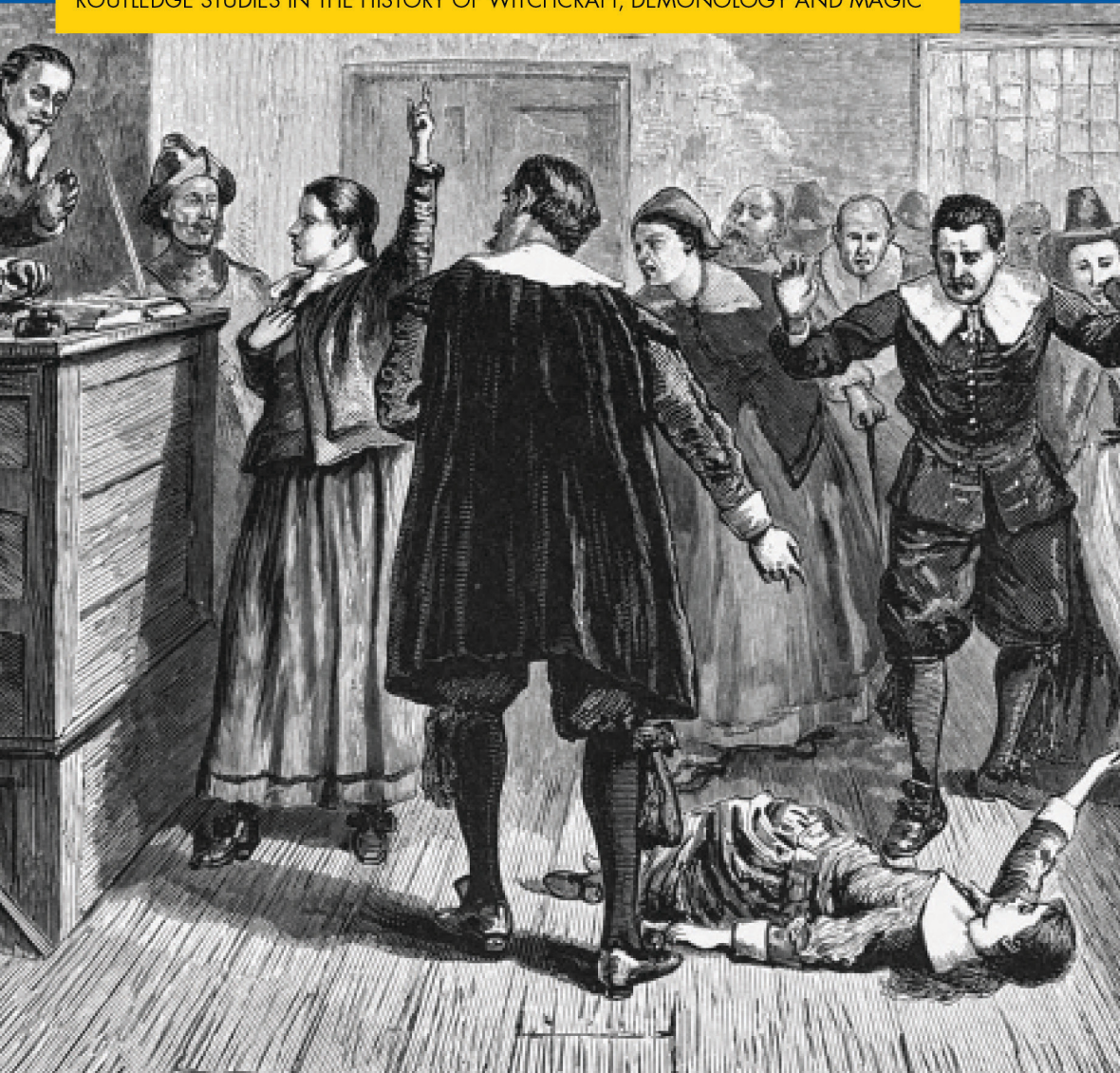


# AGENTS OF THE INVISIBLE WORLD

Children and Witchcraft in England and New England, 1589–1692

Molly Northcott

ROUTLEDGE STUDIES IN THE HISTORY OF WITCHCRAFT, DEMONOLOGY AND MAGIC



# AGENTS OF THE INVISIBLE WORLD

*Agents of the Invisible World* explores an underappreciated aspect of the well-researched early modern witchcraft trials: children. In particular, this work analyses the various roles children played in English and New English witchcraft trials between 1589 and 1692, seeking to understand not only how children became involved in witchcraft trials but also why.

Using primary sources, including legal documents, pamphlets and hitherto overlooked archival materials, this book reveals that children were not always passive accusers who identified witches, but could be aggressive in their denunciations, sometimes even being accused of witchcraft themselves. By once again allowing these children to take centre stage, Northcott uncovers the haunting history behind children's pervasive involvement in witchcraft trials on both sides of the Atlantic. Readers are guided through thirty-six case studies from England and New England, making this the most detailed work on the role of children in England and New England to date. The main themes discussed include agency, motivation, influence and impact, incorporating multidisciplinary insights and principles from feminism, anthropology, history of emotion, social, cultural and religious studies.

This volume is a valuable resource for students, scholars and anyone interested in concepts of early modern witchcraft and magic, children and childhood, and social history.

**Molly Northcott** received her PhD at the University of New England, Australia. Her current research focuses on the different roles children played in early modern English and New English witchcraft trials in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Ever since studying early modern witch-hunting as an undergraduate at UNE in 2017, Northcott has become fascinated by the subject. Her research interests focus on witchcraft trials in England and New England as well as issues and questions of youth, gender, motivation, agency and fraud.

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and New England, 1589–1692

*Molly Northcott*

Designed cover image: Witchcraft at Salem Village. Engraving. The central figure in this 1876 illustration of the courtroom is usually identified as Mary Walcott.  
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*For Professor Thomas A. Fudge  
Who is known by many epithets and titles but my  
favourite ones will always be 'mentor' and 'friend'.*



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**MAPS**



**xii** Maps

<b>Number</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>County</b>
1	Orpington	Kent
2	Ashford	Kent
3	Faversham	Kent
4	Hadlow	Kent
5	Tunbridge	Kent
6	Westwell	Kent
7	Woolwich	Kent
8	Baildon	Yorkshire
9	Bishop Burton	Yorkshire
10	Burton Agnes	Yorkshire
11	Halifax	Yorkshire
12	Huddersfield	Yorkshire
13	Northowram	Yorkshire
14	Scarborough	Yorkshire
15	Sheffield	Yorkshire
16	Thorne	Yorkshire
17	Wakefield	Yorkshire
18	Warmfield	Yorkshire
19	West Riding	Yorkshire
20	Fewston	Yorkshire
21	Woolley	Yorkshire
22	Middleham	Yorkshire
23	Beckington	Somerset
24	Taunton Dean	Somerset
25	Milton Ernest	Bedfordshire
26	Bewdley	Worcestershire
27	Droitwich	Worcestershire
28	Bilson Brook	Staffordshire
29	Burton upon Trent	Staffordshire

**MAP 0.1** (Continued)

30	Birchen Nook	Northumberland
31	Northumberland	Northumberland
32	Newcastle upon Tyne	Northumberland
33	Borough of Southwark	Surrey
34	London	Middlesex
35	Whitechapel	Middlesex
36	Wapping	Middlesex
37	Tyburn Tree (London executions site)	Middlesex
38	Shipyard near Temple-Bar	Middlesex
39	Edmonton	Middlesex
40	Stanmore	Middlesex
41	Isleworth (Thistleworth)	Middlesex
42	Kingswood	Gloucestershire
43	Bristol	Gloucestershire / Somerset
44	Bow	Devon
45	Exeter	Devon
46	Penzance	Cornwall
47	Trebition (unclear spelling)	Cornwall
48	Honiton	Devon
49	Lyme Regis	Dorset
50	Bury St Edmunds	Suffolk
51	Dunwich	Suffolk
52	Herringswell	Suffolk
53	Stradbroke	Suffolk
54	Walsingham	Suffolk
55	Denham	Buckinghamshire
56	Ilkeston	Derbyshire
57	Ipswich (was Essex historically)	Essex
58	St. Osyth	Essex
59	Stisted	Essex

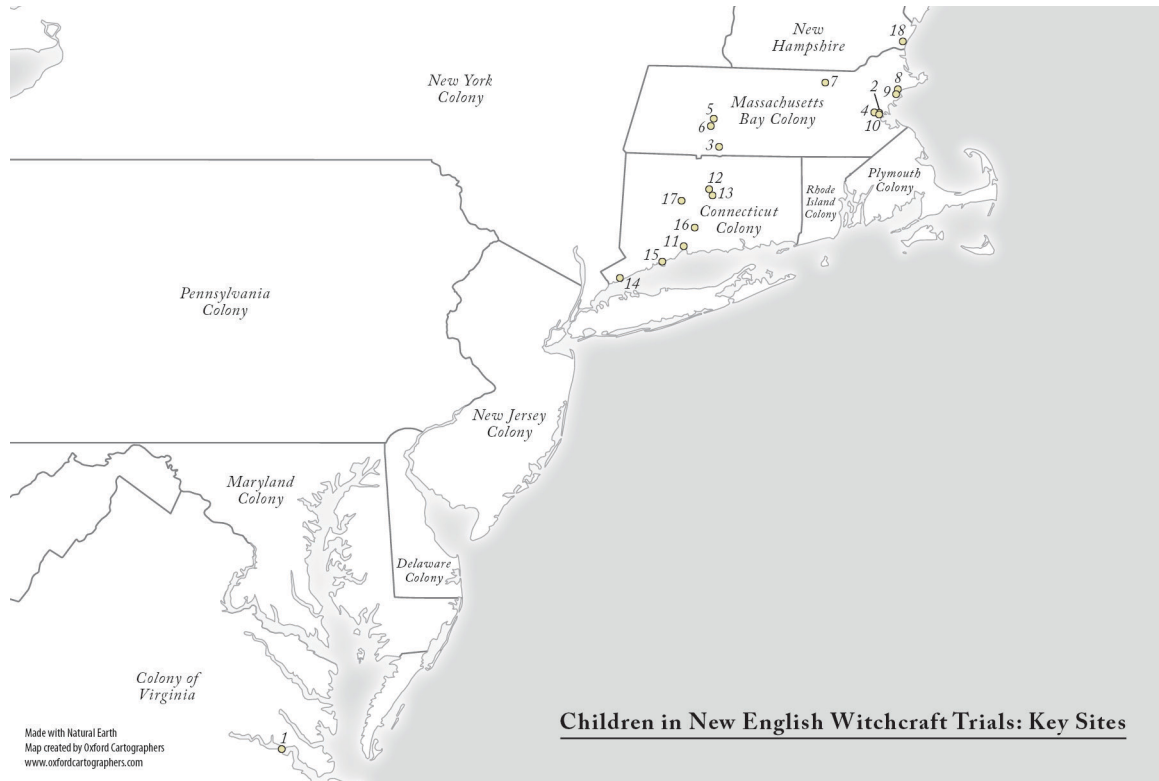
MAP 0.1 (Continued)

**xiv** Maps

60	Upton	Essex
61	Great Bowden	Leicestershire
62	Husbands Bosworth	Leicestershire
63	Leicester	Leicestershire
64	Hertford	Hertfordshire
65	Little Gaddesden	Hertfordshire
66	Sarrett	Hertfordshire
67	Ware	Hertfordshire
68	Chester	Cheshire
69	Northwich	Cheshire
70	Huntingdon	Huntingdonshire
71	Warboys	Huntingdonshire
72	Isle of Ely	Cambridgeshire
73	Leyland	Lancashire
74	Ormskirk	Lancashire
75	Pendle Forest	Lancashire
76	Samlesbury	Lancashire
77	Surrey (general)	Surrey
78	Ewell (Yowel)	Surrey
79	Norfolk (general)	Norfolk
80	North Moreton	Berkshire
81	Windsor	Berkshire
82	Northamptonshire (general)	Northamptonshire
83	Nottingham	Nottinghamshire
84	Oxford	Oxfordshire
85	Rutland (general)	Rutland
86	Rye	Sussex
87	Warwick	Warwickshire

**MAP 0.1** (Continued)

## Children in New English Witchcraft Trials: Key Sites



**MAP 0.2** A map of New England showing where children featured in New English witchcraft trials, 1626–1768. Points are grouped geographically and do not follow the chronological order of Appendix B.

**xvi** Maps

<b>Number</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Colony</b>
1	N/A	Virginia
2	Charlestown	Massachusetts
3	Springfield	Massachusetts
4	Cambridge	Massachusetts
5	Northampton	Massachusetts
6	Easthampton	Massachusetts
7	Groton	Massachusetts
8	Beverly	Massachusetts
9	Salem (Village)	Massachusetts
10	Boston	Massachusetts
11	New Haven	Connecticut
12	Hartford	Connecticut
13	Wethersfield	Connecticut
14	Stamford	Connecticut
15	Stratford	Connecticut
16	Wallingford	Connecticut
17	Bristol	Connecticut
18	Hampton	New Hampshire

**MAP 0.2** (Continued)

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

They say it takes a village to raise a child, and it certainly took an immense amount of support and encouragement to help complete this book. Firstly, I would like to thank the following institutions for allowing me access to vital archival documents: The British Library, The Bodleian Library, The National Archives (Kew), The Devonshire Record Office and The Gloucestershire Record Office. I also wish to sincerely thank Peter Boyce and Owain Vaughan from the Association of British Counties for their assistance with creating the maps used in this work. I would also like to thank the anonymous readers for the Press whose suggestions towards improvement were helpful, Brian Levack for advice and Gary K. Waite for his expert and thoughtful comments on the text. I want to acknowledge Richard Raiswell, Teresa van der Kraan and Vanessa Braganza for their assistance with accessing source documents. Lastly, I want to extend my deepest gratitude to Laura Pilsworth and Sneha Shiralagi for their commitment, patience and enthusiasm in helping me prepare this book for publication.

# ABBREVIATIONS

AEEBO	American Early English Books Online.
ASSI	Records of Justices of Assize, Gaol Delivery, Oyer and Terminer and Nisi Prius.
BL	British Library
EEBO	Early English Books Online.
ESRO	East Sussex Record Office
Ewen, WD	Ewen. C. L'Estrange, <i>Witchcraft and Demonism Witchcraft and Demonism: A Concise Account Derived from Sworn Depositions and Confessions Obtained in the Courts of England and Wales</i> , London: Heath Cranton Limited, (1933)
Ewen, WH	Ewen. C. L'Estrange <i>Witch Hunting and Witch Trials</i> , London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., (1929)
GRO	Gloucester Record Office
NLA	National Library of Australia
PRO	Public Record Office
STAC	Records of the Court of Star Chamber.

# INTRODUCTION

## Troublesome Children and the Trouble with Children

On a spring day in 1983, staff members at the McMartin Preschool in Manhattan Beach, California, found a young, shy boy who could barely speak.<sup>1</sup> After looking through his bag, they discovered his name was Matthew Johnson. He was two years old, and his mother, Judy Johnson, was recently told that the preschool was not accepting new enrolments. For whatever reason and without telling anyone, Judy simply dropped her son at the preschool, much to the anger of the preschool's owner, Virginia McMartin. When Virginia adamantly stated that Matthew would not be enrolled in the school, her daughter, Peggy Ann Buckey, implored her mother to be more understanding: 'we could be compassionate'.<sup>2</sup> Virginia conceded, and Matthew attended the McMartin Preschool for two days a week for around six weeks.

That summer, Judy Johnson became 'preoccupied' with the condition of her son's anus.<sup>3</sup> On 11 August 1983, Judy examined Matthew's anus before he left for the McMartin Preschool, believing it looked normal; however, when he returned home that afternoon, she found that Matthew's anus was red and irritated. Judy became suddenly convinced that McMartin's only male teacher, Ray Buckey, had sodomised her son. When Judy asked Matthew, he said nothing happened at the preschool. Judy repeated her question, phrasing it in terms of a game where the children pretended to be medical practitioners. At this, Matthew said that Ray 'took his temperature'; Judy concluded that the 'thermometer' must have been Ray's penis.<sup>4</sup> Judy swiftly took her son to the hospital and lodged a report with the police. Although the doctor at the hospital did not definitively diagnose sodomy, and investigator Jane Hoag could not get Matthew to admit anything, Judy insisted her son had been molested; the police, meanwhile, opened an investigation of Ray Buckey.

## 2 Agents of the Invisible World

In September of 1983, a letter was circulated amongst two hundred families whose children attended or had attended the McMartin Preschool. The letter directed parents to:

Please question your child to see if he or she has been a witness to any crime or if he or she had been a victim. Our investigation indicates that possible criminal acts include oral sex, fondling of genitals, buttock or chest area, and sodomy, possibly under the pretence of 'taking the child's temperature'.<sup>5</sup>

Panic ensued as anxious parents questioned their children about whether they had been molested. By the spring of 1984, it was claimed that 360 children had been abused. However, the techniques used by the Children's Institute International (CII) when interviewing the children were said to have been extremely suggestable, inviting the children to pretend or speculate about supposed events and even creating false memories.<sup>6</sup> As a consequence, the allegations from the children included seeing witches fly and testifying to 'orgies' that occurred at car washes.<sup>7</sup> Other children added Satanic elements to their stories, claiming that Ray Buckey had taken them to a Church where he sacrificed a rabbit on the altar and drank its blood.<sup>8</sup> In every single interview the CII conducted, they found sexual abuse.<sup>9</sup> The way in which the children were manipulated is aptly summed up by one of the children who, in 2005 as an adult, retracted allegations of abuse:

anytime I would give them an answer they didn't like they would ask again and encourage me to give them the answer they were looking for ... I felt uncomfortable and a little ashamed that I was being dishonest but at the same time, being the type of person I was, whatever my parents wanted me to do, I would do.<sup>10</sup>

As a result of the accusations against him, Ray Buckey was held in gaol for five years without ever being convicted of committing any crime. What began as one mother's paranoia about her son's anus quickly turned into one of the most infamous cases regarding the ritual satanic abuse of children. The McMartin Preschool trials lasted for seven years and were, at the time, the longest and most expensive trial in U.S. history.<sup>11</sup> The trials resulted in no convictions, but their legacy meant that generations of parents remained suspicious of people and places that were supposed to keep their children safe.

The McMartin Preschool trial and other cases during the 'Satanic Panic' of the 1980s triggered an enormous amount of paranoia as parents, authorities and care givers struggled to discern between the truth and media sensationalism. The stakes were high; legally and socially speaking, children are unable to protect themselves; it is therefore the duty of the adult, as

their guardians, to protect them. Notwithstanding, these trials also raised countless questions surrounding the veracity of children's testimony in court, their ability to remember and describe past events and whether they have any agency in the process or are simply pawns in a much larger, adult game. Relying primarily on stories from children, prosecutors in the McMartin case believed they were doing their civic duty in preventing the McMartin family from hurting another child again.

About 400 years earlier, in 1582, eight-year-old Thomas Rabbet also stood in a courtroom to provide evidence of his neglect against his own mother, Ursley Kempe. To our modern minds, the crime Thomas Rabbet accused his mother of appeared much less sinister, even impossible in nature. Thomas told the court that his mother had:

four several spirits, the one called Tyffin, the other Tettey, the third Pagine and the fourth Jacke and being asked of what colours they were, saith that Tettey is like a little grey cat, Tyffin is like a white lamb, Pagine is black like a toad and Jacke is black like a cat.<sup>12</sup>

Thomas continued stating that his mother often fed these familiar spirits beer and loaves of bread. At night-time, Thomas stated that his mother let these familiars suck blood from her arm and other parts of her body. While these crimes appear benign compared to what Ray Buckley was accused of, Thomas Rabbet was outlining to the court his abuse: Ursley Kempe had become the inverse mother and care giver; instead of taking care of him, she had made a pact with Satan and embraced evil familiar spirits. Unlike the McMartin trial, Ursley Kempe confessed and confirmed her son's information. Due to this and other evidence (which also came largely from children) Kempe was executed as a witch. Of course, vital elements of the McMartin trials and Kempe's trial make these cases inescapably different. Yet, one theme evident in both cases transcends historical boundaries and reveals an important element of judicial and social control: the role of children in court cases, particularly regarding preternatural crimes and abuse.

The inclusion of children in court cases has always raised some level of scepticism amongst people who question the reliability of child witnesses. More recently, consideration has been given to the mental and emotional effects of asking children to recall and describe traumatic events.<sup>13</sup> Why, then, are children asked to give testimony despite what we know of the possible ramifications of their involvement? In lieu of a monocausal answer, one of the best explanations revolves around what sixteenth-century French jurist Jean Bodin called 'exceptional crimes' which included witchcraft.<sup>14</sup> In 1983, it is doubtful any accusation of 'witchcraft' in the McMartin trial would have been taken seriously; however, the inclusion of Satanic elements, interwoven with allegations of sexual abuse, was meant to be seen as 'the horror of

horrors'.<sup>15</sup> Hence why the prosecutors in the McMartin case maintained such absurd testimony from children claiming that Ray Buckey ate dead babies and went grave-robbing with naked nuns.<sup>16</sup> Like Bodin's 'exceptional crimes' the prosecutors in the McMartin case permitted the children's stories because the nature of the crime (if committed) was so great, it was seen as necessary to transgress usual procedural norms that would otherwise exclude these children from giving evidence. In a similar way, Thomas Rabbet's testimony about his mother's familiar spirits was seen as evidence of a larger and abominable sixteenth-century crime: witchcraft. Whether the supernatural stories these children told were true is, in part, immaterial. The fact that they were believed and acted on in a court of law represents both a fascinating and troubling phenomenon: children's knowledge of and participation in invisible crimes.

With a particular focus on early modern England and New England, this book explores children's involvement in witchcraft trials, not just as witnesses to invisible crimes but also as victims and perpetrators of them. Through an in-depth analysis of primary sources, the following discussion reveals that children played an important and often pivotal role in witchcraft cases. While some children were consigned as victims, the evidence shows that children helped shape witchcraft discourse and held a unique position in this particularly *adult* cultural phenomenon. Other children demonstrated considerable autonomy, becoming magistrates of the invisible world which sometimes rivalled the adults' ability to control the courtroom. In this way, children were instrumental in gathering information from accused witches that adult prosecutors otherwise could not obtain. Of course, some children were either manipulated or engaged in fraud (or both), yet this often appeared to have little effect on their roles as decisive shapers of witchcraft trials.

The themes explored in the modern-day case of the McMartin Preschool transcend historical boundaries and reveal a deep-rooted human condition: fear for the safety of defenceless and innocent children. There is no shortage of examples in modern times. From the 'Satanic Panics' in the 1980s and 1990s, to Pizzagate and QAnon, the safety of our children is held as one of the highest paragons of our society, but these are not new ideas.<sup>17</sup> Although Lawrence Stone has argued that families in medieval and early modern times did not love their children in the same way we do now, the early modern witchcraft trials are a prime example that the safety of children has always been a high priority.<sup>18</sup> During the witch-hunts, the human instinct to protect children and punish their aggressors resulted in transgressing procedures that usually excluded children, for their own protection, as well as the protection of the accused adults. This instinct, unfortunately, resulted in the utter destruction of hundreds of innocent lives, adults and children alike. As Richard Kieckhefer rightly pointed out: 'history may teach few

lessons clearly, but it does give dramatic evidence of vengeance against evil becoming itself a source of evil'.<sup>19</sup>

### **Conceptual Framework**

At its core, this work demonstrates that children were active and instrumental participants that influenced witchcraft trials and witch-hunting discourse in England and New England, particularly during the years 1589–1692. Broadly speaking, children were seen as innocent in ways that adults were not. In a religious sense, children were viewed in a similar way to women, that is, that they were spiritually weak and in need of strict spiritual and moral guidance. Due to their inherent weakness, children, like women, were seen as prime targets for Satan. In a broader sense, concepts of 'children' and 'childhood' were not understood in the same ways we think of them today. Indeed, this has changed drastically over time depending heavily on religious identity, as well as social and class status; these themes will be explored throughout. What is significant to note here is that children had a unique status in society; usually they were to be seen and not heard, be bound as apprentices or servants, or be prepared for marriage and a life of motherhood and domesticity. They were also to be watched closely for any rising moral or spiritual abnormalities that would plague their soul into adulthood. It appears somewhat surprising, then, that in the realm of witch-hunting and witchcraft trials, children seemed to hold a singular and often powerful role as agents of the invisible world. In both physical and spiritual senses of the word, children were in a place of liminality and this helped allow them to exercise a level of active participation and influence in witchcraft trials.

During the witch-hunts, children frequently appeared as victims, accusers and sometimes even witches themselves. In England and New England, children featured so frequently almost all of the large-scale or well-known witchcraft cases in these two countries involved the active participation of at least one child. Indeed, the first and last documented early modern witchcraft trials in England and New England involved children. Children also played dominant roles in European trials, particularly in the Basque region of Spain, Germany, and in Sweden which will be the focus of Chapter 1. Yet, it appears that scholars have dedicated more attention to these European locations than to England and New England.<sup>20</sup> In recent scholarship, children were either not taken seriously by scholars (who relegate their role in witchcraft trials to that of passive or voiceless victims), or they are seen as simple tools (manipulated by adults), or scholars have ignored them completely.<sup>21</sup> Over the last decade, interest in the role of children in witchcraft proceedings has increased with important ideas and conclusions circulating.<sup>22</sup> However, even in these more recent works, historians have either chosen to focus on one

trial/case, or their approach is too broad and not wholly engaged with the aspect of children.<sup>23</sup>

This book identifies at least 130 English and New English witchcraft cases that involved children in a meaningful sense.<sup>24</sup> The cases chosen for discussion in this book were determined by the following criteria: their case contained sufficient detail whereby viable speculations could be made, as well as whether or not the child (or children) had a unique or decisive influence in the shaping of witch-hunting discourse and/or witchcraft trials. This resulted in ten cases for New England and twenty-six cases for England.<sup>25</sup> From this, there is an important distinction to make between cases/trials and individual children. For example, there may be reference to the ‘Witches of Warboys’ or the case of the Throckmorton children, but there are distinctions made to the individual children in this case, being the five Throckmorton children. It is necessary, with an emphasis on children’s agency, to allow these individuals to come to light – where the evidence allowed – as these children often played different and separate roles. Even though a collective approach can be useful, it is important to not always view these cases simply as hegemonic groups. Therefore, within the aforementioned cases, there are forty-three individual children in England and twenty-four in New England that had a meaningful impact on witchcraft trials and/or witch-hunting discourse. Included in this number are three cases in England which are best described as ‘supernatural affairs’, as the children involved in these events did not generate accusations of witchcraft *per se*. However, including the stories of Elizabeth Crofts, Anne Mylner and Thomas Lever are vital in establishing context that adds valuable information to the multifaceted role of children as preternatural agents. Furthermore, in the case of Mylner, even though no witch was named, cases of demonic possession permeated and influenced witch-hunting discourse. Indeed, eminent historian Keith Thomas stated that the terms ‘possessed’ and ‘bewitched’ came very near to being ‘synonymous’ in seventeenth-century England.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, it may be a false dichotomy to try to clearly separate demonic possession and witchcraft cases in England.

Through a close examination of these thirty-six cases, certain qualitative data became clear, allowing for fascinating interpretations which will be expanded on throughout the body of this work. For example, analysing the concept of ‘age’ reveals a fresh perspective regarding the diversity of children who participated in witch-hunting. Of the English cases in this book, age could be determined of all but four of the individual children.<sup>27</sup> Of these children, ages varied from four to twenty years old, the aggregate age being twelve. Of the New English children, age was determined of all but seven.<sup>28</sup> For New England, the age range varied between five and twenty-one years of age, the aggregate age being fourteen.<sup>29</sup>

This nature of this book is chronological, rather than a thematic, with regard to the cases of children explored herein. It is clear that the role of

children in English witchcraft trials changed over time according to certain circumstances, ebbing and flowing with the political, religious and social turmoil of the time. In this way, children remained pervasive and important in witchcraft trials despite society's shifting priorities, which included ecclesiastical debates, the Civil War, as well as magisterial and clerical scepticism. Furthermore, this idea – with the necessary caveats given to time and population density – could be seen with regard to the role of children in New England, where the role of children quickly evolved from passive victims to active influencers. Hence, a chronological approach allowed for a comprehensive engagement with the role of children, whereby their influence can be traced over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This also gave insight into how children may have learned from earlier cases, as well as seeing how they adjusted their role within the changing circumstances in which they lived.

### Using the Term 'Children'

Questions surrounding early modern English and New English 'children' and 'childhood' will be explored more in-depth in Chapter 1, but it is essential to first outline the justification for adopting the term 'children'. Firstly, the fact that the aggregate age for England and New England is twelve and fourteen, respectively, it makes sense to refer to these people as children rather than adults. I have chosen the term 'children' over 'youth' or 'adolescents' as it is more encompassing, transcends historical bounds, and importantly, it is more impactful with regard to its symbolism and connotations.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, 85% of English children and 76% of New English children used in this study are under the age of eighteen.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, by some of our legal and cultural standards, one could argue that the majority of the individuals identified as children would be classified as such by modern standards. However, it would be anachronistic to assume that early modern English and New English society did not have its own ways of defining childhood. To understand this properly, it may be necessary to move away from quantifiable data and analyse the primary documents. This assists in ascertaining how 'children' and 'childhood' were understood on both sides of the British Atlantic in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The evidence shows that children have long been intertwined with witchcraft discourse, trials and demonic possession. In light of this, even when a person's age is not explicitly stated, primary sources can illuminate how old they might be based on the ways in which they are spoken about as they will often fit into well-established roles of an accuser or demoniac. This idea fits in with the concept of a 'cultural phenomenon' which will be expanded on in Chapter 1. What is significant to note is that bewitchment and demonic possession seemed to be weapons wielded mostly by the young

against adults. The reasons for this are many, but put simply, children's liminality in both a physical and spiritual sense was the main reason they were frequently seen as having a connection to the supernatural in ways that adults did not. This idea, of course, has exceptions: notably the thirty-year-old English demoniac Robert Briggs who was possessed in 1574 in London. While Briggs' symptoms were closely aligned with those that children manifested, Briggs' possession was culturally understood to be related to and informed by his experiences as an adult.<sup>32</sup>

Overall, the concept of age can be seen less as a numerical figure but more of a 'status' in early modern England and New England. This was undoubtedly influenced by gender, social status and wealth; in most cases, a person was no longer considered a child once they were married. This too fits with the idea of age as being a 'cultural phenomenon'. Often when people got older, became married and owned property and possessions, these concerned them more so than expressions of their spiritual vitality. Demonic possession and bewitchment, then, may have been dominated by children because it was thought to be within *their* centre of control, one of the only valid ways to express themselves. In this way, it becomes clearer why children often actively engaged with aspects of demonology and witchcraft. In legal terms, it is important to note that children under the age of fourteen were 'generally' not allowed to testify in court.<sup>33</sup> However, high-ranking members of society, including King James I and eminent judges such as Matthew Hale and Geoffrey Gilbert, all conceded that testimony from children under the age of fourteen was allowed in cases of witchcraft.<sup>34</sup> This was likely due to the 'exceptional' nature of the crime of witchcraft.

While age can be understood to be more of a 'status', considerations must be made for the children who had likely entered or had gone through puberty. For example, Ann Cole and Anne Gunter were both around twenty years of age at the time of their bewitchments. By twenty, one could assume they had both gone through puberty and had started menstruating. This is important, as historian Ursula Potter notes, because menstruating had certain connotations associated with it.<sup>35</sup> For example, in *The Midwives Book* (1671), Jane Sharp stated that 'maids will not be easily ruled' and 'lustful thoughts draw away their minds' when girls begin to menstruate.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, when Ann Cole suffered bewitchment in 1662, she expressed worry that witches would 'hinder' her marital prospects.<sup>37</sup> Menstruation was linked to an illness called 'green-sickness' and became widely discussed in medical texts throughout the seventeenth century.<sup>38</sup> 'Green-sickness' was associated with the effects of menarche on the virginal body and 'the dangers of retained menses of female seed once the girl had reached "ripeness"'.<sup>39</sup> One of the symptoms of 'green-sickness', according to Sharp, was that 'it was always almost attended with disgust and loathing of good nutriment and longing after hurtful things'.<sup>40</sup> Although it cannot be determined with certainty, many

of the pubescent girls in this study exhibited symptoms that closely align with ‘green-sickness’, such as fatigue, weeping, irrational behaviour, depression and suicidal tendencies.<sup>41</sup> It is important to question how accessible information about ‘green-sickness’ was to ordinary people; however, Potter suggests that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century popular drama (as one example) can be seen as a purveyor of this contemporary medical knowledge.<sup>42</sup>

There appeared to be less anxiety around pubescent boys; Sharp simply noted that ‘men about the same age change their faces and grow downy with hair and ... change their notes and voices’.<sup>43</sup> Yet, it would be inaccurate to claim that puberty was not considered an important milestone for boys. For example, in 1716, Sarah Savage fretted over her fourteen-year-old son because he would not do as he was told in this ‘critical time of life’.<sup>44</sup> While it is important to acknowledge the significance of puberty and its effect on children, it is equally important to assess how children were perceived by their society; this idea interplays with the important issue of gender.

Early modern witch-hunting has sometimes been characterised as ‘gynocide’ because of the disproportionately large number of women who were accused and executed.<sup>45</sup> In fact, Alan Macfarlane, in his research on witches in Essex, found that only twenty-three of the 291 accused witches were men.<sup>46</sup> Of these twenty-three, eleven were married to an accused witch or appeared in a joint indictment with a woman.<sup>47</sup> However, there is a finite amount of value that can be gained from viewing history as a collection of statistics; they help inform but cannot dictate conclusions. The fact that men were victims of witchcraft at all means that witch-hunting cannot wholly be considered woman-hunting.<sup>48</sup> The persistence of children in English and New English witchcraft trials adds an additional problem to the issue of gender and witch-hunting.<sup>49</sup> While most witch-hunting scholarship acknowledges ‘gender’ to some extent, only adult men and women are discussed.<sup>50</sup> With regard to the English children examined in this study, the gender split appears to be slightly more balanced than existing adult statistics with 70% girls and 30% boys. The New English context represented a greater disparity with 88% girls and 12% boys. One conclusion from these statistics is that girls were more predominant in both English and New English witchcraft trials than boys. Several theories – ranging from pathological hysteria to heightened sexual impulses – have been put forward to explain this phenomenon.<sup>51</sup> The answer to why girls appeared in more witchcraft cases than boys remains unclear. Popular beliefs in witchcraft did not inherently assume that witches were biologically female, but they did associate witchcraft as being maternal in nature.<sup>52</sup> Therefore, girls may have found it more socially acceptable than boys to participate in witchcraft trials as the crime itself was closely aligned with aspects of femininity. Furthermore, connotations with girls and ‘green-sickness’ may have made them more believable demoniacs over younger boys, who were rarely (if ever) portrayed as ‘hysterical’. Yet, the fact that

boys feature consistently throughout witch-hunting trials (especially in England) indicates that the phenomena cannot neatly be explained as a ‘gender issue’.

Understanding children’s prevalence in witchcraft trials adds to historians’ knowledge about gender and witch-hunting more broadly. When an analysis of age/puberty is added to this, greater insights can be revealed. For example, younger children (both girls and boys) appeared to have less malicious motivations in their witchcraft accusations; their testimony often seemed to be born out of fear, fantasy or even fun.<sup>53</sup> Accusations from older, pubescent children often appeared more complex; their motivations were focused on themselves, as well as their growing wants and needs, such as not wanting to go to school or a desire to earn money.<sup>54</sup>

### Chronological and Geographical Constraints

This book’s examination begins in earnest in 1589 which starts with the famous witches of Warboys case, also known as the Throckmorton case in Huntingdonshire, England. It concludes in 1692 with the large-scale Salem witch-hunt in Massachusetts Bay Colony, New England. Both these trials marked pivotal moments regarding the role of children in witchcraft trials. In addition, nine earlier English cases (1564–1589) and seven later English and New English cases (1693–1768) are discussed, as these cases hold great significance in helping to clarify how the role of children was established and sustained over time.<sup>55</sup>

While the core focus of this book is on England and New England, Chapter 1 briefly explores the role of children in witchcraft trials in Germany, the Basque region in Spain and Sweden. This discussion assists in establishing context, as well as providing a helpful platform from which to compare the role of children in witchcraft trials on the Continent against England and New England. From this, analysing and comparing England and New England appears logical, as they share many legal, social and cultural elements.

In England, there was a substantial number of children involved in witchcraft trials in twenty-one counties. The most significant areas, in terms of the highest number of cases, were Essex and Yorkshire with eight, Lancashire with six, London with five and Hertfordshire with four.<sup>56</sup> With regard to New England, the highest predominance of children in witchcraft cases occurred in Massachusetts and Connecticut. Other research indicates that records for witchcraft trials in the southern colonies were either relatively non-existent or are now lost.<sup>57</sup> Endeavouring to understand the role of children in multiple trials across a larger geographic and chronological timeframe adds insight to the narrative of early modern witch-hunting. There is also inherent value added to the history of children and childhood and their place in early modern society.

## 'Out of the mouths of babes and sucklings': Interpreting Early Modern Sources

In order to better understand early modern witchcraft, it is necessary to highlight the nature of the sources that underpin this study. The most obvious challenge is the lack of substantial trial documents. Unlike the Salem witchcraft trials – where the sheer amount of trial documents provides a bounty of information for historians – the English Assize system has not yielded similar volumes of evidence. According to J. S. Cockburn, the Assize system in England had been well and truly cemented by 1558 although the 'essential elements' were much older.<sup>58</sup> For the purposes of understanding this study, as well as the deficit of trial documents, it is essential to briefly outline how the Assize circuits worked and the kind of sources they typically produced. Twice a year, in the Lent vacation during late February and March and the Trinity vacation during late July and August, two common law judges would travel around a circuit – usually one they did not reside in – to hear pleas and deliver gaols in county towns.<sup>59</sup> As of 1337 the six circuits were as follows:<sup>60</sup>

*Home:* Essex, Hertfordshire, Kent, Middlesex, Surry and Sussex

*Midland:* Derbyshire, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire, Northamptonshire, Rutland and Warwickshire

*Norfolk:* Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Cambridgeshire, Huntingdonshire, Norfolk and Suffolk

*Oxford:* Gloucestershire, Herefordshire, Shropshire, Staffordshire and Worcestershire

*Northern:* Cumberland, Lancashire, Northumberland, Westmoreland and Yorkshire

*Western:* Berkshire, Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Hampshire, Oxfordshire, Somerset and Wiltshire

In his pioneering work, C. L'Estrange Ewen noted no major witchcraft trials in the Palatinate of Lancaster and Durham.<sup>61</sup> The Palatinate of Chester noted fifty 'wise men' accused of witchcraft, and eight of those were executed.<sup>62</sup> Unfortunately for the historian, the trial documents pertaining to the Assize records are at best patchy and at worst completely wiped from the historical record. For example, Tracey Boreman's research on the case of Margaret and Phillipa Flower from Rutland in 1619 was thwarted by a frustrating error of judgement:

The papers from Margaret and Phillipa's trial probably survived until 1800, when the Midland circuit clerk declared that he saw no point in keeping the 'cart load' of records received from his predecessor and

proposed to destroy everything when it was 60 years old. He evidently did so, for when most of surviving assize records were transferred to the national Archives in 1911, the earliest document from the Midland circuit was dated 1818.<sup>63</sup>

Other than lapses of judgement, the eroding nature of time itself is the main reason why English witchcraft trial records have not survived. The only circuit for which records survive in bulk is the Home circuit, but even these are not complete; about a quarter of Assize files for the Elizabethan and Stuart periods are missing.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, the bulk of the records from the Home circuit are limited mainly to indictments, which can have limited value for the historian as they were used largely as quantitative insights for past law enforcers.<sup>65</sup> This creates a quandary for the historian, particularly one wanting statistical or quantifiable data. Without full and consistent trial documents, the early modern English witchcraft historian must turn to other sources of evidence, namely, pamphlets.

The first witchcraft pamphlet in England appears to have surfaced out of nowhere in 1566 and details the story of three accused witches.<sup>66</sup> Arriving with much of the lore and features of English witchcraft clearly established, this pamphlet seems to offer historians more questions than answers. Historians such as Marion Gibson have rightly pointed out the many limitations of relying on pamphlet literature.<sup>67</sup> Gibson argued that the sensational nature of pamphlets can lead to distortions or stereotypes of the 'truth' of the events. Although Gibson admitted that 'subjectivity is inevitable', her book sought to challenge previously held assumptions about the reliability of pamphlet literature.<sup>68</sup> However, this does not mean that historians should abandon them altogether or assume trial documents are not also flawed.

Unless one is a devout empiricist, one would have to conclude that, in some capacity, all historical documents are flawed, that is, that they have limitations. Understanding elements such as authorship, motivation and other contextual questions, such as, how was it written and when was it written, is essential to ask of *all* historical documents in order to tease out as much 'truth' as can be reliably given. It is true that pamphlet accounts are often trivialised and sensational, but even accounts that are wholly fictitious add something to our understanding, especially of the attitudes relating to early modern witch-hunting. As Diane Purkiss astutely noted: 'in psychoanalysis, a fantasy is a story in which people both express and relieve their unconscious (and sometimes their conscious) fears, conflicts and anxieties'.<sup>69</sup> Rather than being outwardly dismissed, accounts such as these should be analysed and interpreted so historians can probe deeper into why accounts that are wholly made up are thought of, written about and distributed. All sources have meaning and value regardless of whether they reflect real events or not. Of course, making this distinction is a noble and important feature of the

historian's work, but one should not disregard historical sources based on this single feature alone.

The first two major challenges for historians working with English witchcraft trial records have already been noted: their lack of availability, and even where they are available, the trial documents are limited mainly to indictments which do not often allow a deep level of insight for historians. In two separate lines of inquiry, J.S. Cockburn noted that the occupation of the accused person, as well as their place of abode, was in most accounts 'entirely fallacious'.<sup>70</sup> Cockburn's studies led him to the conclusion that 'in taking assize indictments at their face value' historians can run the risk of 'seriously oversimplifying their possibilities as historical evidence'.<sup>71</sup> Other trial evidence, such as recognizances, depositions, examinations and confessions, frequently yields fascinating insights, yet the lack of complete data creates a climate of frustration for the historian.

Similarly, the availability of sources for New English witchcraft trials varies greatly. Firstly, there were significantly fewer witchcraft trials in New England. This can be attributed largely to quantifiable reasons such as the age of the colony and the size of its population relative to England. Therefore, this study noted only twenty-one witchcraft cases that had any significant or notable references to children in the years between 1626 and 1768.<sup>72</sup> Many of the sources for these cases are not formal court records but rather mentions in annals, lengthy tracts or letters. The exception to this rule are the 1692 Salem witchcraft trials where there are bountiful trial records, as well as other primary source documents in the forms of books and treatises.<sup>73</sup>

In addition to acknowledging the issues of bias in popular pamphlets, it is important to consider the evidence surrounding the distribution of pamphlets, as well as how this relates to children being able to learn and follow a 'cultural script'. It is suggested throughout this book that many bewitched/possessed children mimicked the behaviour of cases/children who preceded them after learning about them from pamphlets or word of mouth. There is explicit evidence of this occurring in some cases, for instance, where the child admits to having read or heard of a previous case of bewitchment or possession. For example, Agnes Briggs explained that after she saw Rachel Pindar exhibit fits, she thought to copy her, for reasons that remain unclear.<sup>74</sup> Thomas Darling also admitted to having read the infamous account of the Throckmorton children.<sup>75</sup> This is evident when Darling claimed that Alice Goodridge (the accused witch) wore a thrummed hat, the same kind of hat the Throckmorton girls saw Alice Samuels wore when she was first accused.<sup>76</sup> In 1604, Anne Gunter also admitted to having read the Throckmorton case to learn how to mimic their bewitchment symptoms.<sup>77</sup>

In many other cases, one must infer how and why the behaviour of bewitched children seemed similar across cases that traverse many years and locations. For these, there are three possible scenarios to consider. Firstly,

the fact that children appeared to mimic one another in their bewitchment or possession cases was mere coincidence. Secondly, there really was an epidemic of Satanic assaults on early modern children, or thirdly, children learnt to copy the behaviour of other cases after learning about them from word of mouth or by other means of knowledge transfer. Based on the evidence available – where children admitted to copying one another – it would appear that the last option is the most likely. Of course, adults learnt how to perceive and decipher the behaviour of children who acted bewitched or possessed. Additionally, authors of pamphlets sometimes distorted or sensationalised events to replicate a bewitchment or possession trope in their account.<sup>78</sup> However, the agency of children in this exchange should not be downplayed. For example, when Agnes Briggs admitted to copying Rachel Pindar in her fits she declared that no one was ‘privy’ to it ‘but herself’.<sup>79</sup> The influence of adults is important, especially as it may not be captured in the primary documents. Yet, evidence suggests that most children were able to ‘act’ bewitched or possessed outside of direct adult manipulation.<sup>80</sup> From this, it is imperative to ascertain how widely read/circulated pamphlet accounts of witchcraft trials were. This facilitates a greater understanding of how children may have come into contact with ideas and stories pertaining to bewitchment and possession.

Popular propaganda or pamphlets have been shown to be powerful spreaders of information. They were cheap, often mass-produced and captured society’s attention with sensational stories that were relevant to them. Of course, one must consider how many people could read during this period. Though illiteracy was common, Margaret Spufford’s work on popular fiction noted that scholars have too often portrayed a negative interpretation on the literacy statistics for early modern England, rather than taking a positive stance.<sup>81</sup> For example, in 1642 there was an ‘absolute minimum’ of 20% of men who could read in the *least* literate areas.<sup>82</sup> Therefore, Spufford states, there was a growing incentive for publishers to print materials, including pamphlets, sales of which were booming in the 1660s.<sup>83</sup>

The distribution of pamphlets came mostly from hawkers, pedlars and petty chapman, all of which had been common figures since the beginning of the sixteenth century. These men (and sometimes women) were an integral part of English society and a profitable source of revenue. For example, in 1697, an Act was passed whereby all pedlars, hawkers and petty chapman who travelled on foot had to apply for a licence to trade outside of market days. These licences cost four pounds each, for both the individual and their beast; by the end of the year, 2500 licences had been issued.<sup>84</sup> This trade seemed to be so profitable that in 1684, a group of booksellers petitioned the Stationers’ Company, complaining that the great number of hawkers selling books both in London and at country markets was damaging the booksellers’ retail trade.<sup>85</sup> While pamphlets were clearly important in English society, it

would be a fallacy to assume that printed media was the major means of transmitting information. Historian Robert Scribner's work has rightfully noted that 'the profoundly oral nature of the culture was inescapable'.<sup>86</sup> Thus, the power of popular propaganda – in the form of pamphlets – combined with an oral tradition allowed for an almost seamless transmission of ideas.

While pamphlet accounts and trial records provide brief snapshots, they can still paint vivid pictures of children's lives during their brushes with witchcraft trials. After which, most children return to obscurity within the historical record. It is for these aforementioned reasons that this book uses both trial documents and pamphlet accounts. Other primary sources used in this work include sermons, genealogical records and censuses. Analysing, comparing and understanding the vast array of sources available helps to weave the tapestry of early modern English and New English witch-hunting. This balanced approach recognises the inherent limitations of all types of sources, but it also perceives the rich value that can be gleaned from understanding witch-hunting as the people who lived understood it, through the courts and through society itself. Thus, this study offers questions and tentative answers that have been arrived at after analysing an array of different sources that illuminate this neglected but important feature of early modern witch-hunting.<sup>87</sup>

Finally, it is important to note that the quantitative data outlined in this study has elements of subjectivity. This is due largely to the subjectivity of the sources themselves – what and how the recorder chose to include – as well as a general lack of complete information. Care has been taken to present this statistical information as accurately as possible. Minor flaws undoubtedly exist, and, where relevant, it is noted where the data is incomplete or missing. These issues have not been overly detrimental but are important to note. Nevertheless, this study paints a clear picture showing that children played a key role in shaping witchcraft trials and witch-hunting discourse.

## Notes

- 1 Debbie Nathan and Michael Snedecker, *Satan's Silence: Ritual Abuse and the Making of a Modern American Witch Hunt* (Lincoln: Author's Choice Press, 1995), p. 68.
- 2 Paul Eberle and Shirley Eberle, *The Abuse of Innocence: The McMartin Preschool Trial* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1993), p. 28.
- 3 Debbie Nathan and Michael Snedecker, *Satan's Silence: Ritual Abuse and the Making of a Modern American Witch Hunt* (Lincoln: Author's Choice Press, 1995), p. 69.
- 4 Ronald C. Summit, 'The Dark Tunnels of McMartin', *Journal of Psychobistory* 21 (No. 4, 1994), note 4.
- 5 Manhattan Beach Police Department, letter to parents of former and current McMartin Preschool children, 8 September 1983, as cited in Debbie Nathan and

- Michael Snedecker, *Satan's Silence: Ritual Abuse and the Making of a Modern American Witch Hunt* (Lincoln: Author's Choice Press, 1995), p. 72.
- 6 Nadja Schreiber, Lisa D. Bellah, Yolanda Martinez, Kristin A. McLaurin, Renata Strok, Sena Garven and James M. Wood, 'Suggestive Interviewing in the McMartin Preschool and Kelly Michaels Daycare Abuse Cases: A Case Study', *Social Influence* 1 (No. 1, 2006), p. 35.
  - 7 Paul Eberle and Shirley Eberle, *The Abuse of Innocence: The McMartin Preschool Trial* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1993), pp. 42, 77–78 and 372; Reinhold, 'The Longest Trial...', n.p.
  - 8 Paul Eberle and Shirley Eberle, *The Abuse of Innocence: The McMartin Preschool Trial* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1993), p. 171.
  - 9 Debbie Nathan and Michael Snedecker, *Satan's Silence: Ritual Abuse and the Making of a Modern American Witch Hunt* (Lincoln: Author's Choice Press, 1995), p. 80.
  - 10 Kylie Zirpolo, 'I'm Sorry: A Long-Delayed Apology from One of the Accusers in the Notorious McMartin Pre-School Molestation Cases', *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, October 2005, n.p.
  - 11 Robert Reinhold, 'The Longest Trial – A Post-Mortem: Collapse of Child-Abuse Case: So Much Agony for So Little', *The New York Times*, January 24, 1990, n.p.
  - 12 W. W., *A True and Just Recorde of the Information, Examination and Confession of all the Witches...* (London: Imprinted by Thomas Dawson, 1582), sig. A4v.
  - 13 See for example Mary S. Tarsha and Darcia Narvaez, 'Effects of Adverse Childhood Experience of Physiological Regulation Are Moderated by Evolved Developmental Niche History', *Anxiety, Stress & Coping* 35 (No. 4, 2022), pp. 488–500.
  - 14 Jean Bodin, *On the Demon-Mania of Witches*, trans. Randy A. Scott (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2001), p. 187.
  - 15 Paul Eberle and Shirley Eberle, *The Abuse of Innocence: The McMartin Preschool Trial* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1993), p. 339.
  - 16 Paul Eberle and Shirley Eberle, *The Abuse of Innocence: The McMartin Preschool Trial* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1993), p. 227.
  - 17 See for example Michael J. Cat, *QAnon & the #Pizzagates of Hell: Unreal Tales of Occult Child Abuse by the CIA* (Walterville: Trine Day, 2022).
  - 18 Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977); see for example pp. 70, 117 and 420.
  - 19 Richard Kieckhefer, 'Avenging the Blood of Children: Anxiety over Child Victims and the Origins of the European Witch Trials' in *The Devil, Heresy and Witchcraft in the Middle Ages: Essays in Honor of Jeffrey B. Russell*, ed. Alberto Ferreiro (Koninklijke: Brill, 1998), p. 108.
  - 20 See Chapter 2.
  - 21 For example, see Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1974), p., 35; Michael MacDonald, ed., *Witchcraft and Hysteria in Elizabethan London: Edward Jorden and the Mary Glover Case* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. liii; and Richard Hite, *In the Shadow of Salem: The Andover Witch Hunt of 1692* (Yardley: Westholme Publishing, 2018), p. 214.
  - 22 For example, see Anna French, *Children of Wrath: Possession, Prophecy and the Young in Early Modern England* (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2016).