The Devil Does His Mischief: An Interesting Glimpse into the Huguenot World of Demonology during the Scientific Age

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At the request of the famed scientist Robert Boyle, the French divine, Pierre du Moulin, translated an account of a demon that had plagued a Huguenot family in Burgundy, France in 1612. Moulin’s 1658 translation of François Perreaud’s *L’Antidemon de Mascon* went through at least six editions (three French and three English) during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Years later, nineteenth-century enthusiasts popularized the story of the *Devill of Mascon* by reprinting it in their commentaries on early modern religion and witchcraft. This paper offers a fresh evaluation of the *The Devill of Mascon* by considering how French Protestant elites made sense of the supernatural during the Scientific Revolution. “The Devil Does His Mischief” additionally explores the relationship between popular belief and elite thought. Huguenot ministers and demonologists, like François Perreaud, who sought to understand how the supernatural and natural worlds were related, maintained meaningful contact with scientists like Robert Boyle and frequently preached on new scientific ideas they had learned vis-à-vis their readings and intellectual circles. What they learned they re-communicated to their audiences, many of whom were artisans and professionals tied to new trades and technologies. The popularity of works such as *The Devill of Mascon* suggests that Huguenot thinkers and audiences were committed to a system of supernatural belief that, however common in origin, was not at odds with pre-modern scientific thought.

The setting for Perreaud’s account is the small Burgundy town of Mâcon. The story opens in the home of Huguenot minister François Perreaud, who, after attending a religious meeting in the neighboring town of Couches, returns home

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1 The author thanks Joelle Rollo-Koster, the panel audience, and her colleague, Christopher L. Miller, for their comments and suggestions.

2 The following authors reference Perreaud’s *The Devill of Mascon* in their works: Thomas George Stevenson, Robert Vaughan, Charles Wentworth Upham, and Samuel Butler. Interestingly, Cotton Mather and Richard Baxter, both figures of the seventeenth century, also mention *The Devill of Mascon* in their works.
to find both his wife and maid in a state of anxiety. Both women claimed that their sleep had been repeatedly interrupted during the night with “great noise and violence.” Someone had also “pulled off their blankets” while they slept. On the evenings to follow, the maid went into the kitchen to investigate the sound of banging pots and pans, what Perreaud referred to as “Charivari” or “hive bees.” The maid found pewter and brass all “throwne about.” The doors and windows remained fastened and secure, but when she unbolted the kitchen door, she experienced, “(physical) resistance, as if a man had been on the other side thrusting the door against her.”

The encounters with the “uncleane spirit” continued through the fall of 1612. Family members and neighbors, who happened to be present, also encountered the Demon during its nocturnal visits. And the late night noises grew louder as the days went on. Mr. Perreaud writes:

Scarce was I in my bed, but I heard a great noise from the kitchen, as the rolling of a billet4 throwne with great strength. I heard also a knocking against a partition of wainscot in the same kitchen, sometimes as with the point of the finger, sometimes as with the nailes, sometimes as with the fist, and then the blowes did redouble. Many things also were throwne against the wainscot, as plates, trenchers, and ladels, and a musique was made with the brasse cullender, gingling with some buckles that were at it and with some other instruments of the kitchen.

On 20 September at nine in the evening the spirit made itself known by whistling “a very loud and shrill tone.” It sang vingt and deux deniers, a little tune usually taught birds, and then spoke in an “articulate” but “horse” voice. The spirit sought to demonstrate its supernatural abilities telling stories of neighbors and people it had encountered in its travels in nearby towns. The demon spoke in detail of private matters of which only close family members would know. It disorganized a linen bleacher’s workshop, attempted to steal a maid’s shoes, and upset Perreaud’s bedding. The demon showed it had secret knowledge of past events and the history of the people who had lived in Perreaud’s house previously.

It imitated the voice and dialect of others, predicted the future, and offered to transform itself into the shape of a man, woman, lion, bear, dog, or cat. It tempted with hidden treasure, and tried to gain friendship by speaking of its poverty and citing the Lord’s prayer, the Creed, the morning and evening prayers, and the Ten Commandments. Acting meek, and then poor and desperate, it insisted that it was

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3 Pierre du Moulin, trans., The Devill of Mascon Or, A true Relation of the chiefe things which an uncleane Spirit did, and said at Mascon in Burgundy, in the House of Mr Francis Perreaud, Minister of the Reformed Church in the same Towne (Oxford, 1658), 1-3.
4 A piece of cylindrical wood used for fuel.
5 Moulin, The Devill, 4.
only a good servant of the master, whose place it was keeping while his master was out of town. The spirit asked Mr. Lullier, the local goldsmith, if he would make it his apprentice for fifty crowns. It then asked Mr. Philibert, the local bleacher, the same, insisting again that it was just a poor and humble servant, cold and ill clad, its wages nothing more than twelve crowns a year.  

To Protestant divines like Minister Perraud the “unclean spirit” was not a deceased individual (a ghost) because Protestants, in contrast to Catholics, did not believe in purgatory. For Protestants, one’s soul following death either ascended to heaven or descended to hell. None languished, trapped on earth. Since Protestant theologians rejected purgatory, the more reasonable explanation for understanding Mr. Perreaud’s experiences was that they were the workings of a demon – a demon, interestingly enough, that seemed more of a nuisance or an irritant than a serious danger. Leaving messy rooms, whistling and singing silly songs, ringing bells, tapping on walls, and banging pots and pans did not appear to be the actions of a dangerous supernatural power, but rather of a naughty little child, or prankster. Mr. Perreaud would certainly agree. In describing his encounters with the demon, he indicated its innocuous nature, suggesting that the demon was more irritating than threatening:

In the room… where I had my study, I found several times part of my books laid on the floore, and my houreglasse unbroken, and no other harme. As I was once sitting in my study the Demon made a noise as it had been a great voly of shot in the roome above. Sometimes he would be the groome of my stable rubbing my horse, and platting the haire of his tayle and maine, but he was an unruly groome, for once I found that he had saddled my horse with the crupper before, and the pommel behind.

The Devill of Mascon possesses many of the themes and archetypes of European folk tales. One example from the Devill of Mascon illustrative of the European folk tradition is the Devil’s conversation with Minister Perreaud about a small bottle, within which Perreaud and one his guest’s presumed the Devil may have taken residence. The Devil chided Perreaud and his onlookers for thinking that he, the Devil, would be so foolish as to inhabit a bottle where he could easily be trapped and held hostage. The theme of trapping a spirit in a bottle was

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6 Ibid., 6-18.
7 Historian Darren Oldridge draws a distinction between Catholic and Protestant interpretations of ghosts in Strange Histories: The Trial of the Pig, the Walking Dead, and other Matters of Fact from the Medieval and Renaissance Worlds (New York, 2007), 68.
8 Moulin, The Devill, 26-7.
9 Ibid., 17. The Devil states: “I was told long since that thou wort a foole, and I see now that thou art one indeed, to believe that I am in that bottle: I should be a foole myself to get into it, for so one might take me with stopping the bottle with his finger.”
common in European folktales. In such tales, the Devil, which is usually released from a bottle in which it has been trapped, either threatens harm or offers a reward for its release, usually in the form of treasure. In the Grimm’s version of the story, a boy who discovers and releases a spirit from a bottle, while helping his father chop wood in the forest, receives a magical cloth that can heal and change metal into silver. In the early version of the story, the boy does well and uses his fortune to fund his studies at school. In later versions, such opportunity for fortune does not bode so well for the boy, who loses sight of his original educational goals and becomes consumed by greed.\footnote{Jacob Ludwig C. Grimm, “The Spirit in the Bottle,” from \textit{Household Stories Collected by the Brothers Grimm} (London, 1853).}

If considered within the context of the seventeenth century, one may interpret Grimm’s magical cloth as symbolizing the new economic opportunities that were burgeoning with the rise of cottage industries. During the seventeenth century, peasants and townspeople came into greater contact with city merchants, who were establishing putting-out relationships in towns and rural villages. These new networks put rural folk in touch with townspeople and vice-versa. Much of this interaction revolved around the manufacture of textile products. City merchants furnished spinners with the raw materials and equipment to spin yarn, while artisans prepared semi-finished textile products for urban markets. In Grimm’s tale, the magical cloth, with its capacity to turn base metal into silver, represented the new economic opportunities brought about by the textile trades. Through one’s involvement in textiles, either as an artisan or merchant, one was bound to do well financially. Grimm’s protagonist in the story, the boy, who is the son of a humble woodcutter, symbolizes the next generation that stands to benefit from these economic developments.\footnote{At least this would seem so in Grimm’s earlier account of the story of the “Spirit in the Bottle.” Grimm’s later version of the story tends to stress the negative result of fortune (the Devil’s influence) with the boy’s failure to embrace nineteenth-century values of hard work and self-reliance.}

In contrast to Grimm’s story, no one in the \textit{Devill of Mascon} is certain that the Devil originated from the bottle, though the implication is there – that the “unclean spirit” was perhaps inadvertently released. No attempt was made to recapture the demon and return it to its bottle. The Devil did not offer a magic cloth or any other reward for its release. Nor did anyone benefit financially from the Devil’s presence (or release), even though the Devil, on more than one occasion, tempted with offers of inheritance and hidden treasure.

Despite these discrepancies, Perreaud’s account does reference textiles, suggesting that the cottage industry was central to the economic life of Mâcon. Several neighbors and relatives Perreaud identifies in his account have occupations tied to textiles. Two of Perreaud’s witnesses, Claude Repay and
Philibert Guillermin, for example, were linen bleachers who had to contend with the Devil’s whimsical toying with their wardrobes and workshops.\footnote{12} Other textile references involved more direct encounters between Perreaud and the demon. One of the demon’s annoying habits, wrote Perreaud, was to toss around a great roll of cloth that his friend left behind with him.\footnote{13} At other times, the Devil imitated the noise of hemp makers working in unison.\footnote{14} In another unique encounter, and presumably one in which the Devil took the female form, Claude Repay, a local bleacher, and Abraham Lullier, a goldsmith, came upon a woman, who was alone in a country habit, spinning on a street corner “by the moon shine.” When the two approached the figure, “she vanished from their sight.”\footnote{15}

That the Devil would appear as a country woman spinning suggests a kind of suspicion or apprehension of the new cultural exchanges brought about by the cottage industry. As new putting-out relationships expanded, so did the circulation of people and products between town and country. Inhabitants of both town and country became more aware of each other’s cultural differences, ways of speech, dress, and mannerisms. In the case of The Devill of Mascon, the Devil’s appearance as a lady spinning “by the moon shine,” suggests a fear of rural folk, whose presence and interactions with townspeople had undoubtedly grown with the expansion of putting-out networks.

Another example of this awareness of town-country cultural differences is demonstrated by Perreaud’s maid, Bressande. On more than one occasion Perreaud notes Bressande’s foreign origins.\footnote{16} The Devil himself observes Bressande’s rural background, mocking her country dress and speech. Suspicious, Perreaud thinks Bressande might be the reason for the Devil’s arrival, as rumors abound of the maid’s secret efforts to obtain a healing elixir from the Devil. Perreaud’s concerns about his maid in many ways mimic those Repay and Lullier had of the female apparition. Like many town dwellers, Perreaud possibly found Bressande’s country manners and beliefs unfamiliar and unsettling. More than likely, Perreaud harbored a suspicion of the countryside, and especially of peasant women, who, with their special knowledge of folk remedies, exercised a kind of traditional local authority. It would seem that Perreaud’s concerns about his maid

\footnote{12} According to Perreaud, Master Bleacher Philibert Guillermin, awoke from sleeping in the bleaching house when his hat, which was resting on a nail by his bedside, flew into his face. Perreaud infers it was the doing of the “unclean spirit.” See Moulin, The Devill, 9.

\footnote{13} Perreaud contends that this roll of cloth was 50 ells in weight. See Ibid., 25.

\footnote{14} Perreaud held that the Devil sounded as hemp makers “that beate the hempe foure together such as we had in our neighbourhood, and keeping the same equall measure.” See Ibid., 27-8.

\footnote{15} Ibid., 29.

\footnote{16} The maid’s name itself, Bressande, is suggestive of Bresse, a region north of Mâcon that remained under Savoyard control until 1601 when it was annexed to France.
were typical of religious elites of the time, who tended to associate rural folk medicine with black magic and female-devil compacts.

Possessing many popular literary elements, the *The Devill of Mascon* seems tailored for an audience tied to the commercial and middling classes. The Devil in *The Devill of Mascon*, for example, solicits two master craftsmen to make him an apprentice. The Devil is aware of his inferior status. He attempts to appeal to the craftsmen's sense of charity by stressing his poverty and economic insecurity. That the Devil would speak in such terms suggests an awareness of the realities of economic hardship and class inequality. It additionally reflects recognition of the opportunities for social mobility made available by apprenticeship. In another example, the Devil makes clear his intentions to see to his legal matters regarding a law suit and directs a notary to rewrite his will to include several relations, whom the Devil wishes to leave an inheritance. When his offer of an inheritance is declined, the Devil contends he will release his cosigner (though none existed) from his contract for “six pence and a piece of bread.”

Offers involving contracts, law suits, inheritances, and apprenticeships illustrate an appreciation for commercial activities commonly associated with the propertied classes. Such offers stand in marked contrast to the findings of Robert Darnton, whose study of eighteenth-century folk tales demonstrates a popular desire for food, usually grand meals with plates of meat, which Darnton contends were typical of the peasant class. By contrast, the primary actors in *The Devill of Mascon*, have no interest in the Devil's enticements, which tend to be in the form of business or legal contracts. The Devil's association with things legal may be attributable in part to popular conceptions of lawyers as untrustworthy and duplicitous. Negative connotations of the like were possibly commonplace among those of the business classes that had since the Renaissance become increasingly more dependent on legal services for their livelihood.

Another popular theme of European folk literature that appears in *The Devill of Mascon* is one that depicts the Devil as stupid, ridiculous, and easily defeated by mortals. The Devil's stupidity and impotence is demonstrated in *The Devill of Mascon* by the Devil's own story of his attempt to scale the walls of Geneva. In this story, the Devil assists a contingent of Savoyard soldiers,

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17 Ibid., 16.
obviously Catholic, in retaking Geneva from its Calvinist citizens. The Devil’s account is undoubtedly a description of the ill-fated Escalade of 1602. At this point *The Devill of Mascon* takes on a distinctly Protestant tone. Perreaud is recapitulating the story through the eyes of a Protestant minister, who harbors no love for the Catholic Savoyards. While scaling Geneva’s wall, the Devil’s ladder breaks, plunging him into a ditch below, where he is “near eaten” by frogs, whose “croaking” the Devil boasts, he “did perfectly imitate.” The Savoyard soldiers’ fate was more bleak. Encouraged by a Jesuit priest, who stood at the foot of the ladder assuring them of success and eternal paradise, the soldiers are eventually captured and then hanged. As in popular folk literature, the demon of Mâcon appears impish and rather impotent. His power is more of trickery than magic, and though he attempts to win folks over by appealing to their basic needs, their sense of compassion, and their human desire for joy and merriment, in the end he fails. The Devil seems crafty, but is the fool, who departs winning nothing.

In all probability, the story of *The Devill of Mascon* originated with the maid and minister’s wife. In much the same way that the Grimms obtained the popular folk stories of mother goose from a child’s nurse, so did Perreaud learn of the “unclean spirit” – from his wife and her maid servant. The first to encounter and report the “unclean spirit,” Perreaud’s wife and her maid were known to sit spinning together at night by the fireside, a typical social setting for story telling during the seventeenth century. It was probably during one of these evenings, when the minister was away, that the ladies of the house developed the story of *The Devill of Mascon*.

The story changed once the minister entered the picture. While the Devil’s actions were expressive of traditional inversion practices, Perreaud’s version of the Devil is also distinctly counter-Calvinist. In many ways, the Devil is the antithesis of the good Huguenot. The Devil tempts by offering others an inheritance or hidden treasure. What is quite acceptable in popular folk narratives is most unworthy to devout Huguenots, who believe financial gain only befits those who earn it vis-à-vis their vocational calling. The Devil plays, sings, jokes, whistles, tells silly stories, and gets angry and emotional when he does not get his way, conduct completely uncharacteristic of the Huguenot elect, who champion the contrasting virtues of industry, discipline, and orderliness. What might be

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20 Darnton, “Peasant,” 11.
21 Perreaud’s account mentions an evening in which both his wife and her maid sat spinning together, while he retired to sleep. No doubt the original story formed in such a social setting as folk tales at this time were commonly shared in this way. See Darnton, “Peasant,” 17.
considered by some as the Devil’s playfulness, Perreaud sees as disorderly, disruptive, and irrational. By contrast, the good Huguenot is always in control and knows how to exercise patience, eternally confident in the Lord’s salvation and divine plan. The Devil consorts with and aids Catholics, and endeavors to steal souls, all of which is of little consequence to Perreaud and others, who consider the Devil as rather impotent when it comes to dealing with the elect, whose souls, by Calvinist reckoning, were already irrevocably spoken for.

Minister Perreaud does not try to outwit or trick the Devil, as was a common tactic of protagonists in folk literature. Instead, Perreaud defeats the Devil by remaining firmly committed to his faith, a strategy that seems distinctly Huguenot. Perreaud neither bargains with the Devil, nor falls prey to the Devil’s pity-poor-me tricks or temper tantrums. The Devil tests others as well, but no subject succumbs. Both the goldsmith and bleacher refuse the Devil’s financial offers. So responds the goldsmith to the Demon’s overtures: “I have no need of thy (the Devil’s) love… I am content with the love of my God.” Likewise, Madame Perreaud shows her courage and commitment to Christ by declining her husband’s suggestion that she take refuge elsewhere, where she and her unborn child might be more safe. Madame Perreaud chooses to remain with her husband in Mâcon, preferring to place her trust, as she puts in, in the power and mercy of God.23

Though clearly popular in origin, the question remains why The Devill of Mascon garnered the attention of religious and scientific elites. The seventeenth century served witness to a number of scientific discoveries and a new method of empirical investigation. Despite these developments, the publication of the Devill of Mascon demonstrates a continued appreciation for the supernatural. For scientists such as Robert Boyle, the Devil of Mâcon posed interesting and challenging questions concerning the interplay between the natural and supernatural worlds. As an instrument of Huguenot propaganda, The Devill of Mascon validated the existence of the supernatural at a time when new science was raising the standard of proof. Huguenot theologians like Pierre du Moulin sought to reaffirm belief in the supernatural, and they did so by simultaneously co-opting believers in the new science. In publishing and circulating The Devill of Mascon, Huguenot ministers communicated that supernatural events and occurrences were not only real but also subjects worthy of study. If scientists of the stature of Robert Boyle supported such studies, then such an investigation must be meaningful and worthwhile.

At the same time, The Devill of Mascon promoted Calvinist values. The incident of The Devil of Mâcon may be local, but the ideal the account sought to communicate was Calvinist: ordinary people, men and women both, can drive away the Devil by placing their trust and faith in Christ. The success of ordinary

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23 Moulin, The Devill, 23.
people against evil, a common theme in oral culture as well, requires no magic or intervention on the part of a social superior or religious/supernatural figure. Such belief, possibly rooted in the humble’s resentment for the powerful, reflects the Huguenot emphasis on the innate capacity of ordinary people to lead meaningful, Christian lives. For the Huguenot, ordinary Christians do not need the local priest or conjuror to aid them in thwarting the Devil. The ordinary individual is a Christian hero who effectively wards off the Devil by simply resisting temptation and living a pious, Christian life according to Scripture. In the end, such a message possibly resonated with Huguenots who were not only believers in the new science, but also ordinary artisans and merchants, who remained firmly committed to their belief in God and His Providence.