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The Devil Wears...Anything: Fluidity of the Devil During Medieval and Early Modern Europe

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Abstract

Although a clearly defined and well-known character in modern society, the devil's place in pop culture and religion has been dynamic through time, particularly during the transition between the medieval periods and early modern Europe. This essay explores the initial place and protections surrounding the devil as well as the context that created the robust and dynamic evolution of the character. In addition to this main idea, there is also a discussion about surrounding ideas such as ghosts and how they alleviated grieving and punished those who lead sinful lives. The context of all presented ideas in this essay is legitimized by the government, church, and medical professional which allows the reader to make parallels into our modern society and place this institution play in our conceptualizing of these same ideas. There is much to unravel about the Devil and how thought-out time his power is waning and waxing parallel to his image and extent of his influence. This paper also opens up a discussion of the place of government in legitimizing religious practices.

Keywords: History, Medieval, Theology, Gender, Class, Society, Devil, Institutions

Throughout time the devil was used to explain why a right and just Christian god would allow innocent suffering. The devil becomes the physical manifestation of all things evil, with his main purpose being to create calamity on earth from a human-centered point of view. However, the devil is a fluid character with significant changes in appearance, power, and purpose during the medieval and early modern periods of European Christian history. The appearance of the devil before the 11th century was humanlike or imp, however, after the reformation he becomes a mixture of creatures with fewer human features. Similarly, the devil increased his reach during these two periods and was thought to have a larger influence on human nature and became the main antagonist in the struggle between good and evil.

The devil's appearance during the medieval period was a human and animal composite with combinations of an imp in some imageries. Influential pieces such as *Dante's Inferno* depicted the devil with scaly legs, large, spiked ears, and fire coming from holes in a dragon like manner all while keeping human anatomy. These depictions were parallel to the devils' persona in traditional medieval folklore," a common theme in folk tales and chapbooks that Satan, despite his great powers, could himself be deceived. He was often outwitted by the guileful heroes and heroines whose adventures were recounted in cheap literature. This quality meant that the Devil could sometimes appear as a relatively harmless or even" (Oldridge,2000). However, during the Early modern period, the devil was depicted completely as a creature due to his increased power such as dogs, black cats, horses, and snakes. In Francisco de Goya's *Witches Sabbat*, the devil is a prominent figure and shown as essentially a goat with extending horns and the darkest almost unnatural black sitting with witches on almost equal terms. This

change of imagery used to depict the devil directly coincides with the discourse in Christian theology that was taking place during these two deeply contrasting periods.

Perhaps the most dramatic change in the devil during the medieval period and the early modern period was his power and prominence in the everyday life of Christians. The medieval devil in the context of Christianity was essentially a result of evil in the larger sense and not the creator of evil. He was often depicted as the main devil with lesser demons. In the manuscript, *The Neville of Hornby Hours*, the devil isn't depicted at all but instead shown as multiple demons which take the essence of the devil and evil. The text rather focuses on prayers, poems, and psalms; with practically no thought to a singular demon. In the context of Medieval fairy tales, which are a combination of pagan and Christian beliefs, the devil was almost a comical figure who had physical limitations and was often outwitted by the human protagonist. Often depicted alongside fairies and other typical fairy-tale creatures; He was able to be outrun if you were fast enough and easily tricked through mind games," While traditional beliefs in the Devil as a physical being could inspire great fear, they also reminded men and women of the Devil's limits. It was possible to physically outrun the Devil and there are many medieval tales of men and women evading the Devil by running and hiding." (The Devil in Early Modern England). In addition to this, the devil was only "allowed" to exist in the outskirts of town and dark forests where human communities didn't exist. In addition to being able to outwit the devil essentially in the same process, you would a human the Church allowed holy protection against his vices such as holy water, salt, and relics. With these two narratives together, the devil was a friend who was dangerous but also limited and not given much attention in the overall human experience.

However, in the Early Modern period and Protestant reformation, the devil became the embodiment of evil and the antagonist against God and his followers. Reformers believed that humankind was innately sinful making them prey to the Devil and evil which Protestant reformers warned that only “steadfast faith in God was the infallible protection against Satan” they saw the Catholic churches vices against the devil as superstitious and made them illegal. The devil was now depicted as entirely an animal in some cases, however, given superhuman abilities such as mind-control and shapeshifting. These new abilities in combination with the ability to be practically anywhere created an environment that anyone could be in collusion with the devil but more commonly those who were not “steadfast in their faith with God” (Devil in the Early Modern Period).

Likewise, as the reformation took power from the church it also took it away from society, rather the connection to God was individual and personal, increase access and exposure to God and goodness followed similar exposure to the devil and evil. There was also a clearer and more defined role for the devil during the transition from the medieval period to the early modern period, in contrast to his traditional place among other fairytale characters he was now given the role as the cause for all evil and as a result the direct enemy of God and goodness. “Whereas the old morality had emphasized sins against society, the new emphasized sins against God and stressed how unknowable, terrifying, and unapproachable he was. Nothing angered him more than idolatry: his first two commandments were devoted to condemning it. And as God grew more terrifying, so did the devil. In the old morality, he had been the enemy of sociability, comical as often as not, but the new conception set him up as God’s rival, the goal of all idolatry, the titanic rebel angel whose greatest wish was to be

worship”(Armstrong,2014)

These two representations of the devil reflect a changing society and Christian theology discourse that evolves with it. The context in which the devil evolves can be studied to further analyze the place he plays in society and the action of those during this time. The devil is a fluid character and plays a minor role in some societies and in contrast plays a larger role in others.

What role did ghosts play in medieval and early modern society?

Ghosts are spirits or the soul of a deceased person that appears to the living in various forms. Ghost played a large role in medieval and early modern society by reminding the living of the afterlife and torment of the soul for various reasons. Due to literacy rates during the time Ghost stories were popular and initially spread orally and then written in Latin by members of the church. They are often a combination of pagan ideas of the afterlife as well as Christian theology which allowed for the populous to connect to them on a spiritual level.

Ghost in essence represented an aspect of the afterlife that was a product of living an essentially unsuccessful life. People who lived an honest and humble life had 5 sons and 5 daughters, fruitful land, pious wives, and died peacefully next to their family were often not becoming a ghost. Becoming a ghost became synonymous with those who died with regret, anger, bad fortune, and sinful life. It became a punishment to not be able to rest the soul after receiving the equalizer of death that was promised by the church. The Memento Mori: Medieval Images of Death was one of the vices used to warn sinful Christian of the torments of death, however becoming a Ghost and tales of ghosts created an additional punishment for those who were hoping it would end with death.

Similarly, to the depiction of Hell, depictions of becoming a ghost became a way to scare people into attending mass and living a pious life with good deeds. Becoming a ghost was in some ways the fault of the living rather than up to a higher power. For example, people who typically became ghosts were women who died in childbirth, deceased who didn't receive a proper burial, and suicides. The medieval Church believed ghosts were humans in the purgatory who need intervention to return to grace. As such ghost stories usually involved a priest or prayer to save the human/spirit and send it to its final resting place. These three stipulates are manifested in the following except a Ghost story during the medieval period *"it is said that before his absolution, he would stand at the doors and windows of houses, and beneath their walls and partitions as if listening, perhaps waiting for someone to come out and conjure him to help him in his need. Others say that he had aided and plotted the murder of a certain man and that he had done other evil things the particulars of which should not be mentioned at present."*

Ghosts were tied closely to the Medieval Church; it was in some ways professionalized as clerics were the ones who wrote down ghost stories as well as the ones who would perform the absolution to return the ghost to graces. This legitimized the threat of becoming a ghost and in turn, created becoming a ghost and death to be prominent during the period. However, the early modern ghost wasn't a human and more of a demon which moved the ghost from a mankind issue to more of the devil's minions' side. The disillusionment of the Church because of the Protestant Reformation changed the face of the ghost as a demon taking the shape of a loved one which connected to the devil's increased power to do so during the Early Modern Period. Pieces like Shakespeare's Hamlet popularizes this idea by showcasing the deception of these demons.

Ghost during the medieval period reminded people of the torments of death and was popularized by ghost stories and the recognition of purgatory. The fear of you or your loved ones becoming ghosts became closely tied with ideas of your life spent on earth. During the Protestant Reformation ghost became a product of the devil as his image as a shapeshifter and the main antagonist increased. The reformed church wanted to eliminate superstition and in doing so made ghosts a soldier in the devils' army. Both ghost representations played an important role in how people viewed death and the afterlife as well as how their time on earth could predict their journey.

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