Possession is a corporeal proof of the importance and immediacy of the incorporeal. The experiences of the bewitched and bedeviled, in raw and visceral terms, argue for the inexorable interconnectivity of the physical, verbal, and social articulations of the divine and the demonic in early modern England. The demoniac moves beyond performing piety and possession, madness and rationality, the diabolical and the beatific. She makes manifest the demonic. She becomes her afflicted body, and it comes to move, and scream, and be filled with the objects, diseases, and familiar spirits that define the demoniac.

The demoniac physically, emotionally, and cognitively experiences what she feels is demonic in the texts that recount her tale. Elizabeth Orten, for instance, is said to be experiencing the pains of purgatory, in front of a live and engaged audience in 1582. When he is prayed over during his torments in 1603, Thomas Harrison, the Boy of Northwich, “passions were strongest and his rage, and violence greatest, ready to fly in their faces, and to drown their voices by his yellings.” He taunts the divines praying for him by suggesting that, “if they had come to cast out the evil spirit they should have come better provided.” Faith Corbet quickly learns that accusing a witch of theft would cost her more dearly than the price of her stolen gloves. Corbet, who allegedly suffered from four years of fits (1660–1664), cursed by Alice Huson, “did often Screech and Cry out vehemently, sometimes scratch and bite any she could lay hold on, and say, Ah, Alice, Old Witch, have I gotten thee?” Sometime in 1689 Mary Hill commits a trifecta of acts guaranteed to get her bewitched: she threatens an old woman to reclaim a ring, declines to help her with spinning, and refuses to give her an apple as a requested act of charity. The families, doctors, and ministers who saw the demoniac’s experience called it extraordinary; they held her down; they bolstered her
up; they collected and counted the pins she vomited; they debated with her demons. Her experience was interiorized and exteriorized: intimate, social, and cultural. She became an amalgam.

In the light of modern knowledge demoniacs seem diseased. They are represented as vessels infected by spiritual, emotional, and physiological contaminants. In the most fanciful possession accounts, familiars, spirits, and the Devil himself entered and exited demoniacs like unwelcome body fluids: through their ears, nostrils, mouths, vaginas, and anuses. Bewitchments often included elaborate accounts of the supposed evacuation of objects: hair, sticks, pins (believed to be snuck into mouths and spit or regurgitated). Although women like Rachel Pinder allegedly began vomiting objects as proof of spiritual infestation as early as 1574, those accounts that appear mid-to-late sixteenth century are the most fantastic. Margaret Muschamp, whose torments began in 1645, vomits fir branches, coal, pins, straw, wire, brick, lead, and stones. In 1656, fourteen-year-old Elizabeth Mallory, supposedly vomits paper, tow, and wool stuck with pins, two feathers, and a stick. In 1658, two bewitched women from Yorkshire have wonderful fits and strange visitations before they vomit wool and parts of knives. Until the year 1662, the Lowestoft demoniacs (Elizabeth and Deborah Pacy, Anne Durrant, Susan Chandler) were noted to puke pins. In 1670, the anonymous daughter of a gentleman allegedly vomits searing hot coals, hay, hair, and rags. John Tonken vomits sixteen or seventeen pins, walnut shells, pieces of straw and rush, a piece of dry bramble, flat sticks, a very rusty pin, and a beading needle half an inch broad and an inch and a half long in 1686. Mary Hill vomits over two hundred crooked pins, clusters of sixteen or seventeen pins, seven pieces of pewter, four pieces of brass, six pieces of lead, six pieces of latten, five pieces of iron, and twenty-two nails in 1689. The anecdotal examples of alleged material infiltration stretched on and on (see figure 1.1). The demoniac was said to get into other people as well, to make them bruise, bleed, and live in terror, to control people’s homes and their minds. If demoniacs were vessels, they were also that which needed containment.

The Devil was always present in a world where most people managed to avoid murderous rampages, falling into fits, and having visions of demons. The Devil was not, therefore, the first explanation for bizarre bearing. There were contemporary efforts to provide simple and logical explanations; we find possession when those explanations fail. In his skeptical dialogue on possessions, A Summarie Answere (1601), John Deacon’s character Orthodoxus argues that fits that look demonic, including the supernatural symptoms of “rending, foaming,