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Brian P. Levack, *The Devil Within: Possession and Exorcism in the Christian West*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013. vi + 346 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$35.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-300-11472-0; eBook ISBN 0-300-19538-5.

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In *The Devil Within*, Brian Levack offers a reinterpretation of the wave of demonic possessions that occurred in early modern Europe. Although he concentrates on the thousands of presumed possession cases in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, he sets those events and the ideas underlying them within a context stretching from early Christianity to modern movements such as the Pentecostals. Like many scholars studying possessions, Levack emphasizes the need to “take seriously the religious beliefs of the possessed and their families” (p. ix), leading him to propose what he terms a theatrical model where “demoniacs were performers in religious dramas who were following scripts they learned from others” (p. ix).

The Devil Within repeatedly argues that possession and exorcism must be understood within a continuum of beliefs and practices, and as one of the leading experts on early modern witchcraft and demonology, Levack is well fitted to the task. From the beginning, he is clear about the parameters of his work: the qualities of a possession in early modern Europe [1] and what individuals should be excluded from his analytical framework [2] (pp. 6-19). No specialist in this area would disagree with his parameters, although some might challenge the extent to which every possession case exhibits all of these characteristics. Levack himself addresses that critique as he analyzes particular possessions. By the end of first two chapters, readers have a clear sense of Levack’s interests and definitions: what he means by theater, how he will approach confessional distinctions, what distinctions might be made between devils and *the Devil*, and the central theological concerns that early modern possession cases reflected. Levack’s research in these areas is not new, but the sources on which he relies are excellent. His contributions are the scope of his synthesis, his reinterpretation of existing data, and the qualities he emphasizes. For example, he argues that nominalism provided the methodological and theological foundation for the presumed expansion of demonic activity beginning in the later fourteenth century. This is an intriguing connection that complements recent work on both the development of nominalism and the rise of witch trials at that time.

In a book of this scope and with an author of such knowledge, it is not surprising that *The Devil Within* integrates many themes in the historiography of possession, exorcism, demonology, and even the witch hunts. Three topics seem particularly valuable, however, because they take existing data and provide convincing and important reinterpretations of it. They are 1) the distinctive attitudes and actions of Calvinists, even among other Protestants, when dealing with possession and exorcism, 2) the relationship between the witchcraft and possession, which is the subject of chapter eight, “The Demoniac and the Witch,” and 3) the negligible effect of the Enlightenment on interest and belief in possession and exorcism, which is the focus of chapter nine, “Possession in the Age of Reason.” Despite two topics having their own chapter, the themes they raise reappear in many places in the book.

The first topic, on Calvinism's distinctiveness, ties into recent work emphasizing the differences among Protestant denominations and calling into question the Catholic versus Protestant binary that once underlay discussions of early modern religion and society, even what may seem to be their more radical manifestations: possession and exorcism. While Levack brings up the classic distinction between Protestant and Catholic possession—Protestants prayed and Catholics exorcized—he takes cases such as the nuns of Loudun, Nicole Obri, and Thomas Darling and shows how they should be analyzed more profoundly as part of a continuum of beliefs and practices understood by both clergy and laity, what Levack would likely call a script. Because of this emphasis on both the understanding and the experience of possession and exorcism as following culturally-conditioned scripts, Protestant communities must be understood as having more diverse approaches than the classic binary implies.

Not surprisingly, Levack compares Calvinist to Catholic attitudes, but he also makes telling points about distinctions between Lutherans and Calvinists throughout the book.[3] For example, "The unrivalled Lutheran penchant for presenting possession in apocalyptic and eschatological terms stemmed from the Biblicism that characterized Lutheranism from its inception.... Evidence of the connection between the increase in the number of possessions and apocalyptic thought was far less evident in Calvinism, not because Biblicism was weaker in Calvinism, which it was not, but because the number of Calvinist possessions was so small" (p. 69). Such differences assume particular importance from pages 156 on when Levack develops the themes of performance and theatricality. He stresses the practical implications of theological debates, such as whether the devil could actually possess a human soul or just a human's body. He also provides a persuasive analysis of why Protestants, especially Calvinists, never developed the practice of discernment of spirits:

"The main issue in Protestant possessions, therefore, was whether the demoniac would succumb to demonic temptation.... Catholics were mainly concerned with the narrow boundary between the saint and the demoniac, whereas Protestants were concerned with a more invidious distinction: whether the demoniac, whom they always considered morally suspect, might be a witch. One indication of this different approach to demonic possession is that the Roman Catholic art of discernment of spirits did not develop within Protestant congregations. Lutherans might occasionally consider the possibility that a possession was divine or angelic rather than demonic, but even for them such a positive experience was interpreted as a divine call for repentance, not an indication of sanctity" (p. 211).[4]

The second topic—possession, exorcism, and the witch-hunts—plays a surprisingly minor role in *The Devil Within*, given that most readers will probably know Levack's expertise in the early modern witch trials and themselves have background in the witch hunts and related demonology. From the beginning of chapter eight, on witches and demoniacs, however, Levack stresses the need to see possession and witchcraft as distinct, although by the second paragraph he shows how they can be linked, noting that "both involved the exercise of demonic power in human society" (p. 198). Throughout this chapter, Levack walks a tightrope between distinctiveness and similarity, a challenge that much of the best work on possession and exorcism faces.[5] Even with this tension, Levack convincingly demonstrates an evolution in the relationship between witchcraft and possession that the narrower chronological, confessional, or geographic focus of most books on possession and exorcism prohibits appreciating. For example, Levack argues that fifteenth-century theologians such as Johannes Nider crossed the line that had once separated the demoniac and the witch. By connecting the two under the umbrella of susceptibility to demonic overtures and corrupted human nature, these intellectuals provided the foundation for demonizing the possessed well into the eighteenth century. They also allowed for cases of possession to mutate into witch trials, as happened in Paderborn, Germany, in 1659 (p. 205).

When Levack notes that witchcraft and possession cases increased and decreased concurrently until sometime in the eighteenth century, he sets the scene for his third topic and the subject of chapter nine, possession and the Enlightenment. Over the last twenty years, scholarship on the supernatural has questioned the traditional narrative about the triumph of reason in the eighteenth and even nineteenth

centuries. Levack builds on that work and contributes to it. He demonstrates how both theologians and physicians saw possession as able to have an empirical foundation and how their interpretations could complement each other. Working through the well-known examples of the *convulsionnaires*, Johann Gassner, and the patients in the Salpêtrière, as well as more obscure examples from Aragon and the Savoy, Levack argues that cases of possession “formed part of a counter-offensive against the skepticism and the secularism of the Age of Reason” (p. 216). Yet Levack’s work proves much more. These cases and his interpretation make clear the extent to which many Europeans retained traditional beliefs even when they might be using a new vocabulary to express them. He provides valuable evidence for those scholars who argue against a Weberian “disenchantment” and for an eighteenth-century “re-enchantment” of Europe.

Underlying these topics and *The Devil Within* as a whole is Levack’s emphasis on understanding possession and exorcism as theatrical, with commonly accepted scripts and performative characteristics. This is far from saying demoniacs were mere actors. Drawing on the work of Traugott Oesterreich and I. M. Lewis, Levack argues that both demoniacs and their audience worked within a cultural context that allowed for both agreement and misunderstandings.[6] For a person to be considered a demoniac, he or she certainly had to exhibit characteristics that others would recognize (the script), but he or she also had to internalize the script. A complex and, at times, unconscious process, such “cultural performances” drew on biblical models, stories, sermons, plays, and for some, written texts, and they evolved as communities and confessions changed.[7] Levack condemns those scholars who equate this argument with fraud, and from his first chapter, he challenges medical and psychological explanations for possession, such as DID (dissociative identity disorder) and the nineteenth-century catch-all of “hysteria.” In chapters five and six, he delves most deeply into the theoretical foundations for his theatrical interpretation. Chapter five examines group possessions in particular, and here Levack develops concepts that also hold for his work on smaller or individual possession cases. Arguing for the value in seeing possessions as performances, Levack writes:

“One might plausibly refer to collective stress, caused by shared fears and concerns of people in the same close-knit community, but an analysis based on this type of collective anxiety, sometimes referred to as mass psychogenic illness, takes us out of the realm of medical, psychiatric diagnosis and into that of collective mentality and emotion.... Understanding group possessions thus requires that we abandon a search for medical causes, including those of a psychiatric nature, and explore the dynamics of group behavior and the development of what the clinical psychologist Adam Crabtree calls the group-mind.[8]... Two common features of all such epidemics of religious group behavior are shared belief and imitation. The epidemics took place in settings where all the members of the group had similar or identical religious beliefs, aspirations, and anxieties, and they spread by means of a process of imitation.... Such imitation does not necessarily mean that the demoniacs whom they aped were faking possession, although we cannot categorically rule out that possibility” (pp. 135-36).

Such a perspective leads Levack to focus primarily on manifestations of possession, rather than their causation. The latter would likely have been of more interest, or at least importance, to the theologians and elites experiencing and/or writing about these cases. Yet, Levack clearly shows how case after well-known case can be understood and linked through “the sacred drama of possession.” This emphasis provides an innate explanation for the changes over time or differences between confessions that Levack chronicles.

Levack’s emphasis on performance will certainly be challenged by some readers, who assume that “performance” means such possessions were fake, illicit, or ignorant and that Levack thereby holds his subjects in contempt. Levack addresses this concern throughout *The Devil Within*, beginning in his preface. There, he describes modern academic approaches to possession and the biases that arise from their underlying presumptions. While quite aware that written reports about possessions could be exaggerated consciously or unconsciously, Levack also notes that such exaggerations were also part of a

cultural script that scholars must take into account rather than discount. Despite these excellent clarifications, however, one of Levack's standard rhetorical techniques can leave a reader who is skimming his work with the false impression that he thinks those who believed in possessions were ignorant or deluded. He often begins an interpretation with a strong statement, such as that he gives after briefly discussing the case of a young Silesian girl: "When a possessed twelve-year-old Silesian girl discussed theological learned issues with Tobias Seiler, the author of this young girl's possession narrative, we can safely assume that Seiler, the educated pastor and school superintendent in the girl's parish, composed the entire discourse."^[9] A reader who is already looking for bias based on the use of terms like "theatrical" and "performative" may easily assume that Levack has just called Seiler a liar. Yet, the subsequent paragraphs argue that such attribution does not make Seiler's account "entirely fictional" and situate Seiler and the girl within a context that allowed for her performance of possession. If Levack began this case and others (see pp. 160 and 187) with a sentence that suggested more nuance was coming, such misunderstandings might be less likely to occur. Levack is certainly not arguing that demoniacs, exorcists, and observers should be generally seen as credulous and frauds, and it would be a shame if readers thought so.

The more significant critique is, unfortunately, one I myself do not know how to resolve. Levack's argument about theatricality and cultural performance relies on the transmission of such knowledge—the narratives of possession—throughout and between communities. The author excels at presenting the types of scripts to which early modern people might have access, but he is less successful at showing how they internalized such knowledge. In some ways, such work on reception is impossible to do, but there is research on sermons and education, to name two examples that might have provided Levack with valuable data (and, admittedly, a much larger book). Levack clearly knows that he has to deal with the transmission of ideas and integrates material on the role of female mysticism, morality literature, and the setting of possession cases, to name only a few of the themes, at various places in the book. Chapter seven, "The Demoniac in Society," attempts to address the transmission question more broadly, but it is unfortunately the least satisfying chapter in the book. Here, Levack notes the problems facing anyone who tries to reconstruct a demoniac's social relationships, but performance theory does, in part, call for it. He then turns to printing as a way of discussing transmission of such ideas among the literate, an approach that makes perfect sense, but I could not help wondering about the illiterate or less literate who were involved in such dramas. Scholars have shown ways that such ideas could circulate. Would it have been possible to address those topics more extensively throughout the book or, perhaps, to move this chapter up and expand it somewhat, so that readers could approach the sections on theatricality with this information in mind?

My questions over transmission should not be seen as a condemnation of the book, however. On the contrary, Levack has achieved something that few scholars could: synthesizing the extensive literature on possession and exorcism in Christian history and offering a precise and persuasive reinterpretation of that evidence. It reflects his vast knowledge of the latest historiography and methodology and his skill at communicating that knowledge to readers at various levels. *The Devil Within* thus provides something that no other modern book on possession and exorcism does, and I would recommend it to both educated, non-academic readers and specialists in the field.

NOTES

[1] The qualities that the possessed exhibit are described in brief sections in the first chapter: convulsions, physical pain, rigidity of the limbs, muscular flexibility and contortions, preternatural strength, levitation, swelling, vomiting, loss of bodily function, fasting, language, voice, trance experiences and visions, clairvoyance, blasphemy and sacred objects, immoral gestures and actions. (Levack, pp. 6-15)

[2] Those individuals whom Levack excludes from his analysis are 1) those who had similar symptoms but good spirits were presumed to be the source of them; 2) those who were obsessed by demons, rather than possessed by them; 3) those who came to exorcists for medical cures; and 4) “those who were described as possessed simply because they were sinners” (p. 19). He provides his justifications on pp. 16-19.

[3] “In contrast to Catholics trained in the scholastic tradition, Calvinist clergy discouraged the popular belief that the Devil assumed aerial bodies and interacted with humans in that capacity; Calvinists thought much more of a Devil that threatened them spiritually and internally, tempting them to sin, rather than physically meeting with them and offering them power, sex, or money in exchange for their souls” (Levack, pp. 62-63).

[4] Here Levack cites H. C. Erik Midelfort, “Sin, Melancholy, Obsession: Insanity and Culture in 16th Century Germany,” in Steven L. Kaplan, ed., *Understanding Popular Culture: Europe from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Mouton, 1984), pp. 113-46, here p. 136.

[5] Levack himself places Richard Kieckhefer, Barbara Newman, and Sarah Ferber in this category.

[6] Traugott Oesterreich, *Possession, Demoniacal and Other: Among Primitive Races in Antiquity, the Middle Ages and Modern Times* (New York: University Books, 1966; first published 1930); I. M. Lewis, *Ecstastic Religion: An Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971).

[7] Levack sees five biblical possessions as having special significance for early modern Europeans: those found in Mark 1:21-8 & Luke 4:31-7; Matthew 8:28-3, Luke 8:26-39, & Mark 5:1-20; Mark 7:25-30 & Matthew 15:21-8; Mark 9:14-29, Matthew 17:14-21, & Luke 9:37-43; and Matthew 9:32.

[8] Adam Crabtree, *Multiple Man: Explorations in Possession and Multiple Personality* (New York: Praeger, 1985), ch. 11.

[9] Tobias Seiler, *Daemonomania: Ueberaus schreckliche historia von einem besessenen zwelffjährigen jungfräulein zu Lewenberg in Schlesien in diesem 1605 jahr* (Wittenberg, 1605); H. C. Erik Midelfort, *A History of Madness in Sixteenth-century Germany* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 57.

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