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Sin and Filth in Medieval Culture

The Devil in the Latrine

Martha Bayless



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Routledge Studies in Medieval Literature and Culture

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Martha Bayless

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Abbreviations

CCCM	Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis
CCSL	Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina
CSEL	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum
EETS	Early English Text Society
o.s.	original series
MGH	Monumenta Germaniae Historica
NRCF	<i>Nouveau recueil complet des fabliaux</i> , ed. Willem Noomen and Nico van den Boogaard, 10 vols. (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1983–98)
PG	Patrologiae cursus completus, Series Graeca, ed. J.-P. Migne. 161 vols. Paris: 1857–66
PL	Patrologiae cursus completus, Series Latina, ed. J.-P. Migne. 221 vols. Paris: 1844–58
Tubach	Frederic C. Tubach, <i>Index Exemplorum: A Handbook of Medieval Religious Tales</i> , FF Communications 204 (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1969)



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A Note About the Translations

I have endeavored to provide an English translation of all quotations in other languages. In some cases the published critical editions of texts offer a facing English translation, and in these instances it seemed presumptuous to disregard the editor's translation and substitute my own, and so I have used the original editor's translation. In other examples, principally the *Cronica* of Salimbene de Adam and the *Dialogus Miraculorum* of Caesarius of Heisterbach, the editions of the original are difficult of access and the translations much easier to obtain; therefore (while using and quoting the original) I have cited the modern published translations so as not to obscure the fact that they are available for those who might wish to follow the trail. These are all footnoted to this effect. I also have often used standard published translations for Biblical passages. Further, in the cases of languages of which I am not very familiar (e.g., Old Norse, medieval German and Cornish), I have relied on the published translations of others. In all other cases, in Latin, Old English, Middle English, French and other languages, translations are, for better or for worse, my own.



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Luxuriam ventris, lector, cognosce vorantis,
Putrida qui sentis stercora nare tuo.
Ingluuiem fugito ventris quapropter in ore:
Tempore sit certo sobria vita tibi.

—Alcuin (ed. E. Dümmler, MGH, *Poetae Latini Aevi Carolini I*
(Berlin, 1881), p. 321)

Understand, reader, the excess of the devouring belly,
You who smell the putrid dung with your nose.
Flee therefore the gluttony of the belly and mouth:
May your life be sober at the certain day.

Reflection on dirt involves reflection on the relation of order to
disorder, being to non-being, form to formlessness, life to death.

—Mary Douglas

Ooh, there's a lovely lot of filth over here.

—*Monty Python and the Holy Grail*



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Preface

However much modern scholars may try to bridge the gulf between the medieval period and the twenty-first century, there is one perspective that unfailingly brings into view the famous Otherness of the Middle Ages: the medieval attitude toward filth and dung. I have found that it also tends to bring conversation to a halt. Like the fastidious Absolon in Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*, the modern age has proven itself "squeamish of farting"—and like Absolon, when we investigate matters more closely, we may find ourselves faced with a closer view of the lower anatomy than we like.

But the emblems of material corruption—the corrupt body and the filth it brings forth, particularly the filth found in latrines—are everywhere in medieval culture: in sermons, in saints' lives, in histories and chronicles, in Biblical commentaries, in fables and moral tales, in accounts of heresy and witch trials, in pious poetry, in religious plays, in depictions of hell, in manuscript illustrations, in paintings in cathedrals and houses and in both learned and popular stories. For the medieval world, excrement and dung were powerful moral and theological material, to a degree scarcely imaginable in today's world, where serious discussion of excrement is almost inconceivable in most realms. Like the modern world, the medieval world could regard dung as lowly, degrading, trivial and comic; but medieval thought could also understand dung as lowly, degrading, important and deadly serious. To comprehend that mindset, we must be prepared to put away the prejudices of modern social constraint and look realistically at medieval practice. Today excrement is a substance so taboo (despite being so universal and unavoidable) that it is still considered virtually unspeakable in modern scholarship. This is testimony to its power to disgust and embarrass, two reactions that dispassionate modern scholarship seeks to avoid. But these reactions were precisely the response serious medieval writers hoped to provoke.

In the current day, as in the Middle Ages, filth and dung are familiar symbols for sin, corruption and moral impurity. This is an obvious and predictable equivalence. What I aim to show in this book is that in the Middle Ages these relationships were not merely metaphorical. (The book does, however, agree with the groundbreaking thesis of Lakoff and Johnson,

which contends that our worldview is constituted through metaphor, so that even metaphor is not “just” metaphorical.) As the following chapters will demonstrate, excrement was not merely used as a figure of speech but was central to a popular medieval metaphysics. It was not a symbol of sin or a consequence of sin: it *embodied* sin. It was an alternate manifestation of sin, as ice is an alternate manifestation of water. Excrement was sin made material. In the modern period, filth and excrement are deplorable but otherwise meaningless material realities, most useful as metaphors. In the Middle Ages, filth and excrement were the foundation of the understanding of human history. They were as important as sin because they *were* sin. This is a radical and crucial difference from modern attitudes.

This conception of excrement is expressed in both historical and fictional sources, by theologians and storytellers, by sophisticates, but most of all by popular writers who were not trying to argue a particular point of philosophy, but were reflecting the world as it was generally understood. This explains the otherwise perplexing pervasiveness of excremental motifs in medieval literature and art. Literary scholars have noted the popularity of latrine humor in medieval comedy, attributing it to a freewheeling crudity in medieval attitudes. But few scholars have remarked on the even more pervasive presence of excremental motifs in serious medieval religious material. This is not because even religious writers were crude, but because the material was theologically meaningful in a way that modern images of filth cannot be. Not only does this explain the otherwise inexplicable (and ignored) widespread use of filth in religious literature, but it throws new light on the use of filth in comedy, which operated against this backdrop of theological significance.

Part of what this book seeks to demonstrate is the central role of filth and excrement in medieval religious thought, and to this aim I have provided full examples from numerous sources, hoping to give some idea of how extensive and how commonplace such stories really were. Just glancing at or summarizing the evidence would obscure the very open, detailed, theological nature of the examples, and so I have quoted at length. What is more, these examples should demonstrate the level at which such thought was conducted: most are in Latin, the language of “official,” elite culture, which modern scholarship has tended to suppose was too refined to deal with such low matters. But Latin was the language of the Church, and the Church understood the importance of filth more than any author of entertainment. There is more dung in theology than there is in Chaucer. Even in Chaucer, the subject is tied to religion. At the same time, the analysis of filth was not the province of abstruse theological writers; the sources reflect a culture-wide understanding most relevant to those concerned with the divine, with which filth was intimately connected.

For this reason, I have chosen to concentrate largely on the utilitarian, devotional and exemplary literature of the medieval period, rather than on “literary” authors such as Chaucer or Dante. Although the texts in this

study can evince considerable sophistication, they are more ordinary than singular, witnesses to a commonplace understanding of the moral and material structure of the universe. I have included the original texts, despite their length and number, in part to show what a great number appear in Latin, the language of learned, “official” culture. The fact that they concern dung does not make these texts lowly, facetious, subversive or improper. On the contrary, they are entirely mainstream: commonplace, sober, exhortatory and moral. Dung could certainly be a staple of comedy in humorous genres, as today. That does not need a book to explain it. What this book explains is the non-comedic, moral, sober uses of the subject.

The scope of this book is broad: from the first glimmerings of the theological formulation of the subject in the early Christian period to the dawn of the Renaissance. Indeed, as examples will make clear, this understanding of filth outlasted the Middle Ages. In some ways it found its most aggressive form in the early modern period, and the whole of this book might form a prolegomenon to the work of Martin Luther, which is suffused with scatology. But the Reformation precipitated theological complexities which are beyond the scope of this already distended study, and so I have left later periods to future researchers. As a rough guide, the earliest substantial works examined here date from the fifth century, and the latest from the late fifteenth and very early sixteenth century. Culture, morals, resources and technology do not remain static over an eleven-hundred-year period, and I emphasize that I aim to avoid a totalizing view of the medieval period. Individual thinkers sometimes formulated individual answers to common medieval questions: the thirteenth-century philosopher and proto-scientist Roger Bacon, for example, developed mechanistic explanations for many phenomena in ways that differ from more popular interpretations. But what I aim to discuss are the elements that remained constant across the period: the ways in which medieval culture largely agreed, rather than the specifics of those who sometimes differed. Medieval Christian culture from the fifth century to the fifteenth had a steadfast understanding of the moral connotations of filth within a theological framework. Certainly this might take different forms in different periods. In the tenth and succeeding centuries, worries about the relationship between divinity and corrupt materiality found voice in the stercoran heresy and controversies about the Eucharist. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the same concerns are reflected in the beliefs of the Cathars and other heretical sects. The twelfth century saw the same understanding reflected in the rite of the stercory seat at the papal consecration, a practice that continued until the sixteenth century. With the rise of drama in the later medieval period, this understanding of filth begins to appear in plays about Judas, demons and sinners. In late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Continental painting, it took the form of images of Christ and the saints being insulted by the lower bodies of fools and sinners. Across the period it appears in theology, sermon literature and tales of the deaths of sinners. The methods and focuses of theology

as a whole shifted from period to period, but many of the basic underlying assumptions were the same throughout; the understanding of filth was one of these. Thus this book intends to draw the broad picture that found expression in many forms, some of them taking different forms across the period, some enduring.

Similarly this understanding of filth was general throughout western Christendom, the area of focus in this book. To some extent I favor witnesses from Britain and France, particularly in the historical sections, although materials from Italy, Germany, the Low Countries and Scandinavia also come into play. This bias is largely because English materials were easiest to access and alone provided far more evidence than could be included in any single study. I hope that providing this more comprehensive background to English literature may encourage scholars of English to take account of this material when they look at vernacular texts on these themes. While I discuss differences between regions and periods in the second chapter, once again my focus is on the larger commonalities between disparate witnesses.

Chapter 1, “The Devil in the Latrine,” introduces the subject: the role of dung and filth as moral agents in medieval thought and literature. These are set against a backdrop of modern scholarship on filth, disgust and the body, forming a theoretical context for the study of medieval social practices.

Chapter 2, “Pollution and Filth in the Middle Ages: Material Realities,” examines filth and dung as the material, public reality it was, the underlying actuality upon which systems of thought were overlaid. It proceeds by analyzing the sanitation of four categories of medieval people: citydwellers, countrydwellers, the cloistered and the wealthy and identifies their concerns, ranging from shame, privacy and bodily vulnerability to the hoarding of waste as a vital resource and source of wealth. The latter part of the chapter examines the thought underlying filth-related taboos and euphemisms. The whole forms the first comprehensive overview of medieval sanitary systems to appear in scholarship. This explication of material conditions demonstrates that the medieval understanding of filth is a symbolic construct, shaped by Christianity, rather than an invariant reaction to a single objective reality.

Chapter 3, “The Symbolic Order of the Body,” extends the current understanding of the cosmology of the Middle Ages, situating filth in relation to other material reflections of moral issues in the realm of the body and the wider cosmos. It begins by establishing the body as a moral realm: In the medieval understanding, the body could be read and interpreted no less than scripture or other components of the universe. Moreover, in medieval culture the material and moral were identical, not just metaphors: filth *was* sin, “up” was literally “superior.” The chapter then uses this framework to analyze the literature of inversion, in which sinners invert the right order of the body, ceding lofty reason to the base animal desires of the lower half. As a whole, the chapter seeks to demonstrate the ways in which

this medieval schema is vital to a full understanding of a variety of works, including hagiography, exempla, devotional treatises, heresy charges, altarpieces and religious images.

Chapter 4, “The Realm of Corruption,” lays out the consequences of these systems: an understanding of human filth as both a symbol and a literal embodiment of sin. After laying out the ways in which divinity was associated with the immaterial and sin with the fleshly and corrupt, it identifies the many ways in which medieval people worried about conjunctions of the divine and the bodily, whether this concerned the attributes of God or the specifics of Christ’s incarnation. As a wealth of examples demonstrate, sinners could be likened to excrement itself, often being *de facto* transformed into excrement as they suffer death in the latrine as punishment for their sins. I then discuss the theological understanding of dung as reflected in the Bible and its exegesis, including the ways exegetes introduce dung into a discussion of Biblical passages that do not specify it, such as the interpretation of the conditions on the ark. The chapter goes on to discuss the practical ramifications of this understanding of sin and excrement, such as the very concrete understanding that sin and treachery literally arose in the bowels, and the ways in which this was expressed in practices like the disemboweling of traitors and the “inverted execution.” The moral system of the body was also reflected in images of the body and its processes as a figure of the Church, as examples show; and excrement became a marker of sin. This chapter analyzes these and many other instances of the symbolic force of filth and excrement, showing how an understanding of these beliefs makes sense of much that has been deemed crude or unwarranted in medieval culture.

The final chapter, “In Conclusion,” sums up and applies the schema of previous chapters. Here I discuss the question of whether filth really embodies its own contradiction, whether that contradiction may be carnivalesque, fruitful or protective. With the meaning of filth clear from so many examples explored in previous chapters, it should be possible to shed light on some more enigmatic examples. Therefore, I look at four cases that have puzzled or bemused previous scholars: a key passage from the early gnostic theologian Valentinus, a thirteenth-century manuscript image of St. Francis, the devilish torments of St. Christina of Stommeln and the knockabout fabliau *Le sacristain*. Finally, the chapter traces the religious understanding of filth past the end of the Middle Ages, into the early modern period and the Enlightenment, and to its end.

To recognize the role of filth in the symbolic order is to expand our understanding of medieval thought, thought that assigned to even the lowliest of substances a key role in the universe and in relation to God. To put aside modern discomfiture and apprehend this in medieval terms is to understand the very real concerns represented by the Devil in the latrine.



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1 The Devil in the Latrine

A godly father sitting on a draught,
To do as neede, and nature hath us taught;
Mumbled (as was his manner) certen pray'rs,
And unto him the Devil straight repayr's:
And boldly to revile him he begins,
Alledging that such pray'rs are deadly sins;
And that it shewd, he was devoyd of grace,
To speake to God, from so unmeete a place.
The reverent man, though at the first dismaid;
Yet strong in faith, to Satan thus he said.
Thou damned spirit, wicked, false & lying,
Dispairing thine own good, & ours envying:
Ech take his due, and me thou canst not hurt,
To God my pray'r I meant, to thee the durt.
Pure prayr ascends to him that high doth sit.
Down fals the filth, for fiends of hel more fit.

—Sir John Harington, *The Metamorphosis of Ajax*¹

Among the concerns of medieval theology, one debate was particularly down-to-earth: whether the latrine was a proper place for the praise of God. The thirteenth-century Italian chronicler Salimbene de Adam tells a story in which the devil weighs in on this question:

Quidam religiosus, dum in loco privato *ad requisita nature* sederet et Deum laudaret, fuit reprehensus a demone quod locus ille non erat ydoneus, sed inhonestus ad Deum laudandum. Cui respondit frater et dixit: “Ita sum divinis laudibus assuetus, quod a laude Dei cessare non possum. Nam, Scriptura teste, didici quod Deus est ubique, ergo ubique est laudandus a suis. . . . Igitur qui omnem locum dicit nullum excludit. Quapropter et ventrem meum purgabo et Deum meum laudabo.”²

A certain man in religious orders was praising God while sitting on the privy “for the necessities of nature” [Deuteronomy 23.12]. And a demon came and rebuked him, saying that such a place was

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not suitable and honorable for giving praise to God. But the Brother answered, "I am so accustomed to singing divine praises that I cannot cease praising God. For I learned in the Scripture that God is everywhere; therefore, everywhere is suitable for praising him. . . . Therefore, I shall praise God while emptying my bowels."³

The brother castigates the demon for some time, and finally expounds on the similarities between the demon and latrines:

"*similia similibus gaudent. Nam omne animal ad sibi simile convertetur. Tu porcus es, immundus es, immundus diceris, immunda diligis et immunda requiris. Factus enim eras ut habitares in celo, et nunc vadis per sterquilinia visitando latrinas.*" Cum igitur frater talia perorasset, demon erubuit et recessit ab eo confusus.⁴

"like rejoices in like. For every animal seeks its own kind. You are a pig: you are impure, you speak impurities; you love impurities; you seek impurities. For you were created to live in heaven, and now you seek out toilets and go visiting latrines." After the Brother had said these things, the demon blushed and departed in confusion.⁵

In replying, the brother articulated an important theme of medieval thought: that moral impurity and material impurity are closely allied. Thus cleanliness was indeed next to godliness, and filth and material corruption, no less than sin, were the realm of the devil. So it should come as no surprise that the latrine was regarded as the haunt of demons and that this religious man was not alone in meeting the devil when he went to satisfy the necessities of nature. Similar tales were abundant in the Middle Ages. The story is found, for instance, attached to Gregory the Great.⁶ As in Salimbene's account, the devil reproaches the religious man for reciting psalms in the privy, whereupon Gregory defends himself, echoing the memorable line, "*Ventrem meum purgo, et deum meum laudo,*" "I empty my bowels and I praise my God." Peter the Venerable, abbot of Cluny in the twelfth century, tells the story of monk who was able to expel a demon into a privy: "*immundum spiritum per condignum ejus immunditiae locum a domo sua expulit,*" "he expelled the foul spirit from his dwelling via the place befitting his foulness."⁷ The biographer of Peter told another story in which a monk who had not confessed all his sins was oppressed by a demon; when he completed his confession, casting out his sins, the demon fled to the privy.⁸ Another story, retailed by Thietmar of Merseburg in the thirteenth century, tells of seven demons who emerged from a privy.⁹ The Prose Rule of the Céli Dé, an Irish rule preserved in a twelfth- or thirteenth-century manuscript, confirms that "the privy-houses and the urine-houses they are the abode of demons," and prescribes the blessings to be performed before entering, as well as

the prayers permitted in the privy.¹⁰ The *Cent nouvelles nouvelles*, a fifteenth-century French collection of stories, tells of a knight who met the devil in the latrine and struggled physically with him for an hour, and was only able to vanquish him by maintaining a steadfast faith in baptism.¹¹ The Icelandic tale *Þátr Þorsteins skelks* describes the ordeal of Þorsteinn, who defies the king's orders that no one should visit the privy alone at night, and finds himself confronted in the privy by a demon. After describing hell, the demon advances on Þorsteinn until vanquished by the ringing of church bells.¹² In the early twelfth century, Guibert of Nogent tells the story of a man who witnessed the Devil creeping amongst the sleeping associates of a bishop and finally retiring into the latrine.¹³ Elsewhere he describes a monk accosted by the Devil in the latrine.¹⁴ The *Passion of St. Juliana* recounts Juliana's encounter with the Devil. Though he appeared to her disguised as an angel, she was able to discern his true identity and cast him into a latrine or dungheap.¹⁵ The *Life* of the fifteenth-century holy woman Francisca or Francesca of Rome tells of the time she was accosted by two demons, who attempted to abduct her to the latrine; she resisted only by keeping a strong faith and by angelic intervention.¹⁶ The fifteenth-century theologian Johannes Nider tells the story of a brother who cast out a demon and mockingly told it to repair to the latrine; when the brother later went to use the latrine at night, the devil tormented him so much there that he barely survived.¹⁷ The very popular thirteenth-century *Dialogue on Miracles* of Caesarius of Heisterbach recounts the story of a lay-brother named Albero, who suffered eight days of illness after spotting a devil lurking by the latrine.¹⁸ He also tells the story of a priest who encountered the devil in the privy and nearly succumbed to the devil's urgings to hang himself there; finally he purified himself through confession and hence was able to cast the devil out.¹⁹

A latent theme runs through all of these stories, most clearly articulated in the version of Caesarius of Heisterbach. The latrine is the realm of filth and danger both material and spiritual. When the man purifies himself—through confession, as in Caesarius, or through faith in baptism, as in the *Cent nouvelles nouvelles*—the devil is cast out of the privy. Both the latrine and the man undergo purification: it is as if the man himself *is* a latrine, full of corruption and vulnerable to the devil.

The motif extended past the close of the Middle Ages, appearing in the works of some of the most notable figures of the sixteenth century. The Protestant reformer Philipp Melancthon is witness to a tradition that assigned the encounter to St. Bernard:

Dicitur de sancto Bernhardo, qui cum aliquando in latrina oraret Psalmos, venit ad eum Diabolus et obiurgavit eum dicens: Quare tu in latrina oras sanctos Psalmos? Respondit ei S. Bernardus: Illud, quod ex ore exit, Deo offero; sed id, quod infra ex ventre eiicio, tu comedas.²⁰



Figure 1 The Devil appears to the hapless man in the latrine. As the latrine is the domain of the rear, and the Devil is its champion, the Devil is backing in and presents himself rear foremost. Illustration of the poem "A godly father sitting on a draught," from *A New Discourse of a Stale Subject, called The Metamorphosis of Ajax* (London, 1596), p. 18. "Ajax" is a pun on the contemporary word for a privy, "a jakes."