

The possessions at Loudun

Craig E. Stephenson looks at their significance in the history of the science of mind

The best-known case of possession in Western European history took place in the French town of Loudun, 20 kilometres west of Richelieu and 60 kilometres west of La Haye, the birthplace of Descartes. In 1631 Cardinal Richelieu received royal permission to construct the town that still bears his name as a monument to his own power. In 1633, in voluntary exile, Descartes suppressed publication of his treatise *Le Monde* after learning of the trial of Galileo. From 1632 to 1638, Loudun was the unlikely epicentre of a collective crisis; it became the stage for a case of demonic possession that drew crowds from all over Europe. These three events together defined a zeitgeist and prefigured the direction in which the Western science of mind would be carried.

According to ecclesiastical records, the events at Loudun began on 22 September 1632, when Jeanne des Anges, the prioress of the Ursuline convent, Sister de Colombiers, the sub-prioress, and Sister Marthe de Saint-Monique, a junior nun, were each visited during the night by an apparition of 'a man of the cloth' asking for help. Strange disturbances continued: the nuns heard voices, experienced physical blows from unseen sources, and found themselves gripped by fits of uncontrollable laughter. Finally, physical evidence of possession appeared: hawthorns passed from a ghostly hand into the palm of the prioress, after which time the nuns were stricken with convulsions and irrational behaviour. The first exorcisms were conducted on

5 October 1632, expanding into public events attracting thousands of onlookers. On 18 August 1634, the parish priest Urbain Grandier was found guilty of sorcery and burned at the stake. The exorcisms continued until 1638.

The documentation about the possession at Loudun shows how abruptly a period of tolerance and civic cooperation between Catholics and Protestants ended. The very first account (Tranquille, 1634/1838), by a member of the earliest team of exorcists, is a polemic on behalf of the rites of the Church. Father Tranquille defended his own actions and condemned scepticism about the nuns' possession, emphasising that a possession is either genuinely demonic or is voluntary and wilful. But he did not acknowledge the skewed political situation in the town: a court order forbade debate or disagreement about the possessions or the legal proceedings, on pain of death. Grandier's trial legitimised the evidence of the demoniacs and the exorcists, the court order rendering all objections illegal. As a result, an opposing Protestant position was not available in print until 1693 when a Huguenot from Loudun who lived in exile in Amsterdam published his account (Aubin, 1693).

Nicolas Aubin argued that the Huguenots of Loudun had been undermined by the intrigues of the nuns, ecclesiastics and magistrates. He discussed the nuns as instructed about how best to perform during the public exorcisms in order to incriminate Grandier, who was reputedly a libertine and an

embarrassment to the Catholic cause, and to demonstrate the power of Catholic ritual over the devil.

Devils and exorcists

The language of possession has been fluid during the history of European religion, with the diagnostic criteria orthodox only to a particular time and place. In the early Middle Ages, the devil's field of action was the imagination, not the body: the devil was portrayed as a deceiver who employs *fantasmata* to lead the soul astray (one fell prey to the devil particularly in dreams). In the 13th century, however, the church reversed this position and attributed corporeal reality to the devil's *fantasmata*. A pontifical constitution rendered nocturnal dream voyages into quasi-religious meetings marked by physical, not imaginary, acts of incest, sodomy, and infanticide – Sprenger and Kramer (1486/1968) specified this change took place around the year 1400. Witches and sorcerers were henceforth described as have abjured their Christian faith by inviting devils to enter their bodies.

As the body became the target of diabolical attack, the terms 'possession' and 'obsession', which had been used almost synonymously, diverged in meaning. Etymologically, *obsidere* denotes 'to sit at or opposite to', 'to sit down before', or 'to besiege', as when an enemy force sits down before a fortress. And *possidere* denotes 'to be able to sit'. Hence, an obsessive spirit was thought to assail, haunt, harass a person from outside, while a possessing spirit was considered to have taken up residence inside the body, to 'occupy', to tyrannically 'take over the seat' of the self. At Loudun, on 1 October 1632, three nuns were declared 'possessed'; by December 1634 nine were declared 'possessed' and eight others 'obsessed'.

The first task of an exorcist was diagnostic: to identify by name the devil to whom the demoniac gave voice and to discover where in the body it resided. The body of Jeanne des Anges housed seven demons, among them one lodged in her

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The execution of Urbain Grandier, parish priest of the Church of Saint Pierre du Marché of Loudun, 18 August 1634 (attributed to René Allain, Poitiers)

forehead, one below the last rib on her right side, one at the base of her stomach. The map of the correspondences between the diabolical and bodily hierarchies in Jeanne des Anges's case (Certeau, 1970) demonstrates how the demons took up their physiological residences in an orderly fashion according to rank: Seraphim in the head, Powers in the upper body, Thrones further down. The exorcists alone constructed this far-from-haphazard map, since the demoniac herself was expected to emerge from each attack with no memory of what the devil inside her had said or done. This public mapping of Jeanne des Anges's demons functioned as authentication. Still there were doubts expressed about the possessions, because devils must be heard to converse in foreign languages unfamiliar to the demoniac, and they

must perform acts of clairvoyance, as well as of supernatural strength such as levitation.

Diagnostically, exorcists were preoccupied with recognising 'who' (that is, which spiritual agent and which sorcerer) was responsible for the suffering of the possessed, while physicians were identifying 'what' in the body and the mind was the cause. Marc Duncan, a Scottish Calvinist doctor living at the time in nearby Saumur, fled from possible arrest for attributing, as earlier thinkers had, neither trickery nor fabrication to the possessed Ursulines of Loudun but error of the imagination, *fantasmata* reinforced by fasting, vigils and solitary religious life.

A century later, François Gayot de Petaval (1735) posited the 'medico-scientific' possibility of nymphomania and hysteria to the differential diagnosis of demon possession or willed chicanery on the part of the nuns. And in the 19th century Doctor Gabriel Legué (1874) supported a similar hypothesis by citing the works of his contemporary, the neurologist Jean Martin Charcot.

By naming God, the exorcist solemnly invokes a devil in an attempt to establish a truth. The irony of using a devil to discern truth had not escaped a committee of Sorbonne theologians, who discussed the admissibility of diabolic evidence in legal proceedings and issued their decision in 1610: one must never admit the accusation of demons or exploit exorcisms to determine whether a man is a sorcerer, since the devil is always the 'Father of Lies'. The trial and execution of Grandier in 1634 defied this ruling (Carmona, 1988). Richelieu made the decision, approved by Louis XIII, to proceed against Grandier, coopting the

polarised conflicts between religion and medicine and between the Catholic and Huguenot citizens of Loudun for his own purposes, including the privileging of his own city.

The orthodox criteria for determining a case of demonic possession – speaking in foreign languages, clairvoyance, preternatural physical strength, levitation – were, frustratingly, also the criteria for determining a case of possession by the Holy Spirit. Keeping in mind this supernatural symmetry between the infernal and the celestial, a feminist reading of the possessions at Loudun might chart the process by which the non-rational experiences of the Ursuline nuns were rendered demoniacal. Jeanne des Anges, the main demoniac at Loudun, published an autobiographical account in 1644. She told the story of her supernatural experiences not as deliverance through exorcism from demonic invasion instigated by the sorcerer Grandier, but as an absolving mystic transformation of a negative into a positive possession. Although the seven named devils who took up residence inside her were apparently expunged, her cure was marked, not by absence, but by even more preternatural presence: miraculously, four names – Jesus, Maria, Joseph, and Francis de Sales – were found indelibly traced on her left hand. In 1638 she embarked on a triumphant 'pilgrimage' in which she displayed her hand like a living reliquary to the royal family, to Richelieu and to crowds of up to five thousand a day. Her memoir describes a series of communications with her 'good angel', which she published as divine revelations.

Jeanne des Anges's memoir remains in print but with the subtitle *Autobiographie d'une hystérique possédée*, in an edition annotated by Georges Gilles de la Tourette (des Anges, 1886) the neurologist whose name now identifies Tourette's syndrome (he dedicated the edition to Charcot). As this autobiography makes clear, the metaphors of warfare and battlefield common in the orthodox discourse about exorcism

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momentarily liberated the Ursulines to provoke and attack their male overseers. Although the women were led in chains onto the stage constructed in the cathedral, as soon as the devils were invoked, they were freed to mock and wrestle with their male exorcists. But as each rite of exorcism and public spectacle drew to a close, the patriarchal authority of the Church and the power of the court reasserted themselves.

The original image of a recently deceased father confessor appearing to Sister Marthe was altered and diabolised, not only by the language of exorcism, but possibly beforehand by the 'personal equation' of the Mother Superior. For Jeanne des Anges, the encounter with the unknown phantom gave form to a frightening erotic problem. The grieving Sister Marthe interpreted the visitation of the fantastic figure as a haunting by the soul of Father Moussaut; Jeanne des Anges experienced it as a terrifying seduction. After Moussaut had died, Grandier's name had been put forward to her as a potential replacement confessor for the convent, but Grandier had declined the position. A month later, during the first week of Jeanne des Anges's exorcisms, a devil declared under oath that Grandier had gained entry into the convent and into the bodies of the nuns through a bouquet of musk roses left on a dormitory step, a foreign and forbidden erotic element introduced into the convent. Only recently arrived in Loudun, Grandier was reputedly an eloquent preacher and a ladies' man (rumours circulated that he had seduced a young parishioner and written an anonymous tract questioning celibacy for priests). Inadvertently, in her autobiographical descriptions of possession and exorcism Jeanne des Anges recounted a horrific battle with Eros.

The arrival of Father Jean-Joseph Surin four months after the execution of Grandier, shifted the outcome for Jeanne des Anges towards something less destructive (Huxley, 1952). Surin introduced Jeanne des Anges to the works of Teresa of Avila and to the vocabulary of mysticism, proposing that she rely less on the public spectacles of exorcism and more on active private prayer and penitence for the continued presence within her of possessing demons. This discourse allowed Jeanne des Anges to speak an erotic vocabulary of 'ravishment' and 'jouissance' within a positive spiritual context. At the same time, in his role as exorcist, Surin took the unorthodox strategy of praying for her devils to possess him instead. Surin's memoirs

described how the Mother Superior's devil came to obsess him first somatically, with headaches, breathing difficulties, fits of trembling and physical hallucinations; finally it possessed him, manifesting as terrible pain entering the base of his stomach. His account of his psychic symptoms demonstrated a keen articulation of his own pathological feeling-states for, unlike the nuns, Surin remained self-aware and oriented during his experiences of possession. Together, the autobiographies of Surin and Jeanne des Anges record the extent to which Surin's state deteriorated as the Mother Superior's improved. Jeanne des Anges portrayed herself in her memoir as absolved but henceforth engaged in a positive mystic dialogue with a 'good angel'. Surin portrayed himself as sacrificial victim in a continual battle between the Word Incarnate and radical Evil. Although he despaired at times and even attempted suicide, he survived, continuing to study and write, until 1665.

Psychodynamic interpretations

Freud never mentioned Loudun in his writings, but he did write a psychoanalytical interpretation of a case of exorcism in his essay 'A seventeenth-century demonological neurosis' (Freud, 1923/1985b). One can argue that Freud would have also identified 'demonologically neurotic' strategies in the possession at Loudun. The death of the father confessor was concurrent with the first appearances of the mournful phantom figure to Sister Marthe, and Freud would attribute the 'uncanny' quality of her psychological experiences of grieving to the reviving of repressed infantile complexes and to a conflict of judgement about what was real or not real, about what was good or evil (Freud, 1919/1985a). What Freud would regard as the necessary and healthy incorporation or internalisation of images of a mourned loved one (in this case, a father substitute) was transposed by the discourse of the Church into possession by a demon. At the same time, Sister Marthe's possession by the image of the phantom father-turned-devil necessitated the increased ministering of the replacement confessor, providing a secondary gain to her illness.

Jung mentions Loudun in a definition of demonism that he prepared in 1945 for the *Schweizer Lexikon* (Jung, 1945/1954). Jung used his theory of complexes to account for the phenomena of possession. A feeling-toned complex is an image to which a highly charged affect is attached, which is incompatible with the habitual

attitude of the ego. Attributable to a trauma that splits off a bit of the psyche or to a moral conflict in which a subject finds it impossible to affirm the whole of his or her being, a complex is a splinter psyche that behaves with a degree of autonomy and coherence, like an animated foreign body in the sphere of consciousness, overriding will and blocking memory (Jung, 1934/1960a).

Jung credited Freud with the first case to support a theory coinciding with the medieval view and substituting a psychological formula for the 'demon'. Jung acknowledged Freud's debt to Charcot who described hysterical symptoms as ideas 'taking possession of the brain', and to Janet who elaborated Charcot's theory of possession and obsession, Freud realising that the symptom-producing ideas rooted in unconscious affects had to be brought to consciousness and re-experienced. Still, Jung argued that psychoanalytic theory does not adequately convey the power and the positive potential of these symptom-producing ideas. Jung claimed that his own theory corrects psychoanalytic theory by emphasising the inherent ambiguity of complexes that the ego experiences as negative (Jung, 1920/1960b).

Although Freud wrote about group psychology, he did not include any hypothesis about collective factors in his case of demonological neurosis, whereas Jung's definition of demonism does include a collective component. For Jung, the possession at Loudun was an epidemic comparable to what he called the 'induced collective psychoses of the twentieth century', and as a result, an interpretation of possession in an individual such as Jeanne des Anges should take into account not only the possibility of trauma and the activation of repressed contents in the personal unconscious but also the effects of the collective. Jeanne des Anges's demonological neurosis psychically infected the other Ursulines, polarised Loudun, and drew crowds from across Europe because her possession articulated both a personal repressed conflict and a collective dilemma.

The tensions between Catholic and Huguenot factions in the town and the container for these effected by the Edict of Nantes; the practice of chastity in Catholic religious orders and the parallel cult of Eros in secular society; the destruction of the walls of Loudun and the decree by Louis XIII to build a city called Richelieu 20 kilometres away; Descartes's decision not to publish his epistemology for fear of the Inquisition

–all these social and political phenomena can be reread psychodynamically as ‘surface’ events concurrent with an eruption from the collective unconscious.

Michel Foucault noted that the shift from a two-sided structure of demoniacs and exorcists to the three-sided public exorcisms of the Ursulines at Loudun with the implicit presence of a new third element – a sorcerer – coincided with the impulse to present the conflict differently, to stage it (Foucault, 1961; see also Foucault, 1969). Public exorcisms were not typical in the Middle Ages; not until the late 16th century did exorcism combine public spectacle and ritual action. For Foucault, theatre is synonymous with a problematic which is publicly performed. Seventeenth-century French society, he argued, could no longer endure the splitting of God the Father by the wars of religion; it evaded or abdicated this conflict by shifting its projection of paternal power from the Godhead onto the head of state Louis XIII, Cardinal Richelieu coopting this power for his own purposes.

Michel de Certeau concurred with Foucault’s structuralist hypothesis. He supported Foucault’s view of the exorcisms as the enactment of a problematic, which was then re-enacted repeatedly, the drama anticipating the direction in which French society would move, including the fundamentalist revoking of the Edict of Nantes. However, Certeau (1975) later revised this position, describing the staged exorcisms as a theatricalised encounter with the ‘Other’, the place from which Jeanne des Anges and the Ursulines spoke being indeterminate – not only feminine, not only somatic, but a ‘somewhere else’ that revels in its power to elude and evade. The exorcists and the physicians responded with a patriarchal power play, confining the women and this Other to a discourse circumscribed by their theological and medical knowledge.

Certeau portrayed the priests and doctors opposing the patient’s escape into ‘the signified’ (i.e. reality) because that escape represented not only a frightening exile for the nuns from shared language but also a betrayal of the linguistic map upon which the social order was organised. Arguing against the feminist argument that the possessed nun’s discourse exists beneath an overlay of patriarchal interpretations, Certeau claimed that what Jeanne des Anges said was ‘a transgression that is not a discourse’. He referred to Freud’s notion of the ‘uncanny’ with its emphasis on the

furtive power of repressed contents, and to Lacan’s notion of the ‘*réel*’ (Lacan, 1966/1977).

Employing another Lacanian term, Certeau said that the demons ‘slipped’ about within the bodies of the Ursulines as if to avoid classification, mocking their interlocutors, changing names. The questions evoked by the presence of this Other in the voices and bodies of the nuns were intolerable, undermining social discourse; they provoked a collective splitting in which the negative power of God as patriarchal progenitor was projected onto the libertine Grandier as scapegoat, while Louis XIII and Cardinal Richelieu recuperated the positive power.



From the 1961 Polish film *Mother Joan of the Angels*

Certeau’s hero is Surin who wrestled with these questions for the rest of his melancholic life.

The Enlightenment let these questions drop altogether, but Freud’s concept of the ‘uncanny’ and Lacan’s concept of *réel* picked them up again for 20th-century psychology, and Certeau resurrected them for postmodernism.

Reclaiming ‘possession’

An etymological reading of possession locates an occupying entity exercising power over the sufferer as if tyrannically sitting in the sufferer’s seat, claiming his or her chair. Freud’s notion of demonological neurosis emphasised the idea of evasion, of possession as the ego’s abdication of its seat: the individual employs a defensive strategy against difficult experiences such as grief or thwarted sexual desire and subsequently lives a diabolic parody of responsible

adult life. Jung’s discourse emphasised the power of complexes that assimilate the ego and render a life ‘provisional’, but Jung also recommended psychological discernment when he argued that the core of the complex carries both negative and positive qualities for psychic equilibrium. Psychodynamically, the exorcists and doctors only opposed the negating tyranny of the symptoms of possession, whereas Surin shifted the opposition by confronting the negative aspect of Eros in Jeanne des Anges and allowing her to adopt a potentially positive prospective point of view to her suffering.

Psychopathology coopted the word ‘obsession’, stripped of its religious

connotation, but left the word ‘possession’ outside medical discourse. Revisiting the history of Loudun provides a means for situating possession within a medical and intellectual continuum. Even when the possessed speak the language that is imposed upon them by the exorcists and doctors, their discourse bears the trace – the ‘wound’ – of the Other from which they seek distance.

Jung praised Freud’s analogical argument

about medieval demons and repressed ideas but criticised his psychoanalytic signifiers as reductionist. Similarly, addressing the dilemma of how to speak about a so-called ineffable experience, Certeau found Freud’s notion of the ‘uncanny’ and Lacan’s *réel* useful but rejected Jung’s ‘collective unconscious’ as too reducible (Dosse, 2002). To evaluate the effectiveness of any discourse about possession, and this is a most important and unorthodox contribution to our post-modern scientific notion of mind, one criterion is to ask to what extent it allows for, rather than contradicts, these irreducible irrational spaces.

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