



**HAL**  
open science

# The devil, God's worst enemy, in some late fifteenth-century dominical sermons in English

Agnès Blandeau

► **To cite this version:**

Agnès Blandeau. The devil, God's worst enemy, in some late fifteenth-century dominical sermons in English. Irene Graziani e Maria Vittoria Spissu. *Il Mito del Nemico. Identità, alterità e loro rappresentazioni.*, Minerva Soluzioni Editoriali srl, Bologna, 2019, 978-88-3324-150-0. hal-03582683

**HAL Id: hal-03582683**

**<https://nantes-universite.hal.science/hal-03582683>**

Submitted on 21 Feb 2022

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

**Agnès Blandeau**

Lecturer in English

Nantes Université, NU CRINI UR 1162 F-Nantes, France

[agnes.blandeau@univ-nantes.fr](mailto:agnes.blandeau@univ-nantes.fr)

## **The devil, God's worst enemy, in some late fifteenth-century dominical sermons in English.**

### **Introduction**

A close scrutiny of the sixty-nine sermons published in the two volumes of *A Late Fifteenth-Century Dominical Sermon Cycle* reveals that the enemy *topos* is relevant to this collection of texts. The abundant set of sermons runs from Advent to Trinity and forms a complete *De Tempore* cycle, which means that the secular clerics in charge of ministering the cult used it on a weekly basis, and had at their disposal a diverse compilation in Middle English to preach on Sundays.<sup>1</sup> The collection follows the Lollard attempt to pursue the policy of "making the Englished Scriptures, or parts of them, available to the unlettered laity".<sup>2</sup>

The boundless mercy of the Lord, depicted as the sovereign pastor, protector, and friend of humankind, is praised extensively throughout the cycle. The audiences of the sermons are recommended to live virtuously and do charity truly and humbly, while being reminded of the final reckoning they are to give before the supreme judge in heaven. Unrepentant sinners shall indeed undergo the everlasting torments in hell inflicted by the devil and his kind.

It is precisely the devil that will be focused upon in this article because the dread he inspired was still acutely vivid in late fifteenth-century England. Clerics, priests, and mendicant preachers were invested with the mission of dispensing instruction on the Christian faith and doctrine. They were expected to warn their congregations against the temptations of the Seven Deadly Sins thought to be embodied by the fiend, a frighteningly protean creature intent on playing dangerously effective tricks on men and women, as proven in some of the sermons under scrutiny.

### **1-The devil's multiple faces**

The disguises with which the devil beguiles mortals strike as ingeniously varied and mutable. As early as Sermon 1, *Dominica Prima in Aduentu Domini*, mention is made of the daemon in an exhortation to unbind one's soul from sin, namely from the devil, so that it can be "browghte into the castell of heven" (1, 151). The castle metaphor hints at the kingdom of pleasant living in perpetual joy. The formulaic assonance in "ever lyghte and never nyghte" (1, 62-63) strengthens the idea of perfection, of permanent wealth and bliss in the celestial castle (60-64) which darkness cannot besiege. Then a related martial image takes over, that of the armor of

---

<sup>1</sup> Morrison S. (ed.), *A Late Fifteenth-Century Dominical Sermon Cycle*, Oxford, Oxford University Press for the Early English Text Society, 2012, Vol.1, Introduction, xli. The reference to each sermon will be made as follows: first the number of the sermon, then the number(s) of the lines quoted. For instance, Sermon 5, lines 56 to 63 will be indicated as 5, 56-63.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, lx. The compiler(s) of the sermon cycle drew upon the Later Version of the Wycliffite Bible, a definitely influential vernacular source at the time.

light to be worn (116-18) for protection against the threat of damnation. Sinners are doomed to the unceasing fire of hell governed by the devil and his cohort (200-202). Only the shield of unwavering belief can ward off the assault. The semantic field of battle underlies the whole text of the opening sermon, and recurs in other sermons. *Dominica ij in Aduentu Domini*, Sermon 2, lays stress on the faith in the coming of Christ, which in Jerome's words will be "dredfull to devyls" (2, 122), a plural occurrence of the word that evinces the belief in the ubiquitous peril represented by the master of hell. The devil's nefarious weapons are the Seven Deadly Sins, pride being the most operative agent of corruption. Significantly, the reference to saint Bernard's words in his *Meditations*, quoted in Latin and translated into Middle English, borrows from the isotopy of warfare and imprisonment (3, 33-37):

'Lord God', he seythe, 'helpe me, for myne enemye hathe closed me on every syde.' As who seythe, the fowle synne of pride, envye and wrathe, and so forthe all the vij dedely synnes whiche bithe moste enemye to mans sowle, and cawsithe synfull sowlis to lye in the preson of stronge peynes.

The evocation of God's arch-enemy testifies to the compiler's ability to draw on a wide selection of image-clusters for salient metaphors. Throughout Sermon 33, *Dominica ij post Pascha*, the good shepherd, stray sheep, and meadow of the holy kingdom are pastoral metaphors to be instilled into the minds of the parishioners prone to wander away into the wrong pasture of sin. Faith is gnawed away by the fiend's "sotell suggestion" (15, 19). Psalm singing helps to keep at bay the harassment or "comberaunce of the fende" (28, 58), who relentlessly inspires wicked thoughts that lead to moral ruin. In Sermon 30, *Alia Sermo in Die Pasche*, "suggestion" means insidiously cunning temptation in Eden: man "had broken the faste of innocency, takyng the appull of dethe by the suggestion of the olde serpent, our gostly enemy the devyll" (30, 92-94). Taking from the animal imagery, the preacher adequately raises the graphic spectre of the satanic serpent.

The cycle corroborates the view commonly accepted in the later Middle Ages that the devil is a deceiving shape-shifter that corrupts the Christian soul. Frequently employed in sermons besides the simile is another particularly effectual rhetorical device: the exemplum.<sup>3</sup> In *Dominica Prima Post Octavam Epiphanie*, Sermon 9, a popular exemplary narrative known as *The Devil in Service*<sup>4</sup> portrays a corrupt knight. One day he and his gang of highwaymen robbed a worthy preacher. When the priest confronted the gang's chamberlain, the latter eventually confessed that he was a fiend despatched by the council of hell to rule over the knight and his henchmen. The fake chamberlain's avowal opened the sinner's eyes to the urgency of reform. The knight began to worship the Holy Virgin devoutly, and his daily prayers saved him from the devil who was driven back to the pains of hell (9, 121).

The anecdote of the knight, a representative of a highly esteemed estate, is intended to incite the listeners to turn away from the fiend capable of exerting vicious control on the *bellator*, the medieval epitome of unconditional service to God, along with the clergy. Sermon 37, *Dies Rogacionibus*, closes on an enumeration of similes pertaining to the imagery of military pageantry; a king's army is compared with Christ's "clarions and his tromppytis" (37, 134) that frighten the fiends away. Sermons borrow their materials not only from biblical and patristic textual sources but also from the observation of daily life and the secular contemporary world. It was indeed incumbent upon *bellatores* to protect the people from foreign invaders,

---

<sup>3</sup> Schmitt J-C., "Temps liturgique et temps des exempla", in Bériou N., Morenzoni F. (eds.), *Prédication et liturgie au Moyen Âge*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2008, 223-236. The author of the article points out that this type of exemplary short narrative was introduced in the preaching practice around the thirteenth century.

<sup>4</sup> *A Late Fifteenth-Century Dominical Sermon Cycle*, Vol.2, Explanatory Notes, 500, 9, 83-124. It was *The Miracles of our Blessed Lady* edited by Peter Whiteford.

"enmys of other londis" that "wolde haue boldnes to cum to vs, and wolde not late vs lyfe in rest and pes, but oppresse vs dayly" (14, 59-61). The compiler(s), it may be assumed, had the Hundred Years War in mind.

## 2- Other "enemies" of God, some avatars of the devil

In the medieval imagination, the devil has analogues, various incarnations including people with morally reprehensible, unchristian conduct. The *In Die Pasche* sermon (31) warns that perdition threatens to befall all those who try to escape holy communion on the feast of Christ's resurrection. At this point in the sermon, the key sacrament of the Eucharist is explicated. Earlier, in Sermon 22, *Dominica Quarta Quadragesime*, emphasis has already been laid on the fact that whoever eats the holy bread and drinks the holy blood unworthily shall not be saved. The preacher aptly provides the exemplum of a woman whose faith in manducation was unflinching until one day as Lent had just started she was deluded by the fiend, who had taken the semblance of the deacon. Although she yielded to the temptation to desecrate the holy host, she was preserved from damnation because her desire to save her soul at the cost of her own life won her to be miraculously protected.

Worse than Christians who lack steadfastness in their worship of the sacraments, holy communion especially, are the Jews. The censure of envious people bears the mark of the old anti-judaic<sup>5</sup> rhetoric: "Envy was the cawse that the Iewys betrayed Crist" (46, 96). The hackneyed set phrase denouncing the Jews' enmity towards Christ is echoed when the covetous are likened to Judas the traitor. The fire of hell lies in store for them, the preacher concludes in an ominous QED (46, 156-163). The adversaries of the ecclesial institution way into the medieval era also comprise the heretics. In Sermon 59, *Dominica xvij post Festum Sancte Trinitatis*, the condemnation of usury as an unchristian practice reads like a reminder of how despicable unorthodox conduct was held to be at the time. Whoever claims that usury is not a sin, the preacher asserts accusingly, deserves to be inflicted the worst physical torments. He invokes the authority of "the law of holy chyrche" (59, 70) to define the heretic in terms of one who antagonizes the Faith. Sermon 31, *In Die Pasche*, castigates heresy by pointing out the circumstance of the Lord's rise from "all maner wrechednesse" to enter "endles ioye and clennes" (31, 35-36) in order to end thralldom to the devil. On Easter day He commanded the fiend to open the gates of the infernal pit, and uttering these words He released all the souls from Antechrist. "Vndo yowre gatis, ye devyls, for here schall enter the kyng of heven" (31, 110). The imperative form sounds strikingly cogent.

However mighty and crafty his enemies may be, Christ comes out victorious in a soteriological perspective. As spelt out in the introductory lines of Sermon 37, "Rogacion Dayes or, in Ynglyssche tong, the dayes of prayers" (37, 3-4) fall on the Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday preceding Holy Thursday. After summarizing the story of Pope Gregory who ended the pestilence resulting from the sinful conduct of the Romans to whom he imposed penance, the preacher proceeds to account for the ecclesial ordaining of the "procession" known as the New Gang Dayes. An additional short narrative fulfils an illustrative function. Long ago in Venice on Easter day many a plague hit the people owing to their foul deeds. The Lord made an

---

<sup>5</sup> Bale A., *The Jew in the Medieval Book. English Antisemitisms, 1350-1500*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, 3. He distinguishes anti-judaism from antisemitism. "To argue against the usury practised by the Jews [of Norwich] on the grounds of Judaism as opposed to Christianity might be called "anti-Judaism". To represent Moshe as Mosse-Mokke in this fictive, grotesquely physical register, in which an imagined "Jewish" body is the cynosure for a range of vices, is antisemitic."

exception in allowing the daemons to take the shape of fearsome wild beasts to terrorise the population. "For devylls of hel, by the sufferance of almyghtty God, ther turned into the lyknes of wolvys and beers and other wilde bestis" (37, 76-78). In this exemplum the devil is invested with the destructive powers of uncontrollable killing animals. This is the only case in which the fiends under the rule of God are required to assist Him in a punitive scheme. The heavy loss and profound affliction sent from heaven as chastisement was eventually lifted when the bishop of Venice ordered a three-day expiatory fast before Holy Thursday.

### 3- Sermon rhetorics: foreboding or comforting?

Underlying the sermon group is the message that hope and encouragement prevail over incrimination of sinners and injunction to reform before it is too late. Sermon 13, *Dominica Quinta Post Octavam Epiphanie*, revolves around the parable of the tares in Matthew's Gospel. A farmer once sowed fair and clean wheat in his field, and yet his effort was fruitless since a fiend (13, 7-8) with a sackful of cockle stealthily spread it so as to ruin the good corn. As expounded at the beginning of the *Moraliter*<sup>6</sup> (13, 19-21), the healthy seed is to be construed as the holy doctrine the Savior wishes to feed us. The wicked enemy is named only later on in an apostrophe to the audience urged to sow the seeds of Christ among them and beware of "Inimicus homo, that is the devyll, the whiche is the enemy of al mankynde" who comes to sow the "myschevys wedys" (13, 85-87). The weeds stand for a multitude of sins including envy, wrath, backbiting, or evil thoughts against which the remedy advocated is loving one's enemies, for which one will be rewarded in heaven. There lies a rather bewildering paradox: the horrifying menace of damnation is raised, yet counterbalanced by a promising horizon opening up for the Christians earnest in their wish to repent.

Driven out of paradise into the vale of misery of this wretched world, humankind was doomed to bodily death and everlasting hell. Still, in the Nativity Sermon (5), the ominous emphasis on the original sin is set in stark contrast with the second chance granted to His people when the Almighty sent His son to turn sorrow into solace. Decay of the soul is described in terms of a disease cured by the holy physician who delivered mankind from "the bondage, thraldome and seruage of the devyll" (5, 122-123). Adam's sin was passed on to his descendants, now infected while spreading the threat of eternal damnation evoked in an alliteration: "the doloreus dawnger and dredfull derkenes of dampnacion" (5, 164).

The dread of the endless torments that await incurable sinners was still vivid when the sermon cycle was drafted. The counterexample of the fiend, preachers knew, was instrumental in impressing God's warnings and commandments on lay congregations. In the premature Reformation at a time when Wyclif and Lollard heresy<sup>7</sup> had vernacularised preaching and shaken conventional attitudes to devotional images, the discourse on the fragility of men and women enduring the devil's unceasing onslaught was deep-rooted in the Christian collective conscience. It was therefore natural that the dissident from heaven should come across as the absolute antithesis of man's "soveren frende" (10, 45).

---

<sup>6</sup> *Moraliter* is a Latin term which precedes the interpretation or explanatory section of the sermon.

<sup>7</sup> *A Late Fifteenth-Century Dominical Sermon Cycle*, xlv. Still, according to Stephen Morrison, the compilers of the sermons under study seem reluctant at addressing controversial points (such as the duties and behaviour of the clergy), as proven by the scarce or disguised topical allusions (in the form of generalities) involving Lollardy, "although the cycle was obviously put together at a time when the proponents of that movement were still a force to be reckoned with".

## Conclusion

A careful reading of *A Late Fifteenth-Century Dominical Sermon Cycle* allows to identify an ultimate catechetical purpose, which could be put in a nutshell: it is the kingdom of God that the sinner ought to choose in living virtuously, not the service of the devil. One example drawn from Sermon 56 helps to grasp the intention behind the collection of sermons. In a clearly exhortatory tone, the priest lectures, if not harangues, his audience lamenting his helplessness in face of the sinner's blind rejection of grace: "Alas! Then, thou cristen man, how thinkiste thou to be savvyd that holdyste thus thi gostly enemy the devyll witheyn the?" (56, 70-71). The direct address to every single person in the congregation gives immediacy and cogency to the point made. The unrepentant sinner is pronounced irrevocably doomed, as implied in the dreadfully evocative comparison with the worst and ugliest of foes. "For the fowlist devyll in hell schall be feyrer then the sowle that is departid from man or woman that dyethe in dedly synne" (56, 175-176). A parallel is cleverly built on the sharp contrast between *fowlist* and *feyrer*. The author of the sermon has an undeniable command and obvious sense of the persuasive effect of rhetorics. Oppositions, similes, or syntactical symmetry, among other stylistic devices, provide precious tools for hammering home the fundamental precepts of the Faith.

Throughout the collection of sermons, a great many formulaic phrases designate the devil, and to a lesser extent other enemies of God. Sermon 66, *Dominica xxiiij post Festum Sancte Trinitatis*, reminds the audience that they should stand in dread of God and rue their sins. The preacher borrows from Bede the exemplum of a dying knight unwilling to be shriven of his misdeeds. He was visited by two angels that produced a small book of his too few good deeds. Some fiends came that showed him a big book listing all his wicked actions. Still, he would not repent. A fiend beat his body with burning brands and torches from hell. The knight died wretchedly and his soul was damned for not heeding to the warning against "the dredefull syghte of devyls that man schall see in that tyme that the sowle schall departe frome the body" (66, 89-90).

Interestingly, in Sermon 51, *Dominica x post Festum Sancte Trinitatis*, the enemy and the devil are mentioned in one same sentence: "Owre sauiovre Ihesu toke vpon him to be the servant of his Fader, and so put hymselfe in the hondis of his enemys to haue mankynde owte of the seruice of the devyll" (51, 51-52). The presence of both terms within the same clause may pinpoint the theological significance of the duty of showing compassion by shedding tears. The contritionist trend in Christian penitential practises began to imbue catechetical teaching as early as the thirteenth century. Therefore stress is put on Christ's tears of heartfelt sorrow over corrupt humankind selflessly extended to his enemies, including the very man who betrayed him, Judas. The tears of contrition have the power to drown the fiend. "Criste withe mornynge water of teeris wasschithe owte synne of the devyls boke" (51, 111-112).

The image of the book implies that the fiend's treacherous plan to subjugate mortals can be eventually thwarted on condition they regret their sins (51, 122). How can it be interpreted? I postulate that the sermons are not so much a sharp castigation of the enemy of God, the wicked fiend, as a celebration of the triumph of Christ. The tone is admonitory, exhortatory, even intimidatory at times, but what prevails in the end is the will of the sermon compiler(s) to afford benevolent recommendation, heartening consolation, and stimulating inspiration for the believer with a wavering faith to pray and stay on the path to perfection away from sin leading to damnation. The preacher's role is to warn, not to discourage. Homiletic discourse, a category of medieval writing for oral delivery, is intended to favour positive response to the threat posed

by God's arch-foe, potent yet not indomitable. Preaching "taught the right way to believe so as to live a better life; by encompassing the Incarnation and Passion, manifestations of God's love for man, it encouraged him to mend his ways so that divine generosity should not lack a response."<sup>8</sup> A similar message is conveyed in *Dives and Pauper*, an anonymous early fifteenth-century discussion of God's precepts between a rich layman concerned with doctrinal matters (and the salvation of the soul) and his clerical instructor who advocates humility, charity, and poverty as the prerequisites to keep on the right path.

### **Bibliography:**

Bale Anthony, *The Jew in the Medieval Book. English Antisemitisms, 1350-1500*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Brinegar John H., "Hagiographic, Homiletic, and Didactic Literature", in Lambdin L. C., Lambdin R.T., eds., *A Companion to Old and Middle English Literature*, Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 2002, 277-298.

Morrison Stephen, ed., *A Late Fifteenth-Century Dominical Sermon Cycle*, Oxford, Oxford University Press for the Early English Text Society, 2012, Vol.1 & Vol.2.

Muessig Carolyn, "Sermon, Preacher and Society in the Middle Ages", in *Journal of Medieval History* 28, 2002, 73-91.

Rapp Francis, "Religious belief and practice", in Allmand Christopher (a cura di) *The New Cambridge Medieval History, Vol. VII c.1415-c.1500*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, [1998] 2008, 203-219.

Rice Nicole R., *Lay Piety and Religious Discipline in Middle English Literature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Schmitt Jean-Claude, "Temps liturgique et temps des exempla", in Bériou Nicole, Morenzoni Franco, eds., *Prédication et liturgie au Moyen Âge*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2008, 223-236.

Tanner Norman, Watson Sethina, "Least of the Laity: the Minimum requirements for a Medieval Christian", in *Journal of Medieval History*, Vol. 32, No. 4, 2006, 395-423.

---

<sup>8</sup> Rapp F., "Religious belief and practice", in Allmand C. (ed.), *The New Cambridge Medieval History, Vol. VII c.1415-c.1500*, ed., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, 209.