deale any more in the
dispossessing of any.\textsuperscript{76} Of course, Darrell did not keep his promise. He would go on to publish a
direct response to the \textit{Discovery}, along with three other works that would refine his position on exorcism, and would further seek to define orthodoxy in a way that would make room for a puritan exorcist.

\section*{V}

\textit{Theological Posturing}

Earlier, when Darrell had his interactions with demoniacs, his greatest strength was his ability to approach demonic possession within a puritan framework. Generally, puritanism favored a strict interpretation of Calvinism, which was an “austere” faith based on discipline and self-restraint. It placed a heavy emphasis on reading scripture, which meant that the literate found it to be more accessible than the uneducated masses. With exorcism, though, Darrell found tool that would allow him to extend the puritans’ faith in a way that went beyond their ordinary modes of piety. It created bridge between the puritan cultural milieu characterized by prayer and reverence for scripture, and undercurrents of “popular religion” with its charms, spells, and miraculous encounters. It allowed him to him to reach large audiences with impressive displays of God’s power.

When Darrell performed his exorcisms he found it easy and natural to assume the role of a puritan exorcist, but as a writer, this was a much more difficult identity to defend. Catholic exorcists had a well developed theology to buttress their practices, but Darrell had no such luxury. He had to create new intellectual justifications to make exorcism work within Protestant theology. One of his largest obstacles was theologians who claimed the demonic possession was impossible because miracles had ceased after the time of Jesus and his apostles. This suspension of miracles was an important part of Protestant doctrine. It was one of the main points on which they diverged from Catholicism. Darrell agreed that the time of miracles was over, but he argued that “it is no miracle to be possessed.”\textsuperscript{77} He believed that his “dispossessions” were of a different

\textsuperscript{76} Darrell, \textit{Detection}, B1.
\textsuperscript{77} Darrell, \textit{Apologie}, 12.
nature than the miraculous exorcisms performed by Jesus. He pointed out that Jesus used miracles to heal many types of ailments such as blindness, leprosy, and fevers. Yet, no one could claim that blindness ceased to exist after Jesus’ time. In the same way, demonic possession continued into the modern era, even after the miraculous cure for it had ceased. He maintained that “to be possessed with a Divell is noe miracle, no more than to be sick of a fever, or to have the palsye, or some other disease.”

Darrell’s understanding of miracles centered on the “means” used to produce them. For him, a work was not miraculous if it was brought about by the means that God provided in nature. For example, if a man ploughs his field and corn grows, “it is an admirable thing,” but it is no miracle, “because God in nature hath so anointed it.” Yet, if corn suddenly grows, “where no plough came nor seed was cast,” then it is a miracle. “Thus we see one and the same worke miraculous and not miraculous, a miracle when it is without means, noo miracle when it is done by meanes.” Likewise, Christ’s exorcisms were miraculous because he performed them without any natural means. He “only spake and it was done.” In contrast, Darrell performed his exorcisms by entreating the Lord. “God hath left us meanes in nature,” he said, “for the healing of those which are sick of this supernaturall disease,” namely prayer and fasting. On this point, he had scriptural backing. He quotes Mark 9:29, when Jesus says “this kind (demons) goeth not out, but by prayer and fasting.” Since Jesus prescribed this method in scripture, Darrell regards it to be as natural a cure as giving medicine to someone who was ill.

Darrell wanted to show that God and demons were omnipresent, but this was a problematic position to take within Protestantism, which generally tried to separate itself from the “magical” and “superstitious” worldview that characterized the Middle Ages. During the Reformation, Protestants drastically widened the gap between the material and the divine. First, they denied that the divine could exist in images or objects. In some places, the process turned violent when zealous Protestants forced change through iconoclasm. In England, this meant selling or destroying a multitude of religious objects, and stripping churches of their ornate decorations. Second, they abolished religious rituals such as pilgrimages and processions. In doing so, they eliminated the occasions in which people felt a heightened sense of God’s

78 Darrell, Apologie, 12.
79 Darrell, Apologie, 15.
physical presence. Third, most Protestants emphasized the inherent sinfulness of humanity and the distance between the human and the divine. They disregarded the cult of the saints, and the idea that individuals could have a holy nature that superseded their human sinfulness. 80 Protestants maintained that God was supremely powerful and had an active role in shaping human events, but they were generally uncomfortable with the physical presence of the divine.

Protestant theology of the demonic mirrored their conceptions of the divine. As the Darrell case shows, Protestants were increasingly wary of recognizing direct human contact with demons. They regarded Catholic ceremonies to drive away demons as superstitious. Candles, bells, and holy water could do nothing against an adversary who had no physical presence. However, they did not deny that Satan was an active force in the world. In fact, in the sixteenth century, there was a surge of demonic fears. The English were quick to label any threatening force as demonic. “Otherness” was almost always equated with “demonic.” According to many English Protestants, Catholicism was a bastion of satanic influence. One of the most common tropes in Protestant polemical tracts was the description of the pope as the antichrist. For Edwin Sandys, newly made archbishop of York in 1576, England’s Reformation was an escape from evil Catholicism. “As Christ hath delivered all his out of the captivity of Satan and sin,” he preached, “so hath he also led us…out of that prison of Romish servitude, out of the bloody claws of that cruel and proud antichrist.” “Let us serve no more him that serveth Satan,” he concluded. 81 At a more personal level, Satan was a tempter who sought to lead people to sin. He plagued people’s conscience in an effort to win their soul. He drove men to greed, lust, and sloth. As Darrell said, “[Satan’s] nature is: to hate man, to torment him, and destroy him.” 82 The pursuit of godliness depended on a rigorous defense against his attempts to lure or drive men from their faith. 83

For Protestants, the real battleground against Satan was the soul, but the debate became less clear when people discussed the ways in which his influence on the soul could affect the body. When Satan tempted people’s souls, what effect did this have on their emotions and

82 Darrell, Apologie, 22.
83 Johnstone, The Devil and Demonism, 60.
behaviors? It was difficult for Protestants to reject the physical presence of Satan completely, for he was always present when people sinned. Puritans also tended to associate states of emotional distress with the influence of Satan. The puritan minister William Perkins said, “As Sathan conveys evil suggestions into mens minds, so the same are full of trouble, sorrow, and vexation, at least to the godly.”84 Most English Protestants would have agreed that Satan’s temptations drove people to sin and sorrow, but drawing connections in reverse was more problematic. If someone was “vexed,” “troubled,” or ill, did this always indicate that Satan was to blame?

At the end of the sixteenth century, most would have agreed that there were often natural explanations for both physical and mental disease. Darrell was forced to confront this newly forming medical discourse, and concede that some of Sommers’ ailments may have had natural causes. He said, “some or few of these effects may come from other cause than that by me alleged, as either from nature or the corruption of nature.” Yet, he maintained that, “all off them possibly can not.”85 As Darrell’s case exemplified, exorcism proved to be a theological grey area. Whether it was possible depended on how one conceived the relationship between the body and soul. The soul was usually discussed as part of the immaterial world of the spirit. In instances such as demonic possession, however, it seemed that workings of the immaterial soul could have a direct impact on the material body. For some, this suggested that the body served as a point of overlap between the natural and supernatural worlds. For others, the substance of the soul remained purely spiritual, divorced from the material. If this was true, and Satan could only affect the soul, then exorcism was impossible. Either way, it was a slippery issue, and exorcism tested how exactly people understood the connections between the body and soul, the natural and the supernatural.

During Darrell’s lifetime, many people were discussing the difference between natural and supernatural causes for disease. Physicians were on a campaign to change popular attitudes about the causes of disease. They contended that there were natural explanations for diseases once thought to have arisen from supernatural causes. In 1584, the English physician Reginald Scott produced a seminal book entitled, A Discovery of Witchcraft. He argued that Satan was merely a symbol of man’s evil temptations, and had no corporeal presence. He claimed that

84 Johnstone, The Devil and Demonism, 86.
85 Darrell, Apologie, 10.
witches and demoniacs were either malevolent imposers or ill. He believed that many seemingly supernatural afflictions were actually caused by epilepsy, hysteria, or melancholy. The physician Edward Jorden complained that “men are apt to make every thing a supernaturall work which they do not understand.” In 1603, while the Darrell controversy still raged, the Bishop of London commissioned Jorden to write a book called *A Briefe Discourse of a Disease Called the Suffocation of the Mother*. The book’s aim was to show “that divers strange actions and passions of the body of man, which in the common opinion, are imputed to the Divell, have their true natural causes, and do accompany this disease,” which he called the suffocation of the mother. Darrell himself even conceded that there might have been natural explanations for some of Sommers’ actions. “For I deny not” he said, “so by reason of some naturall disease, or great and extraordinary distemberature in the bodye, as some melancholick humour, or abundance off melanchollie, a man maye be for a fit of very great and extraordinary strength.” He maintained, however, that Sommers performed many feats that had no natural explanation.

In Darrell’s works, we see him dealing with multiple and sometimes conflicting discourses, creating an identity that was a composite of multiple systems of belief. His controversy forced him to articulate his beliefs and choose the components of his persona. As a healer, he drew from several sources to understand the ailments of children like Katherine Wright, Thomas Darling and William Sommers. His discussion of bodily humors was part of Galenic medical theory that had long been a part of European medical techniques. He did not, however, put his full faith in this hermeneutic. He also took newer proto-scientific medical explanations into account when he consulted physicians who had examined the demoniacs. He put the most faith, though, in religious and supernatural explanations. He drew upon continental demonology infused with puritan rituals of prayer and fasting to deliver the children from their suffering. Darrell’s greatest task, though, was to fit all of these divergent beliefs into a legitimate confessional identity. His writings were an attempt to present his beliefs in a way that would allow him to remain firmly within the Church of England. In certain areas, this meant that he had to create new theology that would extend orthodoxy to include his understanding of the

88 MacDonald, *Witchcraft and Hysteria in Elizabethan London*, ix-x.
supernatural and his methods to cure demoniacs. His resulting arguments were often insightful, but not always refined. His doctrine of miracles, for instance, was complex and somewhat unwieldy due to his deep desire to make exorcism fit into Protestant theology, even when it did not quite mesh. In all of this, Darrell’s emerges as a reflection of his time, a unique compilation of beliefs at an early stage in Europe’s path to modernity.

Epilogue: Darrell’s Legacy

Was John Darrell successful? It depends on how success is defined. Even after all of his theological posturing, he was not able to extend Anglican orthodoxy to accommodate his beliefs. Whitgift, Bancroft, and the Episcopal elite remained opposed to exorcism, and in 1604 they officially outlawed it. Canon 72 banned ministers from appointing or holding fasts; it also banned ministers from holding “meetings for sermons, commonly termed by some prophecies or exercises,” without episcopal license “nor without such licence to attempt upon any pretence whatsoever…by fasting and prayer, to cast out any devil or devils.”90 After the ban was in place, the church enforced it rigorously. Visitation records show that inquiries were made regularly to be sure that the canon was being observed and unlicensed exorcisms were not being performed.91

Yet, despite his inability to sway the institutional church, Darrell did make ripples in his culture. His works spread widely, and were republished several times. He galvanized the godly community to come together to fight for a cause, creating group solidarity and stronger ties. As far as we know, Darrell did not perform any more exorcisms after his catastrophe in Nottingham, but the few traces we have of his later life show that he maintained his identity as a moderate puritan with rebellious tendencies. After his career as an exorcist and polemicist, he returned home to Mansfield and in 1607 he, his wife, his daughter, and a maid were presented, at nearby Teversal, for not receiving communion. Also, his reputation as a preacher must have stuck with him, for later that same year the churchwardens of the local churches at Greasley and Sutton-in-Ashfield presented themselves for allowing Darrell to preach in their churches without a license.92 Our last word from Darrell is from 1617, when he wrote his final work entitled A treatise of the Church, Written against them of the separation commonly called Brownists. In

90 1604 Canons, quoted in Thomas Freeman, “Demons, Deviance, and Defiance,” 60.
91 Thomas Freeman, “Demons, Deviance, and Defiance,” 61.
92 Thomas Freeman, “Demons, Deviance, and Defiance,” 55.
typical fashion, it was a work imploring fellow reformers to work for change within the church, instead of separating from it.
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