Reformed or Recycled?
Possession and Exorcism in the Sacramental Life of Early Modern France

Sarah Ferber

A large vessel filled with holy water was brought. In addition, a sacred stole (as it's called), with the opening verses of St. John's Gospel hanging from it, was draped over Faurnus' shoulders. In his pockets he had a waxen image of the kind blessed annually by the pope and known as an Agnus Dei. Long ago—before a Franciscan could become so formidable—people used to protect themselves by this armor against harmful demons.

Desiderius Erasmus, "Exorcism," 1524

Now that Human nature is not only freed from the captivity of the devil, but is even honored by the fraternity of Jesus Christ, who clothed it and elevated it with him above the highest heavens, it seems that the illustrious title [of exorcist] which gives us jurisdiction over demons is the appanage of our new dignity.

Léon d'Alixé [Pierre de Bécuelle], Traité des Ennemises, 1599

It is now established in the historiography of early modern Europe that in the period of the Catholic Reform and religious renewal, "popular" religious practices were either suppressed or reformed,¹ orthodoxy was grafted onto traditional practices,² and in general, Catholic authorities paid greater attention to separating the spheres of illicit folk magic and licit church-magical

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practices.3 The precise definition of what was orthodox in regard to the rite of exorcism was at times closely contested among a wide range of reforming Catholics in early modern Europe.4 As part of the Catholic cult, the value of exorcism of the possessed had been long disputed, and in the period it continued to provide the church with new dilemmas, which ran not only along class lines, but also caused deep tensions among Catholic elites. In the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, reform-minded Catholics, with quite diverse agendas, such as the authors of the *Maleficarum*, Erasmus, Martin De Castanega, and the Thomist humanist Pedro Ciruelo argued against what they saw as objectionable exorcism practices.5

In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century France, however, such a classic reformist schema was complicated twice over: in theory (as it could be at any time) by the fact that the status of the objects deployed in Catholic sacramental practices can never be fixed and is always open to mixed interpretations, and, in actuality, by the religious wars and subsequent spiritual revival, when demonic possession and exorcism assumed a new place in the avant-garde of proselytism.7 The sharply contrasting characterizations of the exorcist by Erasmus and Bérulle encapsulate this mixed status of exorcism. Erasmus’s exorcist is a shabby representative of the Catholic priesthood, a simonite who places faith in uttering words and wielding objects rather than attending to his own spiritual comportment and trusting in the power of God to act independent of material prompting. Pierre de Bérulle’s exorcist is no less than the image of Christ. Yet each author would qualify as in some way representative of Catholic Reform and spiritual renewal. The aim of this essay, therefore, is to explore the ambiguous place held by cults of possession and exorcism in the reforming climate of early modern France in order to elicit some of the ways that traditional or popular religiosity became enmeshed in both the critiques and innovations of reform Catholicism. This will be done by examining two features of French possession cases.8

First to be considered is how the religion of the so-called vulgar was characterized in several cases of demonic possession, to suggest that while anxieties about popular superstition indeed informed the views of reform-minded


deployed the Host against possessing demons in a series of dramatic exorcisms which came to be known as the "Miracle of Laon." Yet exorcism, with its focus on the uncontrolled body of the possessed (usually a woman in major French cases), its more or less fetishistic attention to the powers of particular cult objects (notably the Host but also saints’ relics and other sacramental aids), and its appeal to mass audiences displayed precisely the type of beliefs and behaviors which, by the standards of Erasmian reform, were highly suspect. Indeed, Huguenot opponents argued that the exorcists were no better than magicians and, of course, rejected the view that the priesthood could perform miracles, either by consecration of the Host or through exorcism. In a climate of intense fear of the Huguenots, seen as agents of the devil, the majority endorsed the Catholic view of the "Miracle," and several major books celebrated this story. These events gave public exorcism of the possessed new respectability as a vehicle of militant Catholicism.

Later in the Wars, however, the so-called superstitious aspects of exorcism came under attack from Catholics in the case of the demoniac Marthe Brossier. In late February 1599, Henri IV persuaded a reluctant Parlement of Paris to register the Edict of Nantes. The edict aimed to provide limited toleration to the Huguenots, as new politiques elements within French Catholicism were pressing back the influence of the recently defunct militant Catholic Holy League. Into this volatile political climate, opponents of the edict introduced Brossier, a twenty-six-year-old woman of the menu people, from Romorantin, whose stridently anti-Huguenot public exorcisms divided Parisian Catholic intellectuals, in effect along political lines. Politiques ridiculed the possession and League sympathizers promoted it.

Marthe Brossier, the woman ostensibly at the center of the debate, was little more than a cipher. Her subject position was negated by her identity as a

9. See the indispensable chapter, Clarks, “Superstition,” in Thinking with Demons, chap. 32.
11. Bireley, The Refashioning of Catholicism, 96, has argued that evangelizing and Christianizing ordinary people “always implied adaptation to their situation.” Hila, The World of Catholic Renewal, 197, cites “persistent public demand” as the reason for liturgical continuity in many rural areas; he also refers to the “persistence of traditional religiosity.” 226. It is also argued that “Tridentine Catholicism ... had to seek accommodations with established popular cultures and cults,” Michael A. Mullett, The Catholic Reformation (London: Routledge, 1999), 180.
12. O’Neill, Discerning Superstition, 293–94, identifies the church’s decision to continue with its sacramental uses as the source of conflict surrounding exorcism.
16. I thank Alfred Soman for this important observation.
demon and by the public function she served: to enable elites to engage in political debates without taking up arms. Under exorcism, Brossier’s demon railed against the Huguenots for several days toward the end of March when the bishop of Paris, Henri de Gondi, sought medical advice to establish if her possession were valid. Two groups of doctors provided the bishop with conflicting reports and at this point of stalemate, royal authorities intervened. The Lieutenant Criminel arrested Brossier and locked her in the Châtelet. At the request of Henri IV, Michel Marescot, a court physician, wrote a pamphlet which derided Brossier’s exorcists for their belief in the reality of her possession and in the power of sacramentals used to exorcise her. Marescot jeered at the use of a fumigant in exorcism (an example is the recipe from the Flagellum Dæmonum of the famous Italian Franciscan exorcist Girolamo Menghi, which contained asafetida and Saint John’s wort). Marescot described a farcical attempt to use the fumigant, which had led the cathedral chapters of Orléans and Clery to revoke permission for exorcists to exorcise Brossier in public. Brossier had been tied to a chair, Marescot writes; then “they did set fire to this Perfume, and offered those villainous and stinking vapors to her Nose,” at which Brossier is said to have cried out, “Pardon me, I am choked. He is gone away.” Marescot provided the recipe for the fumigant, as if this quite lict means of exorcism were self-evidently ridiculous.

Marescot framed his story so as to alert the reader to the dangers of “too great credulity [which] is the path that leadeth headlong to falsehood, fraud, folly and superstition.” He portrayed the exorcisms as a threat which drew the populace to believe in false miracles. To identify exorcism with superstition in this way was a standard jibe, but any ready characterization of its practitioners as ignorant was only as tenable as polemics were able to make it. In this case, Brossier’s supporters included some of the theological luminaries of the day: André Duval, already an eminent theologian of the Paris Faculty and a supporter of the League; Benet of Canfield, the Capuchin mystic who later wrote the influential mystical text, The Ryle of Perfection; and Pierre de Bérulle, later the founder of the Oratorians and a cardinal, at this time a young humanist scholar and trainee priest. Notwithstanding the status of Brossier’s allies, Michel Marescot identified the key threat she posed as being related to the beliefs of “weaker minds.” In order to reduce her and her exorcists to purveyors of popular entertainments, he said her exorcists treated her “like an Ape or a heare.” He noted the participation in exorcisms of members of the elite—“Divines, Religious persons, and Philisians” [physicians]—on the side of Brossier, but he implied the involvement of these people required some explanation; he did not know if they believed in her possession “either through credulity, or to follow the opinion of the people, or for some other reason.” The politique parlementaire Jacques-Auguste de Thou, in his chronicle of the case, echoed Marescot’s rhetorical association of belief in exorcism with a lack of learning when he referred to André Duval, in particular, as “an otherwise learned man.” De Thou also reflected that Brossier’s imprisonment had led to “rumblings among the vulgar,” whipped up by the preaching of her supporters. Interestingly, this desire to resist the vulgar was not unique to the opponents of the possession. Bérulle, who wrote a rejoinder to Marescot, also fell in step with this kind of argumentation and established his own and his colleagues’ elitist credentials. Keen to distance the exorcists from any association with the superstitions of the masses, he stated emphatically that exorcists had at one point removed Brossier from the public view because the people are “not fit to determine

19. (Michel Marescot), Discours véritable sur le fait de Marie Brossier de Romorantin, pretendue demoniaque (Paris, 1599). I am using here the English translation, A true discourse, upon the matter of Martha Brossier of Romorantin, pretended to be possessed by a devil, trans. Abraham Hartvel (London, 1599), 32.
22. A true discourse, 3.
26. Histoire de Marie Brossier, 11. The exorcists of Marie Brossier might have been glad to see riots disrupt the progress of the Edit of Nantes, and the king did indeed have more to fear from Paris crowds than did the League. This example was intended only to illustrate a point about the rhetorical identification of class and belief.
truth." This move by Bérulle is clearly not evidence of an accommodationist position in regard to the vulgar; on the contrary, it shows an educated, militant Catholic defending ecclesiastical magic in spite of, rather than in the service of, the uneducated.

Similarly mixed views about the nature and value of the public emerged in relation to the first major possession case of the seventeenth century: the possessions at the Ursuline convent in Aix-en-Provence, from 1609 to 1611. This case led to the execution in April 1611 of the priest Louis Gaufffrid for causing the possession of several nuns through witchcraft and also for sexual seduction. One commentator at the time associated the witchcraft of Gaufffrid with his eloquence, which had "falsely deluded" the "Marcellian Vulgar" by whom he was "exceedingly revered and very much respected." Elsewhere, Sébastien Michaelis, the noted Dominican reformer and the man who lobbied the Parliament of Aix to execute Gaufffrid, referred favorably to the "great troupes" of onlookers who came to witness the exorcisms, including "the poore of adjoyning villages." Thus crowds are characterized in the same case and from the same perspective, indifferently, as both a caution for their weakness and as a source of support, apparently righteously drawn towards the truth.

In 1612, Michaelis was again involved in a case of possession, this time in a Brigidine convent at Lille in the French-speaking Low Countries. Jean le Normant, a noble layman and passionate devotee of the exorcisms of Michaelis, published a voluminous and detailed account of the case. Its reception among the elite was somewhat mixed. The Paris Faculty of Theology took strong exception to its publication "in the vulgar idiom" (French) of "descriptions of obscenities and prodigious abominations and impieties of witches" which, it observed, were "deadly for the curious, the weak-minded and the wicked." Yet only a few months earlier, in October 1622, two members of the same faculty, Soto and Le Gendre, had signed an approbation for the book, and it was printed early in 1623 in both Latin and French. It is not possible to determine whether the approbation was for the Latin edition only or for both editions. The accompanying royal privilege issued on 8 October 1622 refers specifically to both, suggesting the theologians' approbation may well have applied to both languages. This difference between two sets of theologians from the same faculty would suggest the existence of a hairline fracture in the principal corporation in France to declare upon questions of orthodoxy.

These examples show that those who were depicted as weak-minded or vulgar were seen as most likely to be seduced by appearances and emotions, by the lure of rabble-rousing or charismatic preachers (in the Brossier and Gaufffrid cases), or by lurid descriptions of witchcraft. For the members of the elite who expressed such views, "vulgar" was as much a byword for what not to be, or to whom not to appeal, as it was a pointer to any demographic reality. Statements presented as the product of unambiguous theological
truths may only have been the justifications of sophisticated authors, asserting an ideological agenda by identifying a social group with particular beliefs or practices. This is not to suggest that those who allowed rites which were elsewhere the subject of censure were acting out of pragmatism or bad faith. Indeed, it was something of a tradition for exorcism to find its place in Catholicism suspended between the frontline of reform and conversion (as a marvelous means of proselytism) and the underworld of suspect magical remedies, with their appeal to the allegedly short-term, materialist, and selfish mentality of the uneducated. The precarious status of exorcism is inherent in traditional doctrines which allow for the manifestation of holiness in the physical realm but in which the prerogative of interpretation lies to a large extent within the workings of hierarchy. In early modern France, moreover, the priorities and indeed the nature of religious hierarchies were changing at a rapid rate in light of the wars and in relation to the spiritual revival which followed them. In a climate of profound fear of the devil’s incursions, many members of the Catholic elite saw it as their duty to confront the threat directly. For many, possession and exorcism were means to the re-Catholicization of France. In this context, aspects of the cult of the dead—a cult which was just as theoretically ambiguous—played an important part in underpinning the innovations in cases of possession and exorcism.

POSSSESSION AND THE REALM OF THE DEAD

Relations with the world of the dead were, like exorcism, part of the “soft” interpretative edge of reformed Catholicism: defended as orthodox, they were still the subject of only qualified endorsement because of their association with superstition. The Council of Trent reinforced the importance of the cult of the dead in relation to traditional church beliefs in purgatory, allowing for the continued use, for example, of masses and prayers for the dead. It cautioned, however, against practices which “tend to a certain kind of curiosity or superstition” which were thus to be prohibited as “scandals and stumblingblocks [sic] to the faithful.” These problem areas likely included belief in appearances of the dead, possession of the living by the souls of the dead, and divination about souls in purgatory. Gabriella Zarrè has argued that in spite of the Catholic Church’s adhering to its traditional beliefs about communication between the living and the dead, greater skepticism within its ranks in the sixteenth century nonetheless led to a growing demarcation between the world of the living and that of the dead. One of the ways this came about was through the “demonization” of the cult of the dead. For France, the story of the young Nicole Obry is notable for the way in which it demonized one “popular” aspect of the cult of the dead—belief in the capacity of the dead in purgatory to possess the bodies of the living in their quest for deliverance—and redeployed it to serve the aims of confessional polemic.

Obry initially claimed that her discomfort was caused by the restless soul of her deceased grandfather. She said that she had seen his tormented spirit at his grave and that he had then entered her body. The spirit, speaking both inwardly to Obry and also through her mouth, urged her and her family to have masses said, to give alms, and to go on pilgrimages on his behalf. A Dominican suspected the presence of the devil and proceeded to exorcise Obry. Under his tutelage, Obry went on to become a symbol of Catholic ritual aggression towards the Huguenots. In demonizing Obry’s traditional view of her possession (and also possibly a traditional means of expressing grief), a new use was found for this belief within the exigencies of anti-Huguenot polemic. Faith in this manifestation in the living of the “personal purgatory” of the dead appears to have been widely contested by reform-minded demonologists, keen to extirpate what they saw as superstitious attributions of possession but who thereby left that much more room for an attribution to the devil to be validated. Pedro Ciruelo had declared, “The spirit that speaks in a possessed person is not a soul of some dead man; rather, it is most certainly the deceiving devil.” Jean Bodin reported a 1458 case in which a man claimed he spoke with the voice of a dead woman, but Bodin rebuts: the spirit fled when he

37. The utility of traditional “objective” criteria for discernment, such as the division between knowledge based on necessity and that discovered through curiosity, and caution in the face of perceived excess was nonetheless often subject to ambiguous political situations where equally powerful protagonists held opposing views. Clark, Thinking with Demons, 475–77.
asked to say a Miserere, thereby revealing itself to have been demonic.\footnote{Pedro Ciruelo's A Treatise Refuting all Superstitions, 279; Jean Bodin, De la démonomanie des sorciers (Paris, 1580), fol. 157v.} Martin Del Rio wrote that when the devil pretends to be the soul of a deceased person, the claim is always false.\footnote{Martin Del Rio, "Anacaphalasiae," in Disquisitionum magicarum (Leuven, 1599–1600), 334.} Referring to the Obry case specifically, the Parisian Celestine Pierre Crespet refuted Obry's belief and wrote that it was "against the nature of souls, for they can never enter the bodies of the living" and added "so it came to be known that in the end this was a devil and not a soul or an angel."\footnote{Deux Livres de la haye de Satan et malins esprits contre l'homme, & de l'homme contre eux (Paris, 1590), fol. 208r.} Thus, even while this traditional or popular notion grew out of the Catholic theology of purgatory and belief in meritorious action to help the dead, it was nonetheless subject to revision and redeployment in the Obry case, if not for the family's purposes.\footnote{On the question of the demonization of folklore, see, for example, Middelfort, "The Devil and the German People," 102; Charles Zika, "Appropriating Folklore in Sixteenth-Century Witchcraft Literature: The Nebelkappe of Paula Frixius," in Problems in the Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Europe, ed. R. Po-chia Hsia and Robert W. Scribner, (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1997), 175–218.} Many other cases of possession nonetheless retained the idea that the devil could contact the living to elicit the sympathy and aid of the living, to make known their state in the afterlife, or even to cause torment through witchcraft.

The capacity of the dead to appear to the living, for example, had the qualified endorsement of most demonologists. Ciruelo said, "Occasionally, God permits a soul from the next life to appear to the living," and Guazzo, following Augustine, wrote, "We must understand that such apparitions are not the ordinary rule, but occur in accordance with the special and singular permission of God."\footnote{Pedro Ciruelo's A Treatise Refuting all Superstitions, 279; Francesco Maria Guazzo, Compendium Maleficarum: The Montague Summer Edition, trans. E. A. Ashwin (1959; repr., New York: Dover, 1988), 60.} On this point in Augustine, see Schmitt, Ghosts in the Middle Ages, 21.

The convention's recently deceased spiritual director, Father Moussault. In September 1632, movements at night disturbed the convent. Nuns saw the shadowy figures of men moving through the house, one of which they initially believed to be the specter of Moussault.\footnote{Robert Rapley, A Case of Witchcraft: The Trial of Urban Grandier (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998), 75–82; Michel de Certeau, La possession de Loudun (1970) (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), 24. Quite a different kind of ghost—one who did the housework—came under official scrutiny in Kathryn A. Edwards, "Inquiries on the Inquisition and a Burgundian Ghost," Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Western Society for French History 23 (1996): 219–29.} Interest in Father Moussault's appearances waned quickly, however, as the living priest, Urbain Grandier, became increasingly the focus of the interrogations done to the nuns' demons. The nuns began to appear possessed, and they said under exorcism that Urbain Grandier had caused their possession through his desire to seduce them.\footnote{Sanson Birette, Refutation de l'erreur du Vaugirard, touchant les ressources des diables exorcisés (Rouen, 1618), 4. Here again Birette is invoking the "vulgar" as both the perpetrators and the victims of this belief.} One senses that the often-cited politicization of this case led this possession to slip from being about a haunted convent, and perhaps unresolved grief, to being about priestly morality and threats to the nuns' virginity.

Another feature of exorcism in this period showed exorcists drawing on the devil's capacity to have knowledge of distant and occult events, including knowledge of the world of the dead and the state of souls in purgatory. Several possessed women were believed to have gained access to this knowledge through the gift of demonic clairvoyance. The French Augustinian Sanson Birette condemned as an "intolerable abuse" divination through the possessed "on the misfortunes of illnesses, of death, of accidents, of losses, of animals and of occult crimes, in order to have revelation about them" and described it as an "error of the vulgar."\footnote{Encapsulating this trend, the Franciscan Jean Benedecti wrote in 1611, "Often good people carry their purgatory in their bodies," referring in this instance not to the possession of the living by the dead, but simply to the sul}
the suffering which certain of the demon-possessed endured while attempting to live a good life.\textsuperscript{51} This new accent on the virtue of the suffering possessed can be associated with two principal developments. The first is the increasing likelihood in this period that possession would be accounted for by an accusation of witchcraft, which deflected (without removing entirely) the likelihood of guilt on the part of the possessed. This feature of possession was almost universal in cases in early modern France. Second, a growing emphasis on the imitation of martyrs in pursuit of holiness became a benchmark of religiosity in the "century of saints."\textsuperscript{52} The suffering possessed thus became in some cases, in effect, church-sanctioned witches, who divined under the guidance of exorcists.\textsuperscript{53}

Marthe Brossier, for example, was reported to have performed as an oracle during a yearlong tour of exorcisms in the Loire valley, prior to her arrival in Paris. According to a woman named Anne Chevriou, whom Brossier had accused of causing her possession through witchcraft, Brossier fielded questions from onlookers about whether the souls of their deceased parents were in heaven or purgatory, whether husbands would come home safe from the fields, whether people with whom they had disputes would be damned when they died, and in Chevriou's words "a thousand other frivolous questions."\textsuperscript{54} According to Chevriou, Brossier tailored her answers to the questioners' wishes and drew on her own knowledge of the deceased's lives.\textsuperscript{55} For the possessed peasant Marie des Vallées (1590–1656), a profound desire to suffer graced her with the capacity for her soul to separate from her body during her lifetime and to enter hell and witness the suffering of the damned. There, she reported, she saw the sufferings of the damned, in particular the suffering of witches, which she undertook to share with them.\textsuperscript{56}

For Jeanne des Anges, the superior of the Ursuline convent at Loudun, her initially demonic clairvoyance carried through to her assumption of a more mainstream identity as a mystic and spiritual leader. When possessed, she had testified against the priest Urbain Grandier, who was executed for witchcraft in 1634. But the personal cult around Jeanne, which began with the "spiritual tourism" of Loudun, grew over the next three decades, and her clairvoyant capacities augmented. Following the death of the wife and daughter of Baron de Laubardemont, Grandier's chief enemy and a promoter of Jeanne's cult, the baron sought news of their fate from Jeanne. Jeanne affirmed to Laubardemont that his wife and daughter were saved.\textsuperscript{57}

In a letter of 1660 to her spiritual director, the Jesuit Jean-Baptiste Saint-Jure, Jeanne described a series of conversations she had with the spirit of a deceased nun, the subprioress of the convent, Mother Gabriel de l'Incarnation. Jeanne was aware of the possibility of devils disporting themselves as the dead; therefore, she first confirmed her vision by asking the help of Jesus and recommending herself to her guardian angel, a protective guide who served as something of an internal spiritual director to Jeanne and whose views she regularly relayed by letter to Saint-Jure. She described her experience of this revenant of Mother Gabriel to him:

When I first saw her near to me, I had a great natural fear; but as there was nothing frightening about her, I was quickly reassured. I crossed myself and asked our Lord that I not be deceived in this encounter and I recommended myself to my holy guardian angel.

51. Jean Benedicti, \textit{La triomphante victoire De la vierge Marie, sur sept malins esprits, finalement chassés du corps d'une femme, dans l'Eglise des Cordeliers de Lyon} (Lyon, 1611), 46.


53. The arresting expression "God's witch" is used to describe a similar woman in Italy: Gabrielle Zarru, \textit{Le santo vive: Cultura e religiosità femminile nella prima età moderna} (Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier, 1990), 12.

54. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, MSS ffs f 18453, fol. 8v. Anne Chevriou was later exonerated of the witchcraft charge in 1605. (Personal communication, Alfred Soman, n.d.).

55. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, MSS ffs f 18453, fols. 8v–9r. Chevriou also disparaged Brossier's "demon's" claim that the soul of one of her own exorcists, now dead, had gone straight to heaven (ibid., fol. 7r). It might also be noted, if this commentary was indeed dictated by Chevriou, that we see in it a precedent under accusation of witchcraft, dismissing as "frivolous" activities which were being promoted by senior members of the clergy. Here again the reality behind the model of the uneducated as the purveyors of exorcism may be open to challenge.

56. Bibliothèque Mazarine, MS 3177, 22.

57. Michel de Certeau, \"Jeanne des Anges\" (1966), in \textit{Jeanne des Anges, Autohagiographie} (1886, repr., Grenoble: Jérôme Million, 1990), 301–47, at 340. In a significant example, however, the friend and former exorcist of Jeanne des Anges, the Jesuit Jean-Joseph Surin urged Jeanne not to "run a sort of advice shop" [tenir comme une boutique], where her guardian angel responded to inquiries about marriages, lawsuits, and the like (339). Surin nonetheless approved approvingly the story of a sister at Loudun who read minds. He tells of many nobles' being at the exorcisms and "their lackeys' being in the parlour with a secular girl, a pensioner in this convent," who was also possessed. The lackeys asked the girl to tell them their thoughts to divert themselves. They gave her a "drage\'e (a kind of sweetmeat) for the whole evening, and she told them their thoughts. All of them said she had guessed right: Jean-Joseph Surin, \textit{Histoire abrégée de la possession des Ursulines de Loudun et des prêtres du Père Surin} (Paris, 1828), 31. For Surin, such a display was clearly satisfactory in the case of a lesser sister in the presence of inconsequential employees, but for Jeanne as the superior, it would not do.
Then I prayed that this Mother tell me what state she was in and if I could render her any service. She replied: "I am satisfying divine justice in purgatory."58

The nun told Jeanne of the minor sins she had committed regarding convent life, and she chided Jeanne as her superior for having let them pass, begging her to "work to destroy all partialities in the community from the start." When her face approached Jeanne's, Jeanne felt as if "a burning coal had scalded her" even though Mother Gabriel's specter did not touch her. A month later, Mother Gabriel appeared "all clear and luminous" to Jeanne in the evening and bade her farewell as she passed through to heaven.59 In the case of another nun who had died, Jeanne reported that she had spoken with the woman after her death, following a promise made by the woman to report to Jeanne on her fate once she had died. The woman thanked Jeanne for her contribution "to the glory that I possess."60 In both cases the cult of the dead served to confirm Jeanne in her own quest for spiritual seniority by showing her to be a divinely appointed intermediary of the dead.

Jeanne's contact with the dead was a speculum held up to encourage personal betterment in this life, but it also reinforced the role of purgatory as a source of punishment. This lesson could work more than one way, and Certain observed that Jeanne's interactions with the dead reflected her personal opinions of those whose suffering she described.61 On at least one occasion, when Jeanne's reputation had been impugned, she found in her experience of purgatory vindication for her own contested spiritual authority. At Loudun, in 1662, critics had charged that she showed favoritism among her nuns and that the guardian angel and the famous holy names, miraculously inscribed on her hands following an exorcism, were diabolic illusions.62 As a result there were moves to establish a commission under the bishop of Poitiers to examine her life, mores, and "the extraordinary things" that happened within her. The commission came to nothing, however, after a priest who had worked to build up the dossier against her died suddenly and unconfessed.63 Jeanne offered to render satisfaction to God for his soul in purgatory, and it is recorded that Jeanne endured terrible pain on his behalf for a long time, implicitly showing him to have been a sinner.64 This dead man, she wrote, "now sees the truth of what he opposed so heatedly," apparently referring to his actions in relation to her. Reflecting on the failure of the commission to follow up its investigations, Jeanne related simply that the death of the priest "had given [people] pause to reflect."65 Thus, Jeanne's holiness, as a recovering possessed woman in a new climate of intense spiritual enthusiasm, was amplified through the medium of the dead and purgatory.

At the Hospitaller convent of Saint Louis and Saint Elizabeth in Louviers, Normandy, during 1643 a mise-en-scène unfolded similar to that at Loudun, again following the death of a convent's spiritual director, Mathurin Picard. In this case, it was one of the most depressing and sordid possession stories from this period. The alleged power of the deceased to bring about possession through his dead body and magic charms he had made in life led to the outbreak of possession. Picard, an elderly priest who had been an author of uncontroversial moral tracts,66 died in September 1642 and was buried at his own request in the convent chapel. Around the end of 1642, disturbances began in the convent, and the nuns became unable to take communion, suffering "internal and external torments" caused by "visions of witches at night." Under exorcism the nuns said the cause was the presence of Picard's body in the chantry of the convent chapel.67 The nuns did not see Picard's ghost, nor did they say it had entered their bodies, yet his power reached back to them from the world of the dead. According to the possessed nuns, Picard had seduced one of their sister nuns, Madeleine Bavent, into witchcraft and had also seduced her sexually. Together, the nuns said,Picard and Bavent had

59. Anges, Autobiographie, 284–86.
60. Anges, Autobiographie, 287. This instance resembles the pact made between the shaman of Oberdörf, Chonrad Stecklin, and his drinking companion, Jacob Wolch, in Bebringer, Shamen of Oberdörf, 11. Francesco Guazzo also reported that Marsilio Ficino had made a similar pact with a friend, Michel Mercatis, Guazzo, Compendium Maleficiarum, 67–68.
65. L'arroseur de l'ame d'où elle tire trois sortes d'Armes pour trionpher plaisamment de ses communs Eunuques, savoir, Du laisse, De l'Austosse, de l'oration (Rouen, 1626), and Le Fovet des Paillards, ovr justes punition des voluptueux et chersnels, conforme aux arrests divins & humains (Rouen, 1628).
66. Recit veritable de ce qui s'est fait & passé à Louviers touchant les Religieuses possedeE Extracts d'une Lettre ecrite de Louviers à un Evesque (Paris, 1643), 5.
confected evil charms, using various obscene bodily by-products, including aborted fetuses from Bavenot.

The matter remained for some months within the convent's walls. A priest named Ravaut exorcised the nuns by day, and in a novel twist, some of the senior nuns "by the privilege of their eminent sanctity, although quite incapable of the order and function of exorcists" exercised them by night.

In March 1643 the bishop of Evreux,François Péricard, moved to investigate and swiftly passed sentence on the memory of Mathurin Picard, ordering that his body be exhumed and thrown into a pit known as Le Puits Croisnier in the lands of the archbishop of Rouen. The exhumation was carried out in secret, for fear of scandal, and in order to preserve the honor of "priesthood [and] religion" and to avoid prejudice to the convent. Bishop Péricard also threatened to excommunicate anyone who revealed the secret.

It was noted at the time of the exhumation that the body of Picard, six months after burial, was "healthy and whole." One account said that, while this would normally be taken as a sign of sanctity, the demons offered the unusual explanation "that the flesh of the excommunicated cannot rot in holy ground." Madeleine Bavenot was stripped of her veil and locked up in the ecclesiastical prison of the Officialité of Evreux. These moves proved inadequate, however, to stem the power of Picard's and Bavenot's witchcraft, and the nuns remained possessed. Around 20 May 1643, children found the dumped body of Picard, and the bishop's actions were exposed. Picard's relatives complained to the Parliament of Rouen. The body was again removed, this time by a sergent royal, before a reported crowd of two thousand people. To defend Bishop Péricard, allies in Paris organized a royal commission to investigate the case and, in effect, to find in his favor. Legal machinations surrounding the case continued for around eleven years, during which time numerous exorcists found in this case a means to promote a range of devotional and polemic agendas. One of these exorcists, Father Thomas Le Gaufré, brought another dimension of beliefs about the cult of the dead to the case in the promotion of a reputed saint.

In March 1643, just as news of the exorcisms of Louviers was breaking, Le Gaufré and his companion, a layman known as "Brother" Jean Blondeau, traveled to Louviers from Paris in order to confront the devils with the supernatural power of their late friend, another recently deceased priest, the famous Paris preacher Claude Bernard. Bernard, known as "le pauvre prêtre," had died in 1641. According to Le Gaufré, Bernard had successfully performed an exorcism on a possessed girl at Reims by applying his diurnal to her. Le Gaufré published booklets about the success of Bernard's exorcisms which tell that "demons" accused Bernard of persecuting them. According to Le Gaufré, Sister Bonaventura, possessed by the demon "Arfaza," "began to cry out against the relics of Father Bernard," making specific mention of his breviaries. He recorded:

I was surprised to hear mention of the breviaries of Father Bernard... and I conjured him to tell me more... and the harder it was for him to speak of it the more I pressed him by the merit of the relics. [The devil said]: "You know very well, dog, I have told you, he is a dog of a priest like you, a bigot who chased one of his companions with his breviary." And then he started to cry out: "Dog Bernard, you persecute us everywhere, the devils are powerless since you got involved."

68. "Attention de Messieurs les Commissaires envoyez par sa Majesté pour prendre connaissance, avec M. Montaigneur l'Eveque d'Evreux, de l'état des Religieuses qui paroissent agées au Monastère de Saint Louys & Sainte Elisabeth de Louviers (1643)."
69. "Attention de Messieurs les Commissaires envoyez par sa Majesté pour prendre connaissance, avec M. Montaigneur l'Eveque d'Evreux, de l'état des Religieuses qui paroissent agées au Monastère de Saint Louys & Sainte Elisabeth de Louviers (1643)."
Bishop Péricard also sought Claude Bernard's intercessory powers to deliver the Hospitaller convent nuns. In a letter to Le Gaudefire in April 1644, Péricard wrote that he had vowed a novena at the altar of Bernard's burial place in order that "the sanctity of good Father Bernard...end the evil that a wicked priest had committed." Through the agency of one dead priest, in effect, the exorcists pressed back the powers of another. Thus the cult of the dead was set on a collision course. The miraculous powers of the priest Bernard in death serve as an ironic counterpoint to the effects of the buried body of Mathurin Picard, and each contributes in its way to the cult of a thaumaturgic priesthood. A magic charm is, after all, just a bad or tainted relic. In the end, the Parlement of Rouen issued an arrêt on 21 August 1647 which ordered that Picard's bones be burned, together with a living priest, the young vicar Thomas Bouillé, who, tragically, had also come to be accused of witchcraft by the same nuns. These mirror aspects of the cult of the dead bring into focus two preoccupations of the era of Catholic renewal: the standing of the priesthood and the sexual morality of Christians, particularly among nuns. The cult of the dead in this, as in other possession cases, was not itself the object of reform, but rather it operated as part of its armory, as a medium of zealous persecution.

CONCLUSION
This essay has attempted to illustrate two related arguments. First, it is not possible to assume that the notion of the "superstitions of the vulgar" refers to the behavior of a discrete social entity. Rather, such a notion in French possession cases functioned as a touchstone whereby elites sought to distinguish their position from that of their presumed inferiors. This essay attempts to show that the identity of social groups can be less important than the way in which the idea of them is mobilized. The retention of class distinction was not the primary aim here; rather, it was a way of enforcing the function of hierarchy within religion because of the essentially contestable nature of sacramental forms. The use of the term "vulgar" can be distinguished both from the reality of class relations, which was more complex, and the reality of elite practices. In that era, elites swooped on possession and exorcism and made them their own in the quest for a pure and purifying priesthood and in order to promote spiritually gifted women. The power to assign arbitrarily value systems to the vulgar remained, of course, largely the prerogative of the elite.

The second section of the paper sought to draw attention to innovations in the cult of the dead in possession cases. It shows that the cult of the dead was a viable and productive medium for the elites, one which was open to innovation and expansion even as its retention in Catholicism was qualified officially by reference to its "superstitions" uses.

More broadly, this essay seeks to examine the nature of Tridentine Catholicism as characterized by a fundamentally sacramental, ritualist, and immanent religiosity. Emphasis on the notion of accommodation, while it accounts for certain aspects of reform, tends to reinforce a view of Catholicism in which sacramentals, rituals, and immanence can be considered marginal. Yet because sacramentals, for example, have been the subject of perennial division, it does not mean they are in essence marginal; certainly they are not essential to salvation, as the sacraments are, but that does not mean that they are not central to the institutional identity of Catholicism. In choosing to "ride the tiger" of a sacramental religion, people refashioning the early modern French church ensured the proliferation of activism and enthusiasm among the learned and the vulgar to equally good effect. Sacramental forms not only represented something whose persistence was tolerated in a revamped and supervised form, with the excesses pared down. Rather, their uses were highly innovative and took firm root among the elites, excesses or no excesses. Tridentine reform, however, had sharpened both the need and the taste for division, and in so doing it opened up the possibility of different versions of reform working at cross-purposes, leading to both innovation and fragmentation at the elite level.

79. BN MSS Æs fi 18695, fol. 189 r–v.


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