

Demonology

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Demonology is, as its name suggests, the study of demons: which prompts the question, what a demon is. The word itself derives from the Greek *daimon*, meaning simply a supernatural spirit or power of an inferior sort, i.e., not a god. Thus *eudaimonia*, having a good *daimon*, which is translated as "happiness" or "fulfillment" or even "a flourishing life" (the last is the rendering of the estimable Martha Nussbaum). When ([Plato's](#)) Socrates, in the *Apology*, claimed to be advised by a *daimon*, he meant (it seems) more or less what we now call "the voice of conscience" (or would call it, if we were still old-fashioned enough to believe in a conscience). In Latin, the word became *dæmon*. The general rule, as Latin degenerated through the Middle Ages, was that the diphthongs "æ" and "oe" (which isn't in the standard web character set) became "e"; this gave us edifice from *ædificum*, celestial from *coelestis*, and demon from *dæmon*. None of which actually says what the word came to mean.

In a basic sense, the meaning remained unchanged: an inferior sort of supernatural being. But such a statement carried one set of implications for the pagans, and another, very different one for Christians. (I don't know how the other sorts of monotheists in the classical world --- Jews, Zoroastrians, Manicheans, the sundry [Gnostic](#) sects, etc., used the word, or even how it is employed in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament.) In the Christian tradition, there was only one category of supernatural beings inferior to God, namely the angels, who were divided between those who joined in Lucifer's rebellion (a third of the heavenly host, according to the Book of Revelation) and were condemned to Hell, and those who remained loyal to their Creator and stayed in Heaven. (A charming Irish tradition explained the fairies as the angels who opted for neutrality, but this is not orthodox at all.) The existence of the pagan gods was not, for the most part, denied by the Fathers of Church (for instance, Augustine): they were real alright, and really did work miracles for their followers, they just happened to be fallen angels who lied through their teeth (or whatever it is immaterial beings lied through). This applied all the way down the line, from the Olympian Gods to the most minor fountain nymph, so the *dæmones* of the pagans were really fallen angels. Thus "demon" came to mean "fallen angel, inhabitant of Hell." Demonology, then, took the form of saying what these fiends were like, and what they were up to.

In a sense, this took a respectable form in the writings of the Scholastics. Demons being a species of the genus of angels, anything which was true of angels was, of course, also true of demons. Any interested reader may pursue this thread in the writings of, for instance, Thomas Aquinas; nothing like his discussion of the problem of resurrecting cannibals who eat only human flesh, and whose parents did likewise, but still interesting. It is the unrespectable side of demonology which is more piquant.

This took the form of people writing about the details and particularities of Hell and its inhabitants. Some of this writing professed to be of service to good Christians; a much larger volume of it was frankly for practitioners of ritual magic who wished to make use of the supernatural powers of demons. It is in these sources that we read of the elaborate hierarchy of Hell, with its Dukes and Counts and Grand Dukes and Presidents and Chancellors, in fact, all the accoutrements of the terrestrial feudal order. All of these beings were given names, descriptions, habits and habitations. Those aspiring to traffic with the powers of Hell were advised on which demon was best suited to which operation they had in mind --- this one for seeing the future, that one for getting the object of your lust to have sex with you, a third for finding hidden treasure.

Now, in the earlier parts of the Middle Ages, the Church's attitude towards such demonologists and the traditions of ritual magic they were a part of was actually half-way reasonable. While not denying the existence of demons or the rest of the mythology (it was, after all, in Augustine), it did tend to look very skeptically on anyone who actually claimed supernatural powers or to deal with demons. (Such people were of course still sinners, since it was the *intent* to perform these acts, thereby infringing on the prerogatives of God, which mattered.) This began to change as the Middle Ages gave way to the Renaissance, and especially as inquisitors and other authorities already familiar with traditions of ritual magic (which, since it demanded literacy and even Latin, was very much an aristocratic sort of unorthodoxy) began to have to deal with the supernatural practices of peasants in remote, backward areas --- the usual sort of hexing-your-neighbors-goat affair which can be found in almost any peasant society, persisting, for instance, at least through the 1950s in the Ozark mountains in the USA. For fairly obscure reasons, Churchmen began to actually believe the claims to magical powers; which, within the orthodox Christian scheme, could only be explained by recourse to demons.

Thus was inaugurated the great European [witch-craze](#), which was a shameful and criminal enough episode, even if it did not kill nine million people and was not the suppression of a pagan religion. (I've gone over *that* [elsewhere in these notebooks](#).) So, too, was born the golden era of demonology, when witch-hunters and aspiring witch-hunters of all sorts discoursed upon the nature of the true enemy at great length, and the medieval grimoires were elaborated into vast treatises, some of them rather refined products of [Renaissance](#) Latinity. (James I of England wrote a *Daemonologie, in Forme of a Dialogue*, published in 1603, for instance.) It lasted more or less until the beginning of the eighteenth century; Galileo and Descartes were contemporaneous, even prior to, such works of erudition as Richard Gilpin's *Daemonologia sacra, or, A Treatise of Satan's temptations* (London: Richard Randal and Peter Maplasden, 1677). Gradually, as the educated came to be, if not more rational, then at any rate ashamed of public avowals of superstition, demonology as a learned discipline died out, save perhaps among the most backward of theologians.

This happy state of affairs has continued, more or less, to the present day. True, with the revival of interest in magic inaugurated by the [Romantic period](#), from time to time some unusually benighted occultist will pen a tome on demons --- I myself, browsing through the stacks of the Berkeley library, have seen examples from the 19th century which, to my eye, were fully the equal of anything which flowed from the pens of James I or Cotton Mather. But modern occultism tends to be fairly diffuse and intellectually squishy, and, most important, to reject Christianity; it has, therefore, no reason to couch itself in terms of demons and fallen angels. (Of course some of its representatives do so, playing a more extreme form of the game known to members of the Society for Creative Anarchism as "shock the mundies.") Today, therefore, demonology is mainly pursued by those who share a credulous belief in the supernatural with an acceptance of the Christian tradition, i.e., by the most benighted of the Protestant sects. This Republic is already over-supplied with these people, and they have been gathering numbers and strength for decades. We do not yet see courses in demonology at Christian colleges, much less revivals of laws against witch-craft, but one may always hope...

One of the most curious thing about demonology is the following. It is full of facts, incredibly detailed ones, with *no basis whatsoever*. (There are no angels; *a fortiori* there are no fallen ones, and thus no facts about them.) Where, then, did all those names, portraits, descriptions, chains of command, specialties and so forth come from? Well, much of it was simply each writer borrowing from his predecessors, and historians are very good at uncovering such things. Some of it was simply re-interpreting various beliefs of the pagans, heathens and peasants within an inherited schema. But most of it was just *made up*. For someone interested in [pathological intellectual disciplines](#), understanding how people --- copy-writers, poets, scientists, politicians, role-playing gamers, demonologists --- make things up is pretty important. Equally important is understanding what happens after they've made things up, how such inventions spread, or fail to, among the members of the relevant community, to be incorporated into further imaginings or condemned to the dust-heap, or even to get their authors condemned. One could probably do very useful work by examining the later process among the European demonologists of the last thousand years or so; their [imaginings](#) are, fortunately, no longer accessible for study.

This is as good a place as any to reflect upon the story of the rebellion of the angels, at least as a literary theme. The first person, so far as I can determine, to make it such was Milton, in a work which even [Voltaire](#) was forced to admire. But the story, as Milton tells it, is inconsistent. Lucifer and his fellow angels were, after all, angels, "intellectual beings" (II, 147); for such creatures, or indeed anything sharper than a bag of hammers, to rebel against a power they knew to be omnipotent simply makes no sense. Either Lucifer and his angels were dumb as rocks; or God is not omnipotent; or, as Mitchell Porter points out to me, the rebel angels were simply acting out of defiance and spite, knowing their cause to be hopeless, which is not the way Milton tells it, but has a certain plausibility to modern ears. (The Zoroastrian solution, which of course predates the Christian tradition by many centuries, was to make the opposing powers of good and evil, Ahura-Mazda and Ahriman, equally powerful and equally eternal. While admirably symmetric and logical, there have been strangely few takers for this notion.) For the most part, those later writers who have taken up the theme have been more or less hostile to Christianity, and accordingly have opted to portray God as less than omnipotent, and the rebellion as a less-than-totally-irrational gamble which failed. (Of course, the other problem with *Paradise Lost* is that, in the words of a later and lesser poet,

*Malt does more than Milton can
To justify God's ways to Man,*

the whole problem of theodicy being insoluble within the bounds of Christianity, or indeed any religion which believes in a God omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent.)

This would also be the appropriate place to discuss various mutations of the monotheist belief in devils --- like the Bohemian sect who came to regard Lucifer as the true savior, or the origins of Satan in the Old Testament as a kind of prosecuting

attorney at the court of Yahweh (see Job) --- but I'm tired and I've got real work to do.

See also: [the Renaissance](#); [Classical Era](#), [Mediterranean](#); [Religion](#); [Psychoceramics](#); [Superstition](#)

Recommended:

- Dante Alighieri, *Inferno* (I'm particularly fond of the translation by Dorothy Sayers)
- Steven Brust, *To Reign in Hell*
- Norman [Cohn](#), *Europe's Inner Demons*
- Anatole [France](#), *The Revolt of the Angels*
- [John Milton](#), *Paradise Lost*
- Gilbert Murray, "Satanism and World Order," in *Humanist Essays*
- Wayne Shumaker, *The Occult Sciences in the Renaissance: A Study in Intellectual Patterns*

To read:

- Stuart Clark, *Thinking With Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*
- Michel de Certeau, [The Possession at Loudun](#)
- Bill Ellis
 - *Lucifer Ascending: The Occult in Folklore and Popular Culture*
 - *Raising the Devil: Satanism, New Religions, and the Media*
- Henry Ansgar Kelly, [Satan: A Biography](#)
- Armando Maggi
 - [In the Company of Demons: Unnatural Beings, Love, and Identity in the Italian Renaissance](#)
 - [Satan's Rhetoric: A Study of Renaissance Demonology](#)
- Travis W. Proctor, [Demonic Bodies and the Dark Ecologies of Early Christian Culture](#)
- Sara Ronis, [Demons in the Details: Demonic Discourse and Rabbinic Culture in Late Antique Babylonia](#)
- Jeffrey Burton Russell, *The Devil: Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity*
- Gary K. Waite, *Heresy, Magic and Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*

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