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Introduction

Histories of the devil abound, and I do not claim to be familiar with more than a fraction of them. Histories of stage devils in English drama, however, are more manageable. The earliest are nineteenth-century dissertations in German, which is the model adopted by the first study of the subject in English, L. W. Cushman's *The Devil and the Vice in the English Dramatic Literature before Shakespeare*. Cushman's book in fact originated as a doctoral dissertation at Goettingen in 1899 and was published the following year by Max Niemeyer in Halle, when Cushman was teaching English at the University of Nevada. I have often wondered if Cushman's going from Goettingen to Reno in 1900 was not, perhaps, a little like meeting the subject of his book in person.

In any case, previous histories of the devil in English drama were swept aside by the magisterial work of E. K. Chambers' *The Medieval Stage*, published in 1903. Chambers read Cushman and dismissed him. What Chambers offered for the first time was a narrative so coherent and persuasive that it continues to influence critical thinking about early English drama, even though Chambers' assumptions have long since been recognized and dismissed in their own turn. One task of the present book is to retell the story of English stage devils for the first time since Chambers but with different assumptions. The first chapter explains what those assumptions are and how they affect the interpretation of stage devils, but the issue is important throughout and accounts for this study's engagement with other critics of early drama who have been influenced in one way or another by Chambers, even when they set out to revise his work.

Chambers began with an oppositional scheme that interpreted stage devils in a narrative of teleological secularization. In this scheme, enlightened secularity was bound to flourish in the long run in its opposition to benighted superstition. Chambers saw the introduction of devils into vernacular drama in the fifteenth century as early evidence of

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drama's gradual evolution toward its brilliant secular flowering in the work of Shakespeare. In other words, though devils would, in the long run, be recognized and discarded as part of the religious superstructure that drama eventually outgrew, Chambers argued that they were themselves, at first, a secular incursion in sacred drama.

The assumptions that govern this book are also oppositional, but they are derived from what Stuart Clark calls "the mental world" of demonology, not from social Darwinism (*Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* [Oxford, 1997]). Demons were inherently oppositional, Clark argues, because they were constructed as the subordinate term in a hierarchical polarity. This binary distinction between God and the devil became the model for a series of parallel oppositions that profoundly influenced thinking about science, history, religion, and politics. In similar terms, I argue that the role of stage devils in pre-Reformation drama was to enact whatever opposed individual wellbeing and the sacramental community. Far from being a secular innovation, devils were a way of imagining how and why the sacred needed to function redemptively in the life of the individual and the community. Chapters 2 to 4 make this argument in detail for pre-Reformation drama, noting continuity across dramatic genres (mystery, morality, and saints' plays), and accounting for the origin of dramatic social satire in recognition of the gap between moral affirmation and practice.

The first major change from traditional oppositional thinking about stage devils comes with the Protestant Reformation, as I argue in chapter 5. Reformers continued to think in dichotomies, but they substituted new terms for both the positive and negative poles of their world. The Christian community was thus conceived anew as the reformed church, with the king at its head, while the traditional church, with the pope at its head, was identified with the devil, along with its sacramental system. Chapter 6 argues that the second major change in stage devils came with the establishment of commercial theatres near London and the advent of Christopher Marlowe, who is the first playwright to exploit, in *Dr. Faustus*, the instability of traditional polarized thinking about devils. In this, he was not influential; in fact, chapter 7 discusses several devil plays from around the turn of the seventeenth century that react to his radicalism by reasserting familiar values, ultimately derived from drama before the Reformation.

One of the major benefits of looking at stage devils in light of traditional demonological assumptions is that it enables the recognition of

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continuity and specific difference in early Stuart drama, as I argue in chapters 8, 9, and 10. About forty new plays that we know of put devils on stage between Marlowe's *Faustus* and the closing of the theatres in 1642, with the last of them being performed for the first time as late as 1641. This is not what one would expect, given Chambers' secular teleology. Even Cushman terminates his discussion before the advent of the commercial theatres near London. Moreover, early seventeenth-century stage devils are more continuous with the formative tradition than is usually recognized. Despite rising skepticism and the advent of widespread metadramatic irony, as in Fletcherian tragicomedy, devils continue to bring with them a number of traditional oppositional assumptions. New directions for stage devils are explored in chapter 10, most remarkable being their social function: the traditional association of devils with pride, and therefore with the highest social classes, increasingly gives way to a prevailing association of devils with the lower social classes.

In making this argument, I have deliberately limited my discussion to plays that stage devils, thus excepting those that stage only witches, the Vice, or Vice-derived human beings, like Richard III, Iago, or Deflores in *The Changeling*. My reason for this limitation is to sharpen the focus and keep the study, already long, within reasonable bounds. But I make one exception. In pre-Reformation morality plays, I treat personified vices as devils, because I argue that playwrights made no distinction between them. The seven deadly sins, which are personified abstractions, are often called devils, they behave like devils, they are costumed like devils, and I argue that they have the same derivation as devils. That is why Medwall's *Nature* and Skelton's *Magnificence* receive detailed attention here, even though they stage personified vices, not literal devils. In popular Tudor plays, the character called "the Vice" appears for the first time, and playwrights distinguish him from stage devils. I do not, therefore, deal with Reformation plays that stage the Vice alone or Vice-derived human beings, but I do discuss plays, including a number of Tudor morality plays, that stage the devil and the Vice together.

Shakespeare does not figure very largely in this book, because he included devils in only two plays, 1 and 2 *Henry VI*, both discussed in chapter 7. When referring to these plays and others on occasion, I cite David Bevington's *Complete Works of Shakespeare*, 4th edn. (New York: Longman, 1997). I have included dates for all the plays referred to, both in the text and the appendix. For nearly all of them, however, dating is uncertain, and for the earliest plays it is sometimes little more than a

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scholarly guess. That is why the beginning date is 1350: though the earliest texts are fifteenth-century, the York mystery plays were certainly being performed in the second half of the fourteenth century, and *The Castle of Perseverance* may be as early as 1382, but nothing more precise than that can be said about the originating dates of these plays. For consistency, I have relied principally on Sylvia Wagonheim's revision of *Annals of English Drama, 975-1700* (Routledge, 1989), originally compiled by Alfred Harbage and revised by S. Schoenbaum, though occasionally I have used dates suggested in recent editions of particular plays. In any case, one of the salutary benefits of abandoning an evolutionary and teleological scheme is that dating becomes less important to the argument.

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CHAPTER ONE

Stage devils and oppositional thinking

Aside from human beings, nothing was staged more continuously in early English drama than the devil and his minions. For about 300 years – from the late fourteenth century to the late seventeenth – playwrights regularly put devils on stage in every kind of English play for every kind of audience, whether aristocratic, popular, or commercial. Long after they stopped seeing God and the angels, audiences continued to see devils on stage, and there was no appreciable decline in opportunities to do so on the London commercial stage before the closing of the theatres in 1642. That devils should have so long outlived other characters produced by traditional dramaturgy has neither been noticed nor explained in the critical record, yet it is a singular fact. This book explores both questions: why devils are the last explicit remnant of continuous traditions in staging the sacred, and why no one has recognized that they are.

One reason devils endured on stage was that the material base of culture changed very little throughout the time they were popular: the slow pace of economic and technological change meant that costumes and the materials for assembling them remained the same.¹ “The devill in his fethers” (presumably black feathers) appears in costuming lists from Chester, both for the mystery plays and for the annual Midsummer Show, which reputedly endured from 1499 to the 1670s.² At Coventry a charge is recorded “for making ye demonæs head” in 1543 and “for a yard of canvas for ye devylles mall [maul]” in 1544.³ “The dymons cote” (p. 240), “the devells hose” (p. 246), “pwyntes [points (for attaching the hose to the doublet)] for the deman” (p. 218), and “a stafe for the deman” (p. 238) add details to the picture at Coventry. The St. John’s College Cambridge Register of Inventories lists “ij blak develles cootes with hornæs” in 1548–49.⁴ A dangerous variation on the devil’s canvas maul is recorded at Tamworth on Corpus Christi Day, 1536, where “an actor playing the Devil . . . came with his chain by one of the spectators, Sir Humfrey Ferrers, the lord of Tamworth Castle, and unwittingly broke his shins with it.”⁵ The earliest reference to devils’ costumes discovered

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so far is from York in 1433, where “garmentes,” “faces,” and “Vesernes [visors]” for devils are listed;⁶ the latest before the closing of the theatres is from Thomas Nabbes’ masque, *Microcosmus* in 1637, where a stage direction specifies “A divell in a black robe: haire, wreath and wings black.”⁷ The wings were presumably made of black feathers.

This relatively stable material base of costuming and props was less important in perpetuating stage devils, however, than the mental world that originated them in the first place. The outlook in which demonology flourished has recently been described in detail by Stuart Clark as it affected science, history, religion, and politics throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁸ Clark comments that demonology “was construed dialectically in terms of what it was not; what was significant about it was not its substance but the system of oppositions that it established and fulfilled” (p. 9). These oppositions, moreover, were hierarchical, beginning with God and the devil, and embracing a series of parallels: good and evil, truth and illusion, community and chaos, baptized and non-baptized, belief and heresy. The flexibility of binary thinking was both its strength and its greatest weakness, Clark argues: while almost anything could be made to fit the model of hierarchical polar oppositions, their infinite confirmability made them unstable. Traditional oppositional thinking therefore endured an extended crisis in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries:

In the case of demonology, the dominance of privileged first terms set in hierarchical opposition to their contraries was for a long time successful in yielding coherent and persuasive arguments. However, once the two reformations were under way the very enthusiasm with which writers of different religious persuasions gave authenticating roles to devils betrayed the instability of the logic involved. (p. 147)

What was true of devils per se was equally true, as we shall see, of devils on the stage.

Recognizing the crisis caused by the Protestant and Counter Reformations as *extended*, however, is important. The habit of oppositional thinking did not collapse as soon as Protestants turned the tables on traditional religion by identifying it as idolatrous and demonic. Thinking in opposed hierarchical polarities was so deeply ingrained that it characterized both sides of the religious divide for a long time, with almost no recognition of the incongruities involved. Though virtually all the devil plays discussed in the following pages invite deconstructive analysis by virtue of their oppositional thinking, only Marlowe’s *Dr. Faustus* deliberately exploits the resulting instability.

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One of the principal reasons for the failure of modern criticism to recognize and explain the durability of stage devils has been the misreading of traditional assumptions about a polarized world. Primary credit for this failure belongs to E. K. Chambers, who first read early drama according to a different model altogether – a teleological pattern of gradually developing secularization.⁹ Stage devils were important for Chambers, because they were a key element in his theory. The earlier he could find evidence of secularization, the more credible was his claim that change was incremental, progressive, and aimed where he thought it was. He therefore regarded the “relaxing of the close bonds between the nascent drama and religious worship” as the earliest form of secularization, and he found this “relaxation” in the expansion of early liturgical tropes to include other biblical material, the movement of the plays out of the church, the innovation of lay control and financing, the replacement of Latin with the vernacular, and the appearance of folk-play elements – especially devils – in the biblical stories told by vernacular drama:

For your horned and blackened devil is the same personage, with the same vague tradition of the ancient heathen festival about him, whether he riots it through the cathedral aisles in the Feast of Fools, or hales the Fathers to limbo and harries the forward spectators in the marketplace of Beverley or Wakefield.¹⁰

Chambers’ belief that devils were among the first indications of the secular in early English drama made him incapable of seeing them as one of the last vestiges of traditional sacred dramaturgy in the seventeenth century.

More than thirty years ago, O. B. Hardison pointed out that Chambers’ assumptions about early drama derived from social Darwinism and its evolutionary preoccupations.¹¹ Chambers regarded secularization as progressive, Hardison argued, because “he lived in an age when Christianity was suspect” (p. 14). A romantic conception of vital but repressed pagan folk culture informed Chambers’ view of stage devils (they are vestiges of “the ancient heathen festival”), and the reassertion of this culture against oppressive pre-Reformation Christianity was, for Chambers, one of the first signs of healthy secularization in drama. Chambers’ thinking is thus marked by a “strong polarity,” as Hardison points out (p. 15), that is foreign to the drama he was trying to understand. The primary terms in Chambers’ hierarchical binary rhetoric are not God and the devil, but pagan (the favored term) and Christian, followed closely by a series of supporting terms: “braved,” “won,” “sportive,” and

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“deep-rooted instinct” on the positive side, opposing “bishops,” “barbarians,” “gaolers,” “ban,” “triumphed,” and “barred,” on the side of the church.¹²

Chambers did not invent the oppositional system that Hardison identifies; rather, Chambers inherited it as a derivative from the very system he failed to recognize in the early drama he studied. For binary thinking did not collapse in the eighteenth century, as Clark suggests.¹³ Instead, the deep-rooted sense of certainty that it had provided was transmuted into a new system, in which the favored terms were “secular,” “progressive,” “rational,” “modern,” and the like, in opposition to “religious,” “backward,” “enthusiastic,” “medieval.” We can see these two incommensurate binary systems in transition and in collision with one another in the eighteenth century.¹⁴ James Sharpe recounts a trial in Hertfordshire in 1751, when Thomas Colley was found guilty and hanged for seizing and drowning Ruth Osborne on suspicion of witchcraft.¹⁵ Before his execution, Colley was visited in prison by one who sought to persuade him that “witches had no manner of existence but in the minds of poor infatuated people, in which they had been confirm’d by the tradition of their ancestors, as foolish and crazy as themselves” (p. 3). Colley’s well-meaning visitor speaks from within the new system of oppositional thinking, dividing the world along lines of reason and enlightenment, seeking to dispel centuries of infatuated folly and craziness. On the other hand, after Colley’s hanging, many who heard of it, believed “it was a very hard case, that a man should be hang’d for destroying an old wicked woman, who had done so much mischief by her abominable charms and witchcraft” (p. 4). These people viewed Colley’s execution from within the old system, dividing the world between God and the devil.

Chambers’ binary thinking descends, then, from the Enlightenment, where it developed as a way of grounding rational confidence against the archaic polarities it replaced. Secular knowledge based on reason and experiment came to oppose sacred ignorance, as illustrated in the deists’ rejection of “priestcraft,” a rejection which was itself a legacy of radical Protestant anticlericalism in the seventeenth century and of the early Protestant Reformers’ rejection of traditional clergy and ritual as “superstitious.” For Chambers, the added feature is that Darwin and the social Darwinists had transferred the teleology of sacred history (already secularized in Hegel’s historical “spirit”) into biological and social evolution, in such a way that the hierarchical superior in the Enlightenment binary system seemed bound to flourish in the long run. Reason would

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inevitably defeat ignorance; the secular would inevitably defeat “other-worldliness” and superstition. Writing from the heart of the British Empire at the height of its success, the social evolutionary assumption that the fittest survive seemed obvious to Chambers, and it was apparent that the fittest culture had evolved along with enlightened English Protestantism: anti-Catholic, secularized, and favorable to individual freedom of conscience.

In short, Chambers’ inability to understand traditional oppositional thinking was due to the Enlightenment transformation of an earlier mental world into a new set of binary assumptions. Moreover the latter have remained active in assessments of early drama, even though Chambers’ argument has been repudiated. Chambers’ continuing influence is due, in part, to the inspiration (complementing that of Darwin and Herbert Spencer) of Jules Michelet, who first proposed in *La Sorcière* (1862) that vestigial pagan folk customs were the focus of peasant revolt against ecclesiastical and feudal authority.¹⁶ The Romantic basis of Michelet’s thesis needs no emphasis, and its debt to Enlightenment binary thinking in the French Revolution is clear. Michelet’s influence has been considerable in modern attempts to understand witchcraft, especially when witchcraft has been interpreted romantically as a form of populist or feminist resistance, but Michelet has not been adequately recognized as a factor in the study of early drama.

Despite Hardison’s critique, Chambers’ legacy with regard to stage devils remains largely unquestioned. The first broad challenge to Chambers came in the important revisionist work of Bernard Spivack and David Bevington, writing just after the middle of the century, yet both retained a narrative of organic incremental development with secularization as its goal.¹⁷ The concept of the “hybrid morality,” for example, is important to Spivack and Bevington as a mid-sixteenth-century phase in the gradual development of dramatic characterization, from the personified abstractions inspired by Christian morality to the represented human beings inspired by secular observation.

Most striking is the perpetuation of Chambers’ Victorian and Whig liberal assumptions in the neo-Marxist criticism of Robert Weimann, who has been a Trojan horse for Enlightenment antinomies within the ramparts of postmodernism. Weimann is most responsive to Michelet, arguing that a vestigial pagan folk tradition found expression in clowns, Vices, stage devils, the doctor of St. George plays, and the gargantuan feasts of shepherd plays in the mystery cycles as various expressions of peasant resistance to high culture. Weimann sees devils’ and personified

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vices' proximity to the audience as encouraging subversive identification and sympathy with ostensibly anti-social behavior, blasphemy, and heterodoxy. For heresy was "inevitably and inextricably entangled with attempts on the social order, always anarchic, always political."¹⁸ The soliloquies, knowing asides, and down-stage comic antics of demonic figures were all means of taking auditors into the confidence of an anti-establishment viewpoint, engaging them on its side and creating distance from the more formal, "correct," and socially elevated characters of the main action. In Weimann's view, the social function of devils is to provide a subversive expression for class frustration and protest – a function closely analogous to the one described by Chambers and ultimately indebted to Michelet. Also influential in some postmodern criticism has been the historical work of Keith Thomas, who identifies the purpose of pre-Reformation ritual with that of magic and compares magic unfavorably with science and technology, thus offering another version of the Enlightenment polarity exhibited in Chambers.¹⁹ Thomas' influence on Stephen Greenblatt is explicit, and Greenblatt's ideas about exorcism are considered below in chapter 8.²⁰

My purpose in what follows is not to argue that secularization had no effect on the history of early drama, and particularly on stage devils. Rather, what I propose is a way of conceptualizing secularization that recovers some sense of traditional oppositional thinking without falling into the polarization and tendentiousness of Enlightenment and Romantic assumptions. John Sommerville's argument for a nuanced and sociologically informed theory of secularization is helpful. He contrasts "a people whose religious rituals are so woven into the fabric of their life that they could not separate religion from the rest of their activities" with "a society in which religion is a matter of conscious beliefs, important primarily for the times of one's most philosophical and poetic solitude."²¹ The first is a "sacred" culture; the second, "secular."²² Looked at this way, the story of English secularization effectively begins with Henry VIII, because Henry originated a process that formally defined the power and influence of religion apart from the influence of other social and political institutions (especially the monarchy) and eventually separated them. Where secularization is concerned, Henry's declaring himself the head of the church was not a uniting of monarchy and church but a delimiting of religion from its traditional permeation of cultural life, a subordination of this newly distinct entity under the crown, a consequent redefinition of the church in national terms, and a promotion of a non-ecclesiastical office (the monarchy) to