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**Sarah Ferber**, *Demonic Possession and Exorcism in Early Modern France*. London and New York: Routledge, 2004. x + 227 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$115 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-415-21264-2; \$29.95 US (pb). 0-415-21265-0.

Review by Moshe Sluhovsky, Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

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Once every few years, diabolic possession becomes “hot.” The last few years have witnessed a new edition of the blockbuster movie *The Exorcist* and a few additional movies on the topic; a sensational trial in Romania of a priest and a few nuns accused of causing the death of another nun during exorcism; and the inauguration in February 2005 of a new course at the Regina Apostolorum Pontifical Academy in Rome to train exorcists how to combat Satan’s growing presence in the world. Within the academic discipline of history, suffice it to mention J. J. Chajes’s *Between Worlds: Dybbuks, Exorcists, and Early Modern Judaism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003); Nancy Caciola’s *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 2003); Dyan Elliott’s *Proving Woman: Female Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004); and Philip C. Almond’s *Demonic Possession and Exorcism in Early Modern England: Contemporary Texts and their Cultural Contexts* (Cambridge, UK, and London: Cambridge University Press, 2004). Sarah Ferber’s book is a major contribution to this revived interest in possession and exorcism. It offers both detailed analyses of famous French cases and new sophisticated theoretical insights, and elaborates new interpretive frameworks within which the twin phenomena of demonic possession and exorcism should be articulated from now on.

Some of the French early modern cases of possession and exorcism have become over the years paradigmatic for both academic and popular thinking about possession. Thus, the 1566 case of the possession and dispossession of Nicole Obry has been used to posit the inherent connection between religious propaganda and dramatic exorcisms, while the case of the mass possession of nuns at the Ursuline convent in Loudun in 1632-40 has served as a model for both Aldous Huxley’s *The Devil of Loudun* (1952) and Ken Russell’s *The Devils* (1971). Other cases, such as the strange career of the witch-saint-demoniac Marie de Vallées, are less familiar. But Ferber’s book demonstrates that even the more famous cases still hide within them layers of meanings that have not been excavated. And, above all, she succeeds in connecting the previously separate explanations of specific cases into a coherent whole, one that connects religious propaganda, witchcraft, spirituality, and reform into one overarching frame of reference.

At the center of Ferber’s new interpretation is the thesis that possession and exorcism in early modern France should be understood within three contexts: witchcraft, witch trials, and a growing fear of the devil; religious wars; and new forms of affective spirituality. All three historical developments created an urgent need for the resolution of inherent religious uncertainties within Catholicism. Possession and exorcism were events/spaces in which the ambiguities within Catholicism itself—concerning the sacrality of inanimate objects, times, places, and human beings; the tensions between the institutional and the charismatic roles of the clergy; and the reliability of physicality and materiality to authenticate the miraculous—were all worked out. The scrutiny of the possessed woman was not only a personal affair, concerning one individual and her suffering; it was always also a challenge and an opportunity to rethink claims for spiritual authority and hierarchies within the church (of priests, demoniacs, would-be saints, religious orders, and bishops), and to redraw boundaries between the licit and the illicit, male and

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female prerogatives, and the miraculous and the superstitious. It also served to question the trustworthiness of the laity, the practices of the clergy, the centralized structure of the church, and other major theological concerns. In other words, rethinking demonic possession and exorcism was a crucial aspect of the Catholic reforms of the early modern period. After reading Ferber's book, one can even agree with her that more than other controversies and better than many other events, diabolic possession and exorcism encapsulated the major issues at the very center of these reforms.

Thus, Ferber rightly points out that Nicole Obry's long exorcism was not only meant to convince Protestants of the efficacy of the Catholic rite of exorcism and of Catholic priests' authority to expel demons and lead to their conversion; it was also an affirmation of the material religiosity of Catholicism, of the physicality of its miracles that can be attested through the senses—hence the physical violence of exorcist rites. Lay eyewitnesses were often encouraged to come and touch the possessed while benevolent exorcists beat and pricked them, spat on them, and at times even stood on their stomachs or stepped on them. But this violence was only one aspect of the physicality that characterized demonic possession. The possessing demons caused chaos in the demoniacs' bodies, and violence, judicial torture, and ultimately executions were sometimes brought upon the people (mostly priests who were unveiled as witches) whom possessed nuns accused of causing their possession. Last but not least, in an age that revived the glory of heroic martyrdom, not a few demoniacs might have striven toward glorious suffering and ascribed sacred meaning to their afflictions.

The physicality of the demons' activities within the possessed bodies and the physicality of the exorcists themselves should not and cannot be separated from the popularity of affective—that is emotive but also somatic—spirituality of the period. Ferber joins here other historians who have pointed out the similarities and connections between new forms of “positive” possession and diabolic possession. Some of the possessed women she discussed started as visionaries whose claims for charismatic powers were rejected and they were exposed as frauds (Obry, Marthe Brossier, Nicole Tevernier), while others started as possessed by demons and then went on to establish careers as saintly figures (Vallées, Jeanne des Anges). Ferber adds to this discussion the institutional component, pointing out that some religious orders (especially the Capuchins and the Jesuits) were themselves struggling during exactly the very same years with the legitimacy of spiritual- meditative techniques of direct access to the divine (abnegation and Illuminism). The internal conflicts within religious orders spilled into discernment of concrete cases of possession, just as cases of possession enabled religious orders to sharpen their theological understandings of such matters. Here, too, possession and exorcism were not insignificant occurrences, taking place at the margins of early modern Catholicism or among the “vulgar” and uneducated laity (as some theologians at the time and some modern historians would have it), but major events, where conflicted theological interpretations were articulated and debated.

The proximity of both the possessed individuals and their exorcists to the demons (and the daily and routine interactions between them) necessarily also made demoniacs and exorcists suspect of collaboration with the demon. This, too, is not a new insight, but Ferber does a marvelous job connecting it to the other issues she discusses in her book. Where does adjuration end and negotiating start? Where is the boundary separating the licit invocation of divine power from the illicit invocation of demonic powers? Who is a legitimate exorcist and who is a conjuror and/or should be condemned as a witch? Since exorcism was not a sacrament of the church but a sacramental (an aide to belief that could or could not work depending on circumstances, the personalities involved, and other variables), it was at the very center of the campaign to cleanse the church of “superstitious” practices and to guarantee the reliability and sacrality of its priestly professionals. It is no wonder, then, that exorcists were targeted by the Inquisition, and that their practices were at times condemned. The reform of exorcism was an act of separating magic from rite and magicians from priests, and if a priest or two or even three paid with their lives for this need to demarcate new boundaries, so be it. Skepticism concerning specific acts, rites, and practitioners, Ferber argues convincingly, was not external to the Catholic Church, but part and

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parcel of its own routine functioning. As such, skeptical attitudes toward individual cases of possession or specific actions of an exorcist should not be viewed as a transitory step toward disenchantment or rationalism, but as an integral element in the church's ambiguity toward its own sacramental religiosity.

Ferber pursues this multi-dimensional explanation succinctly and with amazing clarity. She also makes use of primary sources that have not been used before, which is not an easy task given the huge body of literature on some of the cases she analyzes. This book should therefore become required reading in all advanced classes in early modern history, whether French, Catholic, or otherwise. And yet, while the new contexts in which she locates her cases are undoubtedly a very important contribution to the current literature on early modern French religiosity, more than once I felt that something important got lost. After reading Ferber's book, no one can doubt the probative function of exorcism and its role as a mechanism through which the church fine-tuned major theological concerns regarding such matters as the materiality of the sacred, the place of charisma, priestly authority, and the reform of rites.

But exorcism was also a rite of healing, and a very successful one indeed. Exorcism was a means to work out theological and ecclesiastical issues because it worked, and it worked because it enabled people to overcome affliction and to be reintegrated into their society. The church could claim that its rite, when performed in the right manner by the right people, carried results when not only theologians—who were or were not aware of the theological concerns embodied in the act—but also uneducated lay believers witnessed the recovery of the demoniac and the power of the rite to heal. On this crucial aspect of possession and exorcism Ferber has little to say. She appropriately points out that translating possession into modern medical and psychopathological categories such as hysteria and exorcism into abuse is reductionist and does not add much to our understanding of the phenomena. But she does not offer an explanation for the amazing ability of possession and exorcism to survive intact while so many individual cases of the former were unveiled to be frauds and numerous exorcists uncovered as conjurors or magicians. Exorcism, she remarks, was “a buyer's market” (p. 38).

But what made it so? What made a woman who believed herself to be a visionary accept a “verdict” of demoniac and, following the right rite, stop having visions? And what made a suffering, possessed nun wake up the morning after an exorcism and resume her routine activities in the convent as if nothing had happened? If we ascribe to a worldview that does not accept the existence of demons (as I suspect Ferber does) and therefore deny the ability of the rite of exorcism to expel demons (who had not been there to begin with), how do we explain the dynamics among demoniacs, exorcists, and eyewitnesses that made possession and exorcism not only possible but also functionally benedictory to so many people? Like Ferber, I do not have simple answers to these questions, but I wish the brilliance of her complex analysis had something to say about the interpersonal dynamics among the individual persons—men and women, lay and religious, possessed and exorcists—who inhabit her book.

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