

# The Devil and the Sacred in English Drama, 1350–1642

John D. Cox



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## THE DEVIL AND THE SACRED IN ENGLISH DRAMA, 1350-1642

John Cox tells the intriguing story of stage devils from their earliest appearance in English plays to the closing of the theatres by parliamentary order in 1642. The book represents a major revision of E. K. Chambers' ideas of stage devils in *The Medieval Stage* (1903), arguing that this is not a history of gradual secularization, as scholarship has maintained for the last century, but rather that stage devils were profoundly shaped from the outset by the assumptions of sacred drama and retained this shape virtually unchanged until the advent of permanent commercial theatres near London.

The book spans both medieval and Renaissance drama including the medieval Mystery cycles on the one hand, through to plays by Greene, Marlowe, Shakespeare (1 and 2 *Henry VI*), Jonson, Middleton and Davenant. An appendix lists devil plays in English from the beginning to 1642.

JOHN D. COX is Professor of English at Hope College, Michigan. He has taught at Westmont College, the University of Victoria B.C., Harvard University, Calvin College and the University of California at Berkeley. His books include *Shakespeare and the Dramaturgy of Power* (1989) and *A New History of Early English Drama*, co-edited with David Scott Kastan, which was chosen as the winner of the 1997 Best Book of the Year Award by the American Association for Theatre in Higher Education.



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DRAMA, 1350–1642

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*In memory of*  
*Muriel Clara Bradbrook*  
*and*  
*Mabelle DuMez Frei*





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## Introduction

Histories of the devil abound, and I do not claim to be familiar with more than a fraction of them. Histories of stage devils in English drama, however, are more manageable. The earliest are nineteenth-century dissertations in German, which is the model adopted by the first study of the subject in English, L. W. Cushman's *The Devil and the Vice in the English Dramatic Literature before Shakespeare*. Cushman's book in fact originated as a doctoral dissertation at Goettingen in 1899 and was published the following year by Max Niemeyer in Halle, when Cushman was teaching English at the University of Nevada. I have often wondered if Cushman's going from Goettingen to Reno in 1900 was not, perhaps, a little like meeting the subject of his book in person.

In any case, previous histories of the devil in English drama were swept aside by the magisterial work of E. K. Chambers' *The Medieval Stage*, published in 1903. Chambers read Cushman and dismissed him. What Chambers offered for the first time was a narrative so coherent and persuasive that it continues to influence critical thinking about early English drama, even though Chambers' assumptions have long since been recognized and dismissed in their own turn. One task of the present book is to retell the story of English stage devils for the first time since Chambers but with different assumptions. The first chapter explains what those assumptions are and how they affect the interpretation of stage devils, but the issue is important throughout and accounts for this study's engagement with other critics of early drama who have been influenced in one way or another by Chambers, even when they set out to revise his work.

Chambers began with an oppositional scheme that interpreted stage devils in a narrative of teleological secularization. In this scheme, enlightened secularity was bound to flourish in the long run in its opposition to benighted superstition. Chambers saw the introduction of devils into vernacular drama in the fifteenth century as early evidence of

drama's gradual evolution toward its brilliant secular flowering in the work of Shakespeare. In other words, though devils would, in the long run, be recognized and discarded as part of the religious superstructure that drama eventually outgrew, Chambers argued that they were themselves, at first, a secular incursion in sacred drama.

The assumptions that govern this book are also oppositional, but they are derived from what Stuart Clark calls "the mental world" of demonology, not from social Darwinism (*Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* [Oxford, 1997]). Demons were inherently oppositional, Clark argues, because they were constructed as the subordinate term in a hierarchical polarity. This binary distinction between God and the devil became the model for a series of parallel oppositions that profoundly influenced thinking about science, history, religion, and politics. In similar terms, I argue that the role of stage devils in pre-Reformation drama was to enact whatever opposed individual wellbeing and the sacramental community. Far from being a secular innovation, devils were a way of imagining how and why the sacred needed to function redemptively in the life of the individual and the community. Chapters 2 to 4 make this argument in detail for pre-Reformation drama, noting continuity across dramatic genres (mystery, morality, and saints' plays), and accounting for the origin of dramatic social satire in recognition of the gap between moral affirmation and practice.

The first major change from traditional oppositional thinking about stage devils comes with the Protestant Reformation, as I argue in chapter 5. Reformers continued to think in dichotomies, but they substituted new terms for both the positive and negative poles of their world. The Christian community was thus conceived anew as the reformed church, with the king at its head, while the traditional church, with the pope at its head, was identified with the devil, along with its sacramental system. Chapter 6 argues that the second major change in stage devils came with the establishment of commercial theatres near London and the advent of Christopher Marlowe, who is the first playwright to exploit, in *Dr. Faustus*, the instability of traditional polarized thinking about devils. In this, he was not influential; in fact, chapter 7 discusses several devil plays from around the turn of the seventeenth century that react to his radicalism by reasserting familiar values, ultimately derived from drama before the Reformation.

One of the major benefits of looking at stage devils in light of traditional demonological assumptions is that it enables the recognition of

continuity and specific difference in early Stuart drama, as I argue in chapters 8, 9, and 10. About forty new plays that we know of put devils on stage between Marlowe's *Faustus* and the closing of the theatres in 1642, with the last of them being performed for the first time as late as 1641. This is not what one would expect, given Chambers' secular teleology. Even Cushman terminates his discussion before the advent of the commercial theatres near London. Moreover, early seventeenth-century stage devils are more continuous with the formative tradition than is usually recognized. Despite rising skepticism and the advent of widespread metadramatic irony, as in Fletcherian tragicomedy, devils continue to bring with them a number of traditional oppositional assumptions. New directions for stage devils are explored in chapter 10, most remarkable being their social function: the traditional association of devils with pride, and therefore with the highest social classes, increasingly gives way to a prevailing association of devils with the lower social classes.

In making this argument, I have deliberately limited my discussion to plays that stage devils, thus excepting those that stage only witches, the Vice, or Vice-derived human beings, like Richard III, Iago, or Deflores in *The Changeling*. My reason for this limitation is to sharpen the focus and keep the study, already long, within reasonable bounds. But I make one exception. In pre-Reformation morality plays, I treat personified vices as devils, because I argue that playwrights made no distinction between them. The seven deadly sins, which are personified abstractions, are often called devils, they behave like devils, they are costumed like devils, and I argue that they have the same derivation as devils. That is why Medwall's *Nature* and Skelton's *Magnificence* receive detailed attention here, even though they stage personified vices, not literal devils. In popular Tudor plays, the character called "the Vice" appears for the first time, and playwrights distinguish him from stage devils. I do not, therefore, deal with Reformation plays that stage the Vice alone or Vice-derived human beings, but I do discuss plays, including a number of Tudor morality plays, that stage the devil and the Vice together.

Shakespeare does not figure very largely in this book, because he included devils in only two plays, 1 and 2 *Henry VI*, both discussed in chapter 7. When referring to these plays and others on occasion, I cite David Bevington's *Complete Works of Shakespeare*, 4th edn. (New York: Longman, 1997). I have included dates for all the plays referred to, both in the text and the appendix. For nearly all of them, however, dating is uncertain, and for the earliest plays it is sometimes little more than a

scholarly guess. That is why the beginning date is 1350: though the earliest texts are fifteenth-century, the York mystery plays were certainly being performed in the second half of the fourteenth century, and *The Castle of Perseverance* may be as early as 1382, but nothing more precise than that can be said about the originating dates of these plays. For consistency, I have relied principally on Sylvia Wagonheim's revision of *Annals of English Drama, 975–1700* (Routledge, 1989), originally compiled by Alfred Harbage and revised by S. Schoenbaum, though occasionally I have used dates suggested in recent editions of particular plays. In any case, one of the salutary benefits of abandoning an evolutionary and teleological scheme is that dating becomes less important to the argument.



## CHAPTER ONE

### *Stage devils and oppositional thinking*

Aside from human beings, nothing was staged more continuously in early English drama than the devil and his minions. For about 300 years – from the late fourteenth century to the late seventeenth – playwrights regularly put devils on stage in every kind of English play for every kind of audience, whether aristocratic, popular, or commercial. Long after they stopped seeing God and the angels, audiences continued to see devils on stage, and there was no appreciable decline in opportunities to do so on the London commercial stage before the closing of the theatres in 1642. That devils should have so long outlived other characters produced by traditional dramaturgy has neither been noticed nor explained in the critical record, yet it is a singular fact. This book explores both questions: why devils are the last explicit remnant of continuous traditions in staging the sacred, and why no one has recognized that they are.

One reason devils endured on stage was that the material base of culture changed very little throughout the time they were popular: the slow pace of economic and technological change meant that costumes and the materials for assembling them remained the same.<sup>1</sup> “The devill in his fethers” (presumably black feathers) appears in costuming lists from Chester, both for the mystery plays and for the annual Midsummer Show, which reputedly endured from 1499 to the 1670s.<sup>2</sup> At Coventry a charge is recorded “for making ye demonæs head” in 1543 and “for a yard of canvas for ye devylles mall [maul]” in 1544.<sup>3</sup> “The dymons cote” (p. 240), “the devells hose” (p. 246), “pwyntes [points (for attaching the hose to the doublet)] for the deman” (p. 218), and “a stafe for the deman” (p. 238) add details to the picture at Coventry. The St. John’s College Cambridge Register of Inventories lists “ij blak devellæs cootæs with hornæs” in 1548–49.<sup>4</sup> A dangerous variation on the devil’s canvas maul is recorded at Tamworth on Corpus Christi Day, 1536, where “an actor playing the Devil . . . came with his chain by one of the spectators, Sir Humfrey Ferrers, the lord of Tamworth Castle, and unwittingly broke his shins with it.”<sup>5</sup> The earliest reference to devils’ costumes discovered

so far is from York in 1433, where “garmentes,” “faces,” and “Vesernes [visors]” for devils are listed;<sup>6</sup> the latest before the closing of the theatres is from Thomas Nabbes’ masque, *Microcosmus* in 1637, where a stage direction specifies “A divell in a black robe: haire, wreath and wings black.”<sup>7</sup> The wings were presumably made of black feathers.

This relatively stable material base of costuming and props was less important in perpetuating stage devils, however, than the mental world that originated them in the first place. The outlook in which demonology flourished has recently been described in detail by Stuart Clark as it affected science, history, religion, and politics throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>8</sup> Clark comments that demonology “was construed dialectically in terms of what it was not; what was significant about it was not its substance but the system of oppositions that it established and fulfilled” (p. 9). These oppositions, moreover, were hierarchical, beginning with God and the devil, and embracing a series of parallels: good and evil, truth and illusion, community and chaos, baptized and non-baptized, belief and heresy. The flexibility of binary thinking was both its strength and its greatest weakness, Clark argues: while almost anything could be made to fit the model of hierarchical polar oppositions, their infinite confirmability made them unstable. Traditional oppositional thinking therefore endured an extended crisis in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries:

In the case of demonology, the dominance of privileged first terms set in hierarchical opposition to their contraries was for a long time successful in yielding coherent and persuasive arguments. However, once the two reformations were under way the very enthusiasm with which writers of different religious persuasions gave authenticating roles to devils betrayed the instability of the logic involved. (p. 147)

What was true of devils per se was equally true, as we shall see, of devils on the stage.

Recognizing the crisis caused by the Protestant and Counter Reformations as *extended*, however, is important. The habit of oppositional thinking did not collapse as soon as Protestants turned the tables on traditional religion by identifying it as idolatrous and demonic. Thinking in opposed hierarchical polarities was so deeply ingrained that it characterized both sides of the religious divide for a long time, with almost no recognition of the incongruities involved. Though virtually all the devil plays discussed in the following pages invite deconstructive analysis by virtue of their oppositional thinking, only Marlowe’s *Dr. Faustus* deliberately exploits the resulting instability.

One of the principal reasons for the failure of modern criticism to recognize and explain the durability of stage devils has been the misreading of traditional assumptions about a polarized world. Primary credit for this failure belongs to E. K. Chambers, who first read early drama according to a different model altogether – a teleological pattern of gradually developing secularization.<sup>9</sup> Stage devils were important for Chambers, because they were a key element in his theory. The earlier he could find evidence of secularization, the more credible was his claim that change was incremental, progressive, and aimed where he thought it was. He therefore regarded the “relaxing of the close bonds between the nascent drama and religious worship” as the earliest form of secularization, and he found this “relaxation” in the expansion of early liturgical tropes to include other biblical material, the movement of the plays out of the church, the innovation of lay control and financing, the replacement of Latin with the vernacular, and the appearance of folk-play elements – especially devils – in the biblical stories told by vernacular drama:

For your horned and blackened devil is the same personage, with the same vague tradition of the ancient heathen festival about him, whether he riots it through the cathedral aisles in the Feast of Fools, or hales the Fathers to limbo and harries the forward spectators in the marketplace of Beverley or Wakefield.<sup>10</sup>

Chambers’ belief that devils were among the first indications of the secular in early English drama made him incapable of seeing them as one of the last vestiges of traditional sacred dramaturgy in the seventeenth century.

More than thirty years ago, O. B. Hardison pointed out that Chambers’ assumptions about early drama derived from social Darwinism and its evolutionary preoccupations.<sup>11</sup> Chambers regarded secularization as progressive, Hardison argued, because “he lived in an age when Christianity was suspect” (p. 14). A romantic conception of vital but repressed pagan folk culture informed Chambers’ view of stage devils (they are vestiges of “the ancient heathen festival”), and the reassertion of this culture against oppressive pre-Reformation Christianity was, for Chambers, one of the first signs of healthy secularization in drama. Chambers’ thinking is thus marked by a “strong polarity,” as Hardison points out (p. 15), that is foreign to the drama he was trying to understand. The primary terms in Chambers’ hierarchical binary rhetoric are not God and the devil, but pagan (the favored term) and Christian, followed closely by a series of supporting terms: “braved,” “won,” “sportive,” and

“deep-rooted instinct” on the positive side, opposing “bishops,” “barbarians,” “gaolers,” “ban,” “triumphed,” and “barred,” on the side of the church.<sup>12</sup>

Chambers did not invent the oppositional system that Hardison identifies; rather, Chambers inherited it as a derivative from the very system he failed to recognize in the early drama he studied. For binary thinking did not collapse in the eighteenth century, as Clark suggests.<sup>13</sup> Instead, the deep-rooted sense of certainty that it had provided was transmuted into a new system, in which the favored terms were “secular,” “progressive,” “rational,” “modern,” and the like, in opposition to “religious,” “backward,” “enthusiastic,” “medieval.” We can see these two incommensurate binary systems in transition and in collision with one another in the eighteenth century.<sup>14</sup> James Sharpe recounts a trial in Hertfordshire in 1751, when Thomas Colley was found guilty and hanged for seizing and drowning Ruth Osborne on suspicion of witchcraft.<sup>15</sup> Before his execution, Colley was visited in prison by one who sought to persuade him that “witches had no manner of existence but in the minds of poor infatuated people, in which they had been confirm’d by the tradition of their ancestors, as foolish and crazy as themselves” (p. 3). Colley’s well-meaning visitor speaks from within the new system of oppositional thinking, dividing the world along lines of reason and enlightenment, seeking to dispel centuries of infatuated folly and craziness. On the other hand, after Colley’s hanging, many who heard of it, believed “it was a very hard case, that a man shold be hang’d for destroying an old wicked woman, who had done so much mischief by her abominable charms and witchcraft” (p. 4). These people viewed Colley’s execution from within the old system, dividing the world between God and the devil.

Chambers’ binary thinking descends, then, from the Enlightenment, where it developed as a way of grounding rational confidence against the archaic polarities it replaced. Secular knowledge based on reason and experiment came to oppose sacred ignorance, as illustrated in the deists’ rejection of “priestcraft,” a rejection which was itself a legacy of radical Protestant anticlericalism in the seventeenth century and of the early Protestant Reformers’ rejection of traditional clergy and ritual as “superstitious.” For Chambers, the added feature is that Darwin and the social Darwinists had transferred the teleology of sacred history (already secularized in Hegel’s historical “spirit”) into biological and social evolution, in such a way that the hierarchical superior in the Enlightenment binary system seemed bound to flourish in the long run. Reason would

inevitably defeat ignorance; the secular would inevitably defeat “other-worldliness” and superstition. Writing from the heart of the British Empire at the height of its success, the social evolutionary assumption that the fittest survive seemed obvious to Chambers, and it was apparent that the fittest culture had evolved along with enlightened English Protestantism: anti-Catholic, secularized, and favorable to individual freedom of conscience.

In short, Chambers’ inability to understand traditional oppositional thinking was due to the Enlightenment transformation of an earlier mental world into a new set of binary assumptions. Moreover the latter have remained active in assessments of early drama, even though Chambers’ argument has been repudiated. Chambers’ continuing influence is due, in part, to the inspiration (complementing that of Darwin and Herbert Spencer) of Jules Michelet, who first proposed in *La Sorcière* (1862) that vestigial pagan folk customs were the focus of peasant revolt against ecclesiastical and feudal authority.<sup>16</sup> The Romantic basis of Michelet’s thesis needs no emphasis, and its debt to Enlightenment binary thinking in the French Revolution is clear. Michelet’s influence has been considerable in modern attempts to understand witchcraft, especially when witchcraft has been interpreted romantically as a form of populist or feminist resistance, but Michelet has not been adequately recognized as a factor in the study of early drama.

Despite Hardison’s critique, Chambers’ legacy with regard to stage devils remains largely unquestioned. The first broad challenge to Chambers came in the important revisionist work of Bernard Spivack and David Bevington, writing just after the middle of the century, yet both retained a narrative of organic incremental development with secularization as its goal.<sup>17</sup> The concept of the “hybrid morality,” for example, is important to Spivack and Bevington as a mid-sixteenth-century phase in the gradual development of dramatic characterization, from the personified abstractions inspired by Christian morality to the represented human beings inspired by secular observation.

Most striking is the perpetuation of Chambers’ Victorian and Whig liberal assumptions in the neo-Marxist criticism of Robert Weimann, who has been a Trojan horse for Enlightenment antinomies within the ramparts of postmodernism. Weimann is most responsive to Michelet, arguing that a vestigial pagan folk tradition found expression in clowns, Vices, stage devils, the doctor of St. George plays, and the gargantuan feasts of shepherd plays in the mystery cycles as various expressions of peasant resistance to high culture. Weimann sees devils’ and personified

vices' proximity to the audience as encouraging subversive identification and sympathy with ostensibly anti-social behavior, blasphemy, and heterodoxy. For heresy was "inevitably and inextricably entangled with attempts on the social order, always anarchic, always political."<sup>18</sup> The soliloquies, knowing asides, and down-stage comic antics of demonic figures were all means of taking auditors into the confidence of an anti-establishment viewpoint, engaging them on its side and creating distance from the more formal, "correct," and socially elevated characters of the main action. In Weimann's view, the social function of devils is to provide a subversive expression for class frustration and protest – a function closely analogous to the one described by Chambers and ultimately indebted to Michelet. Also influential in some postmodern criticism has been the historical work of Keith Thomas, who identifies the purpose of pre-Reformation ritual with that of magic and compares magic unfavorably with science and technology, thus offering another version of the Enlightenment polarity exhibited in Chambers.<sup>19</sup> Thomas' influence on Stephen Greenblatt is explicit, and Greenblatt's ideas about exorcism are considered below in chapter 8.<sup>20</sup>

My purpose in what follows is not to argue that secularization had no effect on the history of early drama, and particularly on stage devils. Rather, what I propose is a way of conceptualizing secularization that recovers some sense of traditional oppositional thinking without falling into the polarization and tendentiousness of Enlightenment and Romantic assumptions. John Sommerville's argument for a nuanced and sociologically informed theory of secularization is helpful. He contrasts "a people whose religious rituals are so woven into the fabric of their life that they could not separate religion from the rest of their activities" with "a society in which religion is a matter of conscious beliefs, important primarily for the times of one's most philosophical and poetic solitude."<sup>21</sup> The first is a "sacred" culture; the second, "secular."<sup>22</sup> Looked at this way, the story of English secularization effectively begins with Henry VIII, because Henry originated a process that formally defined the power and influence of religion apart from the influence of other social and political institutions (especially the monarchy) and eventually separated them. Where secularization is concerned, Henry's declaring himself the head of the church was not a uniting of monarchy and church but a delimiting of religion from its traditional permeation of cultural life, a subordination of this newly distinct entity under the crown, a consequent redefinition of the church in national terms, and a promotion of a non-ecclesiastical office (the monarchy) to

unprecedented charismatic ascendancy. The material impact of this process was immediate and dramatic, beginning with the transfer of ecclesiastical real estate to Henry's "new men" and proceeding with the way people refashioned their worship spaces, spent their money, distributed largesse to the poor (or sought relief, if they were poor), lived virtually every facet of their daily lives, and died.<sup>23</sup> But eventually the impact was intellectual and psychological as well, and it is the latter effect that we see at work in the secularization of early English drama and particularly in the secularization of stage devils.<sup>24</sup>

To see Henry VIII as the effective originator of secularization in English life is to see the situation before him very differently from the way Chambers does. Viewing stage devils as a separation of the sacred from the secular is understandable from an evolutionary and secularized Protestant perspective, but as Sommerville points out,

the devil is as much a part of the realm of the supernatural as is God. The secular or profane realm contains only everyday beings, not those remarkable for their diabolic character. An inversion of religion in sacrilege, desecration, or sorcery is not evidence of secularization, however bad-mannered. In medieval England, hostility toward some aspect of religion was often expressed in religious terms. The evidence of thorough-going secularization, on the other hand, is to be found in indifference, even though it might be respectful to the Church. (p. 10)

Technically, as we shall see, the devil was not supernatural; he was merely superhuman. In pre-Reformation England, however, he was indeed as much a part of the sacred outlook as God was. He was ubiquitous, because his opposition to God accounted for everything that was wrong, not merely in obvious moral or religious terms (committing the seven deadly sins or sacrilege) but in sickness, death, accidents, crop failure, and social conflict. One of the major purposes of religious activity throughout one's life, from baptism to the last rites, was therefore to reject and defeat the devil, and innumerable liturgical celebrations in the course of every year performed the same purpose for the community. In the traditional society that produced early religious drama, encounters with the devil were deeply involved in the ritual life of the community.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, everyone first encountered the devil without being aware of it and without being able to do anything about it. The doctrine of original sin was construed to mean that newborns literally belonged to the devil, and the baptismal rite therefore involved an exorcism that was designed to expel the devil from the infant to be baptized, whom the rite claimed, instead, for Christ and the Christian community: "Taken

together, the rituals of expulsion, repudiation, and prophylaxis or apotropaism formed a series of ceremonies that dramatized in a striking way the very real struggle that every Christian waged with the devil."<sup>26</sup> Every infant had to be reclaimed for Christ from God's opposite, a cosmic and personal enemy who was malign and dangerous, the source of childhood illness, accidents, death, and deformity, dramatically apostrophized by the presiding priest at baptism as "cursed devil."<sup>27</sup>

The dramatic encounter at baptism, marking the beginning of the Christian life, was repeated even more forcefully at the end of life, on everyone's deathbed, especially in the late Middle Ages. This culture's preoccupation with death is well known, evident in the flourishing of the *ars moriendi*, the dance of death, and the intense interest in purgatory and indulgences. Such a preoccupation was doubtless fostered by the Black Death and recurring bouts of the plague, but it may also have been encouraged by the explosion of wealth, which preachers denounced at every social level, reminding their charges of life's brevity and the consequent obligation to prepare well for their end.<sup>28</sup> That members of the clergy were themselves, in many cases, prime beneficiaries of the new wealth obviates neither the force of moral admonitions that came from the church nor of its provisions for everyone at the end of life.

What was true at baptism was also true in dying, when the preserving power of Christ was pitted against the fearful onslaught of Satan and his followers, which was stronger in one's ultimate weakness than at any previous time of life. This was because the approach of death was accompanied by strong temptation to doubt the efficacy of the Christian graces and the saving power of God, as Shakespeare still remembers at the end of the sixteenth century, when he has King Henry VI pray for the dying Bishop of Winchester:

O thou eternal mover of the heavens,  
 Look with a gentle eye upon this wretch!  
 O, beat away the busy meddling fiend  
 That lays strong siege unto this wretch's soul,  
 And from his bosom purge this black despair!<sup>29</sup>

The presence of the devil at the deathbed is depicted in illustrations that accompanied the *ars moriendi* throughout the fifteenth century and that reached even those who could not read in the form of block prints produced by the early printers. As Eamon Duffy points out, these prints "portrayed the deathbed as the centre of an epic struggle for the soul of the Christian, in which the Devil bent all his strength to turn the soul



from Christ and His cross to self-loathing or self-reliance.”<sup>30</sup> In dramatic opposition to the devil, the ministering priest held aloft a crucifix, displaying the power of the passion as the site of Christ’s defeat of Satan on behalf of humankind and encouraging the dying to appropriate that power on their own behalf.

The material impact of the oppositional preoccupation with choosing God and resisting the devil at the end of life went beyond the production of manuscripts, books, and block prints. It is no exaggeration to say that much of what we think of as characteristically late medieval was shaped by this concern. A large proportion of new wealth was expended in gifts to parish churches and private chapels, with the intent of demonstrating the piety of those who had earned it and thereby preparing the donor’s case for being loosely attached to earthly goods at the time of deathbed reckoning and the Day of Judgment. Every visitor to Westminster Abbey is aware of Henry VII’s gifts to create a magnificent new chapel with fantailed vaulting, but Henry’s prudent generosity did not end so close to the royal domain. His gifts to Great St. Mary’s in Cambridge are no less important as pious contributions to the university church, though Christopher Brooke has recently discovered evidence that the munificence attributed to Henry may actually have been bestowed by Richard III.<sup>31</sup> The point is not which king deserves credit but that both were so determined to establish it. Henry’s story could be told many times over for thousands of other lay Christians in the late Middle Ages. No doubt conspicuous consumption played a part in such gifts as well, but to assert that nothing more impelled them is to miss the religious dimension of the social context that gave rise to them.

Displays of personal generosity were impossible for the poor, of course, but as a vernacular preacher made clear, the poor were at less obvious peril on their deathbeds and the Day of Doom, because they had fewer earthly goods to tempt them into worldly complacency: “Tho[gh] god sende the litill, thou art never the lesse beholden unto hym for too skilles. On ys, thou haste the lesse to yeve hym accountes of at the daye of dome; and anothur, the lesse ioye that thou haste in this worlde, the more thou shalte have in heven.”<sup>32</sup> A common theme of medieval preaching was Jesus’ parable of the sheep and the goats, distinguished from one another on the Day of Judgment by their consideration for the poor and dispossessed, and dramatic renderings of the same parable are also a prominent part of all the Judgment plays in the extant mystery cycles, where the devil claims those who did not repent their willful commitment to luxurious consumption at the expense of others.

An efficacious deathbed struggle against the devil was not, then, the prerogative of the rich. It was a spiritual struggle that confronted everyone, and material donations were expressions of charity that prepared one to face the devil on the deathbed. Though the poor (who were, of course, the majority of the population) were unable to display their charity to the community in the manner of their wealthy neighbors, they were allotted a place in every parish's memory of those who had contributed against the day of reckoning. For the names of all donors were entered on the parish bede roll, no matter how small the donation, and prayers were offered every Sunday for the souls of those named there. Moreover, during the annual requiem for benefactors of the parish, the name of each contributor was read aloud by the priest, from those who had built or remodeled the church to those who had given two-pence (Duffy, pp. 334–35). No one, in short, was denied an opportunity to prepare for resisting the devil at death by expressing charity through material generosity.

Birth and death were not the only times when pre-Reformation Christians were aware of the devil's malignant opposition. Between the beginning and the end of the Christian life, marked by the ordeals of baptism and dying, everyone ritually encountered the devil repeatedly as a frightening opponent in the course of an agrarian cycle that derived its ultimate meaning from the liturgy. Despite the rapid growth of towns in the late Middle Ages, the vast bulk of the population still made its living from the land, and the rhythms of agricultural life dominated European consciousness. What the liturgy provided, then, cannot be accurately described as merely spiritual comfort. In a way that is characteristic of sacred culture, the liturgy also profoundly shaped consciousness about material life on a daily basis, where the power of ritual experience was involved with life, death, and wellbeing:

What that power procured was the salvation of man; or, to recapture the larger overtones of the word *salus*, the deliverance of the Christian from the whole concatenation of dooms, dangers, anxieties and tribulations which loomed over him in his corporal as in his spiritual existence: overtones more exactly rendered by the German *Heil* than by any English equivalent.<sup>33</sup>

The most important half of the liturgical year was the period between Advent and Easter, which had come to include, by the late Middle Ages, Ascension, Whitsunday, and Corpus Christi.<sup>34</sup> During this time a sequence of feast days commemorated the life, passion, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, which were definitively efficacious in the cosmic defeat of Satan. The correspondence of this period with the time

between the winter and summer solstices meant that the communal remembering of Christ's cosmic suffering and victory occurred at a time of year when suffering from cold and a meager food supply was also endured and came to an end. Still, that coincidence does not mean that the "real" significance of the liturgical celebrations was a residual pagan fertility rite, as Chambers inferred. It is more accurate to say that the real meaning of assimilated fertility rites and the community's survival of the passing seasons' hardships had long since become Christian.<sup>35</sup>

In any case, the Christocentric feasts openly re-enact the cosmic victory of Christ over Satan in innumerable ways. The concluding Christmas feast, for example, was Candlemas, celebrated on February 2, commemorating the purification of Mary and the presentation of the infant Jesus in the temple. The name of the feast derives from the candles carried in a procession of the worshipers and presented for blessing to the priest, along with a penny donation. The prayer accompanying the blessing explicitly identifies its apotropaic function, asking that wherever the candle "shall be lit or set up, the devil may flee away in fear and trembling with all his ministers, out of those dwellings, and never presume again to disquiet your servants" (Duffy, p. 16). On Palm Sunday, the yew, box, or willow branches carried in elaborate procession were similarly blessed and were similarly efficacious in banishing the devil (Duffy, p. 23).

One of the most elaborate annual feasts was Rogation, the only liturgical procession retained by the sixteenth-century Reformers, celebrated for three successive days before Ascension, the sixth Thursday after Easter. The Rogation procession was the most extensive of all, for it followed the entire parish perimeter, or "bounds," with church banners, bells, singing, readings from the gospels by the priest, and pauses at wayside crosses, all designed to cleanse the parish of evil influences and bless the fields. On the first two days the procession was preceded by a dragon, whose tail was shorn away for the third day's procession, symbolizing the overthrow of the great dragon, Satan (Duffy, p. 279). The gospel reading for Ascension Day, immediately following Rogation, helped to link the two feasts, for it was Mark 5, the story of Jesus' exorcism of the man possessed by a demon (Duffy, p. 217). Like some other Christian feasts, this springtime celebration originated as a counterpart to a pagan festivity (the Roman Robigalia), specifically designed to promote fertility, and the fertility implications of Rogation itself are obvious.<sup>36</sup> The point, again, is neither that Rogation was really a "heathen festival," in Chambers' phrase, nor that the liturgical calendar was spiritual and irrelevant to the material lives of agricultural