

Union Theological Seminary

**Frightful Demons and Faithful Prayer:
Possession, Exorcism, and Religious Sentiments in
Johann Weyer's *De Praestigiis Daemonum* and Reginald Scot's *The
Discoverie of Witchcraft***

Submitted to Dr. Euan Cameron
As Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of
CH 370: Inventing and Discovering "Popular Religion"
and
CH 317: Pastoral, Spiritual and Devotional Prose and Poetry in the English Reformation

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Fall 2013

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present a clearer picture of Johann Weyer's conception of possession and exorcism by synthesizing various elements of his *De Praestigiis Daemonum*, and comparing these elements with Reginald Scot's *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*. Where appropriate, the two authors will also be compared with relevant contemporary Catholic authors, in order to better highlight the broader context in which they were writing. A particular emphasis is placed on what Weyer and Scot's views on possession and exorcism indicate about their broader religious and supernatural beliefs. To engage with these issues, the essay is broken into two parts. The first looks at how each author understood demons and the problem of demonic possession. The second examines how they engaged with exorcism as it was commonly practiced in the sixteenth century. The essay concludes by examining what the similarities between Johann Weyer and Reginald Scot mean for our understanding of the sixteenth century, and each author's broader ideas.

Introduction

The Dutch physician Johann Weyer has been one of the most studied writers on the issue of superstition in the sixteen century. As the court physician to the Duke of Cleves in the closing decades of the sixteenth century, Weyer was perhaps best known, both in his own day and among contemporary historians, for his magnum opus *De Praestigiis Daemonum*, which was aimed at stemming the widespread execution of witches then taking place across Europe.¹ Many historians have studied *De Praestigiis* for what it says about early modern views on witchcraft and superstition lore more generally. Few have considered another major theme which runs throughout the work: Weyer's treatment of exorcism, and its necessary counterpart, possession. Those who have, generally confine themselves to an analysis of the psychiatric terms of Weyer's

¹ For a full biography of Weyer, see Rossell Hope Robbins, *The Encyclopedia of Witchcraft and Demonology* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1959), 539. The only fault in Robbins otherwise spotless telling of Weyer's life is his claim that Weyer served as tutor to the two sons of the King of France. Weyer actually served as the tutor to the two sons of the *physician* for the King of France. Cf. Weyer, *De Praestigiis Daemonum*, Book Five, Ch. XXVI, pg. 439. All references to Weyer's work are from Johann Weyer, *Witches, Devils, and Doctors in the Renaissance: Johann Weyer, De Praestigiis Daemonum*, trans. John Shea (Binghamton, NY: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1991).

works on possession, and have not attempted to provide a more complete picture.² This paper will address this gap in the historiography by presenting an overview of how Weyer perceived both possession and exorcism in *De Praestigiis Daemonum*.

The lacking coverage of Weyer's treatment of possession and exorcism is particularly egregious when one considers how critical both concepts were to early modern thought. As Benjamin J. Kaplan has stated, "No phenomenon reveals the otherness, the alien quality of early modern culture as dramatically as reputed cases of demonic possession."³ To the early modern mind, the world had been thrust into a disordered age in which the spiritual forces of God were combatting Satan's evil demons.⁴ Discourses on possession and exorcism were one expression of this prevailing mindset. Reported cases of demonic possession, and subsequent attempts at exorcising those possessed by demons, seem to have reached their crescendo, in the second half of the sixteenth century.⁵ Given that this is the period Weyer was writing in, his response to this widely perceived phenomenon is critical to understanding both the period more generally and his thought specifically.

In order to more fully understand Weyer's treatment of possession and exorcism, this paper will compare him with another writer from the late sixteenth century, Reginald Scot. Scot was a Kentish country gentleman and Member of Parliament whose fervent Calvinism marked

² Cf. the introduction to the modern English translation of *De Praestigiis*

³ Benjamin J. Kaplan, "Possessed by the Devil? A Very Public Dispute in Utrecht," *Renaissance Quarterly* 49, no. 4 (1996): 738.

⁴ Jonathan L. Pearl, "French Catholic Demonologists and Their Enemies in the Late Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries," *Church History* 52, no. 4 (1983): 458.

⁵ H.C. Erik Midelfort, "The Devil and the German People: Reflections on the Popularity of Demon Possession in Sixteenth-Century Germany," in *Religion and Culture in the Renaissance and Reformation*, ed. Steven E. Ozment (Kirkville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1989), 105.

him as a unique religious figure in Elizabethan England.⁶ He is perhaps best known today for writing one of the most important pieces of spiritual prose to emerge from England at this time, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*. *The Discoverie* was the first book in English devoted to witchcraft, and it therefore provides a unique insight into the religious beliefs and popular religious culture of the Elizabethan period. The book would go on to remain relevant even after Scot's death in 1599, when King James I wrote a reply to *The Discoverie* and ordered all copies of it to be burnt, for what he perceived as a heretical denial of the existence of witchcraft.⁷ Perhaps more importantly for this study, Scot provides in *The Discoverie* a number of unique observations on possessions, and exorcism as it was commonly practiced during his lifetime. The fact that Scot is broadly discussing the same subject as Weyer, namely witchcraft, makes comparison between the two works particularly apt. A comparison also provides a number of insights into the common context and themes which both authors were relying on in their discussions of possession and exorcism.

Comparing Johann Weyer with Reginald Scot is also useful in addressing a debate currently present in the historiography. There currently exists widespread disagreement among historians about Weyer's fundamental religious beliefs. As an official member of the Duke of Cleves' court, Weyer followed the example of his political ruler by remaining detached from the confessional divisions dividing Europe in the sixteenth century. This has not stopped subsequent historians from conjecturing on what his true religious beliefs were. Some have claimed that, like the Duke of Cleves himself, Weyer was strongly influenced by the *devotio moderna* and an

⁶ Robbins, 453-54.

⁷ Sona Rosa Burstein, "Demonology and Medicine in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," *Folklore* 67, no. 1 (1956): 28.

Erasmian understanding of Catholicism.⁸ Others have claimed that Weyer was a committed Protestant of Melancthonian persuasion.⁹ Perhaps most surprisingly, Hans de Waardt has recently claimed that Weyer was a spiritualist along the lines of David Joris, Hendrick Niclaes, and Sebastian Castiello.¹⁰ Still others have simply been content to recognize the impact Weyer had on the development of later Protestant theology, accepting the nuanced ambiguity that he crafted in his writing.¹¹ There is therefore no clear consensus among historians about how to categorize Johann Weyer within the confessionalized atmosphere of the sixteenth century.

While this paper can in no way provide a definitive deduction of Weyer's religious convictions, examining how his work on exorcism compares with Scot's can certainly provide more insight into this area. While Weyer's religious allegiances are largely in contention, Scot's religious views are much better known. John L. Teall, along with most other historians, has concluded that Scot's "sympathies ran far in the direction of Geneva."¹² Comparing Weyer with this known religious entity may therefore prove useful. The issue of exorcism is particularly useful in this regard. According to Euan Cameron, "exorcism repeatedly became a proving ground and a battleground for the rival spiritual claims of the two main confessional groups" of

⁸ Cf. James J. Bono, "Review of *Witches, Devils, and Doctors in the Renaissance: Johann Weyer, De Praestigiis Daemonum* by Johann Weyer; George Mora; Benjamin Kohl; Erik Middelfort; Helen Bacon; John Shea," *Isis* 84, no. 3 (1993): 568.

⁹ Cf. H. C. Erik Middelfort, *A History of Madness in Sixteenth-Century Germany* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 172-73.

¹⁰ Hans de Waardt, "Witchcraft, Spiritualism, and Medicine: The Religious Convictions of Johan Wier," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 17, no. 2 (2011): esp. 369, 373.

¹¹ Cf. Euan Cameron, *Enchanted Europe: Superstition, Reason, and Religion 1250-1750* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 179.

¹² John L. Teall, "Witchcraft and Calvinism in Elizabethan England: Divine Power and Human Agency," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 23, no. 1 (1962): 22-23.

the sixteenth century.¹³ There was a clear divide between what was considered an acceptable Catholic understanding of exorcism, and rival Protestant viewpoints.¹⁴ At the same time, there was a fundamental disagreement between Lutheran and Calvinist theologians over the appropriateness of exorcism, with Calvinist divines taking a much more critical approach to the practice than their Lutheran counterparts.¹⁵ Therefore, comparing Weyer with the Calvinist Scot and various Catholic authors on the contentious issue of exorcism can provide a greater insight into Weyer's true religious allegiances.

Weyer and Scot's Understanding of Demons and Possession

The basis for any understanding of exorcism begins with a conception of possession. Possession was the problem which exorcism was meant to solve. While the physicians and theologians of the sixteenth century recognized such a thing as "madness," or what we would broadly call mental illness today, they separated it distinctly from the concept of possession.¹⁶ In *Enchanted Europe*, Euan Cameron has given a succinct definition of what possession meant in Early Modern Europe:

In contrast to 'frenzy' or mental distress stood the relatively rare and sometimes spectacular phenomenon of demonic possession. In this instance the personality of the individual was supposed to be taken over entirely by a demon. The demon then spoke through the voice and body of the individual, but expressed a quite different personality. Clerical writers habitually diagnosed demonic possession by the fact that sufferers not

¹³ Cameron, *Enchanted Europe*, 205.

¹⁴ Darren Oldridge, *The Devil in Early Modern England* (Stroud: Sutton, 2000), 113.

¹⁵ Cf. Bodo Nischan, "The Exorcism Controversy and Baptism in the Late Reformation," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 18, no. 1 (1987): esp. 31. James Robert Allen, "The Trick of the Tale: Deconstructing Johann Weyer's *De Praestigiis Daemonum*" (The University of Texas at Arlington, 2012), 130.

¹⁶ For a history of the separation of psychological conditions and possession in history see Patrick Vandermeersch, "The Victory of Psychiatry over Demonology: The Origin of the Nineteenth-Century Myth," *History of Psychiatry* 2(1991).

only lost their natural characteristics, but sometimes gained whole new abilities as well as personalities.¹⁷

Several common elements emerge among different presentations of possession from otherwise very different authors. Fundamentally, possession was thought to be caused by demons.

Demons interacted with an individual in a tormenting way, which was in some form perceptible to outside observers. In the period leading up to the sixteenth century, there came to be associated with possession a number of supernatural manifestations, including the possessed saying something clearly unholy or blasphemous, contorting themselves in unnatural ways, and performing humanly impossible feats. It is this image of possession that Johann Weyer and Reginald Scot would have been aware of as they were writing *De Praestigiis* and *The Discoverie*. Any discussion of Weyer and Scot's understanding of exorcism must therefore begin with an examination of how they reacted to and understood this common discourse on possession.

To begin with, Johann Weyer clearly believed that demons exist. Even though Weyer is broadly categorized as a "skeptic," that skepticism did not extend to the denial of evil spirits, or "demons."¹⁸ It is implicit in *De Praestigiis Daemonum* that demons exist in the world. It is so implicit within the work that Weyer at no point lays out a full claim for why demons exist. Nonetheless, Weyer relied on a number of clear supports for his belief in demons. From the number of biblical citations in regard to demons spread throughout his work, it is likely that Weyer saw the scriptural references to demons as proof of their existence. There also seems to be some sense in *De Praestigiis* that demons were experienced by cultures across the world. For

¹⁷ Cameron, *Enchanted Europe*, 37.

¹⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, 194.

example, there is the common claim that the gods worshiped by pagans were truly devils. “The royal bard and prophet David affirms that the gods of the Gentiles are demons,” Weyer claimed.¹⁹ Perhaps most provokingly, however, it is likely that Weyer would have accepted the presence of demons due to perceived evidence of possession all around him. Benjamin Kaplan has noted that the presence of demoniacs (those possessed by demons) would have been shocking to the early modern mind. The sixteenth century “demoniac sputtered blasphemies and obscenities, denied fundamental Christian dogmas, and mocked figures of authority. Defying all norms and conventions - social, cultural, even physical- demoniacs were disturbing figures.”²⁰ Since Weyer includes a number of his own personal encounters with demoniacs in his work, it is not unreasonable to assume that he left such disturbing experiences with a sense that demons exist. Even if Weyer attributed his belief in demons to some other source, *De Praestigiis Daemonum* clearly assumes that demons do in fact exist.

The belief that demons exist was shared by Reginald Scot. While acknowledging the existence of spirits much less frequently than Weyer, Scot still assumed that the world is inhabited by demons throughout *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*. Leland L. Estes has been correct in arguing that, for Scot, “spirits do have a place in creation; they do really exist [...] they are not themselves merely parables and metaphors.”²¹ Like Weyer, Scot used biblical references to devils throughout his work as an implicit recognition that these evil spirits exist. Also like Weyer, Scot seemed to understand that all cultures recognize demons in some form, again using King David as a source. Scot claims to “have sufficientlie proved in these quotations, that these

¹⁹ Weyer, *De Praestigiis Daemonum*, Book One, Ch. II, pg. 17.

²⁰ Kaplan, “Possessed by the Devil?,” 738.

²¹ Leland L. Estes, “Reginald Scot and His ‘Discoverie of Witchcraft’: Religion and Science in the Opposition to the European Witch Craze,” *Church History* 52, no. 4 (1983): 449.

idols are *dii gentium*, the gods of the Gentiles: and then the prophet David may satisfie you, that they are divels, who saith *dii gentium daemonia stoit*, The gods of the Gentiles are divels. [...]

The idolatrous knaverie wherof being now bewraied, it is among the godlie reputed a divell rather than a god: and so are diverse others of the same stampe.”²² Excerpts like this, where demons exist but are understood only by the godly, are littered throughout *The Discoverie*. Such a position is common in Protestant literature. Everyone was able to interact with demons, but it was only the pious and godly (i.e. Protestants) who were able to see them for what they truly are, and therefore avoid falling into their mischief.²³ It is for this reason that Scot rejected the ways that demons had been traditionally portrayed, tying together wrong Catholic beliefs with a wrong understanding of demons. For example, one who believed that the traditional tales of a demonic hierarchy “are true, or wrought indeed according to the assertion of couseners, or according to the supposition of witchmongers & papists, may soone be brought to beleve that the moone is made of greene cheese.”²⁴ In spite of this dismissal of traditional demonology, Scot was hesitant to say anything concrete on the true nature of the demonic world, being “persuaded that no one author hath in anie certeine or perfect sort hitherto written thereof.”²⁵ One should not mistake this acceptance of ambiguity with skepticism when it came to demons, however. Reginald Scot, therefore, shared with Johann Weyer the foundatoinal belief that demons exist.

²² Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft, A Discourse*, Ch. II, pg. 436. All references for Scot are taken from Reginald Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, (London: Elliot Stock, 1886), <https://archive.org/details/discoverieofwitc00scot>. It is here critical to note that some have claimed that Scot believed biblical references to demons to be mostly metaphorical. Cf. Estes, 449: “For while Scot did believe that devils really existed, he also believed that biblical writers often used the word devil, or some related term, in a purely metaphorical or psychological sense.” Such a claim is not readily evidenced, however, in passages such as the above.

²³ Cameron, *Enchanted Europe*, 194.

²⁴ Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, Book Fifteen, Ch. V, pg. 329.

²⁵ Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft, A Discourse*, Ch. II, pg. 412.

Both Weyer and Scot shared with their Catholic counterparts the basic acceptance of the existence of demons. Virtually all Catholic authors of the sixteenth century assumed that demons were real, and used many of the same sources as Weyer and Scot to ground their beliefs. Pierre de Lancre, a judge and witch hunter in sixteenth century France was one such author. De Lancre sought a middle ground between “the Platonists who attribute everything to demons [and] the Pythagoreans who laugh at demons, magicians, and witches.” Instead, the true Christian holds “beliefs according to the Holy Scriptures and the doctrines of the Holy Fathers and confirm these apparitions, not from stories gathered from everywhere, but by visions of holy personages, by daily experience, and by the testimony and confessions of witches.”²⁶ The Catholic de Lancre held scripture and personal experiences as proof of witches, just as Weyer and Scot did. In this regard then, it is impossible to associate Weyer’s belief in demons with his other religious beliefs. As Richard Raiswell and Peter Dendle have argued, demonic possessions in Early Modern Europe were universally based on “biblically adduced symptoms,” and therefore existed within a common belief in the reality of demons across Catholic and Protestant confessional lines.²⁷ An implicit belief in the existence of demons therefore served as the common foundation for understanding possession in the works of Weyer, Scot, and Catholic authors.

While the reality of demons was shared widely across sixteenth century literature, the form which evil spirits took was broadly in dispute. One particularly important area of disagreement, at least when it came to the issue of possession, was the debate over whether demons could take on a physical form. Some have suggested that Weyer was in agreement with

²⁶ Qtd. in Pearl, “French Catholic Demonologists,” 461.

²⁷ Richard Raiswell and Peter Dendle, “Demon Possession in Anglo-Saxon and Early Modern England: Continuity and Evolution in Social Context,” *Journal of British Studies* 47(2008): 739.

those theologians who claimed that demons could interact with the world physically. For example, Eric Midelfort has argued that for “Weyer and for most Renaissance physicians, physical action by the devil was always a possibility.”²⁸ However, Weyer never makes such a clear link between demons and physicality in *De Praestigiis Daemonum*. At some points, he does seem to suggest that demons, or at least the most important demon, Satan, had taken on physical forms *in the past*. For example, Weyer claimed that “a large number of theologians believe that all the works involved in that temptation [on the Temple Mount] were accomplished corporally and in sensible form, and the Devil appeared to Christ in human form on that occasion.”²⁹ Such statements, which hint towards the possible corporeal existence of demons, seem to be outweighed in *De Praestigiis* by the numerous times that Weyer declares demons cannot interact physically with humans. One example comes early in the work, in the twenty fourth chapter of Book One, where Weyer argues that “a demon cannot lie with a woman and thereby engender offspring, for he does not have corporeal matter and sexual organs, which are given only to those living creatures who possess flesh, blood, spirit, and bone- which the demons lack.”³⁰ It would therefore appear to be an exaggeration to say that Weyer believed in the physical activity of demons. Instead, Weyer seems to reject any understanding of demons possessing a physical form.

²⁸ Midelfort, *History of Madness*, 174. It is unclear if Midelfort is claiming that demons were themselves physical or could interact physically with the world. Either way, Weyer suggests that demons could not interact physically with the world since they themselves were not corporeal. Cf. *De Praestigiis Daemonum*, Book One, Ch. XXIV.

²⁹ Weyer, *De Praestigiis Daemonum*, Book Three, Ch. XII, pg. 197.

³⁰ Weyer, *De Praestigiis Daemonum*, Book One, Ch. XXIV, pg. 85.

Scot largely agreed with Weyer in the belief that demons lacked a physical form. Scot dismissed the traditional rhetoric of demonologists, who discussed demons as having corporeal bodies and doing physical tasks:

Jame Sprenger and Henrie Institor, in M. Mai. agreeing with Bodin, Barth. Spineus, Danaus, Erastus, Hemingius, and the rest, doo make a bawdie discourse; labouring to proove by a foolish kind of philosophie, that evill spirits cannot onlie take earthlie forms and shapes of men; but also counterfeit hearing, seeing, &c; and likewise, that they can eate and devoure meats, and also reteine, digest, and avoid the same: and finaliae, use diverse kinds of activities, but speciallie excell in the use and art of venerie [i.e. sexual activity].³¹

The above passage took direct aim at the “bawdie discourse” of the most renowned demonologists of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, most critically the authors of the widely read *Malleus Maleficarum*. Scot clearly recognized that traditional Catholic demonology relied on physically manifested demons, and rejected such a proposition outright. According to Euan Cameron, “Scot would allow that purely invisible and spiritual demons might enter people; but mocked the opinions of Catholics and ‘some Protestants . . . more grosse than another sort’ that demons [...] could assume physical bodies at will.”³² Scot would therefore appear to be agreeing with Weyer’s claim that demons do not “possess flesh, blood, spirirt, and bone.” This rejection of the physicality of demons, at least for Scot, was based firmly on his Protestant convictions. Many historians, among them Lyndal Roper, have highlighted the Protestant denial of the link between spirituality and physical objects as influencing every aspect of their thought, including

³¹ Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, Book Four, Ch. I, pg. 58.

³² Cameron, *Enchanted Europe*, 183. Scot often blurred the line between demons lacking physical forms and interacting with humans in a physical way. Cameron’s phrasing of spiritual demons entering physical human bodies is probably the best way to put it. As Raiswell and Dendle have noted, it was common in Protestant literature to state that demonic possession subverted both the conscience and physical bodies of humans. Cf. Raiswell and Dendle, 753.

their views on possession.³³ In the case of Reginald Scot, this is clearly manifested in his rejection of evil spirits having corporeal bodies. It is possible that Weyer's similar rejection of the physicality of demons was also based on more fundamental Protestant beliefs.

Even if Weyer was not influenced like Scot by Protestant theology in his rejection of physical demons, this rejection certainly marked him as different from the Catholic writers of the period. While for Weyer and Scot, possession was the case of a spiritual demon assaulting a physical human body, Catholic writers often tied possession to the physical assaults of demons. The usual form this took in the Catholic literature of the period was that the possessed was claimed to have ingested some demonic object. For example, the Jesuit Francesco Bencius told the story, quoted in Martin Del Rio's *Disquisitiones Magicae*, of a demoniac who vomited out the causes of his possession during the course of exorcism. Bencius claimed that the demoniac "vomited various pieces of foul dirt in the presence of people who were standing around and watching- women's hair, egg-shells, linen, cotton, hair-pins and tailor's needles, nail-clippings, fragments of bone and of iron tools."³⁴ While this is not the same as saying that devils take on corporeal form, there does appear to have been in Catholic literature more of a willingness to ascribe to demons physical abilities. This is particularly true in the case of Girolamo Menghi, who Armando Maggi claims viewed possession as "first and foremost a carnal" event.³⁵ Indeed in *Compendio Dell'arte Essorcistica*, Menghi claimed that "our cruel Enemy has become more

³³ Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality, and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 1994), 173-174, 177-180. Darren Oldridge has claimed that this did not always hold true for Anglicans in the sixteenth century, however. Cf. Oldridge, 113. Reginald Scot appears to be one of the exceptions to Oldridge's discussion.

³⁴ Qtd. in P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, *The Occult in Early Modern Europe: A Documentary History* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 45.

³⁵ Armando Maggi, *Satan's Rhetoric: A Study of Renaissance Demonology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 105.

powerful than ever against our human bodies.”³⁶ Unlike Weyer and Scot, who often placed the invasion of the human body by demons in spiritual terms, Catholics seemed more willing to accept a physical element to demonic possession. Even when a Catholic theologian accepted that demons did not possess physical bodies themselves, they still often claimed that demons experienced physical sensations through the possessed body. The friar Franciscus de Osuna, in *The Scourge of Devils*, defended the common Catholic practice of physically abusing a demoniac in order to injure the spirit possessing them: “It is no mistake to say that the devil has no body in which to suffer the physical pain inflicted on the possessed; but there is a sort of suffering which is appropriate to a spirit.”³⁷ While passages like the above might leave the corporeality of demons in doubt, this is only because it is dealing with the sticky issue of the relationship between demons and human bodies. The corporeality of demons was much more explicit in Catholic literature dealing with non-possession cases of human interaction with demons, like incubus and succubus, which is what Weyer and Scot seem to be addressing with their refutation of human-demon sexual relations. Therefore, while not definitive, Weyer’s belief that demons did not possess physical bodies would seem to align more closely with the Protestant understanding of demons, rather than the Catholic.

One way of understanding the differences between the Catholic emphasis on the physicality of demons, and the position of Scot and Weyer, is through their opposing explanations of how one came to be possessed. Weyer and Scot both agreed that possession occurs when a demon, in spiritual form, enters the body of the person they are trying to possess.

³⁶ Qtd. in Ibid.

³⁷ Taken from Euan Cameron, “Selected Extracts from the Works of the Theologians of the Roman Catholic Church in the Sixteenth Century,” in *CH 370: Inventing and Discovering ‘Popular Religion’* (2002), 3.

Weyer claimed that possession occurs when the demon begins “entering into or dashing against the body more rapidly than could be supposed.”³⁸ This only happens when “God gives his assent” because demons cannot “enter into the bodies of men or beasts at will.”³⁹ While this might appear to suggest that Weyer believed demons to enter the possessed physically, his previously noted assertion that demons lack “flesh, blood, spirirt, and bone” must be kept in mind. To see how one can both contend that demons lack corporeal form, yet still enter physical bodies, one must turn to the work of Reginald Scot. In rejecting the concept of demons possessing physical bodies, Scot specifically used the idea that demons *do* enter bodies to disprove their corporeal existence. Describing a text known as *The Lesser Key of Solomon*, which was used by Weyer in creating his list of the “False Monarchy of Demons” (*Pseudomonarchia Daemonum*), Scot claims “his philosophie is verie unprobable, for if the divell be earthie, he must needs be palpable; if he be palpable, he must needs kill them into whose bodies he entereth.”⁴⁰ For Scot, the very fact that demons enter into human bodies proves that they are not physical or “palpable.” It is likely that Weyer had a similar concept in mind when he was describing spiritual demons entering human bodies, since he also rejects the basic positions of *The Lesser Key of Solomon*.⁴¹

The idea that the transmission of demons into human bodies was solely a spiritual event was broadly rejected in Catholic texts of the sixteenth century. As has already been noted, Catholic demonologists often associated physical objects present inside the possessed person as

³⁸ Weyer, *De Praestigiis Daemonum*, Book Four, Ch. XVIII, pg. 330.

³⁹ Weyer, *De Praestigiis Daemonum*, Book Four, Ch. XVIII, pg. 329-330.

⁴⁰ Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft, A Discourse*, Ch. III, pg. 415.

⁴¹ As evidenced in his chosen title for the pieces as the “*False Monarchy*.”

evidence of demonic presence. Even when such objects were not mentioned, there was a broad emphasis on the physical transmission of demons into human bodies. Darren Oldridge provides the following overview of this traditional emphasis, shared by Catholics and many Anglicans in Early Modern England, on the corporeality of possession: “The intensely physical nature of possession was underlined by accounts of how unclean spirits invaded their hosts. [...] The belief that a demon needed to be in close proximity to its potential host meant that observers at exorcisms sometimes perceived themselves to be in danger. [...] Similarly, popular accounts tended to emphasize the corporeal presence of the devil or demons in the body of the afflicted person.”⁴² According to Oldridge, this description was shared widely by Catholics and Protestants, but seems to be rejected by Weyer and Scot. The important difference between the Catholic position on the transmission of demons and the position put forward by Scot and Weyer is that for Catholics, demons could be constrained to a physical setting. This did not always have to be a physical body. Girolamo Menghi notes that demons could be made to possess objects as well: “sometimes, using certain valueless trinkets, [demons] can easily be made into slaves and servants of magi and enchanter, and sometimes they are constrained, either in hair, or in nails, or in wax, or in lead, or they are bound with a weak piece of thread.”⁴³ The very idea that demons could somehow be contained within a physical object is rejected throughout *De Praestigiis Daemonum* and *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*. Therefore, Scot and Weyer’s understanding of possession as the transmission of spiritual demons into a physical human body rejected traditional Catholic discourses on possession.

⁴² Oldridge, *The Devil in Early Modern England*, 112.

⁴³ Qtd, in Michael Cole, "The Demonic Arts and the Origin of the Medium," *The Art Bulletin* 84, no. 4 (2002): 633.

The fact that Johann Weyer dismissed the concept of physical demons is further evidenced in his understanding of what constitutes the power of demons. For Weyer, demons could claim very little power within God's creation. As Patrick Vandersmeersch has correctly noted, "devils, as mere creatures, had only limited power on human beings" in Weyer's writing.⁴⁴ In *De Praestigiis Daemonum*, these powers were mostly limited to "forming apparitions and impressing them upon physical spirits of the soul."⁴⁵ According to Weyer, the demoniac did not actually experience anything "real" while undergoing possession, but instead the "sentient soul is imprinted with these forms as though with the things themselves."⁴⁶ While he does not use the word himself, Weyer was clearly describing "delusion". In such a worldview, demons enjoyed a false power over those they possessed. Hans de Waardt would therefore appear to be correct in claiming that, for Weyer, "demons are not in control; it is human stupidity that gives their monarchy the pretense of reality."⁴⁷ This of course had strong implications for Weyer's understanding of possession. In a world where demons' powers are limited mostly to deception, possession is perhaps best understood as an extreme form of delusion. The torment was still real for the possessed, but Weyer seems to imply that it has no real manifestation outside the mind of the demoniac. Therefore, demonic power for Weyer seems to be limited to deception.

Like Weyer, Scot believed that the power of demons is limited mostly to deception. Like Weyer, Scot implied that spirits interact with humans mostly through the mental faculties, and

⁴⁴ Vandermeersch, 352.

⁴⁵ Weyer, *De Praestigiis Daemonum*, Book Three, Ch.VII, pg. 188. See the entire chapter for Weyer's understanding of demonic power.

⁴⁶ Weyer, *De Praestigiis Daemonum*, Book Three, Ch.VII, pg. 189.

⁴⁷ Waardt, 389.

therefore not in any physical form. For example, Scot claimed in *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* that the Holy Spirit and evil spirits are the same in the way they interact with humans. He wrote that, “this word [Spirit] dooth signifie a secret force and power, wherewith our minds are mooved and directed; if unto holie things, then is it the motion of the holie spirit, of the spirit of Christ and of God: if unto evill things, then is it the suggestion of the wicked spirit, of the divell, and of Satan.”⁴⁸ The main role of devils in Scot’s worldview was to deceive and tempt the godly, and therefore the truly pious would be ever vigilant of any demon-inspired thoughts.⁴⁹ Being possessed, therefore, implied being “moved and directed” towards “evill things” for Scot. This can be understood as a type of “mini-possession”: the demon is affecting the mind of someone, but they are not fully “demoniacs”. This is not to say that Scot and Weyer perceived of possession as some type of psychological state, but rather that possession was brought about through a deception of the mind rather than the experience of the body.

This particular emphasis on the power of demons to deceive through possession appears to have been a particularly Protestant obsession. Oldridge, for example, has noted that the Protestant call to be vigilant of Satan’s influence has many parallels with their descriptions of possession. Oldridge claims that it “seems reasonable to view the 'demonic' thoughts which assailed godly Protestants as a kind of possession experience. This is certainly how they were described by those who received them.”⁵⁰ Within the Protestant context, “possession” could therefore be broadly construed to mean any demonic involvement in leading people away from the true faith. Euan Cameron has described the extreme form this took in Martin Luther’s

⁴⁸ Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft, A Discourse*, Ch. VI, pg. 460.

⁴⁹ Raiswell and Dendle, 753.

⁵⁰ Oldridge, 123.

thought, where theological opponents like Andreas Karlstadt were thought to be possessed. According to Luther and other reformers, “if justification was effective through faith, then filling someone with false faith represented the worst form of ‘possession.’”⁵¹ Weyer and Scot’s casting of demonic power into the realm of the mind would therefore seem to be part of this Protestant discourse. The type of possession that people faced in the works of Weyer and Scot was not the physical torment described by Catholic demonologists, but the physiological deceptions and torments that the “godly” Protestants avoided.

Another important element to emphasize in Weyer and Scot’s limited understanding of demonic power is the role ascribed to Satan and God in possession. There has been some confusion in the historiography on this point. Eric Midelfort has, wrongly, argued that Satan is the fundamental driver of possession in Weyer’s thought. In *A History of Madness in Sixteenth-Century Germany*, Midelfort argues that “Weyer, in fact, represented at its fullest Lutheran pitch the conclusion that the Devil was overwhelmingly powerful and deceptive.”⁵² Contrary to Midelfort’s claim, Weyer does not emphasize the “overwhelming power” of the devil when it comes to possession, but rather the power of God in “assenting” to possession. Striking an almost Calvinist tone, Weyer claimed that God “confines Satan so narrowly within these limits that he can do nothing, even to beasts, without God’s assent, much less to men.”⁵³ This emphasis on the sovereignty of God in all matters, including possession, would have been highly appealing to the Calvinist Scot. Indeed, Euan Cameron has claimed that Scot fundamentally

⁵¹ Euan Cameron, “Angels, Demons, and Everything in Between: Spiritual Beings in Early Modern Europe,” in *Angels of Light?: Sanctity and the Discernment of Spirits in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Clare Copeland and Jan Machielsen (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 41.

⁵² Midelfort, *History of Madness*, 200.

⁵³ Weyer, *De Praestigiis Daemonum*, Book One, Ch. XXIV, pg. 81.

believed that “the devil, whether understood as singular or plural, was a creature of God, whose evil God used for God’s own good purposes.”⁵⁴ If anything, Scot seemed to take Weyers

position that God allows Satan to possess humans even further:

Neither is Gods omnipotencie hereby qualified, but the divels impotencie manifested, who hath none other power, but that which God from the beginning hath appointed unto him, consonant to his nature and substance. He may well be restrained from his power and will, but beyond the same he cannot passe, as being Gods minister, no further but in that which he hath from the beginning enabled him to doo: which is, that he being a spirit, may with Gods leave and ordinance violate and corrupt the spirit and will of man: wherein he is verie diligent.⁵⁵

Scot was clearly presenting the fundamental Calvinist emphasis on God’s sovereignty; all of God’s creation, including the devil, is under his control. Therefore, Satan requires both God’s “leave” and “ordinance” to enter into humans (as “a spirit”). The fact that this position is so close to Weyer’s is strongly indicative of not only a “Protestant,” but a particular “Calvinist” slant to Weyer’s position.

A smaller part of Weyer’s conception of possession, which is nonetheless important, is the idea that many cases of possession have natural explanations. Weyer in no way claimed that *all* cases of possession had natural causes, but he did seem to suggest that misdiagnosed diseases account for many of the more unexplainable cases. At the very beginning of Book Six of *De Praestigiis Daemonum*, Weyer laid out his understanding of these mistreated conditions: “If anyone is afflicted by some stubborn and uncommon disease which is not familiar to the untrained populace, and if he trusts in the pseudo-science of these men and seeks their advice, they will persuade him that the disease (which really arises from natural causes, and would not

⁵⁴ Cameron, *Enchanted Europe*, 180.

⁵⁵ Scot, *The Discoverie of Witches*, Book 5, Ch. V, pg. 80.

puzzle the more learned physicians) is *maleficium* or enchantment.”⁵⁶ While Weyer’s conception of *maleficium* extends beyond demonic possession, he follows the above passage with a dismissal of “those who employ exorcisms devoid of true efficacy,” which seem to indicate that he had possession in mind as at least one thing misdiagnosed as “stubborn and uncommon disease.”⁵⁷ This rationalization of possession is understandable given Weyer’s profession as a physician. According to Nadine Metzger, “rationalizing seems to be an activity very close the traditional self-concept of many physicians, both in pre-modern and modern medical practice.”⁵⁸ Perhaps that explains why a similar rationalization of possession as untreated disease is largely missing from both Scot’s *The Discoverie of Witches*, and much of the Catholic demonological literature of the time.⁵⁹ Regardless, the medical rationalization of possession is an important component of Weyer’s understanding of exorcism.

It is clear that Scot and Weyer presented fundamentally the same view of demons and possession. Both agreed that demons exist in some form. They also jointly suggested that demons only enjoy a “spiritual” rather than “corporeal” existence, which is partially evidenced through the manner in which one comes to be possessed. Both also portrayed the experience of possession in delusional terms, through which the power of demons is largely limited to deception. Scot and Weyer also rely on the Calvinist emphasis on God’s sovereignty to claim that God allows Satan to possess humans. However, only Weyer’s *De Praestigiis Daemonum*

⁵⁶ Weyer, *De Praestigiis Daemonum*, Book Six, Ch. I, pg. 481.

⁵⁷ Weyer, *De Praestigiis Daemonum*, Book Six, Ch. I, pg. 482.

⁵⁸ Nadine Metzger, "Battling Demons with Medical Authority: Werewolves, Physicians and Rationalization," *History of Psychiatry* 24, no. 3 (2013): 342.

⁵⁹ Scot does echo Weyer’s concept of melancholy (i.e. a buildup of black bile) as the cause of some cases of perceived demonism, but extends the diagnosis only to witches and not to those in need of exorcism. Cf. Scot, *The Discoverie of Witches*, Book 3, Ch. 8, pg. 40.

included a rational, medical explanation for *some* possessions. Perhaps more importantly for understanding Weyer's underlying religious proclivities, Scot and Weyer jointly rejected the dominant Catholic narrative of possession, which emphasized the corporeal nature of possession and the physical means of demonic transmission, while masking the idea of possession as delusion and God's sovereignty over demons. With these contrasting understandings of possession in mind, it is now possible to turn to Johann Weyer and Reginald Scot's take on the act of exorcism itself.

Weyer and Scot's Understanding of the Process of Exorcism

Due in part to the widespread fear of demons in the pre-modern period, the practice of exorcism had developed into a complex and intricate practice by the time Johann Weyer and Reginald engaged with it in the sixteenth century. Exorcism had been a critical part of the Christian tradition beginning with some of the earliest developments of the liturgy surrounding baptism.⁶⁰ Within the Roman Catholic tradition, the exorcist became a formal part of the church hierarchy as one of the four minor orders of the church.⁶¹ Through the latter half of the middle ages, exorcism began to be important in contexts outside of the human possession by demons. By the fifteenth century, official writings on exorcism considered it an ecclesiastical ritual that was meant to address the broader assault of evil forces against the godly, both against their persons and goods.⁶² But unofficial "exorcisms" were also being practiced by clergy and non-clergy alike in the early modern period, moving the practice of exorcism into increasingly more

⁶⁰ Cr. Stuart George Hall, *Doctrine and Practice in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 18-22. and Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church : History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Cambridge: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2009), 855-56.

⁶¹ Robbins, *The Encyclopedia of Witchcraft and Demonology*, 181.

⁶² Cameron, *Enchanted Europe*, 59.

intricate and quasi-liturgical forms. Weyer and Scot reacted to both these unofficial and official uses of exorcism throughout their works. In general, they rejected the types of exorcism practiced popularly and by Catholic authorities.

Both Weyer and Scot brought to their critique of exorcism, as it was commonly understood, a notion of what constituted the proper form that exorcism *should* take. For Johann Weyer, true exorcism was only successful if it was done in the name of Christ. He claimed that “one may rebuke [Satan] in accordance with Christ's teaching that believers will cast out demons in His name [...] expel the evil spirit in the name of Christ.”⁶³ While Catholic exorcists technically casted out demons in the name of Christ as well, Weyer makes it clear that the name of Christ alone is not enough to effectively exorcise. If calling on Christ to cast out demons was not done in true faith, or was obscured by a panoply of obtuse rituals, than the demon would not be truly exorcised. In order to argue this point, Weyer used the biblical narrative of Tobias learning exorcism from an angel: “But I say in reply that the demon was put to flight not so much by the smoke and fumes as by the chastity of the young Tobias, and by the earnest prayers of Tobias and wife [...] to a merciful God. But the practices of antiquity must not dictate to the truth. It is faith, a spiritual entity that banishes the demon; it is also the word of God, working by the spirit.”⁶⁴ Weyers argument is clear. Using the word of God, calling on the name of Christ in faith, was the biblically sanctioned form of exorcism. The fact that Weyer cited Tobias to do so is critical. In responding to their Protestant supporters, Catholic polemicists had long been using the angel’s instructions to Tobias to defend the practice of exorcism based around the ritualistic use of holy items. The fact that Weyer used the same story to emphasize the need of faithful

⁶³ Weyer, *De Praestigiis Daemonum*, Book Five, Ch. XXXVII, pg. 464.

⁶⁴ Weyer, *De Praestigiis Daemonum*, Book Five, Ch. XXI, pg. 427.

prayer in exorcism should be read as an attack on the Catholic understanding of exorcism.

Weyer further rejected the “practices of antiquity” held by the Catholic church. Like Weyer, Scot understood the proper exorcism to be based around the idea of faithful prayer. In Book Fifteen of *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, Scot provides examples of common Catholic interpretations of bible passages in support of exorcism. He concludes, however, that the practices based around the use of “holy” objects portrayed in the Bible could not be true exorcisms because “neither was there fasting and praier, without which that kind of divels could not be cast out.”⁶⁵ Scot therefore seemed to be similar to Weyer in directly targeting the Catholic interpretation of scripture in support of exorcisms requiring complex ritual, instead arguing that prayer alone was what required to cast out demons.

When compared to the common Catholic understanding of exorcism at the end of the sixteenth century, Scot and Weyer’s idea of true exorcism could not be more different. For Catholic confessional writers, exorcism would only be successful if it involved some physical aspect. Unlike Weyer’s understanding, which required only the “spiritual entity” of faith, the Catholic conception of exorcism involved a physical ritual which combined prayers with the use of consecrated objects and interaction between the possessed and the exorcist. The Franciscan exorcist Fransiscus de Osuna is typical of this understanding of exorcism. In *The Scourge of the Devil*, de Osuna defended the beating of demoniacs to drive out demons, saying “The objector might regard all this as futile, and say that the exorcist ought to omit these things [...] such objectors do not know or wish to know for what reason exorcisms are offensive to the devil.”⁶⁶ For Catholic polemicists like de Osuna, the rituals employed by the exorcist had a tangible effect

⁶⁵ Scot, *The Discoverie of Witches*, Book Fiftenn, Ch. 25, pg. 373.

⁶⁶ Taken from Cameron, "Selected Extracts," 3.

in punishing demons to drive them away from the possessed. Other Catholic authors defended the physical aspects of traditional Catholic because they believed that God had particularly instilled in the church power over demons. Albrecht Hunger, in *Theological Theses Concerning Magic*, claimed:

For since the Church from Christ's authority has power over demons, it is surely of great value for resisting malign spirits and their various assaults to use the words and exorcisms instituted by the Church; inasmuch as it is not at all vain to think that by the authority and reverence of the Church, God may either immediately by himself, or by means of his angels respond to such an invocation.⁶⁷

Hunger is willing to take a nuanced approach to exorcism, recognizing that it is God (or his immediate agents) who ultimately exorcise demons. Nonetheless, he insists that they respond because of the “authority and reverence” which God has invested in his church. This is the fundamental difference between Scot and Weyer's view on an effective exorcism, which centered solely on faithful prayer, and the Catholic view which included the traditional rituals with prescribed prayer.

This disagreement over the proper form of exorcism reveals something fundamental about Weyer's beliefs. Peter Underwood's claim that Weyer's emphasis on prayer in exorcism was fundamentally a Protestant position appears to be largely true.⁶⁸ Particularly, the petitionary aspect of Weyer's emphasis on prayer is most comprehensible within a Protestant understanding of the ways in which God interacts with the world. As Keith Thomas notes in *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Protestants could no longer command the demon in exorcism as Catholics had before them. According to Thomas, “a clergyman could no longer command a spirit to depart;

⁶⁷ Taken from Ibid., 17.

⁶⁸ Peter Underwood, *Exorcism!* (London: Hale, 1990), 24.

he could only entreat God to show his mercy by taking the devil away.”⁶⁹ Perhaps more importantly, however, Weyer used a fundamentally Protestant method to argue that exorcism could only be accomplished through prayer. At the end of his chapter on proper exorcism, Weyer concluded that “we see more clearly than by the light of the noon-day sun that this form of cure, supported upon the foundation of Sacred Scripture, involves no suspicion of error, no idolatrous or blasphemous belief.”⁷⁰ From any other author in the sixteenth century, this would clearly be a Protestant argument: true practice could be based on *sola scriptura* and not on the “idolatrous” traditions currently practiced in the church. Therefore, Weyer’s claim that the only true exorcism was grounded on faith and enacted through prayer appears to be a fundamentally Protestant belief.

Beyond Weyer’s basic understanding of a true exorcism through prayer, *De Praestigiis Daeemonum* also included a fundamental critique of how words were used in the common Catholic exorcisms practiced in the sixteenth century. Since prayer served as the central focus of Weyer’s understanding of true exorcism, the words used in that prayer were important. Using the scriptural passage of Matthew 6:7-8, Weyer criticized the “empty words” of the ritualized Catholic exorcism. Weyer asked, “If the exorcist sometimes does not understand what he reads, and only speaks with the tongue, how can an 'Amen' be truly appended to his prayer?”⁷¹ Weyer particularly targeted the hidden “Names of God” used in several exorcisms, claiming that

⁶⁹ Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Scribner, 1971), 479. Note that this goes against W.H. Trethowa’s claim that any exorcist must have “a strong if not absolute belief in his powers to bring about that for which he strives.” W. H. Trethowan, “Exorcism: A Psychiatric Viewpoint,” *Journal of Medical Ethics* 2, no. 3 (1976): 128. It is clear in both Weyer and Scot’s treatment of exorcism that the minister aiding the possessed is meant to ask God for assistant, and does not have authority in themselves.

⁷⁰ Weyer, *De Praestigiis Daeemonum*, Book Five, Ch. XXXVIII, pg. 467.

⁷¹ Weyer, *De Praestigiis Daeemonum*, Book Five, Ch. XXIII, pg. 432.

exorcists were truly naming pagan Gods and that “demons often lie concealed under the cloak of such words.”⁷² Part of this critique of the use of words in traditional exorcism involved a rejection of the liturgical elements of Catholic exorcism. Catholic exorcism in the sixteenth century involved a mix of elements drawn from traditional liturgies and popular beliefs.⁷³ While Weyer attacked many different liturgical elements found in contemporary exorcisms, he had particularly harsh words for the *seinckmiss* mass used in exorcisms, because it hid the power of God over demons by acting as “an irrevocable decree.”⁷⁴ In general, Weyer shows a distaste throughout *De Praestigiis* for formulaic approaches to exorcism. Instead, words must “correspond to the stated object,” which can be guaranteed by using “the words of Christ, of His Apostles or Disciples or even the ministers of the primitive church.”⁷⁵ The meaningful use of words was therefore central to Weyer’s understanding of a prayer centered exorcism.

Reginald Scot shared with Johann Weyer a basic understanding of how words work in the context of exorcism. Like Weyer, Scot is quick to dismiss the inherent power of certain formulas of exorcism. Scot, however, seems to take his critique a step further by dismissing the power of words all together. Scot wrote: “Whence commeth the force of such words as raise the dead, and command divels? If sound doo it, then may it be doone by a taber and a pipe, or any other instrument that hath no life. If the voice doo it, then may it be doone by any beasts or birds. If words, then a parret may doo it [etc...] But all this stuffe is vaine and fabulous.”⁷⁶ Scot’s

⁷² Weyer, *De Praestigiis Daemonum*, Book One, Ch. VI, pg. 17.

⁷³ Cf. Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, Canto ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 73.

⁷⁴ Weyer, *De Praestigiis Daemonum*, Book Five, Ch. XXV, pg. 438.

⁷⁵ Weyer, *De Praestigiis Daemonum*, Book Five, Ch. XL, pg. 470.

⁷⁶ Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, Book Fifteen, Ch. 29, pg. 377.

criticism the inherent power of words was typical of sixteenth century Protestant rejections of Catholic rituals. Protestants argued that the words of Catholic rituals, including exorcism, had no power in themselves.⁷⁷ Instead, demons only sometimes *appear* to obey exorcism formulas in order to deceive the exorcist and lead them further into wrong beliefs. A particularly poignant example of this Protestant line of rhetoric in *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* comes when Scot invokes Weyer's work in order to ridicule Catholic confidence in conjuration formula. Scot particularly targeted the famous demonologist Jean Bodin, writing, "And yet J. Bodin confesseth, that he is afraid to read such conjurations, as John Wierus reciteth ; least (belike) the divell would come up [...] I for my part have read a number of their conjurations, but never could see anie divels of theirs, except it were in a plaie."⁷⁸ The fact that Scot cites Weyer here is telling. Clearly Scot felt that by including conjuration formula in *De Praestigiis*, Weyer agreed that words held no inherent power of demons. That Scot's position was fundamentally based on his Protestant faith is highly suggestive of Weyer's own beliefs.

To see just how "Protestant" Weyer's rejection of the inherent power of words in exorcism really was, it is critical to understand the Catholic position on the formula of exorcism. Technically, Weyer and Scot's rejection any inherent power within the words of exorcism was shared by their theologically trained Catholic opponents.⁷⁹ Even the most nuanced Catholic theologian, however, still believed that because God ordained certain rituals and formulas in the church, those words had power. Johannes Nider, in his *Formicarius*, used no less a figure than

⁷⁷ Cf. Cameron, "Angels, Demons, and Everything in Between," 42-43. Hilarie Kallendorf too has noted, that at least rhetorically speaking, exorcisms were focused more on persuasion than relying on their inherent power to command. Cf. Hilarie Kallendorf, "The Rhetoric of Exorcism," *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 23, no. 3 (2005): 215.

⁷⁸ Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, Book Fifteen, Ch. XXVI, pg. 374.

⁷⁹ Cameron, *Enchanted Europe*, 60.

Thomas Aquinas to show that simply speaking the words of exorcism was powerful, because those words had been instituted by God.⁸⁰ Similarly, Girolamo Menghi's sixth exorcism in *Flagellum Daemonum* commanded the exorcist to tell the demon the words he is about to speak "are a powerful fire, which will burn you in a horrid and effective way."⁸¹ For many Catholic authors, the words of exorcism were an exception, along with the sacraments, of the general rule that formulas were not inherently powerful. Martin Delrio, for example, spends a large chunk of his *Six Books of Disquisitions on Magic* arguing that formula do not work *ex opere operato*, concluding that "Therefore the formula is vain. This argument has force against all the rest." He immediately follows this claim, however, with the following:

However, it does not have force against the forms of exorcisms instituted by the Church: because God directed the Church in these, and supports the wishes of his spouse in these things: such that prayers of the Church of this sort, by the power of the name of Christ, which is invoked and inserted, work both as cause and sign at once, in the same way that the sign of the cross is formed and pronounced.⁸²

Delrio's claim that the exorcisms of the Catholic Church work "both as cause and sign at once" runs directly counter to Weyer and Scot's rejection of the intrinsic power of words in exorcism. This only further suggests that Weyer's critique of exorcism formula should be understood in a Protestant context.

Beyond the words of exorcism, Weyer and Scot also appear to critique the widespread Catholic use of physical objects as part of, and targets of, the exorcism ritual. In terms of items being used by priests as part of exorcism, Weyer makes it clear that the objects often employed

⁸⁰ Ibid., 124.

⁸¹ Qtd. in Maggi, *Satan's Rhetoric*, 119. Euan Cameron agrees that "The exorcisms in Menghi's *Flagellum Daemonum* must have reinforced, rather than diminished, the impression that the Church believed in the power of words and rituals to heal all ills." Cameron, *Enchanted Europe*, 235-236.

⁸² Taken from Cameron, "Selected Extracts," 23.

in this manner accomplish nothing. Weyer provides the example of a “self-loving priest” who used “a particle of the ‘Holy Cross’” in the process of exorcising a man, and yet failed to actually cast out the demon. Weyer draws from this story the conclusion that “under the appearance of these ludicrous objects the Devil often works his mocking illusions; thus it happens [they claim] that all power proceeds from some such artificial object [...] those who attribute such miraculous force and power to a mere figure or scripture or drawing [...] are liars and fools.”⁸³ Continuing with his broader theme that true exorcisms only come about through prayer, Weyer appeared to reject the use of “artificial objects” in exorcism. In a slightly different vein, Weyer also rejected any sort of exorcism which purported to exorcise physical objects themselves. One of the most vivid examples from the sixteenth century would have been the exorcism of town bells, which were thought to curse the town’s agriculture if they were possessed by demons. Weyer explicitly rejects this practice in *De Praestigiis*:

The simple are convinced that, unless tower bells are purified and sanctified by holy Baptism [...] and by exorcisms (which [they claim] should be employed only when the evil spirit is to be thrown down from his abode, and only by those who have the singular gift of putting him to flight) [...] only] then will those inanimate, dead objects will be removed from the tower of the devil.⁸⁴

Weyer did not deny exorcisms completely, but he did limit their usefulness to cases of demons possessing humans. Therefore, Weyer believed that objects served no part in the process of, or as the targets of, exorcism.

Yet again, Scot position on objects being used in, or as the recipients of, exorcism broadly matches Weyer’s. Scot decried the “innumerable popish exorcismes, and conjurations

⁸³ Weyer, *De Praestigiis Daemonum*, Book Five, Ch. XVIII, pg. 417. The only exception to this is a strange section where Weyer seems to defend the concept of “Holy Water,” although he does mention that “in the Greek Church the water is condemned as superstitious.” Cf. Book Five, Ch. XXI, pg. 427-428.

⁸⁴ Weyer, *De Praestigiis Daemonum*, Book One, Ch. IX, pg. 23.

for hearbs and other things,” claiming that they had no real effect.⁸⁵ Scot went on to list every single object which Catholics felt necessary to exorcise: “neither water, nor fier, nor bread, nor wine, nor wax, nor tallowe, nor church, nor churchyard, nor altar, nor altar cloath, nor ashes, nor coles, nor belles, nor bell ropes, nor copes, nor vestments, nor oile, nor salt, nor candle, nor candlesticke, nor beds, nor bedstaves, &c ; are without their forme of conjuration.”⁸⁶ Scot not only argued that such exorcisms did not accomplish anything tangible, but also seemed to be implying that objects like these did not require any exorcisms to begin with. Such a position would have no doubt been influenced by Scot’s Protestant leanings. As Euan Cameron has demonstrated, there was a fundamental divide between Catholics and Protestants in the sixteenth century over the “use of verbal formulae and physical materials to humiliate and torment evil spirits in the name of God,” with Protestants denying that either was useful.⁸⁷ Such a critique, while shared broadly across Protestant circles, was particularly prominent in the Reformed Tradition. The Reformed tradition’s rejection of the link between the spiritual and physical held true even in the case of objects being used during exorcism. For example, Ludwig Lavater, the son-in-law of Heinrich Bullinger, devoted a large part of his book on ghosts to refuting the Catholic use of consecrated objects during exorcism.⁸⁸ The fact that Weyer shared with Scot the refutation of objects in and for exorcism suggests that he too was influenced by this Reformed theology.

⁸⁵ Scot, *The Discoverie of Witches*, Book Twelve, Ch. XVIII, pg. 218.

⁸⁶ Scot, *The Discoverie of Witches*, Book Fifteen, Ch. XXVIII, pg. 428.

⁸⁷ Cameron, *Enchanted Europe*, 237.

⁸⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, 206,

Weyer's proximity to Reformed theology on the issue of exorcised objects can be seen in the way his work contrasts with contemporary Catholic demonologists. One prominent example is Albrecht Hunger, whose *Theological Theses Concerning Magic* was a powerful refutation of the Protestant narrative of exorcism. Hunger did not "assent to the heretics who remove all supernatural power from exorcisms and all consecrated and blessed things."⁸⁹ For Hunger, the traditional practices of the Church had always included the use of holy objects, which were only made holy through the process of exorcism. At times, Hunger takes this position to the extreme, claiming that exorcised objects are as powerful as the blood of Christ: "Indeed, rather whatever of these things we have, exorcized and consecrated in true piety, may very much more break the power of sin, than the blood of Christ does amongst [the heretics]: since they do not only deny it the power of piety, but do not have its appearance, resisting the catholic truth."⁹⁰ This is a clear refutation of the position of Weyer and Scot as presented above: not only can objects be exorcised, they are able to "break the power of sin" once exorcised! It would be illogical to assume that Weyer was influenced by this Catholic tradition in crafting his views on exorcism.

Weyer's critique of the traditional view of exorcism extended beyond the process of exorcism to include those who were themselves exorcists: the clergy. Weyer argues, often in a tongue and cheek manner, that those priests who exorcized were at best scam artists, and at worst, agents of Satan. He went so far as to title one chapter of *De Praestigiis Daemonum*, "A Demonstration that the Devil is an Exorcist."⁹¹ The fact that the activity of these clerical exorcists was tied to the work of Satan for Weyer was largely due to the immoral behavior

⁸⁹ Qtd. in Ibid., 230.

⁹⁰ Taken from Cameron, "Selected Extracts," 18.

⁹¹ Weyer, *De Praestigiis Daemonum*, Book Five, Ch. XXVII, pg. 441-446.

demonstrated by these men. In a chapter on the “Grave Abuses Committed by the Common Run of Priest-Exorcists,” Weyer described these clergy as “bold, rash, and inept individuals- professedly men of the Church, but only too worldly in the filthiness of their lives (just the sort whose services are needed on stage by the chief actor [i.e. Satan] in this drama).” Weyer concludes that “these exorcists should be classified with the enchanters.”⁹² One of the more extreme examples of the immoral behavior of exorcists which Weyer provided in *De Praestigiis* is a story witnessed by Weyer’s brother-in-law of a priest who exorcised a man in Maubeuge. Weyer described the exorcist’s actions in highly unflattering terms: “The priest approached the man with his exorcisms- which were indeed ridiculous, stupid, and inept [...] the exorcist’s questions [of the demon] were such that they seemed prompted by a desire to insult certain people or take vengeance upon them; they were certainly stupid, unworthy, and intolerable.”⁹³ While Weyer does not deny the reality of the demoniac’s possession, he clearly feels that the exorcist was immoral in the way he approached his task. It is perhaps with such stories of corrupt clerical exorcists in mind that Weyer claims priests are incorrectly “convinced that the task of driving out demons by exorcism belongs to them alone.”⁹⁴ Since prayer is available to all in faith, and prayer serves as the foundation of proper exorcism, all were able to exorcise in Weyer’s thought. Supposedly citing the Apostle James the Lesser, Weyer claimed that “the exorcist is not ordained, for this struggle is one of good will, and of God’s grace obtained through

⁹² Weyer, *De Praestigiis Daemonum*, Book Five, Ch. XXIII, pg. 431.

⁹³ Weyer, *De Praestigiis Daemonum*, Book Four, Ch. XXVII, pg. 351. Weyer also provides “The Famous Story of the Exorcism of the Spirit of Orleans,” in which a particularly greedy group of Franciscan friars scammed the mayor of Orleans into believing they were communicating with his dead wife. Cf. Book Five, Ch. XXVI, pg. 439-441.

⁹⁴ Weyer, *De Praestigiis Daemonum*, Book Five, Ch. XXIV, pg. 435.

Christ by the intervention of the Holy Spirit.”⁹⁵ Therefore, Weyer explicitly denied the ordained order of exorcists in the Catholic Church, and claimed that all the faithful were able to exorcise through prayer.

As is many other aspects of their conceptions of exorcism, Johann Weyer and Reginald Scot were in unison in condemning clerical exorcists. Scot’s *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* was largely dedicated to exposing the lies of those who claimed the ability to control demons, and the clergy were inextricably lumped in with witches in this regard. As Philip Almond has noted, “clerical conjurors, like their secular counterparts, were frauds” according to Scot.⁹⁶ In describing the error which Catholics commit when dealing with demons, Scot claimed, “the papists (I saie) have officers in this behalfe, which are called exorcists or conjurors, and they looke narrowlie to other cousenors, as having gotten the upper hand over them.”⁹⁷ Scot recognizes that Catholics consider exorcists “officers” of the Church, yet nonetheless lumps them in with other “cousenors,” Scots word for scam artists. As with other aspects of Scot’s understanding of exorcism, this rejection of the clerical position of exorcist is due to his broader Protestant theology. Leland Estes has identified “Scot’s unwavering anticlericalism” as the heart of *The Discoverie of Witches*, so it is no surprise that this would extend into his rejection of clerical exorcists.⁹⁸ This would have been particularly true given Scot’s Calvinist sympathies. Reformed theologians like Bucer, Zwingli, and Calvin were all more forceful than their Lutheran

⁹⁵ Weyer, *De Praestigiis Daemonum*, Book Five, Ch. XXXVIII, pg. 468.

⁹⁶ Philip C. Almond, *England's First Demonologist: Reginald Scot & 'the Discoverie of Witchcraft'* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 161.

⁹⁷ Scot, *The Discoverie of Witches*, Book Fifteen, Ch. XXII, pg. 365.

⁹⁸ Estes, 447.

counterparts in writing off the ordained exorcist as a “papal relic.”⁹⁹ Once again, Weyer’s similarities with Scot’s position on this point are strongly suggestive of his broader religious views. Weyer’s rejection of the clerical order of exorcists is at least in agreement with a Calvinist worldview, if not influenced by it.

It is no surprise that Catholic theologians in the sixteenth century, often ordained clergy themselves, defended the official order of exorcists within the Church against writers like Weyer and Scot. Catholic polemicists argued that “exorcist” was a position ordained by Jesus himself, and therefore it was the Church’s right and duty to continue that tradition. Friedrich Förner, one of the most prominent Counter Reformation theologians, was one of many to take up this

argument. In *The Panoply of the Armor of God*, Förner argued:

Just as in human society officials are appointed to do justice against malefactors, so in the same way in his Church, since he disposed everything rightly and decently, Jesus Christ, son of God, also left to priests the power of driving out and destroying demons through exorcisms: this power, although those in the higher and more excellent degrees of perfection, bishops, priests, and deacons exercise it, nevertheless by reason of their order all those who are consecrated as exorcists by a bishop receive from the Lord, so that they are empowered to quell and coerce the furies of demons in the possessed and demoniacs by the authority divinely given to them.¹⁰⁰

Förner’s position is the antithesis of Weyer and Scot’s. Not everyone was able to cast out demons, God had appointed the particular clerical order of exorcist to perform this role, in addition to the other clergy. Clerical exorcists were not frauds, but the divinely appointed keeper of God’s justice against spiritual “malefactors.” Förner’s argument also demonstrates another

⁹⁹ Cf. Nischan, esp. 33.

¹⁰⁰ Taken from Cameron, "Selected Extracts," 31.

point. By the closing decades of the sixteenth century, when Weyer, Scot, and Förner were all writing, the kind of Erasmian-Catholicism which embraced a quasi-anticlericalism became less and less tenable, at least in published works. Catholic identity became intrinsically tied to the power of the church as expressed through the clergy, including ordained exorcists. Those who wish to attribute to Weyer an Erasmian understanding of Catholicism would therefore need to ignore his rejection of the ordained order of exorcists.

The final critical element in Johann Weyer's understanding of exorcism was the role of witchcraft in both possession and the process of exorcism itself. Given that *De Praestigiis Daemonum* is concerned fundamentally with witches, Weyer's understanding of exorcism contained therein was intimately related to his notion of witchcraft. As Ann Goldberg has noted, "the epidemic of witch-hunting coincided in time with the rise of demonic possession, and the two phenomena were partially connected."¹⁰¹ The main way in which the two were connected conceptually, including in *De Praestigiis*, was through the idea that witches could cause possession by instructing their demonic partners to possess their enemies. According to Wolfgang Behringer, the view that witches caused possession was enshrined liturgically within the official Catholic exorcism rites, where the exorcist was instructed to ask the possessing demon if they were sent there by a witch, and the name of said witch.¹⁰² Weyer specifically

¹⁰¹ Ann Goldberg, "Review of *a History of Madness in Sixteenth-Century Germany* by H. C. Erik Midelfort," *Journal of Social History* 34, no. 1 (2000): 246. According to Jonathan Pearl, the connection between the ideas of witchcraft and possession was particularly strong in France. Jonathan L. Pearl, "'A School for the Rebel Soul': Politics and Demonic Possession in France," *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 16, no. 2/3 (1989): 291. Richard Raiswell and Peter Dendle have also noted the importance of witchcraft for the understanding of possession in Early Modern England. Cf. Raiswell and Dendle, "Demon Possession in Anglo-Saxon and Early Modern England: Continuity and Evolution in Social Context," 759.

¹⁰² Wolfgang Behringer, *Witchcraft Persecutions in Bavaria: Popular Magic, Religious Zealotry and Reason of State in Early Modern Germany* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 166. D.P. Walker also has highlighted the process of discerning the source of possession in Catholic exorcisms, but claims that exorcists were expressly forbidden from inquiring after the name of the witch. D. P. Walker, *Unclean Spirits: Possession and*

commented on this prevailing belief that the traditional approach to discerning witches involved interrogating the possessed. Using highly skeptical language, Weyer noted that exorcists “profess to be able (by means of their blasphemous exorcisms borrowed from every source), to force the very author of lies to appear in a mirror or an urn of water under the person who is responsible for the enchantment.”¹⁰³ Weyer clearly rejected this practice by calling it “blasphemous,” and seemed to possess skepticism that “the author of lies” would truthfully identify witches. Instead, Weyer suggests that the claims of the exorcists themselves are closer to what can accurately be called witchcraft. When describing the practice of so-called witchcraft, Weyer was always quick to highlight the role of supposed “exorcisms” in the process. For example, Weyer wrote that “to cause the appearance of a person surrounded by a thousand men or horses, a willow branch is used, one year old, and lopped off by a single blow, along with an exorcism, a recitation of barbaric names, and some absurd characters.”¹⁰⁴ Euan Cameron has argued that this is an example of the fundamentally Protestant understanding of what constitutes magic. Cameron claims that in Weyer’s thought, “a magician was someone who summoned or otherwise communicated with a demon using ritual forms in order to accomplish ‘some deluding, deceiving, or otherwise mocking task’.”¹⁰⁵ For Weyer, and Protestant minded interpreters of witchcraft in general, there seemed to be little difference between supposed witches who claimed to control demons and clerical exorcists who claimed the same. One can certainly see a similar view being expressed by Scot. Throughout *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, Scot recognized as the

Exorcism in France and England in the Late Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 9.

¹⁰³ Weyer, *De Praestigiis Daemonum*, Book Five, Ch. XI, pg 371.

¹⁰⁴ Weyer, *De Praestigiis Daemonum*, Book Five, Ch. XI, pg. 371.

¹⁰⁵ Cameron, *Enchanted Europe*, 192.

key element to Catholic exorcisms the ability to conjure demons, using the terms exorcist and conjurer interchangeably. He therefore claimed:

If we seriouslie behold the matter of conjuration, and the drift of conjurors, we shall find them, in mine opinion, more faultie than such as take upon them to be witches, as manifest offenders against the majestic of God, and his holie lawe, and as apparent violators of the lawes and quietnesse of this realme : although indeed they bring no such thing to passe, as is surmised and urged by credulous persons, couseners.¹⁰⁶

Like Weyer, Scot denied that exorcists could actually control demons, but argued that their very claim to do so makes them witches themselves. This would appear to confirm Euan Cameron's claim that Weyer's labeling of Catholic exorcists as "magicians" fits a broader Protestant trope.

Weyer's conception of possession and exorcism also played into his views on witchcraft in another unique way. The skepticism which is so often credited to Weyer in his treatment of witchcraft was based around his opinion that most witches were themselves victims of possession. This was not necessarily unique; others in the sixteenth century had claimed that both demoniacs and witches were possessed by devils, but only witches willingly accepted that possession.¹⁰⁷ Weyer is unique, however, in claiming that those who believed they committed witchcraft were unwilling *victims* of the devil. Robin Briggs has claimed that the central point of *De Praestigiis Daemonum* was that "witches were deluded, and possessed no power to achieve anything whatsoever. They should be seen as victims of the devil, not his agents, and as people who needed medical aid and religious instruction rather than punishment."¹⁰⁸ Weyer often used the language of possession to express this victimhood. For example, he claimed that, "you will see that [witches] have been harassed and possessed by a demon, and that in reality Satan

¹⁰⁶ Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, Book Fifteen, Ch. XXI, pg. 363.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Kaplan, "Possessed by the Devil?," 739.

¹⁰⁸ Robin Briggs, "By the Strength of Fancie': Witchcraft and the Early Modern Imagination," *Folklore* 115, no. 3 (2004): 262.

himself has been speaking within [them].”¹⁰⁹ This instance is one of the rare occasions where Weyer and Scot are in disagreement. Where Weyer argued witches should not be prosecuted because they are being deceived by demons, Scot claimed that witches should not be executed because they claimed powers which were impossible. Both were still closer to one another when compared with contemporary Catholic sources, however, which continued the tradition of claiming witches were able to curse and enchant through their willful cooperation with demons. Therefore, even in his view of witches as possessed, Weyer was closer to the Protestant arguments of Reginald Scot than Catholic theology.

In summation, one dominant theme runs throughout Weyer and Scot’s understandings of the proper exorcism process: exorcism as it had been performed traditionally and by sixteenth century Catholics was wrong. Where Catholic writers felt that the physical aspects of the traditional exorcism rite were the only effective method for casting out demons, Weyer and Scot instead emphasized faithful prayer as the only true way to exorcise demons. Furthermore, unlike Catholic claims that the words of exorcism had power in themselves over demons, Weyer and Scot emphasized that the words of exorcism held no intrinsic power. Similarly, while physical objects were critical to the Catholic understanding of exorcism, both as tools for the exorcist and targets for exorcism, Weyer and Scot denied that objects could be made holy through exorcism or had any real power over evil spirits. Even the foundation of proper Catholic exorcism, the ordained clerical exorcist, was mocked by Weyer and Scot as an impotent fraud. Both Weyer and Scot therefore seem to largely take their views on the true process of exorcism from the antithesis of contemporary Catholic theology. Anyone who wishes to claim that Weyer was any form of Catholic would need to account for this fact.

¹⁰⁹ Weyer, *De Praesitigiis Daemonum*, Book Six, Ch. XXIV, pg. 555.

Conclusion

When it came to the issues of possession and exorcism, Johann Weyer and Reginald Scot clearly straddled a divide between tradition and novelty. On the one hand, they clearly agreed with Christians since antiquity that possession was a serious problem facing society, and viewed exorcism as a viable means to alleviate it. At the same time, they departed from the traditional Catholic mode of understanding possession and exorcism in almost every perceivable way. Nonetheless, they seem to have shared with each other roughly the same view of what it meant to be possessed and the proper way to address it. What conclusions can we draw from these similarities? For one, historians studying Weyer and Scot should recognize the limit of their skepticism when it came to demons. Both clearly still accepted the reality of a demonic world, and their views on exorcism show they took that reality seriously. Furthermore, those interested in Weyer and Scot's treatments of witchcraft should incorporate a more nuanced understanding of how both men understood the spiritual world. As the above discussion of exorcism demonstrates, both men took a nuanced approach to evil spirits that can only be understood when every facet of their thought is considered. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the similarities between Weyer's beliefs about exorcism and Scot's beliefs should force historians to reevaluate Weyer's broader religious allegiances. If Scot's unabashed Calvinism is both widely recognized and fundamental to his view of exorcism, that suggests that Weyer's virtually identical view should also be considered in a Calvinist context. More research should be done on how Weyer treated exorcism outside of *De Praestigiis*, especially in his personal letters, to confirm this conclusion. Nonetheless, Johann Weyer's *De Praestigiis Daemonum* and Reginald Scot's *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* present remarkably similar treatments of possession and exorcism.

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