



**Francis Young, English Catholics and the Supernatural, 1553-1829. Catholic Christendom, 1300-1700. Farnham: Ashgate, 2013, xii + 308 pp., E-rea 11.2 (2014), <http://erea.revues.org/3919>**

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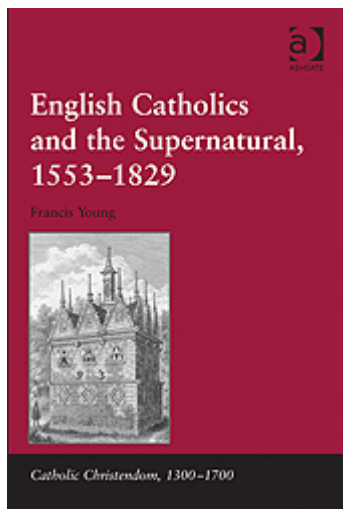
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Francis Young, *English Catholics and the Supernatural, 1553-1829*. Catholic Christendom, 1300-1700. Farnham: Ashgate, 2013, xii + 308 pp. ISBN 978-1-4094-5565-3. 96,32 €



In this monograph, Francis Young acts upon one of the key observations he had made in an article on exorcism in the early modern English Catholic mission: there appeared to be no full-length studies of the attitudes of English Catholics to the supernatural. Scholars had offered illuminating analyses of the Protestant views of Catholic involvement with the supernatural, but nothing had been published to document at length how Catholics themselves perceived and experienced supernatural phenomena in their daily lives, or to determine the part played by supernatural beliefs in the 'old' faith. Steering away from an analysis of Protestant polemics about papist beliefs and practices, this study finally addresses the attitudes of English Catholics (at home and in exile) to the broad, multifaceted and rather nebulous concept of the supernatural.

The book is ambitious in covering a period which ranges from the accession of Mary Tudor in 1553 to the political Emancipation of 1829. Yet this time-span is one of its strengths, since it allows the author to develop his study over the *longue durée* and to nuance the changes which affected English Catholic beliefs from the Reformation to the Enlightenment. This approach, however, poses some difficulties in terms of the construction of the book. The author chose to dedicate two distinct chapters (chapter 1 and 2) to the Catholic treatment of 'superstition', dealing first with early modern attitudes, and second with the shifts which occurred during the Enlightenment period. The same division between early modern and enlightenment occurs in chapters 4 and 5, where the author considers the English Catholic approach to witchcraft and magic. The subject of ghosts and apparitions, however, warrants only a single chapter (chapter 3) in which the authors deals with ghost stories from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century; the topic of the devil and exorcism is also dealt with in one single chapter (chapter 6), and concluded the study.

The subject of English Catholic attitudes to the supernatural is as ambitious as the time-span chosen, and Francis young offers no clear-cut answers here. What he does do, however, is much more interesting: through remarkably detailed case studies, he demonstrates that there were many approaches to the supernatural. Throughout the study, it becomes increasingly clear that credulity and skepticism existed concomitantly, and right from the beginning of the period. The author demonstrates that some of the conclusions published in Keith Thomas's ground-breaking *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971) were somewhat over-simplified and deserve nuancing. He makes use of Latin primary sources which, as he correctly argues, have been too long overlooked by historians of English Catholicism. Indeed, Latin was the language of choice by many Catholics. Decades of neglect have

skewed our perception of Catholic attitudes and beliefs, silencing the authors who published in Latin.

Francis Young shows that, in the early modern period, Jansenists and Jesuits, or Cisalpines and Ultramontanes did hold the same views in the subject of the supernatural. The boundary between faith and superstition a point of debate in which some argued for skepticism and whilst others embraced elements of the preternatural more willingly. In the same way as the English Catholic community should be viewed as plural rather than monolithic, its attitudes to the supernatural varied greatly, not only over time but also depending on regional folklore or social and cultural factors. Whilst this conclusion should hardly come as a surprise, Young's archival work provides lively vignettes which make the book thoroughly engaging and a pleasure to read.

The major contribution of the monograph is to be found in its passages on the specific Englishness of Catholic attitudes to the supernatural. From the various case studies presented, Young posits that the beliefs and practices of English Catholics did not differ greatly from their Protestant compatriots. When ghosts were concerned, Catholics and Protestants reacted in similar ways, and constructed comparable stories, with comparable embellishments added in the Romantic age. Surprisingly, the quintessential disagreement about the existence of purgatory did not seem to impact attitudes towards ghost-related folklore. When considering witchcraft, the same conclusion applies. Catholics and Protestants held compatible views: the importance of the pact with the devil was eroded in England, the Sabbath played little or no part in the national imagination, and witchcraft accusations were no more prominent in Catholic than in Protestant communities. If anything, belief and practice regarding witchcraft present a certain Englishness which differentiates them from attitudes on the Catholic Continent. Thus, although anti-Catholic polemicists often heavily implied a quasi-organic link between witchcraft and what they described as an obscurantist, idolatrous faith, it seems that English Catholics could be as inclined to skepticism as their Protestant neighbours.

On the subject of exorcism, however, this argument is a little less valid. This is the only topic in this book which has previously been tackled by other scholars. Alexandra Walsham, for instance, argued most convincingly that the practice of exorcism served a pragmatic purpose in the mission. Its aim was to convince crowds, through somewhat sensationalist shows, that the Catholic clergy possessed really and effective power against the forces of evil. Exorcism was an effective tool in the confessional propaganda of the English mission, and exorcists have so far been shown as zealous proselytizing agents of the Counter-Reformation. Francis Young tries to nuance this view by emphasizing a certain continuity with long-held beliefs in the correspondence of physical and spiritual ailments; yet it seems quite indisputable that exorcism was clearly a practice where Protestant and Catholic beliefs differed greatly in England.

Some passages in this book are less convincing than others. For instance, whilst it made sense to avoid complicated conceptual definitions and to propose a broad working understanding of the supernatural as comprising all preternatural and supernatural phenomena, it was curious to see the author discuss popular belief in the Benedictine knowledge of herbal remedies as actual 'superstition'. The main criticism however has to be the lack of a clear conclusion: the quality of the work presented over more than two hundred pages deserved as much. Despite this regrettable oversight, this monograph remains a thought-provoking and appealing read, which offers a rich, well-documented and intelligent analysis of a so-far neglected subject.

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