

# The Nature of the Beast: The Portrayal of Satan in the Ballads of Seventeenth Century England

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In the scope of history, the study of religious views is potentially one of the most revealing ways of understanding another culture. Of especial interest is the way that a society conceives of the duality between good and evil as manifested in the figures of God and the Devil and how this duality is expressed through the culture. Frequently, though, it is a challenge to reach these conclusions as in the case of early modern England where social historians have observed a cultural dichotomy between a popular and an elite culture. In addition to differences in wealth and opportunity, these two ends of the cultural spectrum could reveal entirely different views of reality despite a common national identity. An historian can study the writings of the highly educated, elite component of English society and reconstruct their religious beliefs, but these tenets may not be held by the majority of the less-educated English population. Thus, in order to understand early modern England as a whole, it is necessary to understand the composition of the popular culture and how it may have differed from that of the elite.

One area that provides a flashpoint for examining this cultural dichotomy is the study of seventeenth century English perceptions about the Devil and his relations with society. While a great deal of work has been completed with regard to elite views of Satan, it is often more difficult to delineate a popular view of the Devil and reconstruct what the majority of people believed when the available primary source material has often been mediated through the elite-dominated printing process. It is possible to argue, though, that unprinted witchcraft confessions reveal additional insights about Satan; however, these sources are also mediated in that they are written and potentially influenced by elite culture. To understand the elite view of Satan, historians can access their writings and reconstitute the more educated views of the Prince of Darkness. This poses a problem, however, when it comes to analyzing the views of the English masses, who may be able to read and write, but rarely left behind written testimonies detailing their religious beliefs.

Printed sources, like pamphlets, broadsides, and chapbooks can still provide informative accounts of the people and the obscured beliefs of a past society. One of the most easily recognized and informative sources on popular culture is the ballad. While both the elites and popular cultures had ballads and poetry, one can distinguish the ballads of the popular culture as they were often written black-letter and carried the cheapest price. It is particularly helpful to recognize that literacy was not restricted to the educated and a large number of the common people were literate. While it is difficult to generate robust statistics regarding literacy, historians estimate that anywhere between 15 and 60 per cent of the lower classes were capable of reading.<sup>(1)</sup>

This essay explores how ballads written in seventeenth century England portray the Devil. By comparing these documents with the ideas and theories presented by modern historians, this essay will also explore how the popular culture in England conceived of Satan. The ballads collected in the *Pepys Ballads*, *Roxburghe Ballads*, and *Pack of Autolykus*, suggest that Satan had a variety of manifestations, only two of which will be explored here. The first one is the relationship between the Devil and witchcraft and the second how the fear of Satan and his temptations served to warn against sin. These ideas will be compared with those presented by major English social historians in order to test their arguments and see how the information collected from ballads can augment their arguments with regard to popular culture and the Devil.

The first area of focus concerns the relationship between the Devil and witchcraft. In his book, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Keith Thomas distinguishes between popular and elite conceptions of witchcraft based on the presence of Satan. That is, the English intellectuals and clergy defined witchcraft as the union between a witch and Satan through the signing of a diabolical compact that was sealed with the blood of the witch. Thomas also states that the association of Satan with witchcraft may have resulted more from continental influence than indigenous belief on the part of the English clergy. On the other hand, Thomas argues that the common people did not readily accept the Devil's involvement with witchcraft. The only feature of popular belief that could be considered remotely diabolic was the presence of the witch's marks and familiars. According to Thomas, the people probably did not connect Satan with witchcraft and primarily viewed witchcraft as maleficium, or inflicting harm on others through supernatural powers without the use of satanic power. Examples of maleficium include causing illnesses, souring milk, and tormenting people in the night.<sup>(2)</sup>

James Sharpe, in his book, *Instruments of Darkness*, disagrees with Thomas' generalizations by focusing on the

East Anglia witch trials of 1645-7. According to Sharpe's argument, these trials challenge the traditional interpretation of English witchcraft that reduces the importance of Satan in the beliefs of popular culture. The confessions given at these trials yield concepts that exceed maleficium and suggest possible associations between witchcraft and Satan at the popular level. While these testimonies could bear the influence of the witch-hunter Matthew Hopkins, Sharpe posits that the witchcraft confessions challenge the view that popular beliefs on witchcraft were non-diabolical and highlight the need for further research.

Since these confessions come from non-elite members of society and exhibit a covenant between the witch and the Devil that is sealed in blood, Sharpe implies that a redefinition of popular witchcraft beliefs is in order. He is quick to point out, however, that any conclusions drawn from these testimonies are tenuous since beliefs about witchcraft were constantly changing. Despite the weaknesses of the confessions, they do suggest that the division between learned and popular views on witchcraft is an oversimplification and that the populace may have believed Satan was involved with witchcraft. <sup>(3)</sup>

In his synthesis of early modern England, *Popular Cultures in England, 1550-1750*, Barry Reay reiterates and extends Sharpe's ideas by stating that scholars have traditionally assumed that beliefs on Satan differed between the popular and elite cultures. Reay disagrees with the dichotomy of popular and elite by claiming that a belief in Satan extended into the popular literature through pamphlets and ballads. Cheap pamphlets and ballads on witchcraft may have bridged any gap that existed between the elites and the less educated parts of society. The ballads of the early and mid-seventeenth century show a belief in demonology and the Devil, which suggests that these printed sources served as inroads into the popular culture whereby learned ideas could take root among the masses. It should be underscored, though, that one of Reay's overarching theories in his book is that the popular-elite dichotomy is less representative of early modern England and he stresses the importance of diversity and multiplicity of the culture. <sup>(4)</sup>

From looking at the secondary sources, one observes that perhaps the literature of popular culture (in this case, ballads) did, indeed, show a connection between witchcraft and Satan. The question remains, though, as to what the ballads themselves can add to this argument. Of the ballads surveyed, four illustrated an association between witches and the Devil. While no concrete conclusions can be extracted from these ballads concerning the ubiquity of Satan in popular witchcraft belief, they do support the arguments presented by James Sharpe and Barry Reay, while perhaps contributing a slightly contradictory opinion to the argument of Keith Thomas.

The earliest ballad, *Damnable Practices of Three Lincoln-shire Witches*, was written in 1619 and describes how a mother and two daughters became witches through the influence of the Devil. Satan appears to the three women and offers them unlimited powers and familiars in exchange for their souls. Accepting the terms of the agreement, these women then sealed the covenant with drops of their own blood.

And as it seemd they sould their soules,

For service of such Spirits,

And sealing it with drops of blood,

Damnation to inherits. <sup>(5)</sup>

Thus, by the power of the Devil, these three women were given the power to inflict whatever misery and destruction they saw fit upon the local lords, children and cattle. This ballad, written in black-letter, exhibits the possibility that popular beliefs in witchcraft could have included conceptions of Satan, thus supporting the assertions of Reay and Sharpe. In addition, this excerpt bolsters a theory proposed by Clive Holmes that popular beliefs included an association between witchcraft and a family blood relationship. According to Holmes, the popular belief was that the female descendants of witches would inherit their unholy powers. <sup>(6)</sup>

*Witchcraft Discovered and Punished*, printed in 1682, tells of three women from Devon County who are convicted of witchcraft and association with the Devil. These women are said to have sold their souls to Prince of Darkness, but there is no mention of a covenant sealed with blood or any inherited powers. Satan is depicted as the source of the witches' power, but like the ballad about the Lincoln-shire witches, he allows them to use their powers for their own personal desires. To distinguish them as witches, Satan gives them very peculiar witch's marks.

And that they had about their bodies strange  
And proper Tokens of their wicked change,  
As pledges that, to have their cruel will,  
Their Souls they gave unto the Prince of Hell. <sup>(7)</sup>

Thus, like the previous ballad, one sees the Devil as the benefactor of malevolent power—all for the price of a soul, but there is also the presence of the witch's marks in conjunction with the diabolic agreement.

A different perspective is provided by a ballad printed in 1628 called *The Tragedy of Dr. Lambe*. While the ballad itself focuses on the beating and subsequent death of a conjurer named Dr. Lambe, the ballad mentions how Dr. Lambe was continually using powers given to him by the Devil to harass his neighbors. Lambe's pranks and tricks would eventually bring about his demise at the hands of sailors and Satan was powerless to help his servant.

They beate him to the ground,  
And meaning to dispatch him,  
They gave him many a wound,  
The Deuill could not watch him,  
to keep him sound. <sup>(8)</sup>

Like the two previous ballads, the ballad about Dr. Lambe illustrates a third instance in the popular literature where Satan appears in tandem with the practice of witchcraft.

A different perspective of Satan's involvement with humanity through witchcraft comes from a ballad printed in 1670, titled *The Judgment of God shewed upon one John Faustus*. A variation upon an old legend, the ballad of Dr. Faustus doesn't deal explicitly with witchcraft; however, it does show how one man sold his soul to Satan in exchange for worldly success. Like many witchcraft cases, though, Dr. Faustus signs his name in his own blood upon the Devil's register.

Twice did I make my tender flesh to bleed,  
Twice with my blood I wrote the Devil's deed,  
Twice wretchedly I soul and body sold,  
To live in [pleasure], and do what things I would. <sup>(9)</sup>

While the tale of Faustus does not deal with witchcraft, it does illustrate the selling of one's soul to Satan for powers in this world. Malcolm Gaskill, in his essay, "Witchcraft and Power in Early Modern England," mentions the story of Faustus as providing a parallel to the witchcraft scenario where the soul is sold in exchange for material gain. Gaskill also suggests that this fictional paradigm pervades every aspect of print culture from high literature to cheap pamphlets and ballads. <sup>(10)</sup> It should be noted here that a certain tension exists in relation to ballads concerning Drs. Lambe and Faustus. Both of these figures would be members of the elite classes; however, they are represented in a typically popular literary medium. While this raises a questions about which culture is represented in these ballads, the fact remains that the ballads and their black-letter print represent a popular medium of cultural expression.

By looking at the ballads from early modern England, one can see that there is evidence to denote a relationship between Satan and witchcraft in the popular culture. Some historians may still espouse a split between a popular and an elite culture, but with regard to the Devil and his associations with witchcraft, evidence is readily available to suggest that perhaps the popular cultures did, indeed, have a conception of the Devil. In accordance with Reay and Sharpe's interpretations, these ballads illustrate the possibility that the association of Satan with witchcraft was not restricted to the elite culture.

Outside of witchcraft, though, it is important to realize that the Devil also played a role in the religion of the people. It can be difficult to delineate a popular view of Satan in a theological context because of the multiplicity of subcultures present in English culture. This idea is illustrated by Christopher Hill, in *The World Turned Upside Down* when he discusses the various groups like Levellers, Ranters, and Quakers that were present in mid-seventeenth century English society. Hill argues, however, that many English people believed in a world where God and Satan constantly intervened. <sup>(11)</sup>

The arguments posited by Reay parallel those of Hill by saying that most ideas of the Devil in a religious context were in relation to death, judgment, and the punishments inflicted by the Devil in Hell. Reay also suggests the difficulties in this approach due to the dynamic nature of religion. It is also Reay's opinion that ballads are excellent sources of information for studying popular religion because they were often the source of information through which the information was expressed to the public. <sup>(12)</sup>

Reay's arguments are supported when one looks to the ballads that deal with the Devil in relation to religion. In *St. Bernard's Vision*, a dialogue is held between the soul and the corpse of a recently deceased man. Each blames the other for their earthly sins. This ballad also contains a section where the Devil describes the various punishments that he inflicts upon people for their sins. Some get molten lead poured down their throats, while others are fried in sulfur. <sup>(13)</sup>

In addition, a second manifestation of the Devil in the English ballads was a fear of Satan and how his temptations served to warn against sin. These ballads often served to reinforce morality and warn people against various forms of misbehavior. Keith Thomas briefly mentions Satan's role as a tempter and instrument of God's punishment. He describes the Devil's desire to divert human souls from the path of God, which is an idea that is supported by the ballads. <sup>(14)</sup>

Written in 1681, the ballad, *Strange and True News from Westmoreland*, tells the story of Gabriel Hardin's return home from an evening of drinking. Hardin's wife, observing his inebriated state, tries to guide him to bed, but he strikes and kills her. Suddenly, Satan appears to punish this grievous sinner.

The Devil then he straight laid hold,  
On him that had murdered his wife;  
His neck in sunder then he brake,  
And thus did end his wretched life <sup>(15)</sup>

Here, one readily sees that Satan appears to the murderer as his judge and executioner, punishing the man for his sin of murder. While Satan appears as an executor of punishment in some ballads, he is also seen as the cause of sin in ballads aimed at warning people away from various sinful activities like drinking, suicide, and swearing.

Other ballads elaborate upon this theme of the Devil as a warning and depict Satan operating under God's permission and alluring people toward sin. Written in 1629, a ballad entitled *A warning for wiuues* depicts the story of a wife who murders her husband with a pair of scissors. The audience is warned that women who kill their husbands are ruled by the Devil, but this ballad adds something interesting about the relationship between God and Satan. Using this section as an example, one sees that Satan seems to work with God's permission to bring about sinful activities on earth.

She long had thirsted for his blood,...

And now her promise she made good,  
So heaven gave permission  
To Satan, who then lent her power  
And Strength to do't that bloody houre<sup>(16)</sup>

A second example of this kind of behavior comes from a ballad written in 1628 about another wife who killed her husband. In *A warning for all desperate Women* a wife kills her husband by stabbing him in the heart. When asked to recount her actions, the wife says she was acting like the Devil and that he gave her the strength to kill her husband.<sup>(17)</sup> This ballad shows Satan's role as a tempter, but it does not mention his role as a tool of God.

Besides acting as the catalyst for wives to kill their husbands, the Devil also tempted people to commit suicide. One ballad, written in 1662, tells of George Gibbs taking his own life. The story begins by describing Satan as a tempter who is bringing so many poor souls into sin. The Devil is also shown constantly tempting Gibbs to the point where he's ready to kill himself by ripping open his own abdomen and removing his innards with his hands. Gibbs said he tried to resist Satan's temptations, but he eventually submitted. The ballad ends by warning its audience not to give into the Devil's temptations and to reform their behavior.

Trust not too much to your own strength  
to God continual pray  
Resist the Divil elce at length,  
hee'l lead you his Broad way<sup>(18)</sup>

This theme of warning against misbehavior by illustrating sin through Satan's temptations is a pervasive theme throughout the ballad literature. In the ballad, *The Devil's Conquest*, a young woman is quite prone to cursing, swearing, and invoking Satan's name. At one point, she claimed the Devil would set her straight if she had not done the work required by her temporal employer. Satan held her to her word and killed her. The moral, according to the ballad was not to swear, curse, or speak the Devil's name in vain.

So to conclude remember still,  
Swearing and Cursing ends in woe,  
If you let the Devil have his will,  
hee'l prove the worst and greatest foe.<sup>(19)</sup>

A similar lesson is given in *Terrible news from Brentford*, written in 1661. A group of drunken Englishmen gather in a bar and decide to drink a health to the Devil. Upon doing so, the Devil appears and kills each man. Like the previous ballad, Satan is depicted as a warning against drunken misbehavior.

And keep us still from great excess  
of drinking which is evil;  
And never in such drunkenness  
drink healths unto the Devil.<sup>(20)</sup>

The third and final example of ballads depicting the Devil's use as a warning against misbehavior comes from a ballad written in 1678, *Sad and dreadful news from Horsleydown*. This ballad tells the tale of one Dorothy Winterbottom, who was renowned for cursing, drinking and multiple other vices. Ultimately, the Devil ends up coming for her and taking her life, but the objective of the ballad was to illustrate how Dorothy's minor sins could become worse through the Devil's influence because small sins open the way for larger ones.

Her vices were many as people express,  
Being given to curse and to drink to excess:  
Which gave the foul Tempter a way to get in,  
And still urge her on for to multiply sin: <sup>(21)</sup>

By looking at these three ballads, it is apparent that the Devil appears as a way of preventing and illustrating various types of sin. These ballads also seem to support the ideas espoused by Thomas and Reay concerning popular religion in seventeenth century England.

While one must exercise caution in drawing concrete conclusions from these ballads, they suggest that the popular belief in Satan associated him with witchcraft and religion as a source of temptation, warning and punishment. These ballads provide support for and elaborate upon the ideas presented by Barry Reay and James Sharpe, but they also add to provide a new perspective on the research of Keith Thomas and his arguments regarding Satan's involvement in witchcraft. Certainly, the Devil contributes a dynamic and frequently satirical element within the ballad culture, but, more importantly, the ballads offer a unique opportunity to illuminate how the popular culture in England understood Satan and his role in the world. By looking at these ballads, it is apparent that the Devil represents a method of social control and embodies the punishment for breaking the traditional rules and mores of English society. Drinking, cursing, and violence were all common elements of popular culture, but if not properly moderated, one could easily incur the wrath of Satan.

1. <sup>1</sup> Barry Reay, *Popular Cultures in England, 1550-1750* (London: Longman, Ltd., 1998), 38-40, 56, 59.
2. <sup>2</sup> Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), 439,441-445.
3. <sup>3</sup> James Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness: Witchcraft in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1997), 130, 134-6, 139.
4. <sup>4</sup> Reay, *Popular Cultures*, 115-118, 198-9.
5. <sup>5</sup> *Damnable Practices of three Lincolne-shire Witches* (London, 1619), in W.G. Day (ed.), *The Pepys Ballads*, 5 vols (Cambridge, 1987), Vol. 1, 132-3.
6. <sup>6</sup> Clive Holmes, "Popular Culture? Witches, Magistrates, and Divines in Early Modern England" in *Understanding Popular Culture: Europe from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century* (ed.) Steven L. Kaplan (Berlin: Mouton Publications, 1984), 96-97.
7. <sup>7</sup> *Witchcraft discovered and punished* (1682), in J. Woodfall Ebsworth (ed.), *The Roxburghe Ballads*, 9 vols (Hertford, 1886), Vol. 6, 706-708.
8. <sup>8</sup> *The Tragedy of Doctor Lambe* (London, 1628), *The Pepys Ballads*, Vol. 1, pp. 134-5.
9. <sup>9</sup> *The Judgment of God shewed upon one John Faustus* (London, 1670), *The Roxburghe Ballads*, Vol. 6, 703-705.
10. <sup>10</sup> Malcolm Gaskill, "Witchcraft and Power in Early Modern England: The Case of Margaret Moore" in *Women, Crime and the Courts in Early Modern England* (ed.) Jenny Kermode and Garthine Walker (Chapel Hill: University

of South Carolina Press, 1994), 137.

11. <sup>11</sup> Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1972; reprint, 1991), 87.

12. <sup>12</sup> Reay, *Popular Cultures*, 76, 94.

13. <sup>13</sup> *St. Bernard's Vision* (no date for printing), *The Pepys Ballads*, Vol. 2, 4-5.

14. <sup>14</sup> Thomas, *Religion*, 473, 495.

15. <sup>15</sup> *Strange and true News from Westmoreland* (no date for printing), *The Pepys Ballads*, Vol. 2, 155.

16. <sup>16</sup> *A warning for all wiues* (1629), *The Pepys Ballads*, Vol. 1, 118-119.

17. <sup>17</sup> *A warning for all desperate Women* (1628), *The Pepys Ballads*, Vol. 1, 120-121.

18. <sup>18</sup> *The Devil's cruelty to mankind* (London, 1662), in Hyder E. Rollins (ed.), *The Pack of Autolyucus* (Cambridge, 1927), 122-125.

19. <sup>19</sup> *The Devil's conquest* (London, 1665), *The Pack of Autolyucus*, 146-150.

20. <sup>20</sup> *Terrible news from Brentford* (1661), *The Pack of Autolyucus*, 75-80.

21. <sup>21</sup> *Sad and dreadful news from Horsleydown* (London, 1678), *The Pack of Autolyucus*, 215-218.