


The Devil as ‘Father of Lies’: Ideas of Diabolical Deceit in the Donatist Controversy

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This article examines the connections in late antique Christian thought between the ideas that heretics were inspired by the devil, and that the devil was a liar. It begins by showing that the association of the devil with lies was founded on scriptural exegesis, and that Scripture was regularly deployed in heresiologies to cement the links between the devil as ‘father of lies’, and heretics and schismatics as liars in Satan’s image. It then offers a detailed case study of when, where and how accusations of direct and indirect diabolical dissimulation were made by the opposing parties of the ‘Donatist controversy’ in polemical texts produced primarily for their own side. The final part considers how these accusations were modulated in invented textual dialogues and in oral debates between the two sides, showing how direct accusations of diabolical activity made against opponents were often eschewed for more subtle insinuations of diabolical association.

In a sermon on Psalm 39, preached in North Africa in the second decade of the fifth century, Augustine warned his congregation about the devil’s ability to switch from the open violence of persecution to the more insidious deceit entailed by heresy.¹ He used bestial

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¹ Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 39 (transl. adapted from Maria Boulding, *New City Press Works of St Augustine* III/16 [Hyde Park, NY, 2000], 194–238; Latin text: PL 36: 431–52). As Possidius explains in a catalogue of Augustine’s works attached to his *Life*, the *Enarrationes in Psalmos* contain a number of different kinds of texts, and he classifies *En. Ps. 39* as a ‘sermon preached to the people’: *Indiculus* 10.4.3. Seraphim Zarb, ‘Chronologia Enarrationum S. Augustini in Psalmos’, *Angelicum* 15.3 (1938), 382–408, at 402–5, analyzes internal references to urban topography and festivals in this sermon and concludes that it was preached at Carthage between 411 and 413. By contrast, Henri Rondet, ‘Essais sur la chronologie des ‘Enarrationes in Psalmos’ de saint Augustin (suite)’, *Bulletin de littérature ecclésiastique* 65 (1964), 110–36, at 131–4, places it in Hippo, between 405 and 415, perhaps more specifically between 411 and 415.

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doi: 10.1017/stc.2024.1

metaphors drawn from Scripture to show that where Satan had previously been a lion ‘savaging openly’ (*aperte saeviebat*), he was now a snake ‘lying hidden in ambush’ (*occulte insidiatur*),² and pithily summarized the devil’s shift in tactics thus: ‘In former days he used to force [*cogebat*] Christians to deny Christ; nowadays he teaches [*docet*] them to deny Christ.’³ He then imagined an encounter between a heretic and a Christian in vivid metaphorical terms:

But the slippery snake approaches unseen, a serpent with silent, gliding motion, drawing his length along softly as he creeps in, craftily whispering, and he does not say, ‘Deny Christ’. . . . What he does say is, ‘be a Christian’. The hearer is struck by this remarkable saying. If the poison has not yet penetrated, he replies, ‘I am a Christian, that’s obvious.’ But if he is swayed and captivated by the serpent’s tooth, he replies, ‘Why do you say to me, be a Christian? How can you say that? Am I not a Christian already?’ The snake answers, ‘No’. ‘I’m not?’ ‘No.’ ‘Well, make me then a Christian then, if I’m not one.’ ‘Come along then. But when the bishop begins to question you about what you are, do not say, I am a Christian, or I am a believer, but say you are not. If you follow this advice, you may become one.’⁴

In this passage, it emerges that the diabolical snake is a so-called ‘Donatist’, a member of a rigorist Christian community in North Africa stigmatized by bishops and emperors as schismatic and heretical.⁵ The Donatist ‘snake’ is trying to inveigle a Christian to be re-baptized, a practice which had been repeatedly condemned by anti-Donatist bishops and emperors in the later fourth and early fifth centuries.⁶ In Augustine’s imagined scenario, a Christian who

² Augustine, *En. Ps.* 39.3 (transl. Boulding, 195). Central scriptural passages interpreted by early Christians as evidence for the connection between the snake, the lion and the devil, are found at Gen. 3; Ps. 90 (91): 13 (itself cited by Augustine in *En. Ps.* 39.1); Rev. 12: 9 and 20: 2; 1 Pet. 5: 8.

³ Augustine *En. Ps.* 39.3 (transl. Boulding, 195).

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ On the problems of using the labels of ‘Donatist’ versus ‘catholic’ to describe the two opposing parties, see Brent Shaw, *Sacred Violence: African Christians and Sectarian Hatred in the Age of Augustine* (Cambridge, 2011), 5–6. In this article, I use ‘Donatist’ throughout as a label of convenience and prefer ‘anti-Donatist’ to describe their opponents, since members of both groups considered themselves to be ‘catholic’.

⁶ Seven imperial edicts which forbid or otherwise stigmatize re-baptism are preserved in title 16.6 of the *Theodosian Code*, ‘Holy baptism shall not be repeated’: transl. Clyde Pharr, *Theodosian Code* (Princeton, NJ, 1952), 463. See Noel Lenski, ‘Imperial

had already been baptized would be coached knowingly to tell a lie ('do not say, "I am a Christian" ... but say you are not') during the process of scrutiny early in catechesis, in order to receive a second, Donatist, baptism.⁷

Augustine's dramatic sketch builds on two long-established traditions of early Christian polemic: that the Christian experience of persecution and heresy here on earth is not merely a human conflict, but reflects a broader reality of cosmic combat between God and the spiritual forces of wickedness; and more specifically, that one of the devil's key techniques for attacking humans is to spread lies among them, using heretics and schismatics to disseminate bad doctrine, bad exegesis and bad ethics.⁸ While scholars have noted that accusations of heresy in late antiquity were regularly yoked to the devil, and that deceit was one of his main tactics, little sustained attention has been paid to the relationship between these notions, nor to how opposing parties deployed such accusations in a range of textual and oral contexts.⁹ In the first part of this article, I seek to bridge these gaps by demonstrating that the association of the devil with lies was underpinned by the exegesis of Scripture, and that scriptural passages about diabolical deceit were in turn frequently deployed in a range of heresiological works to cement the link between the devil as 'father of lies', and heretics and schismatics as liars in Satan's image. In the second part, I move to a detailed case study of when, where and how accusations of direct and indirect diabolical dissimulation were made by the opposing parties of the 'Donatist controversy' in

Legislation and the Donatist Controversy: From Constantine to Honorius', in Richard Miles, ed., *The Donatist Schism: Controversy and Contexts* (Liverpool, 2016), 166–219, with a useful appendix of imperial communications on Donatism at 196–219.

⁷ On the rite of 'scrutiny' during Lenten catechesis in Augustine's Hippo, see William Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate*, revised edition by Allan Fitzgerald (Collegeville, MI, 2014), 219–25.

⁸ On the working out of this idea in ecclesiastical histories, see Sophie Lunn-Rockcliffe, 'Diabolical Motivations: The Devil in Ecclesiastical Histories from Eusebius to Evagrius', in Geoffrey Greatrex, Hugh Elton and Lucas McMahon, eds, *Shifting Genres in Late Antiquity* (Farnham, 2015), 119–31.

⁹ On the devil as first liar, see Dallas Denery II, *The Devil Wins: A History of Lying from the Garden of Eden to the Enlightenment* (Princeton, NJ, 2015), 21–61. On the demonization of heretics, see Elaine Pagels, *The Origin of Satan* (New York, 1995), 149–78. On Satan the heretic, see Neil Forsyth, *The Old Enemy* (Princeton, NJ, 1987), 309–17. On the rhetoric of polarization, see David Gwynn, *The Eusebians: The Polemic of Athanasius of Alexandria and the Construction of the 'Arian Controversy'* (Oxford, 2007), 171–7.

polemical texts produced for consumption mainly by their own side. In the final part, I consider how these accusations were modulated both in invented textual dialogues and in oral debates between the two sides, showing how direct accusations of diabolical activity made against opponents were often eschewed for more subtle, often scripturally derived, insinuations of diabolical association.

The Donatist controversy is ripe for analysis because it is attested through a rich array of records and a range of different kinds of rhetoric: the eloquent instruments of imperial letters, designed to deliver words from one end of the empire to the other; clerical treatises addressed both to and against their opponents; transcripts of sermons preached to insiders; polemical treatises engaging in selective quotation and then refutation of their opponents' arguments; and stenographic records of the real-time exchanges of church councils and conferences.¹⁰ Sermons and conciliar proceedings in particular give us some sense of spoken language, with the caveat that they have often been tidied up for dissemination.¹¹ Furthermore, the evidential trail represents both sides of the debate, albeit often unevenly, allowing us to see something of how the notion of diabolical inspiration for heretical deceit was deployed by opposing parties. This is relatively unusual, since many theologies and communities stigmatized as heresies or schisms in late antiquity leave very little trace of themselves in textual terms. For example, there are few remaining texts representing the views of so-called 'Arians', another early fourth-century theological grouping that was stigmatized by emperors and bishops alike as diabolical,¹² and the demonization of the 'Messalians' was in part a constructive process of making a heresy out of a scattering of

¹⁰ The evidence for the Donatist controversy has been systematically mined in Brent Shaw's *Sacred Violence*. He notes the linking of heretics with Satan as 'Father of lies' but suggests that 'for the Africans' [i.e. 'Donatists'], 'the Antichrist was an even more powerful figure': Shaw, *Sacred Violence*, 323–4.

¹¹ On the variety of stages of editorial polish of sermons, see Nikolai Lipatov-Chicherin, 'Preaching as the Audience heard it: Unedited Transcripts of Patristic Homilies', *Studia Patristica* 64 (2013), 277–98. On the problems with stenographic transcripts of councils, see Tommaso Mari, 'Working on the Minutes of Late Antique Church Councils: A Methodological Framework', *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture* 13 (2019), 42–59.

¹² On the demonization of Arianism by Athanasius, see Gwynn, *Eusebians*, 171–7. For a discussion of the difficulties of reconstructing the Arian *Thalia*, see Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, 2nd edn (London, 2001; first publ. 1987), 62–6 and 98–107.

individuals who leave almost no independent trace of their teachings and practices.¹³

THE DEVIL AS 'FATHER OF LIES' IN EXEGESIS AND HERESIOLOGY

There was widespread agreement among early Christians that the devil's defining character traits were violence and deception, and these were chiefly established through the exegesis of scriptural stories in which Satan played a part. In his first fall from angelic favour and proximity to God, Satan was held to have lied in likening himself to God.¹⁴ The snake in Eden lied to the first humans, seducing Eve to persuade Adam to disobey God's command, and the devil also provided a model of deception and betrayal for subsequent humans, such as Judas, to imitate.¹⁵ Influential characterizations of the devil as a liar were also found in, or read into, sayings of Jesus and his followers. Paul famously compared 'false apostles' 'disguising themselves as apostles of Christ' with Satan who 'disguises himself as an angel of light' (2 Corinthians 11: 13–14).¹⁶ Jesus's parables contain vivid allegorical figures of the wolf in sheep's clothing (Matthew 7: 15), and the enemy sowing tares among the wheat (Matthew 13: 24–30). Perhaps most important of all was the passage in the Gospel of John in which Jesus inveighed against the Jews in Jerusalem in blisteringly cosmic terms: 'you are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires; he was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him; when he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies' (John 8: 44).

¹³ On the lack of 'Messalian' texts, see Columba Stewart, *Working the Earth of the Heart: The Messalian Controversy in History, Texts and Language to AD 431* (Oxford, 1991), 4–11. On the demonization of Messalianism, see Sophie Lunn-Rockliffe, 'The Invention and Demonization of a "Messalian" Heresiarch: Philoxenus of Mabbug on Adelphius', *JEH* 68 (2017), 1–19.

¹⁴ On debates about Satan's own fall, including the idea that it circled round deceit, see Sophie Lunn-Rockliffe, 'The Diabolical Problem of Satan's First Sin: Self-Moved Pride or a Response to the Goads of Envy?', *Studia Patristica* 63 (2013), 121–40.

¹⁵ On the devil suggesting sin to Eve and others in Scripture, see Sophie Lunn-Rockliffe, 'Augustine on the Diabolical Suggestion of Sin', in James Aitken, Hector Patmore and Ishay Rosen-Zvi, eds, *The Evil Inclination in Early Judaism and Christianity* (Cambridge, 2021), 212–31.

¹⁶ Biblical quotations are taken from the NRSVUE.

Interpretation of John 8: 44 became a crucial point of debate between theological parties, with some apparently reading the ambiguous Greek grammar of the first clause of this verse to mean that the devil himself had a father or grandfather, who could be identified with God.¹⁷ Such interpretations were resisted by Origen in his *Commentary on John* of the 240s,¹⁸ and by Epiphanius in his *Panarion*, a massive anti-heretical treatise of the 370s.¹⁹ In unpacking the sinful genealogy of this verse, both writers constructed moral relationships of ‘fatherhood’, which relied on notions of imitation and participation, rather than biological descent and nature, to explain the relationship between the devil and his human offspring. Thus for Origen, drawing on 1 John 3: 8–12, ‘each person who sins is generically a child of the devil ... but in addition, more specifically, he is a child as well either of Cain or Cham or Chanaan or Pharaoh or Nabuchodonosor, or some other impious person.’²⁰ Furthermore, he held the devil uniquely responsible for the generation of lies: ‘And the reason why truth is not in him [the devil] is that he has been deceived and accepts lies, and he has himself been deceived by himself. On this basis he is reckoned to be worse than the rest of these who are deceived, since they are deceived by him, but he creates his own deception himself.’²¹

¹⁷ See David Litwa, “‘The Father of the Devil’ (John 8: 44): A Christian Exegetical Inspiration for the Evil Creator’, *Vigiliae Christianae* 74 (2020), 540–65.

¹⁸ ‘The text is ambiguous. One meaning suggested by it is that the devil has a father, and, so far as the literal meaning is concerned, those addressed by this word appear to be derived from this father. There is another [possible meaning] however, which is preferable, namely, “You are of this father, concerning whom the title ‘devil’ is predicated.” Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 20.171 (transl. Ronald Heine, *Fathers of the Church* 89 [Washington, DC, 2006], 241–2). Heine explains: ‘The text of John could possibly be read “You are of the father of the devil.” This takes the second genitive phrase to express relationship, rather than being in apposition with the first genitive phrase.’ Heine, *Commentary on John*, 241 n. 182. On the dating of Origen’s commentary, see *ibid.* 4–18.

¹⁹ ‘... the other sects allege that the devil is the father of the Jews, and that he has a different father, and his father in turn has a father. ... They are tracing the devil’s ancestry to the Lord of all, the God of the Jews, the Christians, and all men, by saying that he is the father of the devil’s father...’: Epiphanius, *Panarion* 38.4.3–4 (transl. Frank Williams, *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis: Book 1 (Sects 1–46)*, 2nd edn [Leiden, 2009; first publ. 1987], 272–3).

²⁰ Origen, *Commentary on John* 20.78 (transl. Heine, 222–3) and 20.99–113 (transl. Heine, 227–30).

²¹ Origen, *Commentary on John* 20.244 (transl. Heine, 257).

Epiphanius condemned the so-called 'Cainites' for honouring Cain, explaining that Jesus meant Judas when he told the Jews their father was the devil, and then elaborated a genealogy by which Judas had as his father Cain, whom he imitated in lying and killing, and Cain in turn had the devil as his father, whom he imitated in 'fratricide, hatred and falsehood'.²² In a gospel commentary of the 420s, Cyril of Alexandria read the final clause of John 8: 44 not as 'he is a liar and the father of lies', but as 'he is a liar just like his father', and asked in mock puzzlement: 'Who would we reasonably suppose is the devil's father? Who else fell before him to whom the later one may be compared in classification and behaviour?'²³ He solved the conundrum in a similar manner to Epiphanius, arguing that the father of the Jews was in fact Cain, and that Cain's father was in turn the devil, whose primal rebellion against God was followed by deceit and eventually murder.²⁴

Moving west, we find that Augustine also foregrounded notions of imitation in his tractate on John 8: 44 (delivered as a sermon in the period 411–16), asking: 'How, then, were the Jews the children of the devil?'; and answering: 'by imitation, not by birth [*imitando, non nascendo*]'.²⁵ Augustine then offered an excursus on the nature of lying

²² Epiphanius, *Panarion* 38.4.3–5.2 (transl. Williams, 272–3).

²³ Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 6.94 (transl. Joel Elowsky, *Ancient Christian Texts* 2 [Downers Grove, IL, 2015], 1). On the dating of this text to 425–8, see Elowsky, *Commentary on John*, xvi–xvii. It is not clear if Cyril of Alexandria knew Epiphanius, although it is plausible that he would have done so: see Matthew Crawford, *Cyril of Alexandria's Trinitarian Theology of Scripture* (Oxford, 2014), 81.

²⁴ 'Since we have said that Cain was listed as the father of the Jews and Satan as the father of Cain himself, come let us go through our own words and clearly demonstrate that Satan was the first to rear his head against God's correction, that he then went on to lie and deceive, and that he finally committed murder because of envy. Then we will show that Cain has the same behaviour and mindset as him. And third, we will bring home the argument to the Jews, who possess the image of his wickedness in its entirety.' Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John* 6.97 (transl. Elowsky, 3). John Byron outlines a longer Jewish tradition in which Cain was biologically descended from Satan: John Byron, *Cain and Abel in Text and Tradition: Jewish and Christian Interpretations of the First Sibling Rivalry* (Leiden, 2011), 16–20.

²⁵ Augustine, *Tractate on the Gospel of John* 42.10.4 (transl. John Rettig, *Fathers of the Church* 88 [Washington, DC, 1993], 156). Seraphim Zarb identifies this as one of the sermons delivered to Augustine's congregation at Hippo in the period between 411 and 416: Seraphim Zarb, 'Chronologia Tractatum S. Augustini in Evangelium primamque Epistulam Iohannis Apostoli', *Angelicum* 10 (1933), 50–110. Rettig surveys the complex history of dating the tractates more generally: Rettig, *Tractate on John*, 23–31. On Augustine's diabolization of the Jews, see Shaw, *Sacred Violence*, 299.

which explained why the devil was more to blame for his lying than his subsequent human imitators, in an argument which resembles Origen's.²⁶

For not everyone who lies is the father of his lying. For if you received the lie from another and told it, you indeed lied by making known the lie; but you are not the father of the lie itself because you received the lie from another. But the devil is a liar on his own [*diabolus autem a seipso mendax fuit*]; he himself begot [*genuit*] his own lying, he heard it from no-one. As God the Father begot [*genuit*] his son, truth, so the devil after his fall begot a son, so to speak, lying [*genuit quasi filium mendacium*].²⁷

Augustine productively repeated the theological language of 'begetting', applying it in the first half of the sentence to the relationship between Father and Son, and in the second half to the relationship between the devil and lying. This underlined the generative quality of the devil as 'father of falsehood', and offered a parodic inversion of the truthfulness of Christ.

While some Christian teachers applied Jesus's words in John 8: 44 to condemn Jews in their own day,²⁸ others applied the label of 'children of the devil' – as well as other archetypal scriptural passages about diabolical dissimulation – to heretics and schismatics who were deemed to be related to 'the father of the lies' in their refusal to accept 'orthodox' doctrine. This phenomenon can be seen in heresiologies from the second century onwards, which worked to catalogue and stigmatize as 'heretics' and 'schismatics' groups whose beliefs and/or practices were determined to be errant.²⁹ Heresiologies had an insistent genealogical logic, adopting the notion of 'successions'

²⁶ On this relationship more generally, see György Heidl, *The Influence of Origen on the Young Augustine: A Chapter of the History of Origenism* (Piscataway, NJ, 2009). On Augustine and lying more generally, see Paul Griffiths, *Lying: An Augustine Theology of Duplicity* (Eugene, OR, 2004), esp. 23–110.

²⁷ Augustine, *Tractate on John* 42.13 (transl. Rettig, 159). A similar emphasis on the devil's self-generated sin can be found in the earlier Latin exegesis of Ambrosiaster, *Quaestiones* 90 and 98, ed. Alexander Souter, CSEL 50 (Vienna, 1908), 150–1 and 187–9.

²⁸ See John Chrysostom, *Discourse Against Judaizing Christians* 8.8.4–6 (transl. Paul Harkins, *Fathers of the Church* 68 [Washington, DC, 1979], 235–7), where John 8: 44 is used to justify the prohibition on seeking amulets and healings from Jews at Antioch.

²⁹ The classic account of the construction of heresy is Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, transl. Paul Achtemeier (Philadelphia, PA, 1979), more recently

(*diadochai*) of teachers found in classical philosophical schools.³⁰ In some cases, heresiologists traced the ultimate origin of heresy back through generations of human heretics to their ultimate instigator, the devil.³¹

In his massive treatise *Against Heresies* of the late second century, Irenaeus of Lyons regularly assumed that particular heretics were under various forms of diabolical or demonic influence, and his references to other texts and writers who shared this idea demonstrates that it was a broader worldview. He reported the verse attack of a contemporary, perhaps Polycarp, against Marcus, which accused him of tricking and deceiving his followers using miracles facilitated by Satan, 'your father' (a nod to John 8: 44).³² He described the followers of Carpocrates as 'being sent forth by Satan to the pagans to malign the holy name of the church', and convincing people to turn away from the truth.³³ Of Marcion, Irenaeus claimed that he spoke 'with the devil's mouth', 'uttering all things contrary to the truth'; indeed, as the serpent spoke to Eve, so it was the 'serpent which was in Marcion' who spoke.³⁴ Tertullian's treatise *On the Prescription of Heretics*, written c.200, shows less interest than Irenaeus in the devil's intervention in precise moments of human history, but he used Jesus's parable of the wheat and the tares (Matthew 13: 24–30) to suggest that heresy had been introduced by the devil, and he contrasted the 'priority of truth' with 'the comparative lateness of falsehood'.³⁵ In his exhaustive catalogue of and invective against

contested by essays in Paul Hartog, ed., *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Early Christian Contexts: Reconsidering the Bauer Thesis* (Eugene, OR, 2015).

³⁰ On the notion of a *diadochē* ('succession') of teachers underpinning both philosophical and heretical successions, see Allen Brent, 'Diogenes Laertius and the Apostolic Succession', *JEH* 44 (1993), 367–89; Geoffrey Smith, *Guilt by Association: Heresy Catalogues in Early Christianity* (Oxford, 2014), 10, notes the importance of 'demonic error' to heresy catalogues.

³¹ On the relationship between heresy and Satan, see Pagels, *Origin of Satan*, 149–78; Todd Berzon, *Classifying Christians: Ethnography, Heresiology and the Limits of Knowledge in Late Antiquity* (Oakland, CA, 2016), 150–3 (on Theodore and Epiphanius).

³² Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.15.6 (transl. Dominic Unger, revised edition by John Dillon, ACW 65 [Mahwah, NJ, 1992], 68).

³³ *Ibid.* 1.25.3 (transl. Unger, 88).

³⁴ *Ibid.* 1.27.3 (transl. Unger, 92).

³⁵ Tertullian, *On the Prescription of Heretics* 31 (ed. and transl. R. Refoulé and Pierre Labriolle, SC 46 [Paris, 1957], 130).

heresies, the *Panarion*, Epiphanius suggested relationships of influence between the devil and particular heretics in a range of scriptural images. For example, he deployed the gospel accounts of Satan entering into Judas's heart to describe Satan's possession of the heretic Nicolaus: 'Later, however, the devil slipped into him and deceived his heart ...'.³⁶ He described the teachings and scriptures of heretics like the Gnostics as 'a devil's sowing', evoking Jesus's parable of the weeds and the tares, and accused heretics of wearing sheep's fleeces to disguise the inner ravening wolf.³⁷

So far, we have seen that the scripturally derived understanding of the devil as an archetypal liar regularly shaped the hostile depiction of heretics as diabolical liars, although our exegetes and controversialists were keen to stress that much heretical deceit was derivative and imitative, and only the devil himself had no predecessors in lying, uniquely begat the first lies, and was thus the ultimate 'father of lies'. In the remainder of this article, I will demonstrate that both Donatists and anti-Donatists, battling in words and sometimes violent deeds, regularly made accusations of diabolical inspiration or possession against their opponents, which in turn frequently evoked deceit as a defining diabolical characteristic. I will also argue that the varying modulations of those accusations, themselves often alluding to scriptural images and phrases, imply different levels of moral responsibility for the humans so possessed, but were also shaped by contemporary norms which set different limits to polemical rhetoric in given contexts.

DIABOLICAL DISSIMULATION IN DONATIST AND ANTI-DONATIST POLEMIC

Some dozen and a half of the emperor Constantine's surviving letters deal with Donatism, mostly in correspondence with bishops.³⁸ Scholars generally agree that the distinctive and consistent rhetorical

³⁶ Epiphanius, *Panarion* 25.1.3 (transl. Williams, 84), evoking the Satanic deception of Judas described at Luke 22: 3, John 13: 2 and John 13: 27.

³⁷ Epiphanius, *Panarion* 26.3.2 (transl. Williams, 92) on tares; and 40.1.4 and 46.2.1 (transl. Williams, 283 and 377) on sheep and wolves.

³⁸ Many of Constantine's letters are preserved in Eusebius's *Life of Constantine* (in Greek translation) and in Opatrus's *Appendix* (in Latin). See the texts assembled by Jean-Louis Maier, *Le dossier du donatisme, 1: des origines à la mort de Constance II (303–61)* (Berlin, 1987), 137–254, and the catalogue in Lenski, 'Imperial Legislation', 197–207.

tone of those letters reflect Constantine's own perspective and preoccupations, even though they were probably drafted by his chancery.³⁹ The letters contain a fair amount of generalizing invective against schismatics – including accusations of deceit – which did not often accuse them of being diabolical, instead drawing on older Roman traditions critiquing religious deviants for their anger, madness and obstinacy.⁴⁰ Thus, for example, in a letter to the vicar of Africa, Aelafius, of 314, Constantine condemned the Donatists for their 'rabid anger' (*vesano furore*) and for acting 'in a stubborn and pertinacious manner' (*obnixè ac pertinaciter*); and in a letter to Celsus of 315, he denounced Maenalius as gripped by 'insanity' (*insania*) and those who have 'departed from truth and given themselves most basely [*praevissumo*] to error'.⁴¹ In the single surviving letter to a group of bishops of the Donatist party, dated to about 315, Constantine criticized them as 'troublemakers' (*turbulentos*), 'obstinate in mind' and of 'excessive obstinacy' (*obstinato animo* and *nimia ... obstinatione*), who did not respect 'the spirit of upright truth', but, perhaps diplomatically, made no mention of Satan.⁴²

By contrast, in two separate letters to groups of anti-Donatist bishops, Constantine explicitly and repeatedly identified the devil's influence in their opponents. In a letter of 314 addressed to 'catholic' bishops who had been at the council of Arles earlier that year, Constantine characterized the Donatists as those 'whom the wickedness of the devil [*malignitas diaboli*] seemed to have diverted by his contemptible persuasion', and referred to their 'repudiating truth', being 'wicked men' who are 'officers of the devil' (*maligni homines officia ... diaboli*), and 'unspeakable deceivers of religion' (*infandos*

³⁹ On the distinctive rhetoric of Constantine's correspondence, see Averil Cameron and Stuart Hall, *Life of Constantine* (Oxford, 1999), 240; Andrew Pottenger, *Power and Rhetoric in the Ecclesiastical Correspondence of Constantine the Great* (London, 2022), 4–5; Shaw, *Sacred Violence*, 491.

⁴⁰ Pottenger sketches the longer background of metaphors of madness and reason, and of sickness and healing, used by Constantine in his correspondence: Pottenger, *Power and Rhetoric*, 97–128. It has also been shown that heresy was prosecuted using existing legal categories: see Caroline Humfress, *Orthodoxy and the Courts in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2007), 217–42.

⁴¹ Constantine, Letter to Aelafius (Maier, *Dossier*, 153–8; transl. Mark Edwards in Optatus, *Against the Donatists* [Liverpool, 1997], 181–4); Letter to Celsus (Maier, *Dossier*, 194–6; transl. Edwards, 193–4).

⁴² Constantine, Letter to the African bishops (Maier, *Dossier*, 192–3; transl. Edwards, 192).

deceptores religionis).⁴³ The double use of *malignus* and cognates here, the first time related explicitly to the devil, tallies with broader fourth-century Latin usage, where they are words strongly associated with Satan.⁴⁴

In 330, Constantine made an even more programmatic and sustained account of the devil's work in Donatism in a letter to a group of named Numidian bishops.⁴⁵ He indicated subtly that he was withdrawing his intervention in the affair and commended the bishops for abstaining from quarrels with the schismatics. The letter strikes a florid rhetorical tone and is especially rich in scriptural allusions, perhaps to distract from his withdrawal from direct intervention.⁴⁶ It starts with an overarching characterization of diabolical motivation which is familiar from heresiologies and later recapped by Eusebius:

there is no doubt that heresy and schism proceeds from the devil, who is the fount of evil [*caput est malitiae*], and thus there is no doubting that whatever is done by heretics occurs at the instigation of him [*eius instinctu*] who has possessed their sense and reason [*qui eorum sensus mentes cogitationesque possedit*].⁴⁷

A schismatic is condemned as one 'who runs with headlong error to the devil's party' (*ad diaboli partem*). Constantine repeated the idea

⁴³ Constantine, Letter to the 'catholic' bishops (Maier, *Dossier*, 167–71; transl. Edwards, 189–91).

⁴⁴ Augustine, *Homily 5* on 1 John quotes a Latin text of 1 John 3: 12 which renders *ponēros* ('the evil one') as *malignus* ('the wicked one'). Elsewhere, Augustine collocates *malignitas diaboli* ('the wickedness of the devil') at least twice: *Letter 78.2* and *On the Grace of Christ 2.40.46*.

⁴⁵ Constantine, Letter to the Numidian bishops (Maier, *Dossier*, 246–52; transl. Edwards, 198–201). This text overlaps with the edited version of a law to the governor of Numidia in the *Theodosian Code* 16.2.7 (transl. Pharr, 441–2), both of which were issued at Serdica on 5 February 330. Shaw compares the 'neatly trimmed and edited version of the law that appears in the law code' with 'the original words that were heard by the Africans' (emphasis original): Shaw, *Sacred Violence*, 540. Lenski identifies a petition, three letters and one mandate produced on this date: Lenski, 'Legislation', 206–7.

⁴⁶ Scriptural references in this letter include allusions to 2 Tim. 3: 1–5; Matt. 12: 38, John 8: 44, Deut. 32: 55 and Rom. 12: 19. Shaw suggests that the 'heavy language' is designed to 'distract attention from the little that he was actually going to do or from the unexpected course that he was going to take': Shaw, *Sacred Violence*, 541.

⁴⁷ Maier suggests that Eusebius had seen this letter, presumably on the basis of similar comments on the devil's instigation of Donatism in his *Life of Constantine* 1.45 (transl. Cameron and Hall, 88): Maier, *Dossier*, 247 n. 3.

that heretics were diabolically possessed, stating that 'those who are possessed by the devil [*qui a diabolo possessi sunt*] follow his falsehood and iniquity', and went on to evoke John 8: 44, noting that heretics and schismatics 'are agreed to adhere to the devil who is their father [*diabolo quo eorum pater est*]'.⁴⁸ Overall, there is some negotiation in this letter between the notions that heretics are possessed, not in their right mind, and thus not in control of their actions and, on the other hand, that they are culpable in seeking to do the devil's work, and in remaining obstinately in their error.⁴⁹

The intensity of Constantine's epistolary attacks on the Donatists may, of course, have been designed to replace actual action. However, whether or not they were 'all bark and no bite', it is notable that in both these letters, Constantine was writing in the first place to those who shared his hostile attitude to the Donatists.⁵⁰ This might explain the confidence with which he asserted their relationship with Satan. Of course, in practice, the actual audience for these letters – as for all letters, especially imperial letters, in antiquity – was potentially much larger than their immediate addressees. We know that Constantine's letters were circulated more widely, both from Eusebius's references to receiving them and making translations of them into Greek, and from looser allusions to their contents in his summary of the Donatist affair in the *Life of Constantine*.⁵¹ That is, the assumption of an intimate anti-Donatist solidarity is in part a literary pose. The Donatists would surely also have had access to Constantine's letters, adding to their conviction that imperial authorities of different religious stripes were hostile to their 'pure church', and were themselves diabolically inspired.

Let us now switch perspective to explore how the Donatists deployed similar accusations against their opponents. There survive a number of texts which were either authored by, or edited by, those with Donatist sympathies, and which celebrate both those who died under persecuting 'pagan' authorities rather than hand

⁴⁸ Constantine, Letter to the Numidian bishops (Maier, *Dossier*, 248; transl. Edwards, 199).

⁴⁹ On the moral implications of sins being externally stimulated by demons or Satan, see Lunn-Rockliffe, 'On the Diabolical Suggestion of Sins', 223–8.

⁵⁰ For the suggestion that the 'rhetoric is no sure guide to the government's behaviour', see Shaw, *Sacred Violence*, 491–3.

⁵¹ On the sources and deployment of imperial documents (including letters) in Eusebius's *Life of Constantine*, see Cameron and Hall, 16–21.

over scriptures or renounce their faith, and those who died under Christian emperors hostile to Donatism, from Constantine onwards.⁵² Scholars have shown that Donatist identity revolved around their being the church of ‘the pure’ and ‘the martyrs’ involved in an apocalyptic struggle between good and evil, and that these notions were scripturally inflected.⁵³ While the longer tradition of martyr acts beyond the Donatist sphere sometimes invoked the devil and demons, Donatist martyrology had a much more ingrained and sustained diabolical inflection.⁵⁴

Here, I will focus on three ‘Donatist’ texts. The earlier two texts, which both bear hallmarks of being delivered in liturgical contexts, narrate the stories of ‘Donatists’ executed during the reigns of Christian emperors: the homiletic *Passion of Donatus and Avocatus*, set in the reign of Constantine,⁵⁵ and the *Passion of Maximian and Isaac*, apparently set during the reign of Constans after his promulgation of an edict of unity in 347.⁵⁶ The third is a Donatist version of *The Acts of the Abitinian Martyrs* which recounts the suffering of a group of Christians under the pagan emperors Diocletian and Maximian in 304; the text was either first authored or redacted by

⁵² On ‘Donatist’ texts, see Alan Dearn, ‘Donatist Martyrs, Stories and Attitudes’, in Miles, ed., *The Donatist Schism*, 70–100; Richard Miles, ‘Textual Communities and the Donatist Controversy’, in Miles, ed., *The Donatist Schism*, 249–83.

⁵³ See Maureen Tilley, *The Bible in Christian North Africa: The Donatist World* (Minneapolis, MI, 1997), 93–129; Jesse Hoover, *The Donatist Church in an Apocalyptic Age* (Oxford, 2018).

⁵⁴ Nicole Hartmann suggests that demons are notably absent from martyrology, and are only introduced and ‘escalate’ after the end of persecution; nonetheless, her discussion includes some examples of pre-Constantinian martyrologies invoking Satan: Nicole Hartmann, ‘On Demons in Early Martyrology’, in Eva Elm and Nicole Hartmann, eds, *Demons in Late Antiquity: Their Perception and Transformation in Different Literary Genres* (Berlin, 2019), 61–80.

⁵⁵ *Passion of Donatus and Avocatus* (Maier, *Dossier*, 198–211; transl. Maureen Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories: The Church in Conflict in Roman North Africa* [Liverpool, 1996], 51–60). See Dearn, ‘Donatist Martyrs, Stories and Attitudes’, 93–6, on this text, leaving open its possible date of delivery at some point at or after the 320s. Its liturgical function can be seen from the introduction (transl. Tilley, 52): ‘on this annual solemnity we read the [acts] not unadvisedly in honour of the martyrs and for the edification of believers ...’.

⁵⁶ *Passion of Maximian and Isaac* (Maier, *Dossier*, 256–75; transl. Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories*, 61–75). On this text, see Dearn, ‘Donatist Martyrs’, 81–4, including at 81 the argument that its liturgical use can be inferred from the *inscriptio* in manuscripts which gives the date of martyrdom, leaving open the date of composition to either the 340s or 360s.

Donatists to present these martyrs as emblematic of the faith, not just of Christians under 'pagan' attack, but of Donatists under Christian imperial attack, and in its current state seems to reflect fifth-century values.⁵⁷

This trio of texts share some fundamental smear strategies. Their framing narratives regularly present events as unfolding as part of a grand diabolical plan. The *Passion of Donatus* starts by setting the scene using an adjusted dating formula: 'when Caecilian Eudinepisus was there, and Leontius had been appointed *comes*, Ursatius was *dux*, Marcellinus tribune, and the devil appeared as counsellor for all of them [*diabolo tamen omnium istorum consiliatore exsistente*].'⁵⁸ The *Passion of Maximian and Isaac* presents the persecution of Donatists in North Africa as the revival of diabolical persecution: 'At that time the devil, enraged for a second time, kindled the dying embers of fury into torture and aroused the insane arms of violence.'⁵⁹ The *Acts of the Abitinian Martyrs* begins by stating bluntly: 'the devil waged war against the Christians ... [*bellum diabolus christianis indixit* ...]. This battle was to be fought not so much against human beings as against the devil [*non tam contra homines quam contra diabolum pugnaturus*].'⁶⁰

Secondly, framing narratives also directly present imperial policies and activities as the work of the devil, sometimes cast as the chief actor and grammatical agent. The *Passion of Donatus* indicts Constantine's policy of handing out cash to anti-Donatists and then segues into a parody of the kind of lofty rhetoric that emperors from Constantine onwards used against Donatists and indeed 'heretics' more generally: 'The enemy of salvation [*salutis inimicus*] concocted a more subtle argument to violate the purity of faith.

⁵⁷ *Acts of the Abitinian Martyrs* (Maier, *Dossier*, 57–92; transl. Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories*, 25–49). Tilley argues that the acts were written between 304 and 311/312: Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories*, 26. For the view that this text was redacted by 'Donatists', see Maier, *Dossier*, 67–8. For the view that it was in fact first authored by Donatists and should be seen as a text of the fifth century, see Alan Dearn, 'The Abitinian Martyrs and the Outbreak of the Donatist Schism', *JEH* 55 (2004), 1–18.

⁵⁸ *Passion of Donatus* 2 (Maier, *Dossier*, 202; transl. Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories*, 53).

⁵⁹ *Passion of Maximian* 3 (Maier, *Dossier*, 262; transl. Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories*, 65).

⁶⁰ *Abitinian Martyrs* 2 (Maier, *Dossier*, 61; transl. Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories*, 28). There is almost certainly an allusion here to the earlier, famous story of Perpetua's martyrdom: Perpetua realizes after a dream 'that I was going to fight with the devil and not with the beasts' (*me non ad bestias sed contra diabolum esse pugnaturam*): *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* 10.14, ed. and transl. Thomas Heffernan (New York, 2012), 130.

“Christ”, he said, “is the lover of unity. Therefore, let there be unity [*unitas igitur fiat*].”⁶¹ This casts Constantine’s oft-stated commitment to unity as itself a diabolical tactic.⁶² In the same vein, the *Passion of Maximian* provides a hostile account of the anti-Donatist legislation of the emperor Constans: ‘he immediately ordered a treaty of sacrilegious unity to be solemnly enacted with tortures and sanctions.’⁶³ Maximian is then praised for the provocative act of tearing up and scattering pieces of Constans’s edict of unity ‘as if he were tearing the devil limb from limb’ (*tamquam diaboli ibi membra discerperet*).⁶⁴

Thirdly, these texts use scriptural phrases and allusions to implicate the devil in events. The *Passion of Donatus* describes the devil as the ‘old dragon’ (*inveteratus draco*), echoing Revelation 12: 9,⁶⁵ and played on the idea of the serpent’s cunning, stressed in Genesis 3: 1: ‘By cunning deception [*callida fraude*], he strove to lay hold of those he could not conquer by direct persuasion. The author of deception lay hidden so that his deception might proceed more easily [*ut eo facilius deceptio proderet quo deceptionis auctor latuisset*].’⁶⁶ The *Acts of the Abitinian Martyrs* applies the same phrase in a passage condemning the clerics Mensurius and Caecilian of Carthage for being part of a diabolical conspiracy:

There was lacking neither cunning deception [*callidissimam fraudem*] on the part of all those traitors nor the conspiracy of the noxious remainder of those whose faith had been shipwrecked. These were brought together by diabolical art [*diabolica arte*] which, under the guise of religion [*sub praetextu religionis*], attacked faith, overturned law and disturbed divine authority.⁶⁷

⁶¹ *Passion of Donatus* 3 (Maier, *Dossier*, 204; transl. Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories*, 54).

⁶² On Constantine’s commitment to ecclesiastical unity, see Pottenger, *Power and Rhetoric*, 97–128.

⁶³ *Passion of Maximian* 3 (Maier, *Dossier*, 261; transl. Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories*, 659).

⁶⁴ *Passion of Maximian* 5 (Maier, *Dossier*, 263; transl. Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories*, 66). Shaw notes that this incident replays a foundational martyr story from the era of Diocletian: Shaw, *Sacred Violence*, 174–8.

⁶⁵ This phrase conflates two ideas from Rev. 12: 9 (of the great dragon and the old serpent); one manuscript (K) of the *Vetus Latina* renders this as *ille draco magnus ille serpens antiquus*. See Roger Gryson, *Die Reste der altilateinischen Bibel*, 26/2: *Apocalypsus Johannis* (Freiburg, 2002), 465.

⁶⁶ *Passion of Donatus* 2 (Maier, *Dossier*, 202; transl. Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories*, 53).

⁶⁷ *Abitinian Martyrs* 20 (Maier, *Dossier*, 86; transl. Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories*, 45, adjusted).

Of course, scriptural references were sometimes fleeting or elusive, as when the narrator of *The Passion of Donatus* asks a rhetorical question which quotes John 8: 44 only in passing: 'Who denies that such deeds [the conversion of a basilica by anti-Donatists] have the children of the devil [*filii diaboli*] as their authors?'⁶⁸

Fourthly, these martyr texts accused persecuting humans of being variously ministers of the devil, diabolically possessed, or 'the devil' himself. This was sometimes found in the authors' or editors' framing narrative, as for example in the *Passion of Maximian* where the martyr's experience of torture is cast as a war waged between 'a soldier of Christ and soldiers of the devil' (*milites diaboli*);⁶⁹ or in the *Acts of the Abitinian martyrs*, where the narrator states that 'the devil' speaks 'through the judge' (*per iudicem*),⁷⁰ and twice refers to the proconsul as 'the devil'.⁷¹ On other occasions, the charge of diabolical inspiration or possession was made directly by Donatist martyrs to Roman officials, testing the limits of *parrhêsia* (free speech).⁷² In the *Acts of the Abitinian Martyrs*, the narrator claimed that the martyrs' words were directly reported, perhaps deriving from a contemporary stenographic transcript.⁷³ They contain portions of direct speech in which the martyr Dativus addresses the prosecutor Pompeianus directly: 'What are you doing in this place, you devil? [*quid agis hoc in loco, diabole?*]'⁷⁴ Later in the same text, the martyr Felix addresses the tyrannical proconsul Anulinus as 'O Satan'.⁷⁵

So far, I have looked at texts addressed in the first instance to insiders, which assumed that their readers or listeners had a shared target of hostility in a devil who animated their opponents in both violence and deceit. In the final part of this article, I will explore another

⁶⁸ *Passion of Donatus* 4 (Maier, *Dossier*, 205; transl. Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories*, 55).

⁶⁹ *Passion of Maximian* 5 (Maier, *Dossier*, 264; transl. Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories*, 66).

⁷⁰ *Abitinian Martyrs* 6 (Maier, *Dossier*, 68; transl. Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories*, 32).

⁷¹ *Abitinian Martyrs* 10 (Maier, *Dossier*, 72; transl. Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories*, 35) and

15 (Maier, *Dossier*, 79; transl. Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories*, 40).

⁷² See Irene van Renswoude, 'The Steadfast Martyr', in eadem, *The Rhetoric of Free Speech in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2019), 21–40.

⁷³ 'I begin to write using public records [*ex actis publicis*] ...': *Abitinian Martyrs* 1 (Maier, *Dossier*, 60; transl. Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories*, 28). 'When it comes to the struggles of their battles, I shall not proceed so much in my own words as in those of the martyrs [*non tam meis exsequar quam martyrum dictis*] ...': *Abitinian Martyrs* 4 (Maier, *Dossier*, 65; transl. Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories*, 30).

⁷⁴ *Abitinian Martyrs* 9 (Maier, *Dossier*, 71; transl. Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories*, 34).

⁷⁵ *Abitinian Martyrs* 13 (Maier, *Dossier*, 77; transl. Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories*, 38).

group of texts from the late fourth and early fifth centuries of the Donatist controversy, which either construct themselves as, or are direct records of, dialogues or debates between the opposing parties. In these debates, real and fictitious, accusations of diabolical deceit vary significantly in intensity.

DIABOLICAL DECEIT IN DONATIST AND ANTI-DONATIST DIALOGUES

In the 380s, several decades after a violent crackdown on Donatism in the 340s by Roman officials under Constans, Optatus of Milevis wrote a lengthy rebuttal of a (now lost) treatise by the Donatist Parmenian.⁷⁶ Optatus addressed Parmenian in the second person as if he were speaking to his face, but of course this text was addressed to a much wider audience, and participated in the broader rhetorical habit in late antiquity of constructing an apparent dialogue in which one party nonetheless maintains complete control of both sides.⁷⁷ It is not possible to know how accurately Optatus represented his opponent's argument; in the main, tellingly, he tended to paraphrase rather than to quote Parmenian.

In his framing historical narrative, Optatus claims that the devil was grieved by the unification and pacification of the church under Constantine, and that under the (pagan) emperor Julian's restoration of privileges to Donatists in the early 360s, 'it was almost at the same instant that your [i.e. the Donatists'] madness returned to Africa, and the devil was released from his imprisonment.'⁷⁸ This resembles a common strategy of both the Donatists and their opponents to frame events in cosmic terms: whether Eusebius, explaining that schism in Africa during the reign of Constantine was provoked by 'some evil demon apparently resenting the unstinted present prosperity';⁷⁹ or the narrator of the Donatist *Passion of Maximian and Isaac*, explaining that after a wave of persecution had died down, the devil

⁷⁶ Optatus of Milevis, *Against the Donatists* (ed. and transl. Mireille Labrousse, SC 412–13 [Paris, 1995–6]; transl. Mark Edwards [Liverpool, 1997]). Edwards includes detailed discussion of dating at xvi–xviii.

⁷⁷ On the "cut-and-paste" technique which creates the impression ... [of] verbal debate', see Caroline Humfress, 'Controversialist: Augustine in Combat', in Mark Vessey, ed., *A Companion to Augustine* (Chichester, 2012), 323–35, at 329–30.

⁷⁸ Optatus, *Against the Donatists* 2.15 and 17 (transl. Edwards, 43, 44).

⁷⁹ Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* 1.45.2 (transl. Cameron and Hall, 88).

'enraged for a second time, kindled the dying embers of fury into torture.'⁸⁰

Thereafter, Optatus tends to insinuate that Parmenian and his party were diabolical through scriptural allusions, rather than direct accusations. Early in Book I, Optatus writes that the Donatists 'conspire with that thief who robs God',⁸¹ an elliptical reference to a notion of diabolical robbery that he reprises later in an attack on the Donatist practice of re-baptism, when he states that 'the devil who like a thief wished to rob something [John 10: 10], helped by your actions, sees the person made entirely his own from whom he wished to steal a little.'⁸² That is, the Donatist practice of re-baptism is presented as having the unwanted effect of banishing the Holy Spirit from the candidate, thereby allowing the devil access. Optatus accuses Parmenian of deception and seduction in his teaching: 'you have acted subtly for the purpose of seducing and deceiving the minds of your audience ...'.⁸³ He cites Ezekiel 13: 10 on the whitewashed wall to point the finger at the Donatists as 'false prophets who seduce'.⁸⁴ At times, particular phrases or metaphors subtly allude to a diabolical referent, for example in references to the heretics' 'pernicious doctrine' and the 'subtle seduction of their words' corrupting the 'health of the faithful with creeping disease'.⁸⁵ In complaints that his opponent's party 'have been able to seduce by factious or devious talk', Optatus even evokes an important scriptural passage for diabolical dissimulation which we encountered earlier, claiming that those the Donatists have deceived, 'once sheep', 'have suddenly become wolves' (Matthew 7: 15).⁸⁶

A more direct brand of diabolical accusation can be found in invective from the turn of the fourth and fifth centuries by a Donatist bishop of Cirta, Petilian, who wrote a letter to his clergy trashing his opponents using familiar forms of diabolical attack.⁸⁷ Augustine

⁸⁰ *Passion of Maximian 3* (Maier, 260; transl. Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories*, 64).

⁸¹ *Ibid.* 1.3 (transl. Edwards, 3).

⁸² *Ibid.* 4.6 (transl. Edwards, 91).

⁸³ *Ibid.* 1.9 (transl. Edwards, 7).

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 3.10–11 (transl. Edwards, 7).

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 4.5 (transl. Edwards, 88–9).

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 6.8 (transl. Edwards, 125).

⁸⁷ Augustine, *Answer to Petilian* (ed. Petschenig, CSEL 52 [Vienna, 1909], 3–277; transl. Maureen Tilley and Boniface Ramsey, *New City Press Works of St Augustine 21* [Hyde Park, NY, 2019], 47–264). See Alexander Evers, 'Contra litteras Petilian?', in Karla

first of all received and rebutted a portion of this letter in *c.*400, preserved as Book I of his *Answer to Petilian*; a year later, when he had acquired access to the entirety of Petilian's letter, he produced a lengthier refutation of it, preserved as Book II of the same work. In this more detailed refutation, Augustine quoted directly and extensively from Petilian's work, allowing us to see something of the Donatist's writing.⁸⁸ The impression produced by Book II of his *Answer* that this was a genuine in-person dialogue between two parties is certainly illusory, since Augustine was very much in control, openly admitting that he was in fact manufacturing the appearance of a stenographically transcribed dialogue: 'I shall cite passages from [Petilian's] letter under his name, and I shall give my response under my name, as though we were debating and being recorded by secretaries [*tamquam, cum ageremus, a notariis excepta sint*].'⁸⁹

If we assume that Petilian's invective against his opponents was accurately reported in Book II of Augustine's *Answer*, it turns out to contain some well-established themes. They include the biting deployment of John 8: 44 in diatribes against a bishop whose precise identity is unclear:

Yes, yes, wicked persecutor, with whatever cloak of benevolence you cover yourself, under whichever word for peace you wage war with your kisses, with whichever term of unity [*quolibet unitatis vocabulo*] you lead astray the race of men, you who even now are lying and deceiving are truly the devil's son, showing your father by your character [*vere diaboli filius es, dum moribus indicas patrem*].⁹⁰

This condemnation of his opponent's stated goal of unity as a diabolical trick reminds us of the representation of Constans's edict of unity

Pollmann and Willemien Otten, eds, *The Oxford Guide to the Historical Reception of Augustine*, 3 vols (Oxford, 2013), 1: 213–15.

⁸⁸ The fact that Augustine quoted (and sometimes criticized) his opponents' biblical texts when they differed from his own texts demonstrates that, in this respect at least, his quotations were accurate: cf. Hugh Houghton, *Augustine's Text of John: Patristic Citations and Latin Gospel Manuscripts* (Oxford, 2008), 81–5.

⁸⁹ Augustine, *Answer to Petilian*, 2.1 (transl. Tilley and Ramsey, 75). On Augustine's techniques of quotation and ventriloquization, see Humfress, 'Controversialist', 330; on Augustine creating an impression of dialogue with the Donatists, see Jennifer Ebbeler, *Disciplining Christians: Correction and Community in Augustine's Letters* (New York, 2012), 151–90.

⁹⁰ Augustine, *Answer to Petilian* 2.17.38 (transl. Tilley and Ramsey, 91, adapted).

in the *Passion of Donatus* as a cunning ruse of Satan, and the reference to waging war with kisses evokes Judas's traitorous kiss.⁹¹ Augustine replies that Petilian's opponents had made the very same charges against the Donatists. He then quoted Petilian's long list of scriptural proof texts which Petilian had adduced to demonstrate that his opponent had taken on the title of bishop falsely:

Petilian said: 'It is not so surprising that you unlawfully take on the title of bishop for yourself. This is the devil's true way of acting [*haec est vera diaboli consuetudo*], to deceive precisely by claiming for himself the title of sanctity, as the apostle proclaims: "It is not surprising", he says, "if Satan transforms himself as though into an angel of light, and his ministers as though into ministers of righteousness." [2 Corinthians 11: 13–14]. Neither is it surprising, therefore, that you falsely call yourself a bishop...'.⁹²

Augustine responds tartly that all Petilian has proved is that there were false bishops, something on which they agreed. Petilian subsequently composed what was apparently an abusive response to Augustine's second book, to which Augustine responded with a final, third book, but, in this instance, he provided almost no direct quotations of Petilian's accusations, deliberately refusing to engage with the personal attacks made against him.⁹³

Not quite ten years after Augustine had staged this debate with Petilian in literary terms, the two bishops encountered each other in person for the first time at the so-called Conference of Carthage in June 411. This quasi-judicial meeting between two massed groups of several hundred Donatist and anti-Donatist bishops was summoned and adjudicated over by imperial officials, and was designed to find, once and for all, in favour of the anti-Donatists.⁹⁴ The spoken words of all the participants were stenographically transcribed by a large team of secular and ecclesiastical notaries, and that record was

⁹¹ *Passion of Donatus* 3 (Maier, *Dossier*, 204; transl. Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories*, 54–5), discussed above in section two. On the idea of a 'war of kisses', see Shaw, *Sacred Violence*, 546; he also cites Prov. 27: 6 as a possible source for this passage of Petilian.

⁹² Augustine, *Answer to Petilian* 2.18.40 (transl. Tilley and Ramsey, 91).

⁹³ Augustine, *Answer to Petilian* 3.1.1–2 (transl. Tilley and Ramsey, 342–3).

⁹⁴ On the Conference of Carthage, see Shaw, *Sacred Violence*, 544–86. For a modification of the view that its end was pre-determined, see Neil McLynn, 'The Conference of Carthage Reconsidered', in Miles, ed., *The Donatist Schism*, 220–48.

then meticulously authenticated, line by line, by its participants.⁹⁵ It is notable that in the surviving record of the three days of debate, much of which was procedural, there are barely any accusations of specifically diabolical inspiration or assistance made by the episcopal participants. The relatively restrained tone for the conference seems to have been set by the convening officers, among whose lengthy preambles can be found only muted allusions to diabolical machinations. Thus the notary and tribune Marcellinus, acting as judge in the proceedings, referred obliquely in his opening words to the devil: ‘God desires to see the error of the old enemy [*antiqui hostis*] amended, so that the true religion does not long give the pagans the spectacle of its dissensions ...’.⁹⁶ One of the notaries, Martialis, before laying out the elaborate ground rules about the process of transcribing the debate, explained why this was necessary using language which also loosely evoked the diabolical serpent of Scripture: ‘to prevent the slightest slanderous suspicion [*aliquatenus calumniosa suspicio*] from creeping [*inserpat*] into this examination intended to draw out the truth’.⁹⁷

The opening process was designed to authenticate the presence of every single attending bishop, Donatist and anti-Donatist, who filed in one by one while their identities were checked. During this process, bishops from both sides accused each other of underhand tactics and even of lying, but not directly of devilish behaviour.⁹⁸ The Donatist Petilian exclaimed that it was possible that his opponents had included under their lists of bishops those of a lower clerical order and fictitiously granted them a higher status, as a way of swelling their numbers; his indictment included the passing accusation that his opponents lied, earning a swift rebuke from Marcellinus that it was not fitting for a bishop to make a false accusation against

⁹⁵ On the creation of records at the Conference of Carthage, see Thomas Graumann, *The Acts of the Early Church Councils: Production and Character* (Oxford, 2021), 32–40.

⁹⁶ *Acts of the Council of Carthage* 1.3 (ed. and transl. Serge Lancel, SC 195 [Paris, 1972], 562–3). In expounding Leviathan in Ps. 103: 29, Augustine glosses the phrase *antiquus hostis* (‘the old enemy’) as ‘the devil’ in combination with *draco* (‘dragon’), perhaps a loose allusion to Rev. 12: 9: *En. Ps.* 103.7 (transl. Boulding, *New City Press Works of St Augustine* III/19 [Hyde Park, NY, 2003] 172).

⁹⁷ *Acts of the Council of Carthage* 1.10.70 (ed. and transl. Lancel, 582–3).

⁹⁸ Erica Hermanowicz, *Possidius of Calama: A Study of the North African Episcopate in the Age of Augustine* (Oxford, 2008), 214 and n. 81, cites ‘at least seven occasions during the conference when the Donatists accuse the Catholics of lying’, but her stated examples do not encompass those discussed here.

one of his colleagues.⁹⁹ Other bishops clashed about who had real authority in any particular town: Victor, an anti-Donatist, and Januarius, a Donatist, both claimed to be bishop of the town of Libertina (south-west of Carthage): 'Januarius: "The diocese is mine"; Victor: "Since he has no-one there, neither church nor anyone from his communion, it is in vain that he lies that it is his diocese [*frustra mentitur quod sit eius dioecesis*]."'¹⁰⁰ Another accusation of lying was made by Severianus, an anti-Donatist bishop, who objected to the claim of the Donatist Adeodatus that the people of Ceramussa (near Milevis) were 'his', but that his opponents' violence had chased away all his clerics. Severianus responded: 'He lies, as God is my witness [*mentitur, teste Deo*].' Marcellinus reminded Adeodatus to keep it short: 'Will your Sanctity please just say if there is currently a bishop of your party in this community?' When Adeodatus made another rather rambling claim, Severianus again retorted, curtly, 'He lies [*mentitur*].'¹⁰¹

Testy accusations of falsehood and fraud there were, then, but almost no accusations of diabolical influence. Indeed, it appears that the only time such accusations were made was in the third session of the debate, the complete stenographic record of which has frustratingly been lost and for which only abbreviated accounts survive in Marcellus's chapter headings and in Augustine's *Breviculus*, a retrospective and partisan summary.¹⁰² Here, it seems that the anti-Donatists had accused the Donatists, in ripping out the eyes of their opponents, of surpassing the devil, probably referring here to a tactic associated with the so-called circumcellions, Donatist shock-troops associated with committing acts of shocking violence including blinding.¹⁰³ The Donatists' riposte was that the catholics took the part of the devil. It is striking that it was only in the context of overt violence, rather than more insidious deceit, that the accusation of diabolical involvement was levelled, taking us back to our

⁹⁹ *Acts of the Council of Carthage* 1.61–62 (ed. and transl. Lancel, 674–5).

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* 1.116 (ed. and transl. Lancel, 706–9).

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* 1.134 (ed. and transl. Lancel, 772–3).

¹⁰² See Sara Matteoli, 'Breviculus collationis cum Donatistis', in Pollmann and Otten, eds, *The Oxford Guide to the Historical Reception of Augustine*, 1: 164–6.

¹⁰³ *Capitula of the Acts of the Council of Carthage* 3.298–9 (ed. and transl. Serge Lancel, SC 224 [Paris, 1975], 504–5); Augustine, *Breviculus* 3.11.2§–2 (ed. Serge Lancel, CChr.SL 149A [Turnholt, 1974], 287–8). On accusations of violence made against the circumcellions that include blinding, see Shaw, *Sacred Violence*, 675–720.

starting point of Augustine's sermon, and his stress on Satan's tactical flexibility.

Another way in which the Donatists introduced the possibility of diabolical activity at Carthage was at one remove, through the reading of other texts adduced as evidence. Again at the point where the stenographic transcript no longer survives, and events are only attested to by Marcellus's chapter headings and Augustine's summary, we learn that the Donatists produced a set of martyr acts to be read aloud as part of their argument against the authenticity of the 'protocol of Cirta'.¹⁰⁴ From various internal clues, this text was most probably some version of the *Acts of the Abitinian Martyrs* (discussed above in section two) which was replete with lurid accusations of the diabolical inspiration of imperial officials, both in one of the early framing dating passages ('In the times of Diocletian and Maximian, the devil waged war against the Christians ...') and in subsequent accusations made by the martyrs against their pagan persecutors.¹⁰⁵

Overall, a great deal of effort went into the careful management of the encounter at Carthage between hostile communities who had a history of violent encounters, and this probably constrained exchanges of the kind of invective we find in Augustine's invented dialogue with Petilian.¹⁰⁶ The solemnity of the occasion – presided over by imperial officials and conducted according to the elaborate rules of politesse demanded by late antique ceremonial – seems to have tamped down the trading of direct diabolical insults, demonstrating the importance of context and convention in regulating the extremes of invective.

CONCLUSION

We have seen that the accusation of diabolical dissimulation was made regularly by both Donatists and their opponents in a range of written and spoken words. There were distinctive variations in

¹⁰⁴ *Capitula of the Acts of the Council of Carthage* 3.433, 446–7 (ed. and transl. Lancel, 528–31); Augustine, *Breviculus* 3.17.32–3 (ed. Lancel, 296–8). On the date and contents of the 'protocol of Cirta', see Shaw, *Sacred Violence*, 816–18.

¹⁰⁵ On the identification of this set of martyr acts with the *Acts of the Abitinian Martyrs*, see discussion by Lancel, SC 194, 95–6. On the possible deployment of this text at the Conference of Carthage, see Dearn, 'Abitinian Martyrs', 9–11.

¹⁰⁶ On the necessity of stage managing the encounter, see Shaw, *Sacred Violence*, 564–9.

the ways in which those accusations were made, which included a kind of direct name-calling, where martyrs addressed their persecutors as 'devil'; general statements that one's opponents were animated or possessed by the father of lies; and the deployment of metaphorical language which evoked scriptural templates of diabolical deceit without making the accusation directly. Of course, the varying tone and register of those accusations was in part shaped by conventions about what kinds of polemical rhetoric were appropriate in different contexts. The audiences, genres and contexts of such invective shaped what was polite or possible to say. Unsurprisingly, it was easier to accuse opponents of diabolical dissimulation to an insider audience, than to do so directly to their faces. More broadly, we have seen that in Christian letters, sermons and treatises of late antiquity, especially those addressed to 'insiders' sharing a point of view, accusations of lying made against opponents were rife, and went in both directions.

Augustine defined lying not by the contents of the lie, but by its direction; not so much as saying things that are not true, but rather, saying things with the intention to deceive.¹⁰⁷ In this context, those stigmatized as heretics and schismatics like the Donatists were considered diabolical, not only because their ecclesiology or sacramental theology was false, but because in trying to disseminate their ideas, they were – like Augustine's wily serpentine Donatist with whom I started – deceiving and poisoning others. In two separate treatises and a letter on the topic, Augustine reiterated that all lying was sinful, but his views were developed in part against contemporary Christian arguments that lying could sometimes be permissible and that Jesus himself had lied.¹⁰⁸ That some Christians thought lying itself was not problematic if well intended can be seen further from the development of a theological argument that Christ's incarnation was itself a form of deception, cunningly designed to displace Satan from his mastery over humans.¹⁰⁹ Indeed, a variety of Christian emperors,

¹⁰⁷ For Augustine's ideas about lying, see Griffiths, *Lying*, 25–39.

¹⁰⁸ See Augustine, *On Lying* (transl. Muldowney, *Fathers of the Church* 16 [Washington, DC, 1952], 53–110). His letter refuting Oceanus's charge that Jesus's denial of knowledge about the timing of the end of the world was a 'useful lie': *Letter* 180.3–5 (transl. Teske, *New City Press Works of St Augustine* II/3 [Hyde Park, NY, 2003], 159–60); and *Against Lying* (transl. Jaffee, *Fathers of the Church* 16 [Washington, DC, 1952], 125–79).

¹⁰⁹ See, for instance, the case study by John Egan, 'The Deceit of the Devil According to Gregory Nazianzen', *Studia Patristica* 22 (1989), 8–13.

clerics and laypersons admitted to or counselled practising dissimulation in practical situations where the ends justified the means. For example, Augustine's treatise *Against Lying* denounced both the so-called Priscillianists who argued that the presence of lies in Scripture sanctioned the very practice of lying, and the Priscillianists' opponents, who had taken to lying to infiltrate the group. Returning to the Donatist controversy, we find an imperial sanctioning of similarly deceitful tactics. In 315, the emperor Constantine wrote to Celsus, *vicarius* of Africa, commanding that he 'accept the necessity of dissimulation' (*dissimulandum ... cognoscas*) in treating schismatic Donatists decently, while waiting for the emperor to visit and give judgment; the pretence of hospitality was presumably designed not to alert the Donatists to Constantine's menacing promise to 'destroy and scatter' (*perdam atque discutiam*) once he arrived.¹¹⁰ We have come full circle. The Christian Roman emperor who, like the anti-Donatist clerics of North Africa, decried the violence and deceit of the Donatists as diabolical, was recommending precisely this combination of tactics to overcome them.

¹¹⁰ Constantine, Letter to Celsus (Maier, *Dossier*, 194–6, transl. Edwards, 193–4).