‘These Devils That Have Many Uses’:

Possession and Liberation in Michel de Certeau’s *Possession at Loudun*

In the mid-1630s, the Ursuline convent in the provincial French city of Loudun was allegedly beset by a series of demonic possessions. Loudun had recently been struck by a bout of the plague, which spared the Ursulines but created disorder and uncertainty around them, establishing a backdrop of chaos and suspicion against which the possessions would unfold. Experts were brought in from all over the country to examine and exorcise the afflicted nuns. A local parish priest, Urbain Grandier, was blamed for having caused the possessions, and eventually tried, convicted, and executed as a sorcerer. These events are examined by Michel de Certeau in his 1970 study *The Possession at Loudun.* Although his retelling is meticulously supported by archival evidence, the study does not take as its goal the verification of the possessions, i.e., whether or not demons were truly present at Loudun, and nor shall that be my goal here. Rather, Certeau seems more concerned with the *people* involved and what the possession meant for them. Likewise, I will here examine the possession’s social usefulness for certain parties, and its function as an instrument of fate for others.

‘Ces pauvres filles qui ont le diable au corps’ (108)

A significant concern of the Loudun exorcists, reflected in their documentation of the possessions and in Certeau’s examination of these documents, is the bodies of the possessed women: how they change and how they move while possessed. Examination of this documentation leads Certeau to conclude that ‘this discourse of the body takes on an obsessive character. The slightest physiological changes of the possessed women are followed with acute attention’ (44). Exemplifying this obsession is the meticulous cataloguing of the locations of individual demons within the women’s bodies, a list referred to by Certeau as ‘a strange geography’ (90-93). When

possessed, the women are said to make 'very horrible movements' (49) and 'surprising contortions' (20); it is possible to determine when a different demon has taken hold, because 'with the change of demon the face of the girl also changes looks, and seems like a different face' (94). When the demons take over, Certeau suggests that the women's bodies are no longer their own: 'As for the possessed woman, she doesn't have a body…The devil, it is said, prevents her from pronouncing the words: my body' (46, see 18). The possessed bodies are understood to become objects, vessels for the demons; they are no longer women, no longer human, and they may therefore be treated in otherwise unacceptable ways. Torture is occasionally used to force the demons to speak: the women are bound to the altar to be exorcised (88); they have their faces held over burning candles 'until, unable to withstand it longer and losing patience by the excess of pain, Satan appear[s]' (128). Many of the physicians', exorcists', and other experts' reports chosen for inclusion by Certeau speak of 'movements…neither voluntary nor feigned (49),' 'great agitations (119),' 'great convulsions' and 'strange vexations' (17), suggesting that the women have lost all control over their bodies, which now exist only at the mercy of the demon(s) and for the observation of these experts (and the public, who will be discussed later). Patronisingly, it is asserted in one of the many pamphlets springing up around the events at Loudun that

> in possession, the Demon takes advantage of the faculties and organs of a possessed person in such a way as to produce, not only in her, but by her, actions that that person could not bring about of herself, at least not in the circumstances in which she brings them about (38).

Women's bodies are seen as inherently incapable of performing the wild, unusual, and occasionally perverse acts exhibited during the possession. Therefore, their performance merits intensive study which takes no note of the women themselves; they are worth no more than the quasi-scientific, but also voyeuristic, interest 'their' bodies provide. Indeed, Certeau tells us that

> the minutes of the possessions do not feature a possessing subject, the devil, or lost subjects, the possessed women. As the report is fragmented into names and roles, it obliterates the reference to beings, replacing them with a series of different, and combined, stories: those of the pulse, the digestion, the mouth, the tongue, or the legs. It is not by coincidence that the conscious 'I' of the possessed is eliminated (45).

Because of this divorcing of the women's actions from their own free will, Certeau can assert that 'the women have become victims, and are no longer guilty' (4). However, this seems to be less Certeau's own opinion than a reflection of those of the exorcists and experts. The women, being naturally passive creatures, are of course too hapless and helpless to resist the invasion of the devils and its resulting effect on the 'very weak spirits' – and, of course, the bodies – of these 'little womenfolk' (209). It may therefore be safely assumed that none of the actions they perform while possessed, no matter how blasphemous or otherwise incriminating, are intentional. The Ursulines' feisty prioress, Jeanne des Anges, even blames herself eagerly for the acts she commits in her possessed state, suggesting that the Devil is able to act through her due to her own weakness:

> In most cases I saw quite clearly that I was the prime cause of my turmoil and that the demon only acted according to the openings I gave him…It so happened, to my great embarrassment, that during the first days when Father Lactance was given to me to be my director and exorcist, I disapproved of his way of conducting many small matters, although it was a very good way; but it was because I was wicked (30).

It must be noted, however, that Jeanne wrote this more than a decade after the fact, by which time she had gained fame and notoriety as a mystic – a career she founded upon the sensationalist glamour of her possession. While her account appears to go along with the male experts' conception of her and the other women as essentially passive, her exaggeratedly penitent language also seems to wink at the reader, leaving us to wonder whether she is in fact glorying in having pulled the wool over the eyes of the men who dared to underestimate her and her 'daughters.' Ironically, the men's misogynistic assumptions provide cover for acts by which the possessed women, apparently quite intentionally, deny and fight back against the system which oppresses them.

'A Rebellion of Women' (104)

The men's underestimation of what control the possessed Ursulines have over their bodies and actions provides a singular opportunity for the women, especially Jeanne des Anges, to assert their will and agency in ways otherwise unavailable to them. The women perform acts of blasphemous defiance – such as when Jeanne (or rather, 'the devil') spat the holy host back into a priest's face during communion (31) – and of sexual madness, such as when the smelling of a bouquet of musk roses allegedly charmed by the 'sorcerer' Urbain Grandier caused the women to become so smitten with him that they 'got up and ran on the convent roofs, climbed trees in their chemises, and remained perched at the very end of the branches. There, after frightful cries, they endured hail, frost, and rain, remaining four or five days without eating' (31-32). Such actions would be, if not *unthinkable*, certainly unperformable by these women in their natural, unpossessed state, being restricted by the bounds of religion, ceremony, modesty, propriety, and chastity. Despite their positions of relative power as members of a convent – an all-female world (albeit one supervised by male 'spiritual directors'), adjacent to the typical gender hierarchy of the time – Certeau reminds us that the nuns remain 'subjected to the rigid authority of a sacred power and a masculine field of knowledge' (52). And yet the possession provides these women with a fool-proof, indeed church-accepted, excuse to blaspheme, to run wild, even to express sexual desire – for these actions, of course, are not their own, but were induced by the devil(s) possessing them. They innocently uphold this assertion in their testimonies: 'Sister des Anges told us, questioned about it under oath, that she had no memory of what had been said and done by her during said exorcism, having herself contributed nothing to it of her mind and her own will' (98). And the experts take the women at their word. Sieur Seguin, 'a physician in Tours' (118), does go so far as to posit the existence of a 'wicked conspiracy' among the nuns, speaking condescendingly of 'the force of the imagination of women' producing 'so extraordinary a folly' – but then concludes, equally patronisingly, that

> there must be either devilish wickedness, or deviltry here. Otherwise, how could these girls understand a language we are assured they never learned, and answer on the

> spot all kinds of questions, even the loftiest questions of theology, as I have sometimes seen them do? How could they make movements so various and difficult, without having long studied them?' (120)

Devils have agency; women do not. The wilful blindness of these men is a gift to the women. Certeau asserts – not without, I think, respect in his tone – that

> the exhibitionism of the nuns allows them to attain a truth with respect to themselves and society…The possessed are victims. An other – devil or sorcerer – is responsible…What authorizes them to declare at last, under cover of the devil, 'That's what I am,' is precisely what permits them to protect themselves from it, to declare, 'That is not what I am,' to demand of the representative of the Church, 'Tell me that isn't me' (100).

As may have already been observed, the most notable of the Ursulines is their prioress, Jeanne des Anges, only twenty-seven years old in 1632. She appears in the earliest accounts of the possession and the events leading up to it, and she remains a central figure in the narrative even years later, when she has co-opted the narrative and mythos of the possession and her subsequent miraculous healing for her own purposes, namely gaining celebrity as a mystic. Certeau withholds most biographical information about her until the very end of his text, an unusual structural choice which seems intended to let us see Jeanne as she was *at the time of the possession,* without the interference of knowledge of her past and future actions. At the end of the text we do learn, however, that Jeanne has always been one for showmanship: at Poitiers ten years earlier, 'her noviciate [was] marked by a few excesses of behaviour, quite understandable but already spectacular, and too consciously connected with an awareness of the public' (223). Consciously inspired by the *Life* of Saint Teresa and the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine (ibid.), Jeanne will eventually write an *Autobiographie*, recalling with 'coquettish lucidity' the events of the 1630s – Certeau notes her frequent use of the adjective 'little,' a 'gesture of humility' that 'betrays, in that *little* woman, what are really her dreams of greatness and her feelings' (225). Far from being only frivolous and attention-seeking, however, Jeanne has a practical and pragmatic side, demonstrated by her writing to the queen in 1638 to explain the dire circumstances at the convent caused by the possession, and therefore to

beg her for material assistance. Later, when funds for the building of a new convent have been refused, Jeanne informs the Royal Treasury of exactly how much money she requires to 'maintain her community respectably' and 'keep out of extreme misery.' As Certeau wryly notes, Jeanne 'has a cool head when she is not on stage' (205). While Certeau never explicitly states whether he thinks that the possessions were the work of the Devil or merely a 'wicked conspiracy,' he does seem to admire Jeanne, and lends her enough credence to suggest that, were such a conspiracy to be organised, she would be very capable of organising it.

'A Fascinating Sorcerer' (165)

Whatever its source, Jeanne and her nuns do not make use of their newfound power aimlessly. Instead, they find a target and cause him to be eliminated: Urbain Grandier, the priest (or sorcerer) allegedly responsible for the possessions, who, I will argue, stands as a representative for the patriarchy as a whole. Grandier is a convenient scapegoat for the system which has heretofore kept agency from these women. It is a satisfying irony that he, in supposedly 'causing' the possessions, hands the women the instruments which will bring about his own demise. The events of the possession did not begin with Grandier – the first incidents involved the sighting of the ghost of the convent's deceased former director, Moussaut, on the night of September twenty-first, 1632 (13) – but the quick progression of events places Grandier at their centre barely three weeks later. By the eleventh of October he will be named a sorcerer (15). But who was Grandier, and how did he come to be entangled in this extraordinary situation? Before his appointment as confessor at the convent, Grandier was the parish priest (*curé*) of Saint-Pierre-du-Marché in Loudun. A friend and fellow priest described him as

> tall and good-looking…always clean and well dressed, never walking except in long robes…He expressed himself with great ease and elegance. He preached rather frequently…He was sweet and civil to his friends, but proud and haughty to his

> enemies. He was jealous of his rank and never relinquished his own interests, repelling affronts with such rigor that he turned people against him whom he could have won over by taking a different tack (53).

Most importantly, Certeau tells us, 'He has a power, that of the word. He seduces his public' (54). This public certainly includes the women of Loudun, 'who are more easily charmed than they will say. With his rhetoric, he enflames them' (55). Years before the events at Loudun Grandier had written an inflammatory treatise against clerical celibacy, and followed its philosophy in his own life: 'He was accused…of frequenting girls and women, and of enjoying some widows of rather good family,' and took as his mistress the 'unsociable, pious' Madeleine de Brou (58-59). All of these things count as strikes against him before he ever sets foot in the convent. Once he does, Grandier supposedly serves as a lightning-rod for the sexual desires which are incited (or perhaps, rather, permitted expression) by the possessions. Jeanne des Anges writes that he 'used demons to excite love in me for him. They would give me desires to see him and to speak to him. Several of our sisters had these same feelings…. When I didn't see him, I burned with love for him' (104). She is not alone in this respect:

> A woman says that one day, after having received communion from [Grandier] who fixed his gaze upon her during that action, she was immediately surprised by a violent love for him, which began by a little shiver through all her limbs. The other said that having been stopped by him on the street, he shook her hand and immediately she was also seized by a great passion for him (165).

As we have seen, love or desire for Grandier was also supposed to have driven Jeanne and several of her nuns into such a state that they climbed trees and refused food for days. Certeau suggests that, with all this in mind, it was no great leap to add 'sorcerer' to a list of Grandier's crimes that already plausibly included philanderer, libertine, 'fancy talker,' 'parvenu' (55); he notes that the accusation of sorcery 'combined all crimes into one…*Sorcery* is a word that, in its indeterminacy, designates and synthesises everything threatening' (19). And it is the charge of sorcery which will

spell Grandier's doom. After nearly a year of supernatural occurrences allegedly testifying to Grandier's nature as a sorcerer, in mid-August 1634 the judges make their decision:

> We…have declared and do declare said Urbain Grandier duly attaint and convicted of the crime of magic, evil spells, and possession befallen by his doing upon the persons of some Ursuline religious women of this town of Loudun…Together with other offenses and crimes resulting from the same crime (169).

He is sentenced to death – a necessity, in Certeau's opinion, demanded by society in order to return to the natural order, which had already been disrupted by the plague and is now further beleaguered by the possessions:

> In order that there might be a recognized law (but not necessarily the one he violated), [Grandier] had to die…The death of the 'sorcerer' … 'satisfies' the group – an anonymous god that has taken the place of the ancient gods and received from them its needs and its pleasures (191).

Thus, on the eighteenth of August, 1634, Urbain Grandier is burned at the stake. Certeau recounts a poignant episode occurring on the way to the execution: 'The father…who was with him to take his confession told him: "How now, Sir, do you not wish to ask these girls' pardon?" "Ah, Father," answered he, "I never offended them"' (177). In the end, his real culpability (just like, Certeau suggests, the veracity of the possessions) is irrelevant. The women of the convent have singled Grandier out as guilty, and the testimony of their besieged bodies and extraordinary actions provides sufficient proof for the men in power to condemn Grandier and seal his fate. He, like the demons with whom he is supposed to have invested them, is a vehicle for an agency otherwise denied these women: an agency which works against him, bringing about the death which is required to close the loop of these events and re-centre a society which has been thrown off-kilter. However, the possessions do not stop with Urbain Grandier's death. They have taken on a life of their own in their function as public spectacle; and this spectacle will continue after his death, especially in the person of Jeanne des Anges.

‘The Infernal Show Goes On’ (103)

From almost the beginning until their very end, years later, the events at Loudun are construed as a public spectacle. Grandier takes over Moussaut’s position as director of conscience at the convent, and soon after, assumes his position as its central supernatural figure as well. By the beginning of October, reports of the paranormal occurrence of the night of September twenty-first – the appearance of Moussaut’s ghost – and the others that followed have reached beyond the convent walls, and drawn to it a succession of clergymen, parishioners, and monks. They quickly decide that these events have been caused by the Devil – who, therefore, must have been acting through a sorcerer. Grandier is speedily designated as such. Certeau calls the exorcisms ‘a “theater,”’ and the stage is now certainly set (3); Grandier is the tormentor and the women of the convent are his innocent victims, now possessed and requiring exorcisms, the first of which takes place on October fifth (17). These exorcisms are not only performed in the private sphere of the convent, but also in the parish churches of Loudun (including Grandier’s own Saint-Pierre-du-Marché), where they are accessible to an interested public made up of ‘the curious from all of France and practically all of Europe’ (3). They even take on a different character in front of an audience: Certeau notes ironically that ‘Convulsions are reserved for the general assembly (87).’ ‘The goal is to force the demon to manifest himself as a vanquished rebel and to face the demons to show the wonders of Jesus Christ’ – a noble aim, certainly, and one to which the women seem to submit willingly, even helping the priests to tie them to the altar for exorcism (88). But their motivations are not entirely religious in nature: ‘From these celebrations that are no longer celebrations but exhausting exercises, the nuns derive the privilege of being victims, subjected to the hard law of a purifying theater’ (103). By undergoing what Certeau terms the ‘theatralization’ of their sufferings, the women cement their roles as *subjects* of others’ actions – namely Grandier’s

and the demons' – therefore further absolving themselves of responsibility for any of the abject actions which they have, paradoxically, been given permission to perform (150). The spectacle disguises the women's agency, and, in so doing, allows them to exercise it more fully and more publicly than would otherwise be acceptable. But the *spectators* of the exorcisms also experience the catharsis of watching the women who have performed these unacceptable actions be both 'punished' and 'cleansed,' smoothing out the ripples created by their behaviour and allowing society to continue functioning as normal. All parties benefit. As Certeau explains:

> To that dependence on social judgment stands opposed, among the Ursulines, a capacity for personal self-judgment. They *know* that there is 'sorcery' in them. Henceforth society becomes the means for ridding themselves of an occult deviancy, just as society takes advantage of the possessed women to expel its own anxiety in theatralizing it. A complicity between the actresses and their public reinforces the play of the exorcisms in multiplying its advantages. There is an aspect of social security in this theater (100).

Jeanne des Anges seems to understand this better than anyone. The demons supposedly continue to possess her even after Grandier's death. Eventually the thirty-three-year-old Jesuit Father Surin is brought to Loudun to work on her, performing his first exorcism on St Thomas' Day in December 1634 (200). Over the next three years, a tug-of-war (which in Certeau's description interestingly resembles a seduction) (206) is effected between the two of them, with the result that as Jeanne's condition improves, Surin's worsens; eventually he himself becomes possessed (206-207). (The old power dynamic has been subverted: now a woman, Jeanne, is the agent causing a possession, and Surin is her hapless subject – although there is no charge of sorcery, nor an execution, this time.) Finally in the spring of 1637 Jeanne experiences a miraculous recovery, accompanied by visions of a handsome angel and Saint Joseph (213), and the supernatural inscription of the names IOSEPH and MARIA on her hand (214). (These will survive, incidentally, until 1645, when – as Certeau notes without comment – a M. Balthasar de Monconys 'will flip a letter off these sacred words… "surpris[ing] [Jeanne] greatly"') (221). Apparently at the behest of

the last demon who possesses her, Jeanne capitalises on these marvels by embarking on a five-month-long tour of France beginning in April 1637, telling of her experiences and letting her body, her 'sacred hand,' bear witness. In this tour, her personal triumph and the grand finale to the possessions, she synthesises the discourses of body, agency, and spectacle.

Conclusion

It is admirable that Certeau never attempts to prove the truth or falseness of the possessions at Loudun. Rather, he presents the recorded evidence, often without comment, and lets his readers decide for themselves whether these extraordinary events were the work of devils or of the nuns themselves. However, his analysis of the discourse surrounding the women's bodies, the role of Urbain Grandier, and the function of the exorcisms and possessions as public spectacle lends itself to a reading in which the women took advantage of a new form of agency offered to them by the possessions. Ironically, they used this agency, supposedly vested on them by Grandier, to discredit, accuse, convict, and ultimately rid themselves of him, thereby symbolically (if temporarily) freeing themselves from the patriarchal system which oppressed them and kept that agency from them. Jeanne des Anges especially made use of this freedom, keeping up the spectacle for years after Grandier's death, and emerging as a 'wily and naturally adroit' agent in her own right (200). Certeau, although sympathetic to Grandier's plight, seems to admire these remarkable women, and his analysis proves that the 'spirits' of these 'little womenfolk' were in fact anything but weak (209). However, the central paradox of the Loudun case is such: in order to achieve the agency that they did, the women of the convent were required to give up their bodies – whether literally or only theatrically – to the control of an 'other.' It was their possession which liberated them.

Works Cited

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