

## Touch of the Devil

Early modern British source material describes physical encounters with a range of spiritual beings, including the Devil, angels, fairies, ghosts, the Holy Spirit and various less categorisable entities. I'm going to focus this short discussion on the Devil, who features most regularly in the surviving sources. There are two main reasons for the Devil's prominence. First, Protestant theologians generally argued that appearances of angels or good spirits had been confined to Biblical times, while ghosts, fairies or nature spirits were mere superstitions. They usually allowed, however, that the Devil continued to appear on earth. Second, the early modern witch trials generated interest in, and a large body of records about, diabolic appearances. Many of these records are confessions, which were usually extracted under duress, and might be best viewed as a kind of co-creation between the accused party and the interrogator(s). All the same, they reflect culturally conditioned ideas about how touch functioned.

The Devil was a spirit, which meant that he did not have a flesh-and-blood body. Some Christian thinkers, most notably Augustine of Hippo (354–430), suggested that demons had airy bodies, but these bodies were invisible and insubstantial.<sup>1</sup> Augustine confessed himself unsure of how the Devil could have physical contact with humans. Other theologians were more determined to resolve the issue. The influential Italian Dominican friar Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) rejected the idea that demons had bodies of any kind. However, demons could make themselves visible and tangible by assuming 'bodies made of air, but condensed by divine power'.<sup>2</sup> In his 1597 *Daemonologie*, King James VI summarised an extensive debate when he suggested two ways in which the Devil might make himself 'palpable': by inhabiting and animating a dead body, or by manipulating humans' senses of sight and touch to make them see and feel an illusory body.<sup>3</sup>

The widespread scholarly interest in this issue reflects a preoccupation with demonic touch that is, in some respects, surprising. There was no particular theological justification for the Devil to engage in physical contact with humans. His objective was to tempt people into evil. He could do this simply by suggesting sins, as in the Garden of Eden. He also possessed the power to work invisibly and intangibly on the human mind and body, implanting wicked ideas into the imagination and manipulating the internal humours to generate negative emotions. Restrained in all of his actions by God, the Devil was incapable of physically coercing people into sinning.

There was an idea that the Devil might convey criminal impulses through the medium of touch. In William Rowley, Thomas Dekker and John Ford's 1621 play *The Witch of Edmonton*, a character is inspired to commit a murder after the Devil brushes against him in the form of a dog. The Devil comments that 'One touch from me / Soon sets the body forward'.<sup>4</sup> This may derive from an idea that the Devil could infuse malignant impulses through the skin. The natural philosopher Henry More suggested in 1679 that the Devil transmitted 'subtil seminal Matter' through the pores, impressing something of his nature on

---

<sup>1</sup> See Gregory D. Wiebe, 'Demons in the Theology of Augustine' (PhD thesis, McMaster University, 2015), 109–22, 131–41.

<sup>2</sup> '...corpora ex aëre, condensando ipsum virtute divina'. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ*, vol. 9: Angels, ed. and trans. Kenelm Foster (London: Blackfriars, Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1968) pt. 1, q. 51, art. 2, sec. 3, 36–7; art. 3, sec. 6, 42–3.

<sup>3</sup> James VI, *Daemonologie* (Edinburgh, 1597), bk. 2, ch. 6, 52.

<sup>4</sup> William Rowley, Thomas Dekker and John Ford, *The Witch of Edmonton* (London, 1658), Act 3, Scene 1, 33.

his human victim.<sup>5</sup> In most cases, though, the Devil's use of touch was not part of a programme of temptation, but an assertion of power.

There survive various accounts of the Devil engaging in violence against human beings. Early modern pamphlets and tracts told of invisible demons who attacked people by beating, pinching and hair-pulling. One well-known case was that of the 'Demon of Tedworth', a malignant spirit who tormented a household in the 1660s. In addition to assaulting the family with missiles, the demon 'pluckt [the children] by the Hair and Night-cloaths', and 'forcibly held' a servant 'as it were bound Hand and Foot'.<sup>6</sup> The Devil also harassed his disciples. In 1662, the accused witch Isabel Gowdie from Auldearn in the Scottish Highlands reported that the Devil would 'beat and buffet' any witches who displeased him. He also whipped them with cords and other sharp things.<sup>7</sup> In these cases, the Devil's use of touch was a proclamation of his influence in the world of mortals.

The Devil was thought also to have sexual contact with humans, particularly women. Accused witches described kisses, embraces and 'carnal copulation'. Gowdie claimed that the Devil's member was 'exceeding great and long', though cold 'as spring-wall-water', and he was 'abler ... that way than any man can be'.<sup>8</sup> This seems to recall a sentiment famously expressed in the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486), a German witch-hunting manual: 'all witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which is in women insatiable'.<sup>9</sup> But in most cases, accused witches framed sex with the Devil as unpleasant. He was cold, had no breath, and lay heavy on them like a millstone.<sup>10</sup> The Devil rarely tempted women with sex. Rather, he wooed them with offers of money or power, then used sex to confirm his mastery over them. Gowdie attested that the Devil 'wold lye and have carnall dealling with all, at euerie tym, as he pleased ... We wold never refuse him'.<sup>11</sup> The Devil also expressed his authority through other physical rituals: he marked the skin of those women who submitted to him, compelled them to suckle demonic familiars, and demanded tribute in the form of kisses to his backside. That touch should play so prominent a role in encounters with a spiritual entity is testimony to its importance, in early modern society, as a means of negotiating power differentials and commanding subjugation.

Martha McGill

---

<sup>5</sup> Henry More, *Immortalitas Animae*, translated as *The Immortality of the Soul in A Collection of Several Philosophical Writings of Dr. Henry More*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn (London, 1712–13), bk. 1, notes on ch. 3, sec. 10, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Glanvill, *Saducismus Triumphatus* (London, 1681), 94, 96.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Pitcairn (ed.), *Criminal Trials in Scotland*, vol. 3 (Edinburgh, 1833), 613.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 603, 610, 611.

<sup>9</sup> Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, extracted in Alan Charles Kors and Edward Peters (eds), *Witchcraft in Europe, 400–1700: A Documentary History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 180–228, at 188.

<sup>10</sup> See e.g. the testimonies of Agnes Somerville (1678), Marion Campbell (1678) and Marjorie Fairwell (1661), Julian Goodare et al (ed.), *The Survey of Scottish Witchcraft* (University of Edinburgh, 2003), <http://www.shca.ed.ac.uk/Research/witches/> (accessed 14/05/21).

<sup>11</sup> Pitcairn (ed.), *Criminal Trials in Scotland*, 611.