A further assessment of the activities of John Darrell, the famed ‘Puri-
tan exorcist’ is open, initially at least, to several charges. The first is to 
suggest that the critic is merely a dedicated follower of fashion—that 
possession, and the Darrell episode in particular, has ‘been done’.\(^1\) The 
second is that explanations for, and thereby understanding of, possession 
and dispossession are more than adequately dealt with in the existing 
historiography. The third is that our comprehension of the ‘victory’ of 
Samuel Harsnett et al. in tackling Darrell’s career as a peripatetic aid 
to the allegedly possessed is complete. An outline of what this analysis 
ofers will, I hope, waylay such charges. What follows opens with an 
effort, which will prove to be ironic, to get the story straight regard-
ing Darrell’s work in Lancashire for this case study will show that our 
understanding depends on an inadequate representation of what hap-
pened. This narrative will rest upon the clearly positioned texts of John 
Darrell and his colleague George More and also upon Harsnett’s rela-
tive silence in his critique of these texts. However, this is not too much 
of a cause for concern as there have been few reviewers more severe 
than Harsnett in his assessment of their accounts!\(^2\) In this context this

\(^1\) For a range of works, with different emphases and purposes, see James Sharpe, 
_Instruments of Darkness: Witchcraft in England 1550–1750_ (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 
1997), pp. 96–98, 190–210; idem, _The Bewitching of Anne Gunter_ (London: Profile Books, 
1999); Philip C. Almond, _Demonic Possession and Exorcism in Early Modern England: Contem-
porary Texts and their Cultural Contexts_ (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 
pp. 150–55, 192–96, 240–43; Thomas Freeman, ‘Demons, Deviance and Defiance: 
John Darrell and the Politics of Exorcism in Late Elizabethan England’, in _Conformity 
and Orthodoxy in the English Church, c. 1560–1660_, ed. by Peter Lake and Michael Questier 
(Woodbridge: Boydell, 2000), pp. 34–63. This last is best read alongside this piece as 
the two complement each other despite some disagreements.

\(^2\) In fact Darrell and one of his supporters enquired why Harsnett had not been as 
harsh in his treatment of the Lancashire case as the cases which preceded and suc-
cceeded it: John Darrell, _A detection of that sinful, shamful, lying and ridiculous discours, of 
Samuel Harshnet_ ([np], 1600) To the Reader, pp. 9–10; _A Breife Narration of the possession, 
dispossession and, repossession of William Sommers_ (‘Amsterdam’, 1598), p. 3.
is an advantage as these circumstances provide us with an account of possession by those for whom possession was a reality. This will provide a reassessment of the explanations of historians as the testing ground will have changed; the explanations which seem persuasive for one set of events are less so for this modified account.

Having set out the narrative before us, I will enlarge upon the symptoms which need explaining and look briefly at the structural representation of this episode by Darrell and More. This will provide a site for an engagement with current historiography in two related ways. The first is what it is that needs to be explained and the second is how far present work is sufficient as a comprehension of these events. This will lead to a suggested modification of our analysis and a field of changed questions regarding the controversies, early modern and current, over possession and dispossession.

I

The roots of the seven possessed in Cleworth, in the parish of Leigh, Lancashire, were in the marriage of the Protestant gentleman, Nicholas Starkey. His bride was an inheritrix of a family of whom “some were Papistes, of whom some partlie for Religion”. Her family resented this union and its impact upon the family’s inheritance and so they “wished & vowed still to pray for the perishing of her issue”. The result was that four healthy children died “in most strange maner”. Some of her family were “moved with compassion” and told her of “the said unnatural vowe”, whereupon she made a will which passed all her estate to her husband’s family, regardless of her success or failure in childbirth. With the campaign against her children made pointless in practical terms, a boy and a girl were born and were healthy until Anne’s ninth year and John’s tenth. At this point, in February 1595, Anne “was taken with a dumpish heavie countenance, and with a certain fearful starting & pulling together of her bodie”. A week later John “was taken as he was going to schole, & was compelled to showte vehemently, not being able to stay him selfe. After this they waxed worse & worse falling into

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3 George More, *A True Discourse concerning the certaine possession and dispossession of 7 persons* (Middelburg, 1600), p. 11.