

Appearances of Satan in Mediaeval and Early Modern Europe: A Problem or Not?

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WHEN Satan gives advice to a junior devil in C.S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters*, he boasts that one of his most effective ploys is to persuade people that he does not actually exist. That ploy has proved very successful, indeed so much so, that modern historians find it difficult to approach and sensibly describe earlier European societies for whom Satan's existence in their own everyday lives was not only real, but pervasive and unrelenting. For these people life was lived with a particular undercurrent, the subconscious knowledge that at almost any moment, and under almost any circumstances, men, women, or children might be faced by a presence, an individual, or a creature whose real nature might be obvious to them from the start, but might well be disguised and reveal itself to them only over or after a period of time. Let us look at a couple of examples.

On Thursday 19 June 1664, Cecilia Ferrazzi, a woman about fifty years old, appeared before members of the Venetian Inquisition and answered questions about her life. During the mid 1630s, she said, she was under close confinement in a private house, put there because she was physically ill with bladder stones and because her spiritual condition was giving cause for alarm. One day, she told the inquisitors, a hermit dressed in grey came into her room. The hood of his garment was pulled low over his forehead, but Cecilia could see that he had a big beard and that his hands were hairy – a sign which should perhaps have warned her that appearances can be deceptive. The hermit told Cecilia that he had come from God and, after failing to persuade her to come away with him in order to perform penance, he stayed with her for eight days, talking continuously, all the while kneeling on a prie-dieu and turning the pages of a breviary. He did not look at her throughout this time – indeed, he turned his back on her – and as he talked, Cecilia scourged herself, a regular mode of performing penance, never hearing a word he said. At the end of

the eight days, however, the hermit revealed his true nature. At midnight he insisted Cecilia leave with him, after renouncing the Virgin Mary and openly cursing the obedience she had sworn to her confessor. Realising at last that this was the Devil, not someone sent by God, Cecilia called on Jesus and the Virgin, and was immediately subjected to extreme violence as the hermit beat her, seized her by the hair, and dashed her head violently against the walls of her room, spattering them with blood.¹

More common than this initial failure to understand the true character of a visitant was the experience of Pierrette Trotta in c.1455. She was sitting by the fire at home during the early hours of the morning, worried and annoyed because her husband was a simpleton, and they had a large number of debts and nothing to eat. The Devil then came to her under the guise of a crow, but did not retain this appearance, changing himself into 'a black man of small stature, wearing a hat with some hairy stuff on top of it. He had a black face, bulging misshapen eyes, a hooked nose, a wide mouth, hairy black clothes, a round body, and black, round shins. He said to Pierrette, "You're very sad, distressed, and angry: but if you are willing to put your trust in me, I shall help you and make you rich enough [for your needs]. But you will have to deny God, the whole Court of Heaven, the holy cross, and the Catholic faith". Pierrette replied, "I'll do it only if you do as you have promised".²

These two accounts have certain things in common. The Devil is visible, audible, and comprehensible; he appears at a time of stress; and sooner or later he is recognised for what he is. What are we to make of this? One answer is to listen to Martin Luther who was typically forthright in his commentary on *Galatians* 3.1.

It is undeniable that the Devil lives, yes, rules, in all the world. Therefore ... we are all subject to the Devil, both in respect of our bodies and our material possessions. We are guests in the world, of which he is the ruler and the god. Therefore the bread we eat, the drinks we drink, the clothes we wear – in fact, the air and everything we live on in the flesh – are under his reign.

So thought more or less everyone, Protestant or not, although the realisation of and belief in his ubiquity was not necessarily and entirely one of unalloyed fear. One cannot live in a state of spiritual panic all the time,

1 C. Ferrazzi, *Autobiography*, English trans. A. Jacobson Schutte (Chicago & London, University of Chicago Press, 1996), 25-26.

2 S. Strobino, ed., *Françoise sauvée des flames? Une Valaisanne accusée de sorcellerie au xve siècle* (Lausanne, Université de Lausanne, 1996), 131.

and relief to this stress very often emerged in the many representations of the Devil as a comic figure, and the folk tales, ballads, and popular pamphlets in which he was outwitted by humans more guileful than himself. Nevertheless, that laughter was perhaps more nervous than pleasurable, and ultimately the comic Devil or demon was overshadowed by the frightening and grotesque images more permanently present to the eye in the painted walls, stained glass, and sculpted figures of churches.³ In these forms, as well as in people's imaginations stirred by such sights and by the rhetoric of frequent sermons, Satan, as Luther observed, was indeed omnipresent and omnipresent as a looming, powerful threat, not a Carnival demon. Hence we may expect, rather than be surprised, to find that when Maria Braittingen, a seventeen-year-old from the village of Ebersbach, was caught with stolen goods in 1619, and arrested and questioned by the local mayor, he remarked that she appeared to be no Christian, but given over to Satan. She agreed with this assessment, saying that 'when she went in the grass, the abominable Satan came to her and had dishonourable relations with her in the form of her boyfriend', and that it was not until after the deed was done she realised who this figure really was.⁴

That is a very interesting remark. We, of course, may choose to be cynical and repeat the Mandy Rice Davies line, 'Well, she would say that, wouldn't she', and needless to say, it is always possible that our cynicism could be justified in this instance. On the other hand, it might not be. Have we just expressed a reasonable reservation anent Maria's version of events, or have we fallen into the common modern trap of seeking, not to explain, but to explain away?

The answer to that depends in part on what kind of experience earlier people were undergoing. Evil was a reality and Satan its embodiment, with numberless demons partaking of his nature and, very often, of his appearance. Now, that appearance is important. It is notable and noteworthy that one of the principal sources for people's conception of Satan and demons was church decoration: the wall paintings, sculptures, and stained glass which usually depicted the Devil and his entourage as grotesque, animal-like creatures, often black, often horned, often winged in the manner of bats, with beaks instead

3 See further P.G. Maxwell-Stuart, *Satan: A Biography* (Stroud, Amberley Publishing, 2008), 51-2, and the images in C. Zika, *The Appearance of Witchcraft* (London & New York, Routledge, 2007), 204-7.

4 E. Bever, *The Realities of Witchcraft and Popular Magic in Early Modern Europe: Culture, Cognition, and Everyday Life* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 81-2. This was not the only occasion on which Maria was troubled by the Devil. He came to her again, this time in white, and hit her; and a third time he appeared in the likeness of a farmhand, *Ibid.*, 85, 121.

of noses or mouths, and talons instead of toes. At Vézelay, for example, a capital relief shows demons with flaming hair, shrieking round St Antony in the desert; in the north porch of Chartres cathedral, Job lies in the midst of his sufferings, while the Devil, hairy and bizarre, with the mask-like face of a skeleton, rejoices in his pain; and in Fanefjord church on the Danish island of Møn, a fresco in the nave shows two women seated on a bench, talking to each other, while a tall black demon with webbed feet and ears, two long pointed horns, and a beak-like nose, writes down everything they say.

No surprise, then, if Rudolf Glaber, a Burgundian monk, describes the Devil, as he first saw him, in the following terms:

He was, as far as I could make out, of fairly small to medium height with a slender neck, a lean face, very black eyes, a wrinkled, pinched forehead, and downward-sloping nostrils. He had a long, thin mouth with swollen lips, a receding and very narrow chin, a beard like that of a goat, and hairy, very pointed ears. His hair stood on end and was all over the place. He had teeth like those of a dog; the back of his head tapered to a point; he had a barrel chest, a hump back, and his buttocks were always in motion. His clothes were filthy.⁵

This is the kind of mental picture, less exaggerated than some, one may expect a monk to have, since the sacred space he will have occupied every day, year in year out, for several hours during Mass and the Divine Office, his eyes on the painted walls and carved choir stalls, will have reinforced the animalistic view of the great enemy. 'Be sober, be vigilant', says the office of Compline, 'because your adversary, the Devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour'. Such a portrait was also reproduced in religious theatre which usually took to the streets and required the actors playing demons to wear costumes intended to illustrate (and which would therefore perpetuate) this particular picture. In 1372, for example, Philippe de Mézières instructed that Lucifer 'be decked out with those ornaments which befit what is most shameful and abominable, with horrible horns and teeth and face'; and in an illustrated copy of the mid-fifteenth century romance, *Maugis d'Aigremont*, we find evidence that one of the leading characters dresses as a devil in a dark, hairy body-suit with animal's feet and hands, and a mask with large teeth, horns, and flame-like hair. It was a tradition which lasted long into the post-reformation period, often via woodcuts. Stefan Pumpnickel, for example, illustrated two broadsheets in 1609 and 1610, both entitled 'News of

5 *Historiarum libri quinque* Book 5, chap.2.

a naughty woman who struggled with the Devil'. The first shows him with a scaly body, a man's face, and horns; in the second he is more like an animal, with a hairy body, bat's wings, a tail, and an ass's ears. The tradition could also be used in propaganda. Thus, in 1569 we find a woodcut illustrating the broadsheet story of a Jesuit who dressed up as the Devil in order to frighten an innocent Protestant girl into abandoning her faith. He is wearing a hairy costume with the mask of a bird of prey, behind which his own tonsured head can clearly be seen.⁶

One way and another, then, lay people as well as religious had ample and frequent opportunity to see Satan and other diabolic entities depicted in non-human, frightening, and self-evidently evil form. Why, therefore, was the experience of so many – religious and secular, witches and non-witches alike – completely different? In 1634, Margaret Johnson, a widow from Lancashire, told local justices that about seven or eight years previously, she was at home 'in great passion and anger, and distracted and withal oppressed with some want, [when] there appeared unto her a spirit or devil in the similitude or proportion of a man appareled in a suit of black tied about with silk points'. In 1649 Katharine Gibb from Corstorphine informed her kirk session that twenty years earlier, while she was looking after cattle and sheep in the park of Kinneill, 'the Devil appeared to her in the likeness of a little green man and asked her what age she was of, and if she would be his servant'; and seven or eight days later, he appeared to her again in that same place, clothed in black'. But while black seems to have been his favoured apparel or complexion, Katharine's green was not uncommon. In 1659, for example, John Douglas from Tranent met him in his own house at about ten o'clock at night. The Devil was clad in green and asked John if he would be a piper for his servants, to which John agreed. On the other hand, Katharine Rainie saw him as a man in grey clothes and a blue bonnet; William Scott met him in brown; in Sweden, a group of people conjured him at a crossroads where he appeared in a grey coat, and red and blue stockings; and in 1594, in Germany, Ursula Götz met and had sex with a demon who was dressed like a farm servant in multicoloured clothes.⁷

6 P.G. Maxwell-Stuart, *op.cit.* supra, 109-112.

7 (Johnson) J. Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness: Witchcraft in England, 1550-1750* (London, Hamish Hamilton, 1996), 75. (Gibb) National Archives of Scotland: Corstorphine Kirk Session Records, CH2/124/1. (Douglas) P.G. Maxwell-Stuart, *An Abundance of Witches: The Great Scottish Witch-Hunt* (Stroud, Tempus Publishing, 2005), 144. (Rainie) Stirling Presbytery Session Records, CH2/722/6: 11 May, 1658. (Scott) Corstorphine Kirk Session Records CH2/124/1: 19 August, 1649. (Sweden) G. Sinclair, *Satan's Invisible World Discovered* (Edinburgh, Thomas George Stevenson, 1871), reprint of 1685 edition, 173. (Götz) L. Roper, *Witch Craze: Terror and Fantasy in Baroque Germany* (New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 2004), 2-3.

These variants have a number of things in common. Once again, the Devil is visible, audible, and comprehensible; he appears in human shape, without any grotesque or alarming signs of his other-worldliness; and, in most cases, he behaves just like a man hiring servant-labour. The response from the humans likewise lacks any trace of Grand Guigol or melodrama. Consider Margaret Duchall from Stirling, who met the Devil in Isobel Jameson's house when he was in the shape of a man wearing brown clothes and a little black hat. Their conversation ran as follows.

Satan: What aileth you?

Margaret: I am a poor body and cannot get whereon to live.

Satan: You shall not want if you do my bidding.

Margaret: He gave me five shillings and bade me buy a peck of meal with it. And I went to the tron and bought a peck of peas-meal with it, and it was good money. I brought it home and baked bannocks, and he sent me for a choppin of ale. And we did eat and drink together.

Later that evening, he had sex with her and then asked her to be his servant, to which she agreed.⁸

Could anything, in its way, be more ordinary? It illustrates very clearly three important points about earlier people's relationship with the Devil. First, he was more or less omnipresent and could make an appearance anywhere, at any time, and under virtually any circumstances; and he was usually seen and heard in guises quite other than those depicted by and in the church. This omnipresence is made explicit more than once. 'Almost every night', reported Luther, 'when I wake up, the Devil is there and wants to dispute with me I instantly chase him away with a fart'.⁹ The relationship between Satan and people was, in fact, deeply personal, and both expressible and expressed in physical terms. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that when people described their meeting with Satan, they did so in terms of the everyday - images of individuals they had or could have met; or fairies who, while otherworldly, were more of this world than Satan and just as ubiquitous; or men reminiscent of those in authority who might be seeking someone to work for them, such as clergy, farmers, landowners - a non-human entity rendered comprehensible in a way his Biblical or church embodiment could not manage.

The second point to remember is that Satan is a trickster and a shape-shifter. Thus, in c.1655 William Barton testified that one day, while he was

8 National Archives of Scotland: Stirling Presbytery Session Records, CH/722/6.

9 *Table Talk*, no.469 in *Luther's Works* Vol.54, ed. & trans. T.G. Tappert (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1967), 78.

walking from Kirkliston to Queensferry, he met a pretty young woman and had sex with her both then and the following night, at which time 'he became sensible that it was the Devil'. The Devil also appeared to Katharine Hendrie that same year, 'sometimes in the shape of some friend, or her brother, sometimes in the shape of a cat with burning fiery eyes, sometimes in one and another', while in 1662, Margaret NicWilliam said that during the course of a single meeting, he appeared as a little brown dog, a handsome young man, and a wreath of green smoke. These shifts were not unusual, for he appeared to Janet Thomson first as a black cow and then as a man dressed in green; and to Marion Logan, first as a big, green working man, then a little later as a black dog.¹⁰

It is easy, of course, to dismiss the mist, the fire, the cow, and the dog as recipients of imaginative transference. They happened to be present when the human individual was experiencing an acute consciousness of sin or moral unworthiness or simply of being depressed or angry or famished, and were transformed, as it were, into scapegoats who would bear the burden of the human's emotional and spiritual state. Similarly, we might say that Maria Braittingen's boyfriend and William Barton's pretty woman performed a useful task in deflecting guilt from the principal to the secondary sinner; and indeed it is tempting to use such an explanation, or one similar, in a whole range of cases. The fact is, however, that both Maria and William may have been conscious of doing wrong and, knowing that Satan was both an embodiment of evil and a notorious shape-shifter, have genuinely come to the conclusion that on this occasion he had indeed assumed the likeness of the boyfriend or the pretty woman in order to entice the humans into committing sin. Under these circumstances, there is no transference of guilt – rather an intensification of it in the sinning individual – a quite different experience from those we might be tempted to foist on them. One can see the same happening in the case of Thongi Schenzlin from Rottweil who, in 1590, confessed to meeting the Devil who was clothed in black and accompanied by a goat. The Devil urged him to renounce God and have sex with a mare: and so he did, and continued to commit bestiality with various animals over a period of at least thirteen years before he was arrested and put on trial.¹¹ Was Schenzlin's confession an excuse or an explanation?

10 (Barton) Sinclair, *op.cit.* supra, 160-1. (Hendrie) Alexander Brodie, *Diary* (Aberdeen, Spalding Club 1863), 134.(NicWilliam) J.R.N. MacPhail, ed., *Highland Papers* (Edinburgh, The Scottish History Society, 1920), 3.18. (Thomson & Logan) P.G. Maxwell-Stuart: *An Abundance of Witches*, 144-5.

11 Rottweil, State Archives: Archivalien II, Abteilung I, Lade III, Faszikel 4.

Thirdly, Satan was a master of illusion. He could and did manipulate human senses, and especially the working of that image-making faculty known as the 'imagination', in such a way that people either saw things which were not there, or saw things which were there in a way not consistent with actuality. As Heinrich Institoris explained in his *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486),

He can delude the interior [senses] by drawing out to their main sensory points images which have been kept in reserve for this purpose. But he deceives [the senses] in their natural functioning, so that the man does not see what is visible, does not feel what is tangible, does not hear what is audible, and so forth with the other senses. This 'truth', however, has nothing to do with reality. Everything happens because of an alteration in the organs of the body, such as the eyes and hands, which ruin what he sees or hears, etc. and once an alteration has taken place in these, the man's capacity to perceive by means of his senses belies his ability to make a judgement.¹²

Knowing, then, that Satan was omnipresent, had the ability to change his shape, and to create illusions real enough to fool a human's senses, meant that those who took for granted all three possibilities were able to interpret something they saw at a critical juncture as just such a shape-change or illusion. Hence, as Nicolas Rémy reported in his *Daemonolatria* (1595).

At Serre, on 19 January 1584, Nicole Morèle averred that when her Little Master [*i.e.* Satan] visited her in prison, he appeared in the shape and form either of a bird flying in at the window, or of a hare or mouse running around, or finally, of a man by whom she was defiled. Likewise, at Pagny-sur-Moselle, Jeanne Gerardine, on 23 November 1584, said that he appeared to her in prison in the shape of a black dog, [and] a woman called Lasnier from Nancy said she had seen him in the likeness of a crab.¹³

So what did these women actually see – a bird, a dog, and so forth, which they interpreted as Satan in one of his guises? Or did they see nothing at all, but were tricked by Satan into thinking they had seen a bird, a dog, and so forth, and were then further misled by the particular circumstances in which they found themselves into interpreting the illusion as Satan in one of his guises? Or were they lying, in answer to questions posed by their interrogators? This last might be favoured by many modern commentators, but taking the easy –

12 *Malleus Maleficarum*, Part I, Question 9.

13 *Daemonolatria*, Book I, Chap.1.

and in this instance, patronising – way out is exactly what we should not do. Why turn people into liars simply because we, at our distance, chronological and intellectual, from events, do not fancy these alternative explanations? Historians are constantly tempted to turn Satan, magic, witches, witchcraft and so forth into a problem and then set about finding a solution to that problem. Witches could not actually work magic, runs the argument, so what was *really* going on? There is no such entity as Satan, so if people said they saw him, heard him, had sex with him, or, like Cecilia Ferrazzi, were beaten up by him, what was *really* going on? Well, neither Satan nor magic nor witches nor witchcraft posed a problem for those who lived in and with their reality, and if we wish to understand them and then try to explain their world, the rationality inherent in that world, and therefore the reasonableness of their actions, it is their standpoint which must provide our starting-line, not our imposed problem. As I said earlier, the job of the historian is to explain, not explain away, and a good first step is to suppress our egos and begin with the notion that when people in earlier times said they met and conversed with Satan, they were not necessarily fantasising or mentally ill or responding to what they thought other people wanted to hear, but quite simply meant what they said.

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