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The devil in the human form and related matters: A handful of remarks

Abstract

The aim of the article is to present the book by Małgorzata Dowłaszewicz *Diabeł w legendzie. Wyobrażenie diabła antropomorficznego w średniowiecznej literaturze niderlandzkiej*, published in 2020. The researcher analyzed the anthropomorphic devil figure on the basis of two collections of exemplars and legends *Gulden legende* and *Der Byen Boeck*, translated into Middle Dutch from Latin. The research results were presented in the broad context of medieval Dutch literature.

Keywords: devil, anthropomorphic, Middle Ages, Dutch literature.

The figure of the devil has held sway over the imaginations of people in Christian culture for centuries. Philosophers, thinkers, clergymen, writers and artists have explored the evil one's origin and nature in a panoply of texts. The devil has also proven interesting to contemporary scholars, who have sought to capture and report the entire complex history of the devil. Seminal studies in this field include Maximilian Rudwin's *The Devil in Legend and Literature* (1931),¹ the opulent body of research of Jeffrey Burton Russell, in particular his tetralogy devoted to the devil and the notion of evil from antiquity to the modern age, and Philip C. Almond's far more recent study *The Devil: A New Biography* (2014), boasting an extensive bibliography. Such sweeping syntheses, which attempt to produce a comprehensive account of the issue, tend to be rather cursory and pass over multiple interesting details. For this reason, some researchers choose to focus on investigating more narrowly circumscribed topics, examining texts composed

¹ Though published originally in 1931, the volume is still widely consulted for its abundant source materials.

within a given period or delving into respective vernacular literatures.² This approach is exemplified, for instance, by *Diabeł w literaturze polskiej* [The Devil in Polish Literature], edited by Tadeusz Błażejowski (1998), Peter Dendle's *Satan Unbound: The Devil in Old English Narrative Literature* (2001) and Nathan Johnstone's *The Devil and Demonism in Early Modern England* (2006). Aligned with this framework, Małgorzata Dowłaszewicz's recently released book, based on her yet-unpublished PhD dissertation, is the only comprehensive study of this kind available in Polish.³

Dowłaszewicz's study aimed to examine the anthropomorphic representations of the devil in legends and exempla translated from Latin into Middle Dutch in the late medieval period (14th–15th centuries) and contained in two collections. One of them was *Gulden legende* [The Golden Legend], Petrus Naghel's translation of *Legenda aurea* by Iacobus de Vorainge, dating to ca 1440. The other was *Der Byen Boeck*, an undated translation of Thomas of Cantimpré's *Bonum universale de apibus*, produced probably in 1451. The third group of the exempla investigated by Dowłaszewicz consisted of two volumes edited by De Vooy: *Middelnederlandse Marialegenden* and *Middelnederlandse stichtelijke exempelen*, which Dowłaszewicz, though appreciative of their value, only treated as comparative resources due to certain editorial flaws. Dowłaszewicz's research comprises a comparatist component involving Middle-Dutch literature from an earlier period (12th–14th centuries), wherein she not only attends to legends and exempla but also considers other literary genres, as well as visual arts. This inclusive perspective is particularly important, because it helps capture motifs which had earlier been present in vernacular Dutch literature or were introduced along with the translations Dowłaszewicz studies (Dowłaszewicz 114).

In her extensive "Introduction", Dowłaszewicz offers a detailed survey of relevant scholarship, characterises her sources and presents her research methods, whereby she explicitly states that her analyses are not informed by theological reasoning or purposes. She clarifies her terminology and lucidly defines notions such as 'art', 'literature', 'exemplum' and 'legend', highlighting the connections between the latter two and oral tradition. She lists the synonyms she is going to

² Writings concerning the devil are multiple and often compendious. Hundreds of studies on the subject have been contributed to scholarship across disciplines, such as theology, religion studies, history of literature and culture and visual arts.

³ Some of the previous studies include short depictions of the anthropomorphic devil (e.g. in Rudwin's chapter on "Form of the Fiend"). They are usually very general or associated with one or another distinctive model of imagery, such as, for example, in medieval drama discussed by Andrzej Dąbrówka in *Teatr i sacrum w średniowieczu* [The Theatre and the Sacred in the Middle Ages] and by other authors Dowłaszewicz cites. In Polish research, the anthropomorphisation of the devil is addressed, albeit in contemporary literature and from a somewhat different perspective, by Tadeusz Błażejowski in "Diabeł uczłowieczony – wersje współczesne" [The Humanised Devil: Contemporary Iterations] (173–186).

use in exploring the figure of the anthropomorphic devil and explains how this differs from an individual possessed by the devil. This is an important distinction, given the research method she adopts. Equally important is her insight, which results from her wide-ranging research including Dutch literary texts and secondary sources:

(...) the anthropomorphisation of the devil should not be understood literally in all cases as the real ‘adoption’ of a physical form, but rather as a projection of consciousness. Although in some texts the devil that assumed the human physique became a real protagonist of the story, in many other ones (...) he was a symbolic expression of an imagined vision externalising and embodying the abstraction of evil (Dowlaszewicz 113).

This definition of the anthropomorphised devil underlies her analyses of legends and exempla.

The number of examples of the appearance of the devil in a concrete (literal, imagined or implied) form determines the division of the work into three major chapters and their sequence: “Diabeł jako czarny człowiek” [The Devil as a Black Man], “Diabeł jako piękna kobieta” [The Devil as a Beautiful Woman] and “Diabeł jako twórca idealny” [The Devil as a Perfect Maker]. Each of the chapters follows the same structural pattern, consisting of an introduction to its central issues which discusses social, cultural and philosophical factors complementing the following analyses of individual exempla and legends. Notably the discussion covers all the source material Dowlaszewicz identified in her textual corpus. Besides examining the relevant literary motifs and effects of respective anthropomorphisations (e.g. the devil as a woman) on narrative logic and the didactic function, the investigation often delves into language-related issues. Each chapter concludes with the discussion of the reception of earlier representations encountered in Dutch literature.

While the titles of the two first chapters are rather straightforward and directly point to their thematic concerns, the third of them – “The Devil as a Perfect Maker” – sounds somewhat more enigmatic. To explain, Dowlaszewicz’s central question at this point is whether the devil is capable of assuming a perfect form, rather than whether he can produce an outstanding work. In the common belief, if the devil takes a corporeal, especially human, shape, he should always display one or another physical defect that makes him recognisable for what he is. However, the sources studied by Dowlaszewicz belie this conviction. The devil attempts to be more effective by adopting the form of a prophet, a saint, a clergyman, a teacher or a child, that is, a person who inspires public trust and, as Dowlaszewicz shows, exhibits no features which would facilitate his identification. In taking on the likeness of a less than pretty woman or a plain-looking man, the devil seeks to avoid standing out from the crowd. Contained in the section “The Medieval Ideal of Beauty”, philosophical reflections on beauty/ugliness and good/evil, concepts

which have been discussed by, among other scholars, Umberto Eco⁴ and which affected representations of the devil, vividly exemplify Dowłaszewicz's approach to her subject (Dowłaszewicz 72).

The methodology involving portraying a possibly comprehensive background against which to analyse the anthropomorphisation of the devil is used consistently throughout the book. The first chapter, devoted to the devil as a black man,⁵ contains information on the presence of people of colour (including individuals of Arabic and Jewish origin) in Europe in general and in the Netherlands in particular, as well as more detailed insights. For example, Dowłaszewicz linguistically analyses the ways in which the terms 'Moor' and 'Ethiop' were applied, the social prejudice against people of colour and the symbolism of black and white – dirt and purity – conveying the abstract notions of evil and good. Medieval visionary literature⁶ applies this colour imagery in an analogous manner in order to express the moral status of the souls of the inhabitants of the spirit world – saints and demons. This does not come as a surprise since visionary literature shares parenetic aims and medieval sensibility with exempla and legends. Elsewhere in her study, Dowłaszewicz refers to smell, which also functions as an indication of goodness (pleasant smells associated with holiness) or wickedness (stench attributed to the devil) (Dowłaszewicz 99–100).⁷ Important as they are, such considerations are too multiple to be all listed here. Still, attention is due to the figure of the devil in drama. Given the characteristics of theatrical performances, the devil tended to serve as a vehicle of the comic and the grotesque, which, as Dowłaszewicz explicitly points out, diverged from the traditional image of the devil in hagiographic literature and exempla (Dowłaszewicz 10, 90).

The fourth – and last – chapter of the book offers a scrutiny of the ways in which the devil can be recognised by humans. In this respect, the exempla and legends discussed by Dowłaszewicz attribute a special role to Virgin Mary God as an intercessor and protector of people, an aspect explored in a separate subsection. The book is rounded off with "Conclusion", which presents the final insights afforded by the author's broad research.⁸

⁴ Dowłaszewicz cites *Historia brzydoty*, the Polish translation of *On Ugliness*, a compendium compiled and edited by Eco (2007).

⁵ One of interesting trivium in this respect is provided by considerations on the interrelatedness of climate and skin colour and comments on the characteristics of white and black people to be found in Vitruvius's *On Architecture* (Vitr. *De arch.* VI, 1, 3–10).

⁶ Visionary literature has been studied by Jacek Sokolski, for example in *Pielgrzymi do piekła i raju: świat średniowiecznych łacińskich wizji eschatologicznych* [Pilgrimages to Hell and Paradise: Medieval Latin Eschatological Visions].

⁷ This is another feature that the characters in the exempla and visionary literature have in common.

⁸ They correspond in an interesting way to Teresa Szostek's findings in her *Exemplum w polskim średniowieczu* [The Polish Medieval Exemplum], which also offers a discussion of the devil figure, though not only in his anthropomorphic form (72–76).

An extensive set of source text, multi-perspectival interpretations of the resources and discussions of respective motifs within a comprehensively conceived context of medieval literature and contemporary scholarship make Dowłaszewicz's book a considerably valuable study. While its language is at places somewhat imperfect, such flaws must not overshadow Dowłaszewicz's erudition and the wealth of her materials, which she navigates with ease and considerable literary-historical competence. Two annexes (amounting to the total of twenty-seven pages) appended to the study deserve a special mention. As supplements to the translations enumerated in the study, they contain the original texts and Dowłaszewicz's own translations of nineteen legends and exempla (or their relevant passages) from Dutch into Polish. The author's translatory strategy clearly indicates that she prioritises fidelity over beauty to give readers access to the purest possible form of the text, unalloyed by the translator's excessive interference.

Małgorzata Dowłaszewicz, *Diabeł w legendzie. Wyobrażenie diabła antropomorficznego w średniowiecznej literaturze niderlandzkiej* [The Devil in Legends: Representations of the Anthropomorphic Devil in Medieval Dutch Literature], Oficyna Wydawnicza ATUT, 2020, ISBN 978-83-7977-476-0, 153 pp.

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