The Anatomy of Possession: Witchcraft and Religious Enthusiasm in 17th Century New England

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Introduction: “Spirit Possession”

On Monday, October 30, 1671, Elizabeth Knapp, a sixteen-year-old girl living in Groton, fell into fits. According to her pastor and master, Samuel Willard, she had acted in an ominous manner, first exhibiting “sudden shrieks” and “immoderate and extravagant laughter,” and soon after displaying even more disturbing behavior. Willard wrote:

In the evening, a little before she went to bed, sitting by the fire, she cried out, oh my legs! And clapped her hands on them, immediately, oh my breast! and removed her hands thither, and forthwith, oh I am strangled, and put her hands on her throat: those that observed her could not see what to make of it; whether she was in earnest of dissembled, and in this manner they left her (excepting the person that lay with her) complaining of her breath being stopped. 1)

After this, Elizabeth’s afflictions became more and more violent, and even six men could not hold her in her extremity. At last, the devil within her made “more full discovery of himself,” according to Willard. The voice, which they thought came from the devil in her body, spoke to Willard with improper and blasphemous expressions such as “oh, you are a great rogue.” Willard responded to the voice and it rejoined, which astonished those who were present. 2)

This is one of the most detailed descriptions of possession in early New England. Moreover, this is most quintessentially diabolic. Willard, the observer and recorder, thought Knapp’s unusual behavior was an authentic possession by the devil. In his narrative of her afflicions, he concluded that Knapp’s possession was not fake but real, and not natural but diabolical. 3)

Historians in studies of colonial New England have also interpreted this example of a troubled girl in various ways. John Demos has a psychoanalytical approach to this case. Based on

the backgrounds of Elizabeth Knapp, Samuel Willard, and their families, Demos concludes Knapp’s psychological conflict manifested itself in a physical manner: exhibitionism, dependency, rage, and perhaps some erotic motives. Carol Karlsen, from the viewpoint of women’s studies, explains that Knapp had ambivalent emotions. Knapp accepted the Puritan explanations about her troubles, and appreciated her pastor’s concerns, but at the same time she envied Willard’s promising life and material success that were not allowed women at that time. In the voice of the devil, she was able to show her resentment and to rail at him. Richard Godbeer focuses more on the culpability of Knapp’s side, and interprets the situation as Knapp’s confusion between the sense of innocence and guilty as the possessed, believing that she would be innocent without denying her guilt.

Each of those aspects has a persuasive point, but each explanation seems to put too much emphasis on Knapp and the problems that she had as a troubled juvenile. Instead, I would like to place this phenomenon, possession in 17th century New England, in the tradition of what religious historian Clarke Garrett calls “spirit possession.” This term can incorporate a variety of beliefs and behaviors somehow related to religion, such as vision, prophecy, hysteria, and/or enthusiasm. Then “spirit possession” can be defined as “a kind of spectacular body language for expressing convictions or emotions too profound, too painful, or too dangerous to be expressed verbally.”

What is important is that “spirit possession” has its own history. Authenticity of “spirit possession” as unusual physical afflictions depends on the expectations and preconceptions in the social and historical setting. In the Christian tradition, there are no neutral spirits, so if a spirit is found not divine, it automatically means the spirit is satanic. If people believed there was some spiritual power working on something or somebody, it was important to recognize to whom the power belonged, God or the devil. Since Willard concluded the power was neither natural nor divine, but demonic, there should have been a good reason for believing that the spirit was the devil. In contrast, a half century after Samuel Willard, Jonathan Edwards kept records of similarly afflicted women in the culmination of religious revivals, the Great Awakening. A four-year-old child Phoebe Bartlet, for example, “continued exceedingly crying, and wreatheing her body to and fro, like one in anguish of spirit.” They all experienced violent unusual bodily

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afflictions, but they were all considered to be showing religious affection, and such behavior was even encouraged. In every instance, “spirit possession” was interpreted in the context of contemporary understanding of how Christians should act.

Another important point is that “spirit possession” has a theatrical effect. Once it starts, the place immediately becomes a public situation, or sacred theater. It requires performers and spectators. Then, there is always a mutual recreation, or dynamism in it. Both parties somehow interact, that is, the actors play the roles and the audience watches them and probably comments on them. In this play, the protagonist was Knapp, and Willard was sometimes just an observer, but usually an important participant. There were some people around them during the period of Knapp’s afflictions, and they even responded to the unusual voice heard through Knapp’s body. The plot, in this case mainly written by Willard, was also influenced by contemporary religious beliefs and the relationships between the actors and spectators.

This being the case, Willard’s roles must have actually had great significance in this event. It is worth looking at the dynamism working during Knapp’s afflictions, especially the interactions between Willard and Knapp in the context of a theatrical setting. In this paper, therefore, I intend to examine closely Elizabeth Knapp’s afflictions and Samuel Willard’s reactions as recorded by Willard himself, and to show how the whole story of “spirit possession” was produced in their interactive theatrical performances. To avoid any confusion, I simply use the word “possession,” which is meant to be a diabolical spirit possession unless noted otherwise.

1. Mixed Ministerial and Popular Views on Witchcraft

The incident of Elizabeth Knapp’s afflictions was recorded by Samuel Willard as “A Brief Account of a Strange and Unusual Providence of God Befallen to Elizabeth Knapp of Groton,” which became part of the book compiled in 1684 by Increase Mather, An Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences. Knapp was a servant at the Willards’ and Willard had the advantage of observing as both her master and pastor. This is why he was able to record the possession minutely. As a pastor, he used her possession in writing his fast day sermon in 1673, two years after the event.

According to “A Brief Account,” Knapp’s possession lasted for a surprising three months, from mid October 1671 to mid January 1672. There were periods of violent fits separated by periods of intermission with milder fits. The first distemper Knapp had was bodily aches, as

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12 Garrett, Spirit Possession, 4-5.


15 Samuel Willard, Useful Instructions for a Professing People in Times of Great Security and Degeneracy (Cambridge, 1673); Godbeer, The Devil’s Dominion, 95.

18 Demos, Entertaining Satan, 99–111. The graph on the page 104 was especially helpful to understand what happened at a glance.
in the passage cited in the opening paragraph of this paper. She complained that she had pains in her legs, breast, and neck. Then, the next day, she saw apparitions and talked to an “old man.” At midnight, she was thrown out of the bed and she tried to escape a fire that she thought was attacking her. The period lasted for several days and Willard described it as “representing a dark resemblance of hellish torments.” She cried out “money, money,” as well as she said “sin” and “misery,” during this first phase of the afflictions.15

Interestingly enough, the first violent period of Knapp’s afflictions is something of the religious and the secular mixed together. Given that the custom of the time and place was still Puritan, even though leading pastors lamented that there had been a great declension by then, the girl’s language seems to have followed the Calvinistic ideas of sin and the devil. The “old man” implies the devil, and she mentioned sins, which probably she had committed. Yet, her claim so far was mainly bodily discomfort. In addition, she mentioned “money” and “misery.” These words sound out of place for a theater controlled by some invisible power. They are quite secular words, compared with “sin.” In contrast, Willard’s own language is full of Christian images of sin. Not only was he a pastor and therefore familiar with those images, but he also suspected the possibility that this incident was related to darkness because it was bizarre and extraordinary, and her afflictions were just like “hellish torments.”16

Willard suspected that there was some big sin hidden in Knapp. When her fits became milder, he inquired of her what was happening. Knapp seemed to think she was innocent and what was more, she blamed another person for those fits. The fact that Knapp accused someone else means that she was insisting that she was the victim of the devil, rather than admitting that she had possibly committed a sin which was the real cause of the afflictions. According to the narrative, Knapp answered that she had seen one of the neighbors, or someone in the disguise of a neighbor, come down from the chimney, and that this person had struck her. Willard and the people watching Knapp then sent for the person in question. What happened was important for Willard. Knapp fell into violent fits, just when the person came into the room without knowing what was happening. That convinced Willard that there were “Satan’s suggestions in [her].”17

Willard did not believe Knapp’s accusation of the other person, partly because he knew the person was “of sincere uprightness before God.”18 The main reason that Willard doubted Knapp’s accusation, however, is that he was suspicious about witchcraft on Knapp’s part from the outset. He again asked her about the possible cause of the afflictions. Knapp made “tergiversations and excuses,” accusing one person after another of causing her torments. After his incessant inquiries, she finally started to tell the story of the devil, which Willard had actually suspected. Knapp

brake forth into a large confession in the presence of many, the substance whereof amounted to thus much: The devil had oftentimes appeared to her, presenting the treaty of a covenant and proffering largely to her: viz. such things as suited her youthful fancy, money, silks, fine clothes, ease from labor to show the whole world, etc.\textsuperscript{18}

At last, Knapp mentioned the name of the devil and his compact after many inquiries by Willard. Willard must have had some idea about the devil’s influence on Knapp’s part from the beginning. This is clear from Willard’s description of her mention because Willard described her mention of the devil as “a large confession,” and not “tergiversations and excuses.”

It was important for Willard to have heard the words “the devil” from Knapp herself, because recognizing the true agent of the supernatural influence was the very start towards relief for her torments. The first step to performing witchcraft according to theory at the time was to make a contract with the devil. When someone signs the devil’s compact, oftentimes in blood, he or she becomes a witch and serves the devil. This was obviously an anti-Christ act and a heinous sin. Now Willard came to confirm that Knapp had been somehow involved in witchcraft in the Christian sense of sin.

The focus of inquiry moved on to whether Knapp really signed the covenant or not. Willard pressed Knapp for more details. Knapp admitted that she had had some association with the devil, yet however hard Willard pressed her, she did not admit to signing the compact. While she kept having violent fits during the investigation, other sins that she had committed were brought to light. She had disobeyed her parents, neglected following ordinances, and attempted to murder herself and others.\textsuperscript{20}

In addition to the matter of the devil’s compact, Knapp’s possession showed another aspect of witchcraft, that is, causing harm to others. She admitted that she had tried to kill a person. Witchcraft was considered bad in two ways. The first reason was any covenant with the devil was sinful because it meant dependence on the devil instead of God. The other reason was more practical. That is, witchcraft was bad because it was harmful. These two counts are illustrated in a complex way in the narrative of Knapp’s possession. She first claimed that she was a victim of a witch by accusing another of possessing her, but at the same time she was a witch by the act of confessing her association with the devil’s compact.\textsuperscript{21} Moreover she confessed that she had even tried to cause harm to others.\textsuperscript{22}

In fact, Knapp’s story shows that she was mixing both ministerial and popular beliefs regarding witchcraft. Traditionally, ministers tended to preach that witchcraft was a sin because it meant relying on Satan instead of God, while folks tended to be more preoccupied with the practical effects of witchcraft. Ministers tried to educate people that witchcraft was bad be-

\textsuperscript{20} Willard, “A Brief Account,” 201.
\textsuperscript{21} Godbeer, The Devil’s Dominion, 111.
\textsuperscript{22} Willard, “A Brief Account,” 209.
cause people relied on Satan instead of God and not because it was harmful.\textsuperscript{20} This was why Willard repeatedly asked whether Knapp had really signed the compact or not, which was crucial for determining if she had sinned. Her reference to the devil constituted a sin of dealing with the devil in accordance with the theological interpretation. At the same time, however, she claimed that she was a victim of the harm caused by witchcraft as believed among lay people. In addition, she confessed that she had attempted to afflict harm on others such as a murder. In this way, Knapp’s story according to Willard includes both ministerial and popular views on witchcraft.

Those views seemed to be shared with ministers, too. Willard thought that her confession of these sins was “fair.” He judged so especially because she expressed her remorse with “bitter tears, self-condemnations” and “an earnest desire of prayer.”\textsuperscript{25} For Willard, whether a confession accompanied emotions was an important point to judge the authenticity, but he acknowledged the plausibility of the story Knapp told, too. The gap between the popular and ministerial understanding is said to have been narrow in New England, and this is true in Knapp’s case.\textsuperscript{25}

A sin such as signing the devil’s compact had a further meaning. Knapp was morally degraded by some other sins she had committed by the time of the devil’s compact. Ministers preached to people that the devil offered the compact to those who deserved temptation. Indeed, Knapp admitted that the devil had come to her with the compact when she was discontent with her life.\textsuperscript{26} For her, the devil was the alternative to God that she could depend on. Those who signed the compact, therefore, sinned doubly according to the theory. They did not live up to God and deserved the devil’s temptation. Moreover, they gave in and actually abandoned relying on God.\textsuperscript{27} Knapp’s confession that she had not obeyed her parents, or the ordinances and attempted murders, proved to Willard that Knapp had deserved the devil’s temptation. In this way, Willard and Knapp both shared the mixed views on witchcraft as sinful and harmful.

There is another interesting eclectic element in how Willard dealt with Knapp’s possession. Although Willard grasped the whole thing as essentially a spiritual and moral experience, he sent for the doctor. The physician judged the “main part of her distemper to be natural, arising from the foulishness of her stomach and corruption of her blood, occasioning fumes in her brain, and strange fantasies.” She was on medication the next week and enjoyed some moments of intermissions and milder fits, and so everyone had some hopes for her recovery. She

\textsuperscript{21} Willard, “A Brief Account,” 201.
\textsuperscript{26} Willard, “A Brief Account,” 200.
\textsuperscript{27} Godbeer, \textit{The Devil’s Dominion}, 92–93.
even cried that "Satan had left her." 

The way in which Willard relied on science in solving the problem seems to show the contemporary emergence of belief in science. 

Meanwhile, though Knapp still denied the compact with the devil, the practice of the fast day was observed. The fast day was customary when witchcraft came to light. It was a means of vanquishing the devil and his power on the godly. Knapp felt that she was now free from the devil, but Willard did not think so because her afflictions, though moderate, still lasted. In this way, Willard conducted the examination mainly in accordance with the theological explanation of witchcraft, and yet influenced by the popular and the medical ideas at the time.

2. Interactive “Confession”

Samuel Willard was now convinced that Elizabeth Knapp had been influenced by the devil, but Willard needed proof and eventually her relief. Knapp’s mention of the devil was important for Willard not only to detect the cause of her distemper, which he suspected was witchcraft. Also, it was important because it would lead to confession. Willard required the full confession of Knapp so earnestly because of the role of confession in Puritan theology. Confession of signing the compact was important because the act of confession had a cleansing role. By admitting that a person had sinned, the person was able to wash out the sin. The practice of confession was not only the best evidence of witchcraft, but also was a means of restoring the passage of the person who had committed witchcraft out of bondage and into grace. Above all, it confirmed the authority in the Puritan society.

The choice of the words by Willard should also be noted. He used the expression, “a large confession,” when Knapp mentioned the devil for the first time in the first period of her violent fits. She had explained to him reasons of her distemper before that, but he only described them as “tergiversations and excuses.” They could have been true confessions but they were not what Willard considered acceptable.

In the meantime, Knapp seemed to respond to Willard’s expectations very well. Of course, Knapp also knew about the gravity of a contract with the devil. Everyone in the colony must have known about such a thing, and especially Knapp as she lived in Reverend Willard’s house as a servant. She also asked Willard and other ministers to pray for her, which would testify to the fact that she knew the theological meaning of association with the devil. It also turned out later that she had actually had a fear of being hanged. Willard had suspected Knapp of witchcraft and wanted to reveal it, and Knapp, though slowly and sometimes ambigu-

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21 Cf. Thomas, Religion, etc. I would like to research more on the transition from magic to science at another opportunity.
22 Hall, Worlds of Wonder, 192.
24 Hall, Worlds of Wonder, 192-96.
26 Willard, “A Brief Account,” 206. The original words are to “[have] a shameful end.”
ously, met his expectations. In this sense, it can be said that the process of confession in the narrative was made possible by the interaction and collaboration of the two of them.

Willard’s investigation was continued patiently, step by step. It is interesting to see how cautiously he conducted it based on his assumption of the cause of the possession, that is, the covenant with the devil. A turning point in her confession came when Knapp added that she had agreed to travel with the devil twice between Groton and Lancaster. Those details are quintessential of witchcraft. The devil was in the shape of a black dog with eyes in his back, following custom that the devil was usually said to appear in the form of a small animal. That remark of hers was a perfect response to Willard’s expectation. According to Knapp, she was then quarreling with the devil about the compact and that was why she fell into the first violent fits.

The next step was that Willard asked her if she had promised to sign the compact verbally, if not actually signed it. Knapp denied it, but then yielded and admitted that she had indeed thought of the possibility. In the middle of these interactions, Knapp fell into violent fits again. Then the physician who had diagnosed that the cause was natural had to admit the diabolical distemper this time and gave up treating her. Some more ministers were sent for and they prayed for her day and night. These conditions lasted almost two days. When an intermission came, Willard pressured Knapp, asking if she was hiding anything else regarding her confessions about the dealing with the devil. She then admitted that the torments she had just had were the work of the devil and that he urged her to sign because she had confessed too much already and so she had now had to serve him.

In response to Willard’s pressure, Knapp stepped forward a little and admitted that not only had she thought about the possibility but that she had determined to sign the compact. She said that she had “resolved to seal a covenant with Satan” because the devil had first appeared five years before and had tormented her since. The devil had pressed her to sign in blood, and she had actually tried to go and get a knife, but Willard’s father prevented it unwittingly, according to her. Willard commented that she was protected against evil “by the providence of God.” Willard seemed convinced that God was working on her to repel evil.

Knapp’s language prompted by Willard was similar to Willard’s, too. For example, she mentioned “God’s goodness.” Knapp explained that one of the devil’s incessant temptations had included the offer of his service. She insisted that she had not accepted it, when inquired by Willard. But to his further inquiries, she “declared against herself her unprofitable life she had led, and how justly God had thus permitted Satan to handle her, telling them, they little knew what a sad case she was in.” Her body was controlled by something dark, and yet, she insisted earnestly that she had been prevented from accepting the offer “by God’s goodness.” Knapp in this way relied on God, though she was showing some ambiguity.

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33 Willard, “A Brief Account,” 204.
Based on these interactions between the two during those fits, this possession story can be described as not just the play starring Willard and Knapp in a most spectacular way, but an improvisation of a plot of the holy battle against evil. They both used the same language and shared phrases, such as God’s providence or goodness. Even though Knapp’s possession appeared demoniac to Willard and that implied that she had been in alliance with the devil, it should be noted that she basically believed in God. She must have wanted to depend on God instead of the devil at heart.

Then appeared a new kind of fits and the climax of the possession. Knapp was afflicted very violently. She insisted that she had seen an apparition, and she accused a woman for the apparition and the afflictions inflicted to Knapp. Moreover, Knapp insisted that she saw the devil in the disguise of a little boy with the woman. Knapp was then asked again to confirm that she really had not signed the compact. After a long time of afflictions, she “to many acknowledge[d] that she had given of her blood to the devil, and made a covenant with him” at last. She added that she did it “with his help” to show her unwillingness. Knapp finally admitted herself to have the sin of witchcraft, though reluctantly. The confession that Knapp had signed a compact with the devil was what Willard thought could explain this whole possession. It complemented Knapp’s confession as that of witchcraft.\(^{30}\)

After Knapp’s confession to signing the devil’s compact, Willard formally examined her as a pastor. She was not cooperative and Willard had to summarize the details in the narrative by guessing from what she had said. According to the summary, after she started to live in Willard’s house as a servant, she had come to see the devil in the disguise of an old man through the window when she was alone in a room. She wanted to escape from him, but she ended up listening to him:

> when he came he demanded of her some of her blood, which she forthwith consented to, and with a knife cut her finger, he caught the blood in his hand, and then told her she must write her name in his book, she answered [that] she could not write, but he told her he would direct her hand, and then took a little sharpened stick, and dipped in the blood and put it into her hand, and guided it, and she wrote her name with his help.\(^{40}\)

Knapp’s story revealed in Willard’s summary is archetypal of the story of signing the devil’s compact. Since it is the summary written by Willard, it is natural that the phrasing is archetypal in the Christian sense, but this summary can be another evidence of improvisation of the two because she was reluctant, but in the end she admitted to signing the compact, pressured by Willard.

The summary continued, recounting that then the devil promised her to make her a witch in seven years. She should serve him for the first year. During the next six years he would


\(^{40}\) Willard, “A Brief Account,” 205.
serve her. But she was shocked when the devil showed hell to her and threatened that if she disobeyed him he would torment her. At the same time, she was fearful of becoming a witch and being hanged because of the rules of Christian society. Then the devil required more of her blood, and forced her to consent. The first violent fit happened while she had been putting this off. Such was the summary of Knapp’s story, and Willard described her as a girl who was given temptation but godly in her heart.43

In this way, Willard induced some form of confession that she had signed the devil’s compact from Knapp. The process of the confession was very long and redundant, but the two worked interactively and improvised the confession narrative.

3. Physicality of Confession

Elizabeth Knapp’s confession of the devil’s compact to Samuel Willard was made through the interactions between the two, mostly by means of Willard’s assumptions. The spectators, too, played an important role in confession. Confession as a cleansing function was a part of the public worship in which people around the person were wishing his or her recovery in accordance with the scenario, God’s providence.45 As was already seen in Willard’s notes of her first violent fits, Knapp “brake forth into a large confession in the presence of many.”46 It was their presence that made what Knapp said a true confession in a religious sense. The acknowledgment of her sin and sinfulness had to be made in public. During those violent fits, Knapp was led to acknowledge her sins by Willard in public. These elements constituted a sacred theater and then what Knapp had said could be understood as a true confession.

In addition, the archetypal form of confession was not only public, but also staged, and rich in gestures.47 When Willard pressured Knapp and she admitted that she had verbally agreed to sign the compact, she fell into the fiercest fits in the presence of many people:

she was again with violence and extremity seized by her fits in such wise that 6 persons could hardly hold her, but she leaped and skipped about the house perforce roaring and yelling extremely, and fetching deadly sighs, as if her heartstring would have broken, and looking with a frightful aspect, to the amazement and astonishment of all the beholders, of which

Willard “was an eyewitness.”48 Roaring, yelling, sighs, a frightful look found in the description are the evidence of the extreme body language with too much emotion. The place became indeed a sacred theater displaying the spirit in power. Her afflictions were expressed in a form with such big theatrical effects. That means that she was resisting the devil bravely during the

47 Hall, Worlds of Wonder, 173.
fits and she had a hope for the divine. Knapp’s body was like a battlefield between evil and holiness.

To be sure, emotions alone did not testify that the person confessed and repented and therefore was cleansed. Willard and Knapp confirmed that she actually had signed the devil’s compact. Willard was partly persuaded by this story of the devil, but not fully. He did not think Knapp had repented enough, though he thought her story reasonable and logical as a confession of her alliance with the devil. She expressed this “with great affections, overflowing of tears, and seeming bitterness.” She repented her sins, such as “profanation of the Sabbath,” but she did not refer to the sin of betraying God and relying on the devil instead. From Willard’s perspective, her confession seemed credible as far as her emotional expressions were concerned, but if she did not recognize her sin of witchcraft, it was of no use. In this sense, she was not cleansed thoroughly. The confession as a ritual function was never complete to the Willard’s eyes.\(^43\)

Indeed, Knapp recanted the confession a few days later. She told Willard the contradicting stories, saying with tears that she had betrayed the devil. According to the narrative, she had been full of complaints about heavy burdens, and so she had determined that “she would give herself up to him soul and body.” But she said that the devil had never made his appearance at such times, and therefore she had never committed such a thing as signing the devil’s book. Willard did not believe it at all, and preached to her that she should open up lest she should make such contradictions. To Willard, Knapp’s sin seemed far from being cleansed.\(^47\)

In response, the devil “began to make more full discovery of himself.” According to the narrative, the devil directly talked to Willard through Knapp. Willard, first brought in the light and confirmed no part of Knapp’s body moved. Then he concluded that the voice really belonged to the devil. Now Willard was confident that Knapp was demoniac. Even though he assumed that she had been under the devil’s influence from the beginning and he had led her to confessing, he was still uncertain about the devil’s compact. After she recanted her confession of the compact, his suspicions grew. But this time, Willard had to believe what he saw, which was just astonishing.\(^48\)

The conversation between the devil and Willard is similar to the ritual of exorcism in Catholicism. The voice heard through Knapp’s body called Willard “a rogue” and argued with Willard about theological issues, such as the question as to who was the liar, God or Satan. According to the narrative, Willard insisted to the devil that Satan was a liar and advised him to stop possessing her, while the devil insisted that God was a liar. It was a battle between the holy and evil. Then Willard hoped for God’s goodness and knelt down and started to say prayers with others. Then the devil in Knapp’s body exclaimed, “hold your tongue, hold your tongue, get you gone you black rogue.” What Willard and the spectators did was to pray for


\(^{47}\) Willard, “A Brief Account,” 207.

God and try to repel the devil. The whole event took place on Knapp's body. In other words, Knapp's body became the battlefield of the holy and evil.49

From the beginning of the narrative, Knapp's body can be considered the battlefield between the holy and evil. Knapp's body was controlled by something evil because she had somehow trafficked with the devil. Because of that, she had many violent and sometimes very acute pains over a long period of time. In addition, such acute pains happened when she mentioned the devil and related details. When she disclosed something evil inside, she had not only moral pains but also the accompanying physical pains. Then her experience may be seen as a conversion to God from the devil with enormous physical pains. Therefore, what Knapp experienced during those fits can be described as a violent somatic conversion.

Willard's attempts to restore Knapp from the devil's dominion, or to convert her fully, never saw an end in this narrative. The process of her conversion was never complete because she did not repent what she had done and she just hoped for the better. Knapp's afflictions continued and her stories changed some times even after the devil's appearance as the voice. She again denied that she had signed a contract with the devil.

Willard finally gave up his judgment about this case and concluded the narrative with his own thoughts. Willard believed that her distemper was not counterfeit, but real, that her distemper was not natural but diabolical. Concerning the voice heard from Knapp's body, he was doubtful but he had his own observations by which he had to believe it was genuine. Last but not least, he did not have a decisive answer about the covenant with the devil. Instead, he hoped for the readers' compassion, saying that "[s]he is (I question not) a subject of hope, and therefore all means ought to be used for her recovery. She is a monument of divine severity; and the Lord grant that all that see or hear, may fear and tremble. Amen."50

In his conclusion, Willard connected the Knapp's possession with God's providence to show people in the colony the severity of Him. This kind of conclusion was archetypal of showing the glory of God in Puritan society.51 But Willard must not have been fully satisfied with Knapp's redundant, ambiguous, and contradictory story. Once she admitted that she had signed the devil's compact, but she did not repent, and even worse she recanted. He wrote a fast day sermon in 1673, two years after the possession, making hidden references to the incident. In the preface, he emphasized the importance of repentance: "True Repentance is the best and only way for the settlement of true peace."52

However, the very redundancy, ambiguity, and contradictions in Knapp's story illustrate the confusion between the ministerial understanding and the popular perception of witchcraft. For Willard, the devil's compact was the most important issue. It was a matter of a person's spiritual state. Knapp, on the other hand, knew very well that the compact was the issue, but equally importantly, she was being harmed and was afflicting harm on others. She knew she

52 Willard, Useful Instructions, 3.
had sinned but she had more eminent problems to be freed from. Until Knapp was induced to say by Willard that she had signed with the devil, the slowly developed plot with some haggling between the two was perfect as a confession of witchcraft. They interacted with each other and consummated the confession of the devil's compact in the presence of many. Until then, confession was acceptable in a religious sense. Here and there, however, there was evidence of practical harm caused by witchcraft.

Knapp was afflicted bodily in the first place, and she then understood the consequence of engaging in witchcraft. The spectators were sometimes concerned too much with the practical matters. They shared the Christian belief along with Knapp, and they prayed for her with Willard and other ministers, but they annoyed Willard because they were often more interested in outer spectacular aspects of possession than in the spiritual cause of possession. When the voice was heard through Knapp's body and the voice responded to Willard, the spectators were so astonished that they started to converse with the voice. Willard was displeased and stopped them.\(^5\) Willard complained of their interest in outer features of the possessed only and described their activities as obsession with "the virulence of the enemy." The reason why Willard wrote the fast day sermon was to remind lay people of the spiritual message of the possession. In this way, the mixed ministerial and popular responses were revealed in Knapp's incident. Knapp's possession fit the category of "spirit possession," as a sacred and public theater.\(^4\)

Although Knapp did not fully convert, it is important to affirm that Knapp was a religious person at heart. The act of confession in essence was to cleanse sins, which can serve as evidence of her belief in God. Even though she was initiated to confess and she was unwilling at that, she feared the hell and hoped for God. When she confessed anything related to the devil, she experienced emotional upsurges and great agony in a most spectacular way. It shows that she wanted to be freed from the sins, but it was too hard for her to express herself. It is also a typical expression of the "spirit possession," the body language for emotions that are too profound and too dangerous to say aloud. From these perspectives, it may be safe to conclude that Knapp's diabolical possession is a violent somatic conversion process and shows one side of the coin of religious enthusiasm.

**Conclusion: Historical Contexts**

Some examples of religious enthusiasm were considered heresy in colonial New England. The first witch, Jane Hawkins, was one of the followers of Anne Hutchinson. Hutchinson was banished from Massachusetts Bay colony in 1638, and what led to her banishment may be summarized as the following: God's revelation to her was regarded as delusion by the devil.\(^5\)


\(^3\) I have discussed the dynamism of which this conclusion was led by in "Imagination, Body, and Gender Boundaries in the Early Puritan Society: Anne Hutchinson on Trial" *The American Review* 32 (1998): 127-44.
other words, Hutchinson received a spirit like a prophetess, but it was judged that the spirit was not divine but diabolical. The church and the society at that time did not approve of direct communication with God and so concluded that Hutchinson was a case of heresy and religious fanaticism.

Mary Dyer, another main follower of Hutchinson along with Jane Hawkins, was subjected to the suspicion of religious enthusiasm as well. Dyer gave birth to a monster, which John Winthrop thought resembled the devil. Her midwife was Hawkins, and Dyer left the colony, too. Dyer returned to the colony in 1659 as a Quaker and was executed in 1660 as such. Quakers believed in the inner light, which allowed the direct spiritual communication with God. Of course, they were called heretics and were believed to have joined the devil with Baptists and witches to subvert the Christian orthodox society.\(^{56}\)

“Spirit possession,” or the body language caused by the spirit, was not limited to satanic possession throughout the history of religion in England and New England. With the emergence of revival enthusiasms and Methodists in England, this divine “spirit possession” was reflected on the other side of the Atlantic. In 1739, John Wesley’s follower, and a former Quaker woman, laughed until she was almost strangled and then she began cursing, blaspheming, and writhing.\(^{57}\) The details of bodily afflictions were similar to Elizabeth Knapp’s fits. In another occasion, Thomas Maxfield, another leading figure in Methodism, roared and beat himself against the ground so that six men could not hold him.\(^{58}\) The enormous power involved was again similar to Knapp’s possession.

Even in the revivals, not all inspiration was divine. Wesley was careful in deciding that the afflictions were truly from “divine inspiration” and “false, imaginary inspiration.”\(^{59}\) This is actually similar to what Willard did when he judged whether Knapp’s possession was real or fake. In Methodist and revival cases, however, the afflicted were totally introspective and tried to save their faith in God despite the afflictions. Wesley interpreted the afflictions as the struggle of divine and satanic spirits for the soul of the believer.\(^{60}\) In New England, too, Jonathan Edwards’ followers were all introspective. When Phebe Bartlett suffered afflictions from the spirit, Edwards recorded that Phebe cried vehemently because she thought she had sinned, praying “Pray, blessed Lord, give me salvation! I pray, beg, pardon all my sins!”\(^{61}\) They all admitted that they had sinned and that God put them on trial.

Compared with them, Knapp’s attitude was mixed. Although she did not fully admit and repent the sin of signing the devil’s compact, she confessed that she had neglected her duties and had not obeyed the rules and so on, which Willard saw as a “fair” confession especially be-

\(^{56}\) Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 189.
\(^{58}\) Garrett, *Spirit Possession*, 81–82.
\(^{59}\) Garrett, *Spirit Possession*, 78–79.
\(^{60}\) Garrett, *Spirit Possession*, 82.
cause it was with "bitter tears," and "self-condemnations." The difference is apparent, however. Knapp accused others several times and it cannot be concluded that she was introspective in that sense. But at other times, she confronted the adversary and fought against it to save her faith in God.

Witchcraft and religious enthusiasm—it may sound like a singular combination. But at least they are similar in that they are both personal and direct experiences with the spirit and not administered by go-betweens. This is in fact an important point to understand Christianity in 17th century New England, because Puritanism was in essence a devotional movement, rooted in religious experience. If personal religious experiences are emphasized and people do not need the church and ministers, however, it is too dangerous for the government to maintain the colony. That was actually one of the reasons Anne Hutchinson had to be banished and followers of other forms of religious enthusiasm were persecuted.

The famous witchcraft narrative, Elizabeth Knapp's case, reveals a new aspect of witchcraft if put into the context of the history of religious enthusiasm. Knapp's afflictions, which have mostly been explained as her personal problems, can be seen as her soul fighting against evil. She sometimes fell to accusing others, but basically the series of her confessions was a passage back to the Christian kingdom.

Knapp's case also symbolically shows the transitional phase of religious enthusiasm in New England. The last decades of the 17th century in New England coincided with the time when people wanted more personal connections with God on the both sides of the Atlantic. In that mood, religious enthusiasm was expressed as most peculiar and extreme, similar to witchcraft. This can explain why witchcraft cases sometimes happen in the godliest places like a pastor's home, as in the case of Knapp.

In addition, religious enthusiasm in theology was a term used in a negative sense. It was a deviance from the orthodoxy and an act of believing in God without adequate guidance. If a person insisted that he or she felt a spirit, it was a personal experience and could be a delusion. In Knapp's case, the battle between the devil and the holy was yielded by the guidance of her pastor. Since the gap between the ministerial exegesis and the popular religious belief is said to have been relatively narrow in Puritan New England, Knapp's possession and its narrative by Willard can be seen as a bridge of the popular and the ministerial understanding of the divine and the diabolical. This may be one of the examples to show the transition from the Puritan orthodoxy to the Great Awakening, in which some religious enthusiasms were termed religious affection and even encouraged.

To be sure, it cannot be said that the possession of Knapp is a typical case in the history

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64 Garrett, Spirit Possession, 47.
65 Hall, Worlds of Wonder, especially Chapter 4.
of witchcraft in New England through 1693. The number of surviving historical texts is not big and other descriptions are much shorter, except for the witch-hunt cases such as those in Salem and in Springfield. But Knapp’s possession is a good example because it is detailed, though sometimes too detailed and confusing. What is more, it is a single and relatively isolated case. Knapp and Samuel Willard did not get involved in the craze of the mass witch trials, and so what Willard did to her and what she did and felt should be reliable as a pure example of possession, without any influence from other cases.

Despite its uniqueness, Knapp’s possession casts a light to the understanding of the anatomy of possession. Her possession can be explained as a somatic conversion experience, which was extraordinary and would not have been accepted by the Puritan orthodoxy. The understanding of “spirit possession” changed over time in colonial New England. Thus, witchcraft has its place in the history of religious enthusiasm in 17th century New England from heresies to revivals.
The Anatomy of Possession: Witchcraft and Religious Enthusiasm in 17th Century New England

〈Summary〉

Junko Araki

This paper focuses on the narrative of Elizabeth Knapp's possession in 1671 and attempts to explain the occurrence of witchcraft as a form of religious enthusiasm. This narrative is well known as a detailed and quintessentially demonic description in early New England. Because social expectations within the historical setting determine the authenticity of possession, the narrative reflects the kind of religious experiences that ministers and people in the colony shared.

During Knapp's possession, the central issue was whether she had signed the devil's compact. Her master and pastor, Samuel Willard, cautiously and patiently led her to the confession, which was a ritual of cleansing and restoring her to the divine territory. Knapp responded to him well. Both of them faithfully fulfilled roles consistent with the contemporary idea of witchcraft despite a slight difference in ministerial ideas and popular beliefs of it.

When Knapp confessed, she suffered from such pains and displayed spectacular body languages, both of which were archetypal features of religious enthusiasm. She even wanted God's goodness during those fits, although she was mostly under the control of the devil. As a truly godly person in her heart, Knapp wanted to be saved. Her possession can be then explained as a somatic conversion experience, which was extraordinary and would not have been accepted by the Puritan orthodoxy. Thus, witchcraft has its place in the history of religious enthusiasm in New England from heresies such as Antinomians to revivals such as Jonathan Edwards.