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Levack, Brian P. The Devil Within: Possession and Exorcism in the Christian West

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exclusively filtered through Portuguese and Spanish (and to a lesser extent, Italian missionaries)” (6) during this period. It is not clear, though, why the accounts of the voyages of the English and Dutch East India Companies that were published through the first half of the seventeenth century cannot be said to have had any impact on western visions of the Far East.

In the final analysis, this collection is marred by some methodological problems that stem from a reluctance to engage with the European context in which the figures under examination functioned. In order to be effective, trans-cultural analysis must engage with both observed and observer.

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Levack, Brian P.

The Devil Within: Possession and Exorcism in the Christian West.

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013. Pp. 346 + xii. ISBN 978-0-300-11472-0 (hardcover) \$35.

The last 30 years have seen the publication of a number of important studies examining the problem of demon possession in medieval and early modern Christianity. While these have added much to our understanding of the expression, diagnosis, and treatment of this phenomenon in particular social, historical, and geographical contexts, Brian Levack's *The Devil Within* is the first to offer a comprehensive treatment of the field as a whole. Spanning the period from the New Testament to the present, Levack examines a vast array of case studies taken from across the Christian west in an attempt to understand what was happening in the minds and bodies of the afflicted and those who encountered them. The result is a masterful work that will doubtless remain the standard introduction to the field for some time to come.

In accounting for possession behaviour, Levack explicitly eschews modern naturalistic explanatory paradigms: most putative demoniacs, he asserts, were not frauds; nor were they all suffering from some identifiable mental or physical illness. Certainly some of the symptoms manifested by demoniacs map closely onto various neurological or muscle-control disorders that are now well understood; for Levack, however, the process of retrospective diagnosis is

problematic because it involves winnowing from a litany of strange behaviours only those that coincide with conditions recognized by modern medical science. To be sure, reports that a demoniac could suddenly converse in languages she had previously not known, vomit things such as pins, glass, and stones, manifest preternatural strength, and even levitate—only to be successfully relieved through exorcism or by the prayer and fasting of godly ministers—defy credulity. But these incredible symptoms were integral to the diagnosis of possession. Thus, in order to make sense of possession, Levack argues that historians need to take these preternatural symptoms seriously and approach the problem under the assumptions of those who were actually engaged in the process of diagnosis.

Levack argues that possessions are best understood as cultural performances, what he dubs “religious psychodramas.” Whether a putative demoniac was a cynical fraud, afflicted by some mental or physical ailment, or wracked by deep spiritual angst, once possession was proffered as a possible explanation for the condition, she—along with those who saw and treated her—participated in a culturally authored script. This articulated not just the broad range of behaviours the demoniac was expected to perform, but the appropriate responses of her audience, and the type of remedy sought. For Levack, the strength of this approach is that it explains the whole complex web of symptoms manifested by a demoniac, whether they be physical, behavioural, or seemingly supernatural.

In itself, this is not new. As Levack concedes, the theatricality of possession was something widely appreciated by early modern dramatists. But where he is innovative is in using this approach to account for the differences in content and response to particular possessions over time and between confessional cultures. As he shows in the heart of the book, these variations were significant and come into starkest relief in the period between 1550 and 1650 during which demon possession came to reach almost epidemic proportions, with demoniacs numbering into the thousands. At one level, the nature of these differences is not surprising. Possessions enacted in a Catholic context afforded a prominent role to the sacraments / sacramentals and to the intercession of the saints in their diagnosis, performance, and remedy. Predictably, in Protestant demesnes such idolatrous trappings were shunned; there, it was the word of God, as set down in scripture, that proved central to the drama. But the two confessions also viewed the possessed in markedly different ways. In Catholic belief, demoniacs were believed to have done nothing themselves

to have warranted the devil's assault; by contrast, Protestants, ever mindful of their own sinfulness, always found demoniacs morally suspect. For Levack, the moral innocence ascribed to demoniacs, combined with the extensive arsenal of weapons that could be brought to bear against supernatural incursions, helps explain why there seems to have been ten times as many Catholic as Protestant demoniacs during this period.

Levack's emphasis on possession as a social construction is an important and useful corrective to some of the older historiography. But if possession dramas were religious psychodramas, so too were the pamphlet accounts written about them; yet Levack touches on the role of printing and print culture only in passing, noting in particular that a large proportion of demoniacs were either literate or exposed to the accounts of especially notorious possessions second hand. This is a significant omission, for Levack relies heavily upon specific data adduced from such works for his analysis. Whether these pamphlets are sympathetic or hostile to the possession they purport to describe, they are all polemical, composed in order to persuade their readers. Moreover, as it is wholly licit within the context of early modern rhetorical theory to embellish particular details in order to amplify the overall argument of an account, it can never be entirely clear to the modern historian when it was the participants in a possession drama who were acting within the context of a culturally adduced script, or when it was the author of the account written about it.

The scope of *The Devil Within* is impressive and so it seems churlish to complain that the coverage can be spotty in places. Nevertheless, the period from the end of the patristic era to the twelfth century does get fairly short shrift. I must also point out that there is an error in Levack's summary of the 1621 case of the counterfeit English demoniac Katheren Malpas. It was Malpas's would-be confederate Anne Godfrey who was prosecuted at the Essex assizes, not Katheren herself as Levack describes. There is no record of Katheren's fate after her appearance in Star Chamber.

But this is an otherwise excellent book and goes a long way to restoring the agency of demoniacs as they acted out their strange fits and trances across the centuries.

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