Introduction

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Abstract:

The volume examines the construction of otherness through portrayals of monsters, witches, and sorcerers in non-canonical texts aimed at popular audiences in Northwestern Europe during the late Middle Ages and early modern period. Drawing on street literature – such as sermons, ballads, pamphlets, and annals – as well as two demonological treatises, it investigates how vernacular media absorbed and reshaped learned theological and demonological discourses. Emerging from the PRIN 2022 project, the study highlights the interplay between elite and popular media in shaping collective perceptions of magic, monstrosity, and social marginality, with particular attention to the gendered portrayal of women as agents of otherness.

Keywords: Demonology, Magic, Otherness, Popular Texts, Witchcraft

The construction of monsters, witches, and sorcerers – as well as the processes through which otherness is defined and disseminated – has long been a fertile field for interdisciplinary inquiry. Throughout medieval and early modern times, the portrayal of monstrous beings or events, preternatural phenomena and illicit magical practices in Northwestern Europe developed and operated both as a reflection of prevailing social anxieties and as a potent instrument apt to reinforce moral and religious order. The present volume, which seeks to interrogate these processes through a close examination of non-canonical texts specifically produced for popular audiences, emerges from the PRIN 2022 research project entitled "Monsters, Sorcerers, and Witches of Northwestern Europe: The Medieval and Early Modern Construction of Otherness in Literature for Popular Audiences", which foresees the collaboration of scholars from the Italian universities of Siena, Turin, Naples "L'Orientale", and Florence. Object of the investigation is a geographically and chronologically coherent corpus of non-canonical texts that were produced throughout the late Middle Ages and the early modern era in some representative regions of Northwestern Europe – England, Northern Germany, and Iceland – most notably sermons, ballads, broadsheets, pamphlets, treatises, manuals, and annals. Most crucially, the survey aims at explaining how popular media accommodated and disseminated

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learned theological and demonological discourses (which contributed significantly to the stigmatisation and marginalisation of certain groups, most commonly women), how such discourses were filtered into popular culture and, concurrently, how popular non-canonical texts contributed to the construction of marginality and otherness in the districts of Northwestern Europe.

In similar fashion, focussing on categories of magic and witchcraft described and discussed in the most diverse medieval and early modern literary genres, the present volume intends to explore how Middle English sermons, Icelandic annals, and learned theological treatises may find parallel solutions in the construction of the demonological concepts which underlie the received image of the witch.

1. State of the Art

Over the past decades, scholars have increasingly recognised that the perception of the marvellous, the uncanny, and the magical provides a unique window onto the underlying structures of society. As Daston and Park (1998) assert in *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, the way in which a given society perceives and defines wonders is intimately connected to its broader paradigm for understanding reality. This insight is particularly evident when one considers the representation of the marvellous and the magical in medieval texts, which not only articulate the boundaries between the natural and the supernatural but also mirror the ethical, political, and religious tensions of a given age.

In medieval and early modern Europe, the marvellous was not merely an object of curiosity. As Platt (1999) and Jones and Sprunger (2002) have shown, miraculous events, monstrous births, and instances of diabolic magic were often read as portents of social disorder – a clear sign that the natural order had been disrupted. Cohen's (1996) seminal concept of the monster "as a cultural body" (Cohen 1996, 4) further emphasised that the ambiguous, multi-layered nature of monstrous figures allowed them to serve as vehicles for projecting collective anxieties. Simultaneously, the "cumulative concept of witchcraft" – elaborated by Levack (2006) – illustrated how popular and learned elements converged to shape a singular, pervasive image of the witch as an embodiment of evil and transgression.

Gender studies have played a crucial role in reinterpreting these phenomena. Bradbury (Bradbury, Moseley-Christian 2017) argues that the polarities exemplified by figures such as the Virgin Mary and Eve offer a dual framework for assessing the moral status of women. In this context, women frequently emerge in medieval texts as symbols of both redemption and sin; Bynum (1987) notably discussed how the same female body could be portrayed as a source of life through childbirth and as an emblem of fallibility through sexual transgression. This gendered dichotomy is not confined to theological treatises but is vividly dramatised in the popular sermons and annals of the period. McAvoy (2004) further contends that the stereotyping of women in these texts reflects broader cultural anxieties regarding female power and its potential to subvert established social orders.

The study of magic and demonology has similarly evolved over time. Early medieval scepticism of magic gradually gave way to a systematic denunciation of practices deemed heretical and diabolical. Russell's *Witchcraft in the Middle Ages* (1972) and Cohn's *Europe's Inner Demons* (1975) offer comprehensive accounts of how magical practices were increasingly conflated with demonic pacts and heresy. Texts such as Bernard Gui's *Practica inquisitionis heretice pravitatis* (1886) and Nicolai Eymerici's *Directorium inquisitorum* (1578) exemplified this shift by categorising magic into "simple" (or rustic) forms – associated with ignorance and deception – and learned necromancy, which involved the deliberate invocation of demons and was consequently subject to harsher condemnation. Kieckhefer's (1989) work underscored that, while these distinctions were sometimes blurred in practice, the tendency to attribute a demonic origin to magical acts was a central tenet of medieval demonological thought.

The multidisciplinary perspective of cultural history has further revealed how the interpretation of preternatural phenomena is deeply intertwined with processes of social marginalisation and exclusion. As Brown noted in *Marginal Figures in the Global Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (2021), abnormal events – whether births, deaths, or other cataclysmic occurrences – were frequently read as signs of a breakdown in social order, thereby justifying the stigmatisation of those associated with such phenomena. This insight is corroborated by studies on the role of popular literature in transmitting and reinforcing these ideas. For instance, the examination of ballads, sermons, and pamphlets (O'Mara, Paul 2007; Raymond 2011; Delcorno 2017) demonstrated how texts intended for wide audiences became vehicles for both the dissemination of learned theological doctrines and the consolidation of communal moral values.

2. Theoretical Background

An inquiry on the construction of otherness through depictions of magic, witchcraft, and monstrosity in popular texts requires a multifaceted theoretical framework that draws upon cultural, legal, and gender studies. In this regard, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's concept of the "monster as a cultural body" (1996), according to which monsters are not merely aberrations but serve as liminal figures embodying a society's deepest anxieties, historical traumas, and collective memory, is pivotal. Monstrosity is such, because it challenges established norms by representing the limits of human understanding, and at the same time its ambiguous nature provides a rich terrain for interpreting the social and political underpinnings of a given era. Cohen's approach finds a perfect balancing in Brian Levack's notion of the "cumulative concept of witchcraft" (2006), in which witchcraft is intended as the outcome of the fusion of diverse popular beliefs and learned demonological traditions – ranging from diabolic pacts to nocturnal sabbaths – into a cohesive system that was later institutionalised within legal and ecclesiastical frameworks. This cumulative process is crucial for understanding how disparate magical practices were synthesised into a unified, stigmatised construct. Another theoretical layer of this volume's framework comes

from gender studies, applied to both magical practices (Flint 1991; Briggs 1996; Young 2017) and instances of monstrous births (Niccoli 1987; Crawford 2005; Baratta 2016 and 2017), to explain and understand the mechanisms through which women became subjected to negative stereotyping and marginalisation. As a matter of fact, the image of the woman has been interpreted since antiquity and throughout the Middle Ages through the lenses of Christianity both as moral exemplars and embodiments of sin. Scholars such as Bradbury (Bradbury, Moseley-Christian 2017) and McAvoy (2004) have shown that the polarities of sanctity and sin – epitomised by typological figures such as the Virgin Mary and Eve – served as templates for assessing the moral status of women, and more interestingly proved that this dualistic portray reinforced prevailing stereotypes of female weakness and played a key role in excluding and marginalising women who deviated from established norms.

The dominant thought and morality in the medieval world were most commonly disseminated through *exempla*, which embody the spiritual and behavioural values of society. This is why numerous collections – both anonymous and authored – from the Middle Ages have come down to us. *Exempla* also recur in treatises that systematise the theoretical and theological, or even political, debates reserved for the learned, who were proficient in Latin and were able to write and correspond in that language. The treatment of marginal, monstrous, magical, or witch-like figures is not different inasmuch as innumerable treatises, written in Latin, are devoted to them and numerous Latin *exempla* have been collected in compilations starting from the twelfth century. However, these works are not confined to the elite or solely to erudite discussions; they boldly aim to inform society at every level. For this reason, not only it is plausible to conceive an interaction between elite literature and popular literature, but it is also crucial to re-evaluate the role of vernacular literature – especially the one addressed to broader audiences and delivered through oral performance – as instrumental in transmitting theological and moral instructions and established doctrinal issues to lay audiences, thus influencing public consciousness and helping develop collective cultural identity (Burke 1978): a special place in this regard has to be reserved to vernacular preaching (Fletcher 2009; Delcorno 2017).

3. Contributions to the Volume

Within this framework, the volume focuses on popular texts written in the vernacular addressed to wider audiences, which included individuals with the most diverse educational backgrounds and different social status. Middle English sermons and demonological treatises are analysed in their own context of production, but also in mutual relation with each other, as for instance in their parallel configuration of magic and witchcraft. Such comparative and contrastive reading provides useful insights into the mechanisms through which learned discourses were able to permeate popular beliefs and how medieval and early popular texts reformulated and accommodated elite discourse.

Such process of adaptation and accommodation is paramount in Baratta and Montori's article, in which James VI's *Daemonologie* is seen as a pivotal work that adjusts and filters continental demonological theories – above all, the cumulative concept of the witches' sabbath – to a Scottish context. Written in 1597 amid personal and political insecurities following the North Berwick witch trials, the treatise emerges as both a refutation of witch-sceptical arguments (notably those of Johann Weyer and Reginald Scot) and as an instrument for reinforcing royal authority and orthodox Christian values. The authors argue that the *Daemonologie* appropriates established European demonological constructs, particularly the notions of the diabolical pact and the sabbath, portraying witchcraft as a form of religious apostasy and moral inversion. Indeed, James VI presents the sabbath as a grotesque parody of the Christian liturgy, where the devil and his witches invert and mock the sacraments and rituals of the Church. However, the treatise was not merely a scholarly exercise; rather, it functioned as a deliberate political tool. By depicting witchcraft as an extreme form of disobedience against divine order, James VI sought to consolidate his image as a divinely ordained protector of the realm.

Baratta and Montori rely on sources like the *Malleus Maleficarum* and Bodin's demonological writings, the same that constitute the basis for Bullitta's contribution, which focuses on Samuel Meiger's *De panurgia lamiarum*, the only extant manual on demonological witchcraft in Middle Low German. Bullitta provides a detailed analysis of how Meiger's work – drawing on an extensive range of classical, biblical, and contemporary sources – categorises witchcraft as a transgression of all Ten Commandments. By combining theological discourse with vivid, gruesome anecdotes and historical testimonies, Meiger's text functions both as a catalogue of various forms of witchcraft and sorcery and as a didactic tool for promoting moral rectitude, also relevant for early modern witch-hunts and for conceptually understanding demonology. These treatises are characterised by a rational systematisation of features associated with magic, supernatural and witchcraft that have been overtly individuated since antiquity as collections of *exempla*, and morally edifying literature, as well as patristic and apocryphal texts. However, all these sources are in Latin. Therefore, it is exactly in sermons that one finds the exemplification of behaviours and characteristics later associated with demonic magic.

Accordingly, a separate strand of research in this volume examines the role of healing magic as depicted in sermons and popular texts, showing how the Roman Catholic Church attempted to regulate and repudiate magical practices, while simultaneously acknowledging their deep-rooted presence in popular culture. Specifically linked to the conception of magic are Poggesi's and Riviello's articles. In particular, Poggesi's article explores the representation of healing magic in Middle English sermons from the fifteenth-century, examining how popular healing practices were interwoven with official ecclesiastical discourse. Against the backdrop of a society where conventional medical care was scarce, these sermons served as a medium for both instructing the laity and reinforcing the divine origin of true miracles. Poggesi demonstrates that, although magical

healing practices were often condemned as demonic, they were also appropriated as legitimate means of combating illness, thereby reflecting the inherent ambiguity in the medieval distinction between miracles and magic. Poggesi's analysis offers new insights into the complex relationship between folk medicine, religious belief, and the dynamics of moral regulation.

The figure of Simon Magus is at the centre of Riviello's study that examines his portrait in Middle English prose sermons, highlighting how the character evolved from an archetypal magician in early Christian tradition to a symbol of demonic deceit and doctrinal error. By analysing a range of sermons that rework both patristic and apocryphal sources, Riviello demonstrates that the negative portrayal of Simon Magus served to reinforce the boundaries between authentic Christian miracles and diabolical magic, and argues that the transformation of Simon Magus's character contributed to the construction of witchcraft as an enemy of both religious orthodoxy and social order, thereby providing a critical link between ancient demonological traditions and later medieval witch-hunts.

More focused on one of the features later associated with witches (misbelief) and their practices (theft and execration of the Host) is Vezzosi's contribution, which examines the portrayal of the disbelieving woman in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Middle English sermons. Drawing on reworked Latin *exempla* – derived from sources such as the *Legenda Aurea* and *Speculum Laicorum* – the study reveals how these sermons depict women as morally flawed and susceptible to diabolic deception. By situating the narrative within a broader didactic framework, the article demonstrates that the representation of the disbelieving woman functions both as a cautionary tale and as a reinforcement of orthodox ecclesiastical values, highlighting the dual role of female figures as both moral exemplars and symbols of sin.

Complementing the above contributions, Lombardi's article focuses on selected episodes from the Icelandic annals – specifically, the *Annáll Gunnlaugs prests Þorsteinssonar í Vallholti* and the *Mælifellsannáll* – where rune magic is invoked. Through a comparative analysis with formulas found in Icelandic "black books" preserved in Reykjavík and Stockholm, Lombardi uncovers the narrative and rhetorical strategies employed in the Annals to frame magical practices within local judicial and religious contexts. The study reveals that, in Iceland, magic was not only a practical means of addressing everyday challenges, but also a potent symbol of the tension between the supernatural and social order. This contribution broadens our understanding of the regional particularities in the construction of magical phenomena and the interplay between legal and liturgical discourses in medieval Scandinavia.

The different contributions here gathered and devoted to magic and witchcraft and their representation in learned texts and popular literature both enrich our understanding of the cultural construction of the witch as the other and highlight the dynamic interplay between elite discourse and popular belief. Their findings concurrently advance theoretical debates on the nature of otherness and marginality and offer practical insights into the role of popular literature in mediating complex cultural phenomena. The integration of philological

analysis, cultural history, and gender studies provides a robust framework for elucidating the mechanisms through which the marvellous and the preternatural were mobilised to construct, contest, and ultimately transform social and religious identities in Northwestern Europe by interrogating the ways in which magical, monstrous, and preternatural phenomena were used to regulate social behaviour and reinforce communal values.

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