

“The Diseases of Astonishment”: Cotton Mather and Narrative Possession

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It is generally accepted that Cotton Mather’s (1689/1914) account of the possession of the Goodwin children, published in *Memorable Providences*, helped to kindle the Salem witchcraft panic three years later (Hill, 2000; Reynolds, 2008). This article draws on historical scholarship, narrative theory, and cognitive science in order to throw light on the social conditions and cognitive processes whereby narrative content, genre, and practices can converge to destabilize identity, enabling in extreme cases a kind of narrative possession.

In *Memorable Providences* (1689/1914), Cotton Mather depicts himself reading from his father’s account of demonic possession (I. Mather, 1684) to a child apparently suffering from a like condition: “When I readd in the Room the Story of Ann Cole, in my Fathers *Remarkable Providences*, and came to the Exclamation which the Narrative saies the Daemons made upon her, ‘Ah she runs to the Rock!’ it cast her into inexpressible Agonies” (p. 113).¹ While using “godly works” to examine the possessed would be familiar to most demonologists (Cambers, 2009), the fact that the afflicted child responds in kind to the story of a possession occurring a few years earlier raises the prospect that the widespread availability of such accounts may have been a leading cause of demonic possession in late 17th-century New England. Analysis of Cotton Mather’s best-selling narrative throws light on the social conditions and cognitive processes whereby narrative content, genre, and practices can kairotically converge to destabilize identity, enabling in extreme cases a kind of narrative possession.

¹ All Cotton Mather quotations are from *Memorable Providences* (1689/1914) unless indicated otherwise.

“The Devil Within”

While it is widely acknowledged that Mather’s (1689/1914) account of the possession of the Goodwin children helped to kindle the Salem witchcraft panic three years later (Hill, 2000; Reynolds, 2008), it was only one link in a narrative chain that stretches back to the Gospels, wherein can be found references to dozens of cases of demonic possession, including accounts of five exorcisms performed by Christ himself (Levack, 2013). Invigorated by the demonization of heretics begun in the thirteenth century (Cohn, 1975; Kors & Peters, 2001), the belief that the world was inhabited by demonic entities bent on tempting, harassing, and possessing human minds and bodies would achieve something of a narrative renaissance in the early modern period (Levack, 2013). Why a number of the most learned men of the time set about amassing accounts of demonic possession along with other such narrative “wonders” can in part be explained by the fact that such tales could be enlisted as “experimental evidence” in the battle against a disturbing rise in skepticism concerning the spiritual world (Levack, 2013). In his introductory letter to Joseph Glanville’s (1681/1966) influential account of such possessions, *Saducismus Triumphatus*, Henry More sounds the alarm:

And forasmuch as such course grain’d Philosophers as those Hobbsians and Spinozians, and the rest of that Rabble, slight Religion and the Scriptures, because there is such express Mention of Spirits and Angels in them, Things that their dull Souls are so inclinable to conceit to be impossible; I look upon it as a special Piece of Providence, that there are ever and anon such fresh Examples of Apparitions and Witchcrafts, as may rub up and awaken their benumm’d and lethargic Minds, into a Suspicion at least, if not Assurance, that there are other intelligent Beings, besides those that are clad in Heavy Earth and Clay. (pp. 9–10)

Rather than accounts of evil spirits casting doubt on God, they proved the supernatural precondition of his existence. By demonstrating that “there are bad Spirits,” possession stories “necessarily open a Door to the Belief that there are good Ones; and, lastly, that there is a God” (pp. 9–10).²

² As Mather would put it, “The blessed God hath made some to come from the Damned, for the Conviction (may it also be for the Conversion) of us that are yet alive” (p. 98).

The English Puritans would carry their demonology with them to the New World. Whereas historians have argued that these Calvinists were agents of modernization, planting the seeds of Western capitalism, democracy, and science, many now contend that the Puritans were, in large measure, backward looking, seeking to establish a form of Christianity inspired by the primitive Church (Bozeman, 1988; Greene, 1988). The belief that their Godly efforts would attract the special attention of Satan would reach a crescendo in the late 17th century (Canup, 1990, pp. 73–79). As Mather (1693) summed up the cosmic-historical situation in *The Wonders of the Invisible World*, “Such is the descent of the Devil at this day upon our selves, that I may truly tell you, The Walls of the whole World are broken down! The usual Walls of defence about mankind have such a Gap made in them that the very Devils are broken in upon us” (p. 80).

Religious Worlds

Possible Worlds theory provides a useful paradigm for understanding the power of possession narratives for invoking and maintaining the kind of world in which the invasion of alien spirits could possibly take place. Developed by philosophers to account for the ontological status of fictional statements (Kripke, 1963; Lewis 1978), Possible Worlds theory has been adapted by Lubomir Dolezel (1998), Thomas Pavel (1986), Marie-Laure Ryan (1991, 2006, 2013) and others to analyze the complex interactions within and between worlds constructed through narrative.³ Setting forth his concept of “salient worlds,” Pavel (1986) holds that “an ontological model containing two frames of reference that are as distinct as possible, though closely related, represents religious consciousness” (p. 58). For Dolezel (1998), such dyadic structure characterizes the world of myth: “The alethic structure of the mythological world is dyadic, and the natural and the supernatural domains are separated by a sharp boundary” (p. 186). Thus, “what is impossible in the natural world becomes possible in its supernatural counterpart” (p. 115). Because a complete fusion of the sacred and profane would undermine the kinds of explanation such an ontological model affords, contact between such domains, writes Ryan (2006), “must be limited to narrowly defined areas that pierce the texture of this world like the holes of a Swiss cheese” (p. 670). Providing explanation when

³ For a concise account, see Ryan (2013).

medical diagnosis fails, supernatural possession is a vivid example of such piercing, setting the stage for conflict of the highest order.

While the drama of demonic possession takes place in a physical location—a home, church, or courtroom—the much remarked upon theatricality of the phenomenon, guided by internalized “scripts,” is performed in the demoniac’s mind (Greenblatt, 1986; Levack, 2013). That Mather chose to call his account of witchcraft and possession *Memorable Providences* highlights the important role played by long-term memory to this process. Discussing how narrative and the supernatural work hand in hand by “personalizing” (p. 88) the event, Scott Atran (2002) points to research indicating that “to the extent such violations of category distinctions shake basic notions of ontology they are attention-arresting, hence memorable” (p. 52). Predicated on the split-level nature of reality typical of religious worlds, such violations become what Dan Sperber (1985) calls “relevant mysteries,” generating “the greatest number of inferences with the least cognitive effort” (Norenzayan, Atran, Faulkner, & Schaller, 2006, p. 549). A staple of film, TV, and print (Huskinson, 2011), the spectacle of a besieged self, struggling with invading demons, is highly attention-arresting, conjuring a “relevant mystery” likely to be stored in memory for later pondering.

“Tremors of Uncertainty”

Theories concerning the role narrative plays in identity formation shed light on the social and psychological conditions that also contribute to vulnerability to narrative possession. That possession is a kind of scripted performance is consistent with Dan McAdams’ (2013) theory of the narrative self, according to which “social actors present themselves to each other through performance, in which people playing roles follow scripts, enact routines, and manage the audience’s impressions” (p. 274). Providing the foundation on which the subsequent Agent and Author selves take shape, the Actor self, acquired in childhood, is crucial for the successful development and integration of a functional identity.

Given the cultural scripts that informed Puritan child-rearing practices, it is not surprising that Puritan children would be particularly vulnerable to identity crises.⁴ The fifth question-answer of John Cotton’s

⁴ Drawing on cognitive evolutionary theory (Kelemen, 2004; Roes & Raymond, 2003) as well as his own experimental research, Jesse Bering (2005) concludes that “young children are particularly disposed toward the idea of supernatural agency because it facilitated the acquisition of culturally versatile moral rules and contributed to the

(1646) catechism, *Milk for Babes*, “Are you born then holy and righteous?” was impressed on children as soon as they could understand English: “No, my first father sinned, and I in him.” To use one of McAdams’ (2005) key terms, mankind was “contaminated” from the start, something which Protestant doctrine would not allow infant baptism to wash away (Demos, 2004). The interaction between identity formation and cultural narratives has been elucidated by Phillip Hammack (2008): “As individuals begin to construct personal narratives of identity that will anchor the cognitive and social context through which they develop, they engage with master narratives of identity” (p. 224). Through such narratives, “the life course achieves its coherence, its continuity in social, cultural, and historical time” (p. 232). However, as John Demos (2004) points out, the Calvinist master narrative could have the opposite effect: “Tremors of uncertainty plagued their struggle to grow and endure as free-standing individuals; they could not feel confident of maintaining the existential boundaries of their lives” (p. 210). In the connection between child-rearing practices and the scripts informing them, we see the effect of master narratives on the potentially unanchored nature of the Puritan child’s sense of self.

Vulnerability to possession could also be influenced by master narratives inflected by gender. As Carol Karlsen (1998) notes, not only are “more than half of the New England possessed ... under twenty,” but “eighty-six percent of possession cases on record in colonial New England are female” (p. 135). Numerous stories from the Bible, and teachings inspired by those stories, argued that women were the weaker sex—intellectually, morally, and spiritually—and so especially susceptible to the Devil’s influence. At some point, children would learn that it was Eve who was first seduced by Satan and who, in turn, tempted Adam to disobedience. For Carole R. Bohn (1989), the Christian teaching that men have dominion over women, traced back to Genesis 2 and 3, made identity formation for young women especially problematic, insofar as “women have been taught to find their identity ... always in relationship to males who have control over them” (p. 17).

Another important narrative practice, the Puritan conversion experience, could contribute significantly to the Puritan vulnerability to narrative possession. Such experience took the form of a story intended to demonstrate to the congregation that the narrator had undergone the arduous process necessary for salvation (Morgan, 1965). However, as Levack (2013) and others have pointed out, a process intended to

development of behavioral inhibition” (p. 432).

demonstrate holiness could have the opposite effect: “Overwhelmed with a sense of one’s sinfulness, which was a prerequisite for the bestowal of God’s grace, the demoniac could easily have become convinced that the Devil had taken control of his or her body. Members of the person’s family and community might just as easily have come to the same conclusion” (p. 211).

The primary means for testing and purifying church membership, the conversion narratives, along with the possession experiences they could trigger, were given utmost urgency by Apocalypse, a scripture-based belief which gained new traction in the early modern period among Protestants, especially Puritans (Jue, 2003). Given the relationship between narrative and world construction, it should come as no surprise that this otherworldly revelation is presented through story. While Neil Forsyth (1989) notes the folk-tale quality of the Christian Apocalypse, Abbas Amanat (2002) explains the story’s potency by highlighting the problem-solving aspect of narrative:

In the salvation religions of the Middle East the binary of the Beginning and the End paradigm is particularly powerful since it generally functions as a strategy to resolve the tension engendered by the problem of theodicy. The struggle between good and evil, which has endured since the dawn of creation, will culminate in a destructive final battle in which the victory of the forces of good over evil will be followed by divine judgment and the reward of a timeless bliss. (p. 2)

If, according to Possible Worlds theory, “the motor that operates the narrative machine is the attempt by characters to eliminate conflict by reducing the distances between their model worlds and the actual world” (Ryan, 2006, p. 649), Apocalypse represents the ultimate reduction, as the hero-God eliminates the incompatible “wish-world” of the villain-Satan.

Providing plot and *dramatis personae*, apocalyptic narrative is the cosmic equivalent of the internal battle conversion could trigger. “The frenzies of the demoniacs actually mimicked the fury of the Devil in the Last Days,” writes Levack (2013). “Apocalyptic thought ... set [demonic possessions] within a scriptural and historical framework that assigned the demoniacs and the exorcists a role in human history” (p. 66). That the possession-exorcism drama could be regarded as a sort of mini-apocalypse finds testimony in the words of Christ himself: “But if I cast out devils by the Spirit of God, then is the kingdom of God come unto

you” (Matthew 12:28, 1559, Geneva Bible). Millenarianism would be passed to the second and third generations of New England Puritans and burned especially bright in Cotton Mather, who “desired nothing as much as he did reasons to believe that the end would occur in his lifetime” (Middlekauff, p. 337).

“Satan’s Colony”

Several events persuaded Bostonians that the story was tending toward climax. In the so-called King Philip’s War (1675–1676), one-sixteenth of the adult male population perished, a disaster followed by a smallpox epidemic. The year 1684 saw the revocation of the original political charter, followed by the establishment of the Dominion of New England, the dismantling of representative government, and the appointment of the much loathed Edmund Andros, whose regime failed to protect frontier settlements. Although the Dominion was overthrown in a bloodless coup in 1689 and the old Charter temporarily restored, new Indian raids erupted, followed by another smallpox epidemic and yet more Indian attacks. Perhaps most appalling from the Congregationalist point of view, the New Charter of 1691 “gave its public blessing to public heterodoxy and enfranchised dissenting groups such as Quakers and Anglicans (Godbeer, 1994, pp.182-186). As we have seen, Mather (1693/1862) would draw on the topography of the religious binary world in order to characterize this situation: “The usual Walls of defence about mankind have such a Gap made in them that the very Devils are broken in upon us” (p. 88). Unlike the other gaps he strategically places within his narrative, Mather fills this breach with demons, who barrel into the reader’s world and mind. One might expect that such threat would lead to unification in face of a common enemy (Hammack p. 233). However, as the eruption of possessions and subsequent accusations of witchcraft attest, the warring dualism implicit in Puritan master narratives could, under stress, encourage the fragmentation not only of the community—as faction squared off against faction (Norton, 2007, pp. 16–18)—but of the individual, as selves became riven by opposing forces.

“The Diseases of Astonishment”

If, as David Herman (2011) puts it, “stories orient themselves around the what-it’s-like properties of experiencing consciousnesses in story worlds” (p. 145), the what-it’s-like-to-be-possessed quality of

Mather's narrative gives rise to a complex and compelling virtual reality, one teaming with supernatural agents, a plucky heroine, and a master of pneumatic science, all participating in while preserving the kind of world in which demonic forces can infiltrate and occupy the self. *Memorable Providences* (1689/1914) prompts its audience to enact a world in which the natural and supernatural interact in ways that personal identity is potentially undermined—all stage-managed by Cotton Mather himself, who becomes a main character of the drama. The indefatigable author of hundreds of works—pastoral, historical, theological—Mather was by all accounts the most learned, as well as the most prolific, author of his era, throwing his knowledge, training, and verbal talents into an ongoing effort to win the hearts and minds of his audience. Through preaching and writing, Mather sought to transport the saved soul to “the same Heavenly World, which those men of God are gone unto” (Mather, quoted in Middlekauff, 1999, p. 312).

Inhabiting the highly anxious world of south Boston, the four afflicted Goodwin children, according to Mather, “have labored under the direful effects of a (no less palpable than) stupendous *Witchcraft*” (p. 99). The parenthetical expression creating suspense, Mather delivers his keyword like a 17th-century Barnum, arresting the reader's attention while framing the tale in terms of the genre's primary rhetorical goal of proving that such supernatural forces exist. Given the religious assumptions held by Mather's contemporaries, his audience would have no trouble accommodating themselves (Herman, 2011) to the world evoked by Mather's opening gambit. However, the importance of Mather's purpose requires that the children must do more than mimic the sacred world; they must enact it. Writes Pavel (1986): “Since cult and fiction differ merely in the strength of the secondary universe, when sufficient energy is channeled into mimetic acts, these may leave the fictional mode and cross the threshold of actuality” (p. 60). Through such performance, the world of the sacred is communicated to and through the audience, some of whom become the possessed performers of the spiritual world so central to Mather's narrative project.

Although it might be argued that stating the cause of possession at the beginning of the account undermines suspense, narratologists have noted that knowledge of the outcome of a story doesn't necessarily detract from the moment-by-moment experience of the drama (Gerrig, 1993). Although the believer knows that, according to the apocalyptic scenario, Good will eventually triumph, such knowledge doesn't lessen interest in the challenges to be confronted in dealing with this particular

manifestation of Evil. While the proximate cause of the possession is stated at the beginning, and the primary culprit is identified and dispatched half-way through the story, other questions—whether the demoniac or the devil will win this particular battle, what the contest reveals about the nature of demonism itself—provide the “problem-space” necessary for sustained suspense (Gerrig, 1993, pp. 82–86; Levack, 2013, pp. 211, 213).

It is clear from the account that the children have all of the background knowledge and emotional conditioning necessary to succumb to narrative possession. Stating their ages—from about 4 to 13—Mather notes that the children had been thoroughly initiated into the world of the supernatural: they “had enjoyed a Religious Education, and answered it with a very towardly Ingenuity. They had an observable Affection unto Divine and Sacred things; and those of them that were capable of it, seem’d to have such a Resentment of their eternal Concernments as is not altogether usual” (p. 100). Though the children are not individuated at this point, the reader is clearly meant to empathize with these idealized little Puritans, their correct religious training matched by their responsive, somewhat anxious, feelings toward “Divine and Sacred things.” The children’s emotionality suggests a susceptibility to the aspects of religious scripts as well as whatever possession narratives they had been exposed to.

Having foreshadowed the ultimate showdown, Mather is now in position to give a fuller account of the cause of the plight already introduced. To do so, he descends to another layer of the narrative: “About Midsummer, in the year 1688, the Eldest of these Children, who is a Daughter, saw cause to examine their Washerwoman, upon their missing of some Linnen, which twas fear’d she had stolen from them; and of what use this linen might bee to serve the Witchcraft intended, the Thief’s Tempter knows!” (p. 100). The specificity of the time of the year adds to “perceived realism” (Green, 2003) while the uncertainty concerning the use of the linen invites the reader to fill the gap (Iser, 1979) by imaginatively providing the diabolical use known for certain only by “the Thief’s Tempter.”

The active role taken by the reader/listener is also apparent in the presentation of the story’s antagonist: “an ignorant and a scandalous old Woman in the Neighbourhood; whose miserable Husband before he died, had sometimes complained of her, that she was undoubtedly a Witch, and that whenever his Head was laid, she would quickly arrive unto the punishments due to such an one” (p. 100). It is appropriate that the reader

is not, initially, brought “face to face” with the villain, in that it was through rumor and scandal—stereotypes and other schema triggering imaginative involvement—that the reputation of the accused was usually formed, making her a likely candidate for witchhood (Boyer, 2001; Briggs 1996; Demos, 2004). She plays the role perfectly: “This woman in her daughters Defence bestow’d very bad Language upon the Girl that put her to the Question; immediately upon which, the poor child became variously indisposed in her health, and visited with strange Fits beyond those that attend an Epilepsy, or a Catalepsy, or those that they call The Diseases of Astonishment” (pp. 100–101). Prompting the reader to imagine what the “very bad Language” might be, Mather draws on medical terminology to suggest a cause or agency “beyond.” Although “Diseases of Astonishment,” following 17th-century usage, would signify “a loss of sense or ‘wits,’” the phrase could also indicate a condition wherein the sufferer is not just the subject of the disease, but the object of astonishment in others (“Astonishment,” OED, 2000), thereby suggesting, inadvertently perhaps, the contagious nature of the condition. Indeed, “It was not long before her Sister, and two of her Brothers, were seized, in Order one after another, with Affects like those that molested her. Within a few weeks, they were all four tortured every where in a manner so very grievous, that it would have broke an heart of stone to have seen their Agonies” (p. 101).

Following another aspect of the canonical script—“consultation with a physician before determining that the afflicted person was possessed” (Greenblatt, 1986; Levack, 2013)—one of the men of science concludes “nothing but an hellish Witchcraft could be the Original of these Maladies” (p. 101). Through the magic of narrative, the physicians preside over a process that turns “*post hoc*” into “*propter hoc*,” correlation into causality. As the ages-old prevalence of conspiracy theories concerning satanic evildoers demonstrates, the drive to create causal patterns to explain the mysterious is both powerful and dangerous (see Strange, 2002). As Gerrig (1993) points out, the kind of causal attributions found in or inferred from narratives are easily influenced by the Fundamental Attribution Error: the habitual attribution of causality to a person’s character or disposition rather than situation (p. 55). Enabling what many regard as a distinctive feature of American politics (Hofstadter, 1964; Walker, 2013), such biases encourage the reader of such accounts to find the “Original of these Maladies” not in social factors, but in “hellish Witchcraft.”

While encouraging extreme prejudice toward the villain, such a perspective elicits corresponding sympathy for the afflicted children, conveyed by detailed descriptions of their physically expressed mental agony, the theatrical centerpiece of the possession narratives:

Sometimes they would be Deaf, sometimes Dumb, and sometimes Blind, and often, all this at once. One while their Tongues would be drawn down their Throats; another while they would be pull'd out upon their Chins, to a prodigious length. They would have their Mouths opened unto such a Wideness, that their Jaws went out of joint; and anon they would clap together again with a Force like that of a strong Spring-Lock. The same would happen to their Shoulder-Blades, and their Elbows, and Hand-wrists, and several of their joints. They would at times ly in a benumbed condition; and be drawn together as those that are ty'd Neck and Heels' and presently be stretched out, yea, drawn Backwards, to such a degree that it was fear'd the very skins of their Bellies would have crack'd. (pp. 102–103)

Contrasting with Mather's often florid style, these direct, image-laden sentences strike the reader's mind with the force of alien invasion. From the believer's perspective, demonic beings have pierced the boundary between the natural and supernatural domains and are tormenting the possessed from the inside out, using the body of the sufferer to communicate their defiant presence. One reason for the standardization of this aspect of the possession narrative lies with the usefulness of such extreme emotions for authenticating the possession. Just as the difficult work involved in creating and performing a conversion narrative bolstered the ethos of the testifier, so the ordeal of possession serves to authenticate the demoniac's performance, something which is accomplished through what evolutionary biologists call "costly signaling" (Irons, 2001). As Emily Dickinson (1955) would put it: "I like a look of Agony / Because I know it's true—."

Ethos is matched by pathos, as the reader imagines the children "drawn Backwards, to such a degree that it was fear'd the very skins of their Bellies would have crack'd" (pp. 102–103). The same neural circuitry that generates imagery based on actual perception generates imagery based on other sources, including verbal descriptions. Commenting on the role of emotional imagery in sustaining a sense of self, Antonio Damasio writes that "within a few hundred milliseconds, the

emotional cascade manages to transform the state of several viscera, the internal milieu, the striated musculature of face and posture, the very pace of our mind, and theme of our thoughts” (p. 121). Confronted with a character containing polar opposite selves, the reader experiences contrary emotions: compassion for the girl, fear and anger at the devil. Such display is well suited to the possession experience insofar as emotional experience is often conflicted or contradictory. Writes Dolezel (1998), “If the cluster includes contradictions, motivational conflicts arise. The person is pulled in opposite directions, and a serious disruption of acting ensues” (p. 69). The emotional images of grimacing children possessed by demonic forces become cognitive depth charges, their detonation depending on the audience’s psychological vulnerability.

That readers usually don’t respond to images evoked by memory and imagination with a force equal to that evoked by actual perception is due to the fact that the neural overlap is only partial. Moreover, the simulation the brain performs usually encompasses only the feeling of emotion, and not the emotion itself. Our responses are thus usually an attenuated version of an actual emotional response to an actual event (Damasio, 2012, pp. 128–129). Nevertheless, evidence suggests that such responses form a continuum from faint to extreme. As Melanie Green (2003, 2005) has demonstrated, imagery enhances the degree to which readers can be “carried away” by a well-structured narrative:

Specifically, during a transportation experience, the phenomenal field may become the story-world rather than the physical reality surrounding the individual. The person may lose awareness of the self as a distinct entity. Instead of focusing on one’s own identity, the reader may “become” the story characters, or feel as if she is experiencing narrative events. (p. 326)

While emotional experience of the narrative could be modified by the belief that demonic agents are fictional (see Gerrig, 1993, pp. 171–191), such skepticism would, in Puritan society, be evidence of satanic influence.

Because this essay is focused on possession rather than witchcraft, we will pass quickly over the account of the trial of Mary Glover, while noting that her ability to speak only in a foreign tongue (Irish), the discovery of several “Poppets” or voodoo dolls in her house (which she then uses in court to torment one of the children), her confession of her relationship with a “Prince, with whom she maintan’d, I know not what

Communion” all follow the traditional script (Demos, 2004). After an examination by “five or six Physicians” proves that she is “Compos Mentis” (albeit Roman Catholic), Mary Glover is sentenced to death (pp. 104–105), “judicial murder” helping to authenticate the possession narrative (Greenblatt, 1986).

Building toward climax, the final episode of Mather’s possession narrative is the most dramatic as well as lengthy, taking up half the story. The possession of several of the Goodwin Children persisting—“others had a hand in it as well as [Glover]” (p. 106)—Mather comes to the fore, not only as narrator, but heroic exorcist and ingenious revelator of supernatural knowledge and power. “[To] observe the extraordinary Circumstances of the Children,” he writes, “and that I might be furnished with Evidence and Argument as a Critical Eye-Witness to confute the Saducism of this debauched Age; I took the Eldest of them home to my House” (p. 110). The change in setting at first calms the child; however, on the afternoon of November 10th “she cried out, ‘Ah, They have found me out! I thought it would be so!’ and immediately she fell into her fits again” (p. 110). Whether coughing up a giant hairball (“big as an egg”) or encumbered by an invisible chain, the child is duly tortured in a way which gives rise to the kind of potent imagery seen in previous descriptions. The center of attention, the child enacts the demonic script provided by previous possession narratives, evidence for which can be seen in her request that Mather “Read of Mary Magdalen, out of whom the Lord cast seven Devils” (p. 120). That more contemporary accounts were readily available is demonstrated by Mather’s use of his father’s possession narrative (p. 113), which opened this essay.

While such response suggests the kind of influence books could have on the possessed, other elements model forms of transport (Gerrig 1993) within a world beset by demonic forces. Several “Fantastic Journeys” (p. 115) are enabled by an “Invisible horse,” brought to her by “them” and “Her Company”: “She would give a Spring as one mounting an Horse, and Settling her self in a Riding Posture—she would in her Chair be agitated as one sometimes Ambleing, sometimes Trotting, and sometimes Galloping very furiously.” That this is more than mimicry is indicated by the counter-intuitive violations of natural law typical of the supernatural: “we could not perceive that she was stirred by the stress of her feet, upon the ground; for often she touch’t it not” (p. 114). Arriving at her destination, the young girl acquires esoteric knowledge, which, while increasing mystery and suspense, provides additional motive for

Mather's "experimental" project: "shee'd Listen much, and Received answers from them that indeed none but her self perceived" (p. 115).

Like other religious worlds, Mather's house is split in two. Just as certain books are anathema to the demons, so are certain spaces. Prompted to ride upstairs by one of the spectators, the girl, entering a study, cries out, "'They are gone; they are gone! They say, that they cannot, —God won't let 'em come here!' And she presently and perfectly came to her self, so that her whole Discourse and Carriage was altered unto the greatest measure of Sobriety, and she satt Reading of the Bible and Good Books, for a good part of the Afternoon" (p. 116). When she ventures downstairs, "the Daemons were in a quarter of a minute as bad upon her as before, and her Horse was Waiting for her" (p. 116). Determined to test the reality of her reprieve, Mather drags her upstairs, the girl writhing in his arms:

She was pulled out of my hands, and when I recoverd my Hold, she was thrust so upon me, that I had almost fallen backwards, and her own breast was sore afterwards, by their Compressions to detain her; she seemed heavier indeed than three of her self. With incredible Forcing (tho she kept Screaming, 'They say I must not go in!') at length we pull'd her in; where she was no sooner come, but she could stand on her Feet, and with an altered tone, could thank me, saying 'now I am well.' (p. 116)

Drawing on the possible worlds of religious topography, Mather impresses a dynamic image of supernatural border crossing on the reader's mind, where it is readily accessible should he or she doubt the existence of a world Mather and his fellow believers were determined to maintain.

Closing his depiction of possession with the dying child a resigned martyr, Mather lets his audience—guided by sympathy and horror—fill the gaps by making the appropriate inference concerning the condition of a country so harassed by demons: "She argued concerning Death, in strains that quite amazed us; and concluded That though she was loth to dy, yet if God said she must, she must; adding something about the State of the Country, which we wondered at" (p. 123). With the fate of the girl uncertain, and the "wish-world" of the demon or demons an unresolved threat, Mather leaves open the possibility of a sequel,

something which, with a change of venue from Boston to Salem, would take place three years later.⁵

Intermediary between the reader and the supernatural, Mather strove for an authority he believed could only burnish his already impressive credentials. “But all my Library never afforded me any Commentary on those Paragraphs of the Gospels, which speak of Demoniacs, equal to that which the passion of this Child have given me” (p. 123). The irony, of course, is that it was precisely such extended forays into the supernatural that have marred the reputation of a figure whom McAdams would call a highly generative American self (Levin, 1963; McAdams, 2013). Mather’s relentless efforts to maintain a world constructed in ancient times resulted not only in the possession narrative we have been examining but in a vigorous and thorough defense of the witchcraft panic it helped to precipitate: “I am resolv’d after this,” states Mather ominously, “never to use but just one grain of patience with any man that shall go to impose upon me a Denial of Devils, or of Witches” (p. 124).

And yet Mather’s fervent belief in the wonders of the invisible world has been strangely prophetic. The dark elements of the redemptive American self (McAdams, 2013)—its Manichaeic worldview, its fondness for conspiracy theories, its proneness to self-righteous aggression—are symptoms of an entrenched master narrative whose happy ending can only be realized through struggle for and against superhuman forces. Sustained by compelling imagery, emotionally provocative characters, and gripping suspense, narratives of astonishment continue to maintain an America inhabited by selves possessed by Christianity’s demonic story.⁶

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⁵ *Memorable Providences* was one of the books in the library of Reverend Samuel Parris, whose household was ground zero of the Salem witch panic (Hill, 2000).

⁶ According to a 2012 Public Policy Poll, 57% of Americans (68% of Republicans) believe in the possibility of demonic possession. Given these numbers, it’s not surprising that charges of demonic possession made their way into the 2016 presidential election (Benen, 2016).

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