Introduction:
Grounding Rage Possession

In Newington London 1681, on a day like any other, Charity Philipot snaps. Brandishing a knife, she rushes into the home of her employer intent on killing her. Her mistress flees. Mad with fury, and with a “strange and frightful look, more like a fury, or one possessed,” Charity finds another victim: she slits the throat of her mistress’ “affrighten and amazed child.”¹ She then lights the house on fire, having already poisoned herself.² Before she dies, Philipot implicates a sinister man in a high-crowned hat in the murder/suicide/failed arson. She insists that although she committed the crime, the fault was not on her alone: he gave her instructions, whet the knife, and placed it in her hand. He made her do it. This sinister accomplice seems more than diabolical; he seems demonic. Charity is worse than mesmerized, she acts like a woman possessed.

There is an essential disconnect between Charity Philipot’s visceral and preternatural experience—the playing out of supernatural machinations in a mundane human frame—and the blunt narrative that recounts it. Similar accounts are likewise unable to fully capture the color, sounds, stifling spaces, and complex cultures associated with possession narratives. They fail to frighten. It could be that too large a temporal and geographic divide separates them from today’s critic. The nature of the secondhand, biased, and formulaic accounts might allow some critics to regard them as dismissible fictions; the descriptions can seem at once too fantastic and too formulaic. However, despite their limitations, we can learn a great deal from Charity’s story and those like it.

As we read our own literature, fiction and nonfiction, as reflecting something of the human condition, in describing the demoniac’s language, gestures, and torments, possession literatures provide insight into ‘real’ experiences that underpin early modern possessions. For the purposes of this study, accounts of the demoniac’s experiences in
her bedchamber is as real as, say, Ophelia’s are in the brook; we, the audience, feel with her, because we understand what is being articulated on the page and on the stage. As Shakespeare captures haunting aspects of the human condition, so do these authors. Although these authors were not writing for the stage, they were trying to record something they saw as simultaneously real and transcendent. They see bewitching and bedevilment as spiritual and physical sickness; they see wrath and rage as contagion and catharsis.

In writing about early English spiritualities, sexualities, and bodies—anorexic bodies of mystics, broken bodies of martyrs, the deformed infants of sectarian mothers—we hypothesize how these figures are read by their own cultures. We also think about their experience of their bodies in terms of containment in clothing, and birthing rooms, and writing closets, or the ways in their bodies are exposed in the stocks, organized meetings, or were found far from home on missions. Physiological experience is often gestured to, an act that seems fair—to read bodies exposed in texts. However, this study explores those same early modern bodies inside out, gleaning from their descriptions not only what is seen, and what is felt, but also how those things are written not just onto exposed parts of bodies (grimacing faces, contorting limbs, bending backs) but how the most acute spiritual experiences are written inside the body, carved into sinews, muscles, nerves, and brains. This study looks at what might be uncovered when we look at the problematic states of bewitchment and bedevilment as embodied, in terms of microinteriority, and as performed as public spectacle. It considers what is unveiled about the female spiritual experience when it is seen as, at least in part, an extreme, vicious, and embodied experience of rage.

This project proposes that many early English accounts of possession begin with a state I am calling “rage possession.” Rage possession develops from the experience of a normative but unbridled emotion like rage. After a time this emotion becomes so well honed and terrifying that, in environments that support and sustain these beliefs, it is read as possession and bewitchment. Extreme emotion is at the genesis of possession—its most obvious, defining, and sustaining element—but it isn’t its totality.

The embodiment of raging spirituality is supported and sustained by the performance of possession that can, in turn, contaminate those around the possessed, that demands dispossession function as not only catharsis, but also as emotional and social reconciliation. Even in cases of sickness and fraud, the performance of possession can make someone feel bewitched and bedeviled. Possessions begin with