Orthodox Demonology and the Perception of Witchcraft in Early Modern Ukraine

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As it is impossible to grasp the logic of witchcraft trials without a proper understanding of demonological discourses of the time, the study of demonology has long been established as a part of witchcraft research in Western Europe. From the late Middle Ages and through the early modern period Western theologians, lawyers and even politicians were involved in debates about the nature of the demonic. Drawing on both learned and popular tradition this demonological discourse gave birth to such concepts as the diabolical pact and the witches’ sabbat, which led to the idea of the diabolical witch, a member of a secret conspiracy which denied God’s supremacy and accepted the Devil as its master--notions which spread not only among the educated elite but the wider public as well. These concepts shaped the basic framework for the interrogations of witches who from now on were asked not only about alleged harm (maleficium) they had done through witchcraft but also about the names of other members of the secret sect of Devil-worshippers and could as well be asked about their specific relations with the Devil and their participation in night flights and sabbats.¹ There was a close connection between demonology and legal practices, so that not only did lawyers refer to demonological treatises but demonologists also often drew examples from legal practices in their works.

Paradoxically, Ukrainian scholars associate Ukrainian demonology not with a learned tradition but rather with popular beliefs. Beginning in the nineteenth century, Ukrainian ethnographers collected data on popular beliefs about witches, imps, mermaids and other fantastic creatures. This folklore-collectors contributed to what is considered to be Ukrainian demonology among wider audience: popular stories about devils, mermaids, werewolves, and witches.² At the same time demonology proper, learned demonology, was left aside and remained almost untouched.

In this analysis I will refer both to visual sources and to written sources such as treatises, books of sermons, books of miracles and town-chronicles. These include the

¹ English trials were the exception in that the idea of the witches’ sabbath and the diabolical compact was not generally accepted.
writings of Ukrainian Orthodox preachers and theologians of the early modern period, in particular the seventeenth century, a period when Ukrainian Orthodox sermon-writing reached its fullest flower. Only by taking into account these writings--most of which were reprinted several times during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and were widely disseminated--are we able to gain a proper understanding of the influence, popularity and relevance of demonology in the contemporary context.

Iconography of the Devil, Demons and Witches

It seems that in many cultures, the notion of evil, to be more fully understandable and more broadly approachable, cannot exist merely as an abstract concept, but have had to be personalised and portrayed. In the Christian world evil was embodied in the image of the Devil and his many servants. Though this image was never standardised in artistic tradition, there were certain features assigned to the Devil and his servants that were easily recognised. In the early Middle Ages, the image of the Devil absorbed features of certain pagan gods (the satyrs and Pan): the cloven feet, the horns, the claws and the goatee. However, other features, such as wings, came from the Christian tradition and emphasised the primordial angelic nature of demons.

In Ukrainian Orthodox tradition, too, the iconography of the Devil and his servants was among the main sources of transmission of the Christian perception of evil to the masses of the Orthodox population. In this respect, the Ukrainian lands were not an exception to the wider European context. But there was a major difference. Many scholars have drawn attention the so-called ‘demonic invasion’ of Western Europe that began in the fifteenth century and continued well into the sixteenth. The terror of the Devil was transmitted through many sources:

Little new was invented, but theologians, preachers, printers, miniaturists and sculptors drew on an eclectic farrago of ancient and mediaeval fantasies which they intensified through sculpture in churches, mass-produced books, emotional preaching, and the various manifestations of an intimate and macabre religious art.  

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By contrast one cannot find any signs of extreme ‘demonisation’ in Orthodox iconography. The Devil and his servants almost never constituted a separate subject either of icons or of woodcuts. As a rule they were shown in hagiographic depictions as a fearsome but at the same time miserable addition.

The Devil appears as a character in only a very few iconographic subjects, for example the Fight of the Archangel Michael with the Devil and the Harrowing of Hell. On most of the former icons, the Devil is portrayed as a man with wings whose appearance does not differ much from that of the Archangel.\(^4\) In the rare cases when the Devil appears on an icon picturing Christ descending into Hell, he is portrayed as a horrible dark beast with horns whose contours are only roughly outlined in the darkness of the threshold beneath Christ’s feet (which, as a rule, is dark and empty).\(^5\)

One notable image of the Devil appears on the woodcut enriching the cover of the book *Spiritual Sword* by the celebrated preacher and bishop of Chernihiv, Lazar Baranovich, published in Kiev in 1660. Here the Devil, who is depicted as the leader of a ship of heretics and enemies of Christianity, has a human body and dress but the head of a beast, with big ears, a goatee and horns.

The Devil’s servants—smaller demons or *bisy*—are, unlike their master, represented prolifically on Ukrainian icons [i.e. on many icons; or do you mean: in large groups together?]. They can be found in depictions of episodes from the lives of such saints as St Nicolas, St Mykyta, St Kozma and Damian, and St Anthony and on paintings of the Last Judgement and the ladder of the saints. As a rule, the demons are shown acting in pairs or larger groups. In appearance, however, they are not very diverse. They are portrayed as black or sometimes green anthropomorphic creatures half adult size, typically with little wings and short tails. Often they do not have horns but rather long shaggy hair. They are always naked and their features are unclear. When depicted in large groups they resemble a mass of huge insects.

One of the most popular subjects of these icons is the healing of the possessed, where demons are expelled from humans through the mouth.\(^6\) On icons with episodes from the life of St Nicolas, the demons are shown in the process of causing a storm at


\(^5\) See, for instance, the image of the Devil under Christ’s feet in *The Harrowing of Hell*, the second part of the icon *Passions of Christ* (16\(^{\text{th}}\) or 17\(^{\text{th}}\) century), preserved in the Museum of Ukrainian Art, Lviv. Reproduced in Svientsits’ka – Otkovych (eds.), *Ukrajins’ke narodne maliarstvo*, plate no. 50.
sea; several of them are sitting under the boat and shaking it. Distinct from other icons are those of St Mykyta the Demon-Fighter. On these there is only one demon of quite large size, with very distinct features: he has a goatee, cloven feet and a long comic nose. The saint is holding him fast with his hands and is about to flog him with a lash. On some engravings, for example, in an illustration to the book *A Wonderful Story About the Devil*, published in Kiev in 1627, the demons are depicted as satyrs, with hairy legs, cloven feet and goatees.

On most of these images the demons look comic rather than terrifying to the modern spectator. To be sure, one cannot dismiss the possibility that these quite schematic images might have been differently perceived by those living in the early modern period, and that what seems comic today may have been fearful in the seventeenth century. On the other hand, the comicality of demons might well be part of the artist’s plan, the demon placed by the side of the saint being intended to offer a miserable and comic contrast. This was a major difference from Western tradition, in which by the middle of the sixteenth century the Devil and demons had lost all of their comical features.

Despite casual borrowings from Western art, the Ukrainian Orthodox tradition of demonic depiction remained unchanged for many centuries. While images of the Devil and demons were abundant and quite diverse in Reformation Europe--where they were presented as dragons, beasts of many forms and even humans--the demons in Ukrainian Orthodox iconography from the eleventh century on never became diverse in the manner of their depiction. Nor did the Devil and the demons ever develop as a separate subject of paintings and woodcuts. They were portrayed in such way that they were recognisable but not significant, and the forms and appearance of the demons did not change through time. Their deeds were not brought to the foreground and were not especially terrible and fearful. Here art most likely reflected the attitude of the Orthodox Church itself: the existence of such infernal creatures was accepted, but attributed only marginal meaning. Hence minimum attention was paid to them in art.

Given this fact, it is surprising that witches also became a subject of Orthodox iconography. Yet one can find witch figures on images, notably those depicting the

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7 An example of an icon depicting St. Damian can be found in the Museum of Ukrainian Art in Lviv.
8 *Poviest udivitielna, o diavolie, iako pridie k Vielikomu Antoniu, v obrazie chlovicechestie, khotia kaiatista* [A wonderful story about the Devil, as he came disguised as a man to Anthony the Great, asking for penitence] (Kiev: 1627)
Last Judgement. Commonly in the lower left corner the torture of the sinners in Hell is shown, where several mutilated figures (their number may vary) represent punishments for different sins. As a rule, one can find among them a drunkard, tavern frequenter, murderer, envious person, robber and witch. The latter is depicted as a woman stretched on the rack and enlaced by two snakes that bite her breasts. On occasion, for example in the painting by Master Dymytrij from the town of Dolyna, dated 1560, these motifs include a bucket attached to the neck of the witch. The witch figure on these paintings may be intended to underline that in the Orthodox tradition witchcraft was considered to be a sin no less serious than murder or envy.

The Demonic in Ukrainian Orthodox Texts

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Devil and his assistants became significant narrative characters in the literature of various countries of Western Europe. Among the results of this process were the so-called ‘demonisation of literature’ and the tradition of the ‘preaching of fear’. Demons were ubiquitous in literature at all levels, from broadsheets and wonder books to sermons and treatises. In the German lands books about demons even formed a separate genre – the Teufelbücher The demonisation of literature in German lands coincided with another noteworthy process, the transformation of the image of the Devil, who now became a character less comic and more powerful and dangerous.

Unfortunately the range of sources for the study of Ukrainian Orthodox demonology of the early modern period is not as rich as, for example, the German or French. Consequently, in order to analyse the image of the Devil and his servants one must turn to that section of the literature which has the most references to them: the texts of sermons, books of miracles and those short treatises written by popular Orthodox preachers of the seventeenth century such as Ivan Vyshens’kyj, Metropolitan Petro Mohyla, Ioanykij Haliatovs’kyj, Antonij Radyvilovskyj and

10 See e.g. The Last Judgement (15th or 16th century), Museum of Ukrainian Art, Lviv. Reproduced in Svientsits’ka – Otkovych (eds.), Ukrajins’ke narodne maliarstvo, plate no. 10.
11 This painting is exhibited in the Museum of Ukrainian Art in Lviv.
13 Ivan Vyshens’kyj, “Obličhenie diavola miroderzhtsa” [Denouncement of the Devil, the Owner of this world], in Arkhiv Iugo-Zapadnoj Rossii [The Archive of South-Western Russia], Part 1, vol. 7 (Kiev: 1887), pp. 19-24.
14 “Skazania Petra Mogily o chudesnykh i zamechatel’nykh iavleniakh v tserkvi pravoslavnoj (iuzhno-russkoj, moldo-vlakhskoj i grecheskoj)” [The sermons of Petro Mohyla about the wonderful and
Dmitrij Rostovskij\textsuperscript{17}. One source, a popular anonymous work entitled *A wonderful story about the Devil*,\textsuperscript{18} is particularly important for the study of Orthodox demonology because, along with Ioanykij Haliatovs’kyj’s *Pagan Gods*,\textsuperscript{19} it can be considered an exclusively demonological work.

In Ukrainian lands, as in many other places in Europe, the seventeenth century was in many respects seen as an ominous time, partly due to the numerous long-lasting wars, uprisings and epidemics. Every unusual event was therefore noted: monstrous births, eclipses, comets, invasions of insects and natural disasters, all of these worrying signs being duly interpreted as adumbrating wars, epidemics and hard times in general. Antonij Radyvilovskij\textsuperscript{20}, a celebrated preacher from Chernihiv, used to say that the current (seventeenth) century was overflowing with many evil things, including the invasions of pagans (Tartars), fires, plagues and other terrible illnesses and epidemics. The explanation, namely God’s wrath, was clear to him, for “people had never before committed as many sins as nowadays”.\textsuperscript{21}

Some theologians went further, pointing to the general corruption of the century. Ivan Vyshens’kyj\textsuperscript{22} wrote a dialogue in which the Devil answered the question...
why he was called the master of the Earth. Among other things the Devil said that contemporary Christians were much worse than those who lived in the times of Christ. Contemporary Christians were not even better than pagans since they treasured bodily pleasures and an unchaste life more than pagans did. That is why it was easy for the Devil to attract them into his net by circumvention, dreams and the promise of the pleasures and beauties of this world. Those who loved the beauty, brightness and pleasures of his earthly kingdom include people of all origins, from the most powerful to miserable slaves. The Devil said that they were so much attached to their earthly life and so much in love with it that only death could separate them from this love. The power of the Devil, as he himself boasts, was in his ability to fulfil all wishes: whatever people asked of him, he, the master of the Earth, could give to them. The Devil lists all the possible wishes he could fulfill: all secular and spiritual offices, all earthly treasures and all kinds of love. What people had to do in return was to fall down beneath his feet and accept him as their master.\textsuperscript{23}

The contemporary situation thus seems to have been perceived by seventeenth-century churchmen as gruesome and dark. In order to determine if this was reflected in an increasing role attributed to the Devil and a general process of demonisation, one must study how the Devil was depicted in the writings of the period.

Generally, Ukrainian Orthodox theologians of the seventeenth century based their stories about the Devil and demons on early Christian and Byzantine tradition, though some features were adopted from the Western tradition. The quintessence of the history of the Devil and the demons is expressed by Ioanykij Haliatovs’kyj, who explains that when the Devil and demons were expelled from heavens, they appeared on earth and decided to become the gods of the earth. In this way, they became pagan gods. They were indeed evil, but they were also wise since they were once angels and had learned many things while in heaven, but now they used this knowledge to harm.\textsuperscript{24} So the Devil strives to become a god on earth and to imitate God. For example, the Devil has his own trinity that includes such things as “the lust of the body, the lust of eyes and pride”.\textsuperscript{25}

Ukrainian preachers taught that God and the Devil are the two masters whom people may choose to serve. However, since they are so different, one cannot serve these two masters simultaneously. How exactly are they different? Radyvilovskyj

\textsuperscript{24} Haliatovs’kyj, “Bogi pogansiki”, p. 393.
\textsuperscript{25} Radyvilovskyj, Vieniets Khristov, p. 93.
suggests that God is loving and thus acts in a loving way, while the Devil is evil and, when God allows, brings all evil things to people. People serve God by penitence and the Devil by immoral behaviour. They serve God by being awake and alert for the Devil’s attack, whereas they serve the Devil by sleeping and being indifferent to God.\(^{26}\) So the Devil is not a master who is equal to God in might and power. For he can do only those things which God allows him to do, on God’s sufferance.

However, the Devil is not as weak and helpless as he may seem because he has many helpers and servants. According to Radyvilovskyj, his most powerful helpers are death, sin and hell.\(^{27}\) His other obvious servants are minor demons, but he also has many servants among people. Like master, like servants--since the Devil is evil, his servants are evil as well.\(^{28}\)

Radyvilovskyj asks the question: what draws people away from serving God and attracts them to the Devil? His answer is: sin. The Devil’s true servants are sinners and can be recognised by their sinfulness.\(^{29}\) Those who commit sins are no longer God’s children, they automatically become the Devil’s children.\(^{30}\) The Devil turns a person into a sinner by first making the person blind, then making him commit sins, and through these he becomes his servant.\(^{31}\) Haliatovs’kyj views this process slightly differently. He concurs that sin is indeed the Devil’s strongest weapon. The demons’ assigned task is to attract more new servants to the side of their master, and to do this they attempt to persuade people to sin as much as they can. Nevertheless, they are not able to make people sin unless people want to do so themselves.\(^{32}\) People choose to sin, and by this they wilfully serve the Devil. In all this the emphasis on sin was neither original nor new. What is significant is the nearly exclusive association of the Devil with sins. Most of the times when the Devil is mentioned in a sermon, he is mentioned in connection with sins and sinners.

Besides encouraging sin the Devil and the demons had other functions as well. One of their main roles was to torment people. According to the preachers, the demons cause plagues, invasions, fears and all sorts of failures, illnesses and epidemics.\(^{33}\) Ailments were considered one of the main tools used by demons for tormenting people.

\(^{26}\) Radyvilovskyj, *Vieniets Khristov*, p. 120 reverso.
\(^{32}\) Haliatovs’kyj, “Bogi poganskii”, p. 392.
\(^{33}\) Haliatovs’kyj, “Skarbnitsa potriebnaia”, p. 369.
The belief in the demonic origin of illnesses is ancient and was already current in the first centuries of Christianity. Ukrainian preachers too shared this belief. However, they stressed that even when people are tormented with various illnesses, their souls are left untouched by the Devil. Moreover, preachers emphasised over and over again that demons could torment people only on God’s sufferance.

Stories about the Devil as a seducer of hermits began in the sixth century along with the appearance of the first monks. In such stories, the Devil usually comes to visit hermits in the desert, this being considered his territory. Every hermit should be prepared to meet the Devil and his seduction face-to-face. Hermits, however, were not the exclusive target of the Devil-as-seducer. He also readily came to monks and other pious people to lure them away from God. This image of the Devil was frequently used by Ukrainian preachers.

The third role played by the Devil and demons is as the agents of punishment of sinners after their death. The most popular stories in sermons were those of the punishments of persons guilty of sacrilege. In one story, a man threw a stone at the statue of God’s Mother. As this man died, “his soul was given to demons for eternal tortures.” A similar fate befell another man who was accustomed to say that his life was so good that he did not need heaven. Metropolitan Petro Mohyla told another story about a certain Uniate bishop, Afanasij, who led a vicious and evil life and after death was “terribly and unmercifully” tortured by the demons who tore his head from his neck.

Stories where the life of the Devil and demons is described in greater detail are very rare. But from such stories we learn that demons were believed to have a social and sometimes even a political life. Demons would gather for councils and entertain feelings of brotherhood and friendship toward each other, as is depicted in A Wonderful Story about the Devil. Radyvilovskyj’s book of sermons contains a story of how the

35 Radyvilovskyj, Vieniets Khristov, p. 35 reverso.
36 Ibid., p. 335, and also Haliatovs’kyj, “Bogi poganskii”, p. 389.
37 Riazanovskii, Demonologiia v drevne-russkoi literaturie, p. 11.
38 For example, Radyvilovskyj, Vieniets Khristov, pp. 243, 437rev; Haliatovs’kyj, “Bogi poganskii”, p. 391; Poviest udivitielna, o diavolie; “Skazaniia Petra Mogily”, p. 87.
39 Antonij Radyvilovskyj, Vieniets Khristov, p. 437 reverso.
41 Petro Mohyla (1596-1647) was educated in France and Netherlands. In 1632 he became the Metropolitan of Kiev, Galicia and Ruthenia. In the same year he founded the Mohyla Collegium in Kiev.
43 Poviest udivitielna, o diavolie, p. 2.
demons gather from all over the world in front of the Devil, “their highest master,” to tell him of their evil deeds. One demon boasts that he managed to seduce a very pious man who is now ready to commit all manner of sins. ‘The highest master’ immediately orders the other demons to flog this demon because in his opinion he just wasted his time seducing that pious man, since he will anyway find his way back to God.\textsuperscript{44} In this story the demons are shown as having an organised society with a hierarchy and special laws and rules, and those guilty of breaking these rules are punished.

In some stories, the Devil and the demons are represented in ways comparable to earthly rulers. For example, one magician, a subordinate of the Devil, wanted to seduce another man to become the Devil’s servant. He took this man to a palace with iron gates and when they entered it they saw a golden lantern, many candles and many servants. Then comes a description of the evil master: “The Devil disguised as a king was sitting on a high place. Evil demons were sitting by his right and left sides as if they were senators.”\textsuperscript{45} In a similar story, a man was taken by a magician to meet the Devil who promised to fulfil his desires. The man and magician were greeted by lesser demons who accompanied them “to their king”.\textsuperscript{46}

As one can see from these stories, Ukrainian preachers were not prone to present the Devil or even lesser demons as comic figures. They approached demons quite seriously, recognising them as rather dangerous creatures. This is reinforced by the ascription of royal attributes to the Devil, depicting him as a king with many demons at his service—a motif which I would suggest was borrowed from Western Christianity.

\textit{The Demonisation of the Other}

Before turning to the depiction of witches in Orthodox writings, I would like to briefly dwell on the process of the demonisation of outsiders. The tendency to ascribe demonic features to an enemy is inherent in almost every Christian culture. In one sense this is not surprising, for the demons and demonic creatures are dangerous and their main aim is to lead humankind to perdition. The reasons for the demonisation of others are less obvious, but nevertheless the connection between the other and the demonic is quite common. Demonisation of the other is reflected in a representation of the Devil and demons as foreigners. It can happen that such images are adopted from

\textsuperscript{44} Radyvilovskyj, \textit{Vieniets Khristov}, p. 274.
\textsuperscript{45} Haliatovs'kyj, “Bogi poganskii”, p. 409.