



# Demon Possession in Elizabethan England

*Kathleen R. Sands*

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In October of 1563, 18-year old Anne Mylner was herding cows near her home when she was suddenly enveloped by a white cloud that precipitated a months-long illness characterized by sleeplessness, loss of appetite, convulsions, and bodily swelling. Mylner's was the first of several cases during the reign of Elizabeth I of England that were interpreted as demon possession, a highly emotional experience in which an afflicted person displays behavior indicating a state of religious distress. To most Elizabethans, belief in Satan was as natural as belief in God, and Satan's affliction of mankind was clearly demonstrated in the physical and spiritual distress displayed by virtually every person at some point in his or her life. This book recounts 11 cases of Elizabethan demon possession, documenting the details of each case and providing the cultural context to explain why the diagnosis made sense at the time.

Victims included children and adults, servants and masters, Catholics and Protestants, frauds and the genuinely ill. Edmund Kingesfield's wife, possessed by a demon who caused her to hate her children and to contemplate suicide, was cured when her husband changed his irreverent tavern sign (depicting a devil) for a more seemly design. Alexander Nyndge, possessed by a Catholic demon that spoke with an Irish accent, was cured by his own brother through physical bondage and violence. Agnes Brigges and Rachel Pindar, whose afflictions included vomiting pins, feathers, and other trash, were revealed as frauds and forced to confess publicly, their parents being imprisoned for complicity in the fraud. All these cases attest to a powerful need to ascribe some moral significance to human suffering. Allowing the sufferer to externalize and ultimately evict the demon as the cause of his or her affliction bestowed some measure of hope?no mean feat in a world with such widespread human distress.

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