

Children of Wrath: Possession, Prophecy and the Young in Early Modern England.

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Anna French's *Children of Wrath* is one of the most recent studies addressing the often problematic scholarship surrounding childhood in early modern England. Academics have always faced difficulties in reconstructing the lives of children in this period, limited by a lack of viable source material. Perceptions of early modern childhood have thus been framed around the interactions of this demographic with other historical actors, skewing the scholarship towards a particular focus. The relevant historiography has primarily been concerned with how parents and early modern society as a whole regarded their young—the notion of 'emotional immunity' having gained significant traction. This theory posited that the high mortality rates for children stripped them of any sense of authority while also straining bonds of parental love.

The study of early modern childhood as presented in *Children of Wrath* is somewhat revisionist in approach, joining a series of contemporary works that also attempt to provide an alternative perspective to the historiographical orthodoxy. In this instance, French shifts away from the anthropological inspired approach that has characterised childhood studies over the past fifty years, and examines early modern culture in its own context rather than attempting to draw a linear progression from medieval to modern.

French's objective in this study is to reveal how early modern society perceived, imagined, and depicted their young; revising the scholarly notion that their lives may have gone unregarded. In *Children of Wrath*, French acknowledges the challenges associated with studying childhood in this period and looks to examples of extreme religious experiences as a means of framing her analysis. Primary depictions of demonic possession, prophecy, and divine providence emerge as rich sources for understanding the role and status of children in this context. These examples may appear problematic but, as French argues convincingly, they reveal unique cases in which children were granted cultural or spiritual agency.

Each of the chapters in *Children of Wrath* explores cultural spaces in which children were depicted as reaching beyond their assigned societal roles. In particular, French underlines her research by emphasising changing attitudes towards children that developed during and after the Protestant Reformation. In a period where the old forms of social control had been lost, French asserts that the children depicted in the related source material were the products of cultural and religious adaptation in which early modern society turned to the past and drew on old symbols and tropes. These children seemed to reflect the spiritual anxiety of the period: functioning as martyrs or as eschatological symbols of the ever-deepening sin plaguing the earthly realm. The perception of children in this period was thus shaped by changing religious attitudes, providing them with an important role in this shifting cultural landscape.

The most substantial sections of *Children of Wrath* focuses on accounts of demonic possession. Early modern society perceived children as particularly vulnerable to spiritual experiences, demonic possession thus emerging as symbolic of the wider battle between God and the Devil. These culturally recognised discourses were important as they provided children with a role to play in the religious performance that epitomised cases of demonic possession. Through adopting this role, children could gain a sense of spiritual authority and

temporarily upgrade their social status. Furthermore, possession could also be understood as a form of social protest in which the demoniac was permitted to act outside the narrow behavioural codes of early modern society. French's contention here is that children were acting out—either consciously or unconsciously—a form of hidden cultural transcript in which they not only defied religious structures, but became and redefined them.

The religious performance aspect of demonic possession develops as an important element of French's analysis, particularly the relationship between demoniac and exorcist. Subverting Stephen Greenblatt's theatrical framework for understanding cases of early modern demonic possession, French attributes the 'true' authority to the demoniac and not the exorcist. Traditionally, exorcism has been viewed in the historiography as a form of religio-political propaganda which provided the exorcist with spiritual authority while also affirming their belief system. Citing the exorcisms of John Darrell as the definite example of this point, French argues that children should be seen as the principal actors in these performances and not simply as victims serving the cause of the exorcist.

Continuing with these theme of children as beacons of spiritual authority, *Children of Wrath* also addresses early modern conceptions of child prophets. Prophetic children received a different form of attention and notoriety than demoniacs, constructed as vessels of pious authority. Many of the sources that French examines depict children as symbols of retribution for humanity's personal sins, these figures embodying solutions to early modern anxieties.

As French argues throughout this text, demonic possession and divine prophecy were closely linked to Puritan religious culture and the roles that children adopted in these primary accounts were examples of the religious toolkit designed to fill in the vacuum that existed in England at this time. Emerging beliefs such as predestination meant that even infants could face damnation if consigned to an early death and this religious culture seemed to place youths at the very centre of a theological system revolving around conceptions of sin, solution, and spiritual anxiety.

The entire argument of *Children of Wrath* is aimed at demonstrating how children emerged as important symbols of spiritual authority in the post-Reformation landscape. French successfully asserts that Reformed Protestant theology opened up a series of roles for youths in which they could establish themselves as key actors in many of the religious and cultural performances of this period. French's rejection of the emotional immunity hypothesis does get a bit lost amidst the other arguments of *Children of Wrath* but she does demonstrate that the relationship between parent and child was not as static as once thought. This piece of scholarship is comprehensive in its analysis and provides a well-constructed argument on this area of early modern childhood. Anna French has succeeded in presenting a study that not only establishes a revised hypothesis on early modern childhood, but indicates that far more work needs to be carried out in this area of study.