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Taking the Devil at his Word: The Devil and Language in the Dialogues of Gregory the Great

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In the Dialogues of Gregory the Great (590–604), the devil is sometimes given direct speech in which he is shown protesting his innocence. The devil in these stories is frequently interpreted as comical, trivial and somewhat underwhelming. However, when re-read through the lens of Gregory's exegesis of Genesis iii, and his ideas regarding the devil, sin and language, what emerges is that it is the devil's verbal skill and appearance of harmlessness that make him dangerous. This failure to see the devil's words as a deceptive recapitulation of Genesis iii cannot be separated from the Dialogues' complex historiography.

In Gregory the Great's *Dialogues*, there is a story of a nun who ate a lettuce from a garden, but who forgot to make the sign of the cross over it before she did so. As a result she was seized by the devil. The abbot Equitus was called to pray over her, but when the holy man appeared, the devil, sitting on the nun's tongue, started to complain: 'What have I done? What have I done? I was sitting on the lettuce, and she came and ate me.'[1] In spite of

CSEL = Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum; CCSL = Corpus Christianorum Series Latina; SC = Sources Chrétiennes

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[1] 'Ego quid feci? Ego quid feci? Sedebam mihi super lactucam. Venit illa et momordit me': Gregory the Great, *Dialogues* i.4.7, in *Grégoire le Grand: Dialogues*, trans. P. Antin and ed. A. de Vogüé, SC ccli cclx cclxv, Paris 1978–80.

the devil's protest that he did not, in fact, do anything, the abbot commanded him to leave the woman; this he immediately did.

This story is frequently chosen by historians to illustrate the comical, trivial or innocuous nature of the devil in the *Dialogues*.[2] Its devil has been called an imp,[3] a buffoon[4] and a goblin,[5] whilst the devil's speech has been described as 'whimpering'[6] and 'almost childish' in tone.[7] The tale of the nun and lettuce is often called naïve or interpreted as evidence of Gregory's superstition.[8] In the most extreme interpretation of this tenor, the supposed 'ludicrous' nature of the story is cited as part of the ostensible evidence for the *Dialogues*' non-Gregorian origin.[9] In answer to the devil's question 'What have I done? What have I done?', historians appear to have been almost unanimous in their answer: not much.

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[2] Wiliam D. McCready provides the best discussion of responses to this story: *Signs of sanctity: miracles in the thought of Gregory the Great*, Toronto 1989, 176–8. It is not possible to list all citations of this tale, but it is discussed as an example of humour in Danuta Shanzer, 'Laughter and humour in the early medieval latin West', in Guy Halsall (ed.), *Humour, history and politics in late antiquity and the Middle Ages*, Cambridge 2002, 25–47 at p. 46. It is also interpreted as comical in Gerlinde Huber-Rebenich, 'Hagiographic fiction as entertainment', trans. Richard Stoneman in Heinz Hofmann (ed.), *Latin fiction: the Latin novel in context*, London–New York 2004, 187–212 at p. 204. The devil is called 'comical' and the tale described as 'grotesque humour' in Erich Auerbach, *Literary language and its public in late Latin antiquity and in the Middle Ages*, Cambridge, Ma 1965, 98. It is referred to as an 'amusing tale' in Nancy Caciola, *Discerning spirits: divine and demonic possession in the Middle Ages*, Ithaca–London 2003, 42. The devil is understood to be (in part) a harmless trickster in Carole Straw, *Gregory the Great: perfection in imperfection*, Los Angeles, Ca 1988, 50, 64–5, 257. See also Jeffrey Burton Russell, *Lucifer: the devil in the Middle Ages*, Ithaca 1984, 155–6. Peter Dendel refers to 'trivial anecdotes' containing the devil in the first book of Gregory's *Dialogues*: *Satan unbound: the devil in Old English narrative literature*, Toronto 2001. See also Francis Clark, *The Pseudo-Gregorian Dialogues*, Leiden 1987, ii. 637–8. This interpretation is so embedded in the scholarship that it can also be found in works that do not concern the Middle Ages: Hilaire Kallendorf, *Exorcism and its texts: subjectivity in early modern literature of England and Spain*, Toronto 2003, 22.

[3] Francis Clark, *The 'Gregorian' Dialogues and the origins of Benedictine monasticism*, Leiden 2003, 108; cf. Straw, *Gregory the Great*, 64.

[4] Dan Burton and David Grandy, *Magic, mystery and science: the occult in western civilization*, Bloomington, In 2004, 135.

[5] Auerbach, *Literary language*, 98–9.

[6] Ibid. 98.

[7] Huber-Rebenich, 'Hagiographic fiction', 204. The nun is also said to have been heckled or harrassed ('vessata') by the devil: Sofia Boesch Gajano, *Gregorio Magno: alle origini del medioevo*, Rome 2004, 289 n. 87.

[8] Henry Angsar Kelly, *The devil, demonology, and witchcraft: the development of Christian beliefs in evil spirits*, Eugene, Or 1974, 76; Russell, *Lucifer*, 155–6; Auerbach, *Literary language*, 97.

[9] Francis Clark argues that the *Dialogues* were not written by Gregory but by a 'Dialogist' in Rome who inserted authentic Gregorian passages (IGPs) into the work, with these authentic passages amounting to about 25% of the total text: Clark, *Pseudo-Gregorian Dialogues*. Most scholars accept the *Dialogues* as a genuine Gregorian work, although Marilyn Dunn too believes that they were not Gregorian, arguing that they were written in the 670s in Anglo-Saxon England: 'Gregory the Great, the vision

These interpretations are part of a larger phenomenon. The *Dialogues* were long viewed as 'the joker in Gregory's pack' and seen as different to his other works;[10] even now the *Dialogues* tend to be studied separately from Gregory's other writings.[11] It was more than a century ago that Dudden described the devil in the *Dialogues* as 'a spirit of petty malice, more irritating than awful, playing all manner of mischievous pranks',[12] arguing that he is 'comparatively innocuous' and not the 'portentous power of darkness' that he is in the *Moralia*.[13] At a similar time, Harnack argued that in his doctrine of angels in the *Dialogues* Gregory sanctioned the 'most inferior' parts of Graeco-Roman culture.[14] Since then Peter Brown's seminal *Cult of the saints* has transformed the study of early medieval saints' cults, and the kind of judgements that plagued earlier research are no longer as pervasive as they once were.[15] However, the story of the nun and lettuce has proved remarkably resistant to reinterpretation, and

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of Fursey and the origins of purgatory', *Peritia* xiv (2001), 238–54 at pp. 238, 240. Robert Gillet also accepts the inauthenticity of the *Dialogues*: 'Les *Dialogues* sont-ils de Grégoire?', *Revue des études augustiniennes* xxxvi/2 (1990), 309–14. The main arguments against Clark can be found in Paul Meyvaert, 'The enigma of Gregory the Great's *Dialogues*: a response to Francis Clark', this JOURNAL xxxix (1988), 385–81, and Adalbert de Vogüé, 'Grégoire le Grand et ses "Dialogues" d'après deux ouvrages récents', *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique* lxxxiii (1988), 281–348, and 'Du Nouveau sur les Dialogues de saint Grégoire?', *Collectanea Cisterciensia* lxii (2000), 193–8. This story of the nun and the lettuce is not contained in one of the IGPs and therefore, according to Clark, is not the work of Gregory.

[10] J. M. Wallace-Hadrill, quoted in F. Edward Cranz, Ruth J. Dean, Robert M. Luniansky and others, 'Memoirs of Fellows and Corresponding Fellows of the Medieval Academy of America', *Speculum* lxi (1986), 759–69 at p. 768.

[11] R. A. Markus' astute work on Gregory excluded discussion of the *Dialogues* as he believed that the work concerned different questions: *Gregory the Great and his world*. Cambridge 1997, 16. John Moorhead discussed the *Dialogues* very little, whilst quoting from Gregory's other works extensively: *Gregory the Great*, Abingdon 2005. The best works on the *Dialogues* (necessarily) demonstrate an impressive understanding of their place within early medieval hagiography, focusing less on their relationship to Gregory's other writings: Matthew Dal Santo, *Debating the saints' cult in the age of Gregory the Great*, Cambridge 2012. There have, however, been attempts to demonstrate the unity of Gregory's works: Claude Dagens, *Saint Grégoire le Grand: culture et experience chretiennes*, Paris 1977.

[12] F. Homes Dudden, *Gregory the Great: his place in history and thought*, London 1905, ii. 367–8.

[13] Ibid.

[14] See also Adolph Harnack, *History of dogma*, trans. James Millar, London 1898, v. 263–4.

[15] Peter Brown, *The cult of the saints in late antiquity: its rise and function in Latin Christianity*, Chicago 1981. They can, however, be found in the work of Francis Clark, who speaks of the *Dialogues* as being 'sub-Christian' and 'religiously inferior'.

the vocabulary used to discuss this tale and the devil within it has barely changed since the first decade of the twentieth century. Discussions of this story – the example *par excellence* (it would seem) of the *Dialogues*' mischievous devil – continue to circle the concepts of naïveté, triviality and humour which were set down as relevant to this story more than a century ago. Indeed, the acceptance of these older interpretations is so pervasive that it is quicker to note works which have begun to unpick the nature of this story than to list those which have not.[16]

Dudden's interpretation is sometimes explicitly accepted in works that are otherwise extremely perceptive and hard to fault:

> The devil may be the terrible enemy, but he is also the trickster of the *Dialogues*, the forerunner, as F. Homes Dudden observes, of the comical medieval devil who flung a stone at Dominic and got splattered by Luther's ink. The devil's games can be humorous: he teases Benedict by calling him 'Maledict'…The devil taunts man and plays impish tricks on him, and sometimes man seems more than his match.[17]

Agreement with the idea that such stories are naïve, trivial or comical tends to be more subtle, however, and is usually betrayed by the (perhaps unthinking) use of a particular – and rather predictable – vocabulary. Thus the spirit of Dudden's interpretation is discernable in the odd, throwaway remark, such as in the fleeting sentence dismissing the tale as 'naïve'[18] or in the passing reference to the devil's role in 'trivial anecdotes'.[19] Now that older criticisms of saints' *Lives* have been eradicated (or at least blunted) by a greater appreciation of the genre, it is rare to find language as strong as that used by Francis Clark, who, referring to this tale and several others, argued that

> In their fantastic and often ludicrous quality, and in their triviality and lack of serious moral purpose, the Dialogist's tales are not only religiously inferior but different in kind. They are alien from the gravity, reverence and pastoral wisdom of St Gregory himself, who writes at a higher level of spiritual and moral sensitivity which the Dialogist cannot match. Justly may they be called sub-Christian.[20]

Whilst the kind of assumptions underlying Clark's argument would not be accepted by most scholars, some of his interpretations – such as that regarding triviality – are not radically dissimilar from those which view this story's devil as somewhat underwhelming. When it comes to this story, differences in interpretation have tended to be of degree, and not of type.

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[16] Shanzer has gone furthest in demonstrating its exegetical nature: 'Humour', 46. William W. McCready has discussed its complexities and difficult historiography: *Signs of sanctity*, 176–8.

[17] Straw, *Gregory the Great*, 64.

[18] Kelly, *Devil*, 76.

[19] Dendel, *Satan unbound*, 58.

[20] Clark, *Pseudo-Gregorian Dialogues*, ii. 638.

However, when re-read through the lens of Gregory's exegesis and his ideas about language and sin, it emerges that far from being innocent, it is the devil's manipulation of language and appearance of harmlessness that make him dangerous. This raises interesting questions as to why scholars have been so ready to take the devil at his word.

Gregory's exegesis of the serpent's deception of Eve in Genesis iii provides the key to understanding this story. Gregory's hagiography was informed by his work as an exegete, and that he interpreted at least some saints' *Lives* in accordance with the exegesis of similar biblical stories is in little doubt.[21] In the *Dialogues* Gregory interpreted saints' *Lives* which had similarities to biblical stories in accordance with his (or patristic) exegesis of the biblical stories which they echoed: thus in a *Dialogues*' story which possessed several points of similarity with Christ's expulsion of the devil into a herd of pigs, Gregory's interpretation was strikingly similar to his own and patristic exegesis of Matthew viii.31.[22]

It is fair to assume that this principle – that traditional exegesis should guide the interpretation of saints' *Lives* that are similar to Scripture – applied to the story of the nun and the lettuce. This story parallels Genesis iii: the garden is an allusion to paradise; the lettuce is a reference to the forbidden fruit; and the devil's excuses are reminiscent of those of Adam and Eve. The existence of this parallel has been noted but its significance remains unappreciated:[23] as this story echoes Genesis iii, it is above all Gregory's exegesis of Genesis iii that should guide its interpretation.

It is in his exegesis of this passage that one finds Gregory's oft-quoted multi-stage method of temptation in which the actions of the serpent, Adam and Eve provided the archetype on which all subsequent acts of sin were modelled: 'For in the heart it is committed by suggestion, pleasure, consent, and the boldness to defend. For the suggestion comes by means of the enemy; pleasure, through the flesh; consent through the spirit, and the boldness to defend, through pride.'[24] Genesis iii therefore provided Gregory with the model in which self-justification was the final stage in any act of sin, and the scriptural story that the tale of the nun parodies is therefore the very one which contains the set-piece for all human wrongdoing in which sin is completed by a verbal act of self-justification. Variations of this model can be found in Gregory's letters, homilies and in the *Moralia*, and it was not a passing idea but one which directed Gregory's thinking across a long period of time.[25] Re-reading the *Dialogues* story through the lens of patristic and Gregorian understanding of Genesis transforms the devil's words to Equitus into something rather more sinister than apolegetic whimpering.[26] Offering a defence in place of what should be a confession is a recapitulation of the first parents' failure to confess and is also the culmination and completion of the devil's initial sinful act against the nun. The devil's words of self-defence should be regarded as an example of this fourth stage of sin, and the devil's words of feigned innocence do not exonerate him but condemn him further.

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[21] The link between Gregory's hagiography and exegesis has been convincingly demonstrated in Joan Petersen, *The Dialogues of Gregory the Great in their late antique cultural background*, Toronto 1984. Several writers have identified the biblical and hagiographical debts of the *Dialogues*: M. Mähler, 'Évocations bibliques et hagiographiques dans la vie de saint Benoît par saint Grégoire', *Revue bénedictine* lxxxiii (1973), 145–84; Pearse Cusack, *An interpretation of the second Dialogue of Gregory the Great: hagiography and Saint Benedict*, Lewiston, NY 1993. Joan Petersen differs from Mähler by arguing that Gregory was not intending to make exact biblical and literary correspondences, but that these parallels were the result of Gregory interpreting events in a typological manner.

[22] Gregory, *Dialogues* iii.21.1–4. Gregory's exegesis of Matthew viii.31 can be found in Gregory, *Moralia* ii.10.16, in *Gregorius Magnus: Moralia in Iob*, ed. M Adriaen, CCSL cxliii cxliiiA xcliiiB, Turnhout 1979; cf. John Cassian, *Collationes*, vii.22.1, in *Collationes XIIII*, ed. Michael Petschenig, CSEL xiii, Vienna 2004.

[23] The parallel has been noted, but not fully appreciated, by Shanzer: 'Humour', 46.

Furthermore, Gregory's exegesis of Genesis iii indicates that when the devil claimed that 'She came and ate me', he should not be taken at his word and understood as lacking guilt, but as compounding the guilt that he already possessed.[27] Just as Adam and Eve were not exonerated by their words but were condemned even further by them, so too is the devil when he implicates the nun. By each implicating the other, Adam and Eve increased their guilt;[28] likewise, sinners who deny their guilt increase it.[29] Thus, by attempting to implicate the nun, the devil's culpability was compounded. The use and position of *ego* in this passage was to make it clear that the devil was not claiming that no wrong had been done: he was merely, in the spirit of the first parents, emphasising that *he* was not at fault. The devil's use of *ego* (when commented upon at all) has usually been interpreted as reflective of the folkloric origin of the story or the result of the 'everyday' nature of the devil's speech.[30] However, such interpretations fail to realise that the devil's use of *ego* was intended to make a connection between the devil's words and those of Eve. Furthermore, any simplicity in the devil's speech ought to be considered a feigned simplicity: the devil was pretending to be harmless, just as he was pretending to be innocent.

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[24] 'In corde namque suggestione, delectatione, consensu et defensionis audacia perpetratur. Fit enim suggestion per aduersarium, delectatio per carnem, consensus per spiritum, defensionis audacia per elationem': Gregory, *Moralia* iv.27.49; cf. Augustine, *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* ii.21, in *De Genesi contra Manichaeos*, ed. D. Weber, CSEL xci, Vienna 1998.

[25] Gregory the Great, *Registrum epistolarum* 11.56a, in *Registrum epistolarum*, ed. D. Norberg, CCSL cxl–cxlA, Turnhout 1981–2; *Homiliae in evangelia* i.16, in *Homiliae in evangelia*, ed. R. Etaix, CCSL cxli, Turnhout 1999; *Moralia* iv.27.49.

[26] Satan 'whimpers apologetically': Huber-Rebenich, 'Hagiographic fiction', 204.

[27] See n. 1 above.

[28] Gregory, *Moralia* xx.15.30.

[29] Ibid. xxxiii.28.50.

[30] Shanzer, 'Humour', 46; Huber-Rebenich, 'Hagiographic fiction', 173.

Finally, the devil in this story is guilty because he had presumed to speak at all. God asked the first parents what they had done in order that they might confess, but he cursed the serpent immediately, saying that the serpent is not asked because his repentance is not sought.[31] Likewise, the saint in the *Dialogues* story does not ask the devil what he has done; the devil, however, presumes to ask this question of himself when he asks 'What have I done? What have I done?'[32] Gregory argued that it is pride that motivates one to defend oneself, and the devil's presumption is therefore a recapitulation of Lucifer's attempt to rise above himself.[33]

When this story is read in conjunction with Gregory's exegesis of Genesis iii, it is clear that the devil is neither a comic nor a trivial character. From Genesis iii Gregory drew the lessons that the devil was not given the opportunity to speak as he is not offered salvation; that Adam and Eve compounded their guilt by implicating another; and that the whole episode formed the multi-stage model of sin of which all subsequent ones were a recapitulation. All of the devil's words correspond with one of these lessons: first the devil reaches above his station by claiming for himself the right to speak; he then compounds his guilt by using this speech to implicate the nun; and he then completes his sin by not using this speech to confess his sin but instead uses it to offer excuses of self-justification. He was certainly not innocent.

The idea that the devil was a verbal deceiver had its roots in Genesis, where the serpent deceived Eve using language.[34] These verses had a profound influence on late antique perceptions of diabolical temptation:

> Eloquence had played a key role in the temptation leading to the Fall. Eve had been seduced by the Serpent's crafty words and she in turn (the text hinted, and interpreters assumed) had imitated her tempter by similarly seducing Adam … On a more practical level, the Fall was the original scenario for verbal seduction, whether as practised by heretics urging their false doctrines on the faithful, or by men and women deceiving or manipulating each other.[35]

The story of the nun, devil and lettuce – a parody of the fall of man – features a devil misusing language just as he had done in paradise. The devil is a false exegete who wilfully misrepresented his interactions with the nun just as he had deliberately repeated the command of God in misshapen form to Eve.

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[31] Gregory, *Moralia* xxxiii.28.50.

[32] See n. 1 above. In Genesis iii.14–15 God condemns the serpent without asking him what he has done.

[33] Gregory, *Moralia* iv.27.49.

[34] Gen. iii.13; 2 Corinthians xi.3.

[35] Eric Jager, *The tempter's voice: language and the fall in medieval literature*, Ithaca, NY 1993, 4.

It would be a serious oversight to view the devil's words in this story as separate from Gregory's ideas about the devil, sin and language, even without these correspondences with Gregory's exegesis. Gregory was clear that the devil is a liar and the father of lies, in whom the truth cannot not be found.[36] The danger of speech was a central concern of his works. A significant part of his *Pastoral care* concerns the correct use of speech.[37] The *Dialogues* also abound with stories which emphasise the virtue of silence: in one such story, Gregory comments that if an unbaptised baby who cannot speak dies he will go to heaven, whereas one who can speak will not. The lesson is clear: it is the ability to speak that condemns the unbaptised child, as a baby who cannot speak cannot sin.[38] Given the devil's lying nature and Gregory's mistrust of speech, it is with an attitude of scepticism that Gregory would have expected his audience to approach the devil's words. The devil may not have succeeded in deceiving Equitus, but a not insignificant number of historians have been all too willing to take the devil at his word: thus the devil was not really doing anything; he is all a bit harmless really; perhaps he is even a bit funny. However, when viewed in the light of Gregory's exegesis, not only is the devil a liar and his speech dangerous, but in his abuse of language and manipulation of Scripture the devil does not excuse himself but descends even further into iniquity.

The devil's words to St Benedict in the second dialogue provide the second key to understanding this story. The *Life of Benedict* contains the only other example in the *Dialogues* of the devil speaking to a saint directly rather than via a person whom he has possessed. As in the first example, the devil uses this speech to protest that he is innocent;[39] and, also similarly, the devil's language in this story has been described as a 'humorous' game and a taunting pun.[40]

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[36] John viii.44.

[37] Gregory the Great, *Regula pastoralis* ii.4, in *Grégoire le Grand: Règle pastorale*, ed. F. Rommel and trans. C. Morel, SC ccclxxxi ccclxxxii, Paris 1992.

[38] Gregory wrote very little on the fate of unbaptised babies and children. An exception can be found in the *Moralia*, where Gregory appears uncomfortable with the idea that unbaptised *paruuli* are condemned. He nevertheless appears to adhere to the belief, expressing the opinion that such things are hidden and should be honoured with humility: *Moralia* xxvii.4.7.

[39] Idem, *Dialogues* ii.8.12.

[40] 'humorous' game: Straw, *Gregory the Great*, 64. The devil's words are described as a 'pun', 'tauntings' and as the devil shouting 'in exasperation' in Lester K. Little, *Benedictine maledictions: liturgical cursing in romanesque France*, London 1993, p. xiii.

This protest comes at the end of a series of conflicts between Benedict and the devil, which together illustrate the manner in which Gregory intended that diabolical speech should be understood. First, the devil attacked the bell which was in place to inform Benedict that food had been left for him. In his second attack, the devil appeared as a small black bird which circled Benedict's face. In the devil's third direct attack on Benedict, the saint was seized by an evil spirit which filled his mind with the image of a woman.

The devil's attacks therefore increased in sophistication and threat the more that Benedict overcame him: first he is not seen, then he is seen, and then he enters Benedict's mind. This is in agreement with Gregory's frequent refrain that the devil increases the severity of his attacks the more that he is defeated.[41] Indeed, it is for this reason that it has been correctly identified that the form of attack that the devil takes acts as a 'gauge' of the saint's holiness, indicating his stage in hagiogenesis.[42] In other words, you can tell how holy a saint is by the devil's form of attack.

After these attacks the devil appeared visibly before Benedict, and, inflamed by Benedict's silence, insulted him further:

> First he [the devil] called Benedict by name. When the man of God did not respond, he [the devil] soon broke out insults against him. For when he shouted, he said: 'Benedicte, Benedicte!', and seeing him not replying, he immediately added 'Maledicte, non Benedicte! What do you want with me? Why do you persecute me?'[43]

Gregory described this attack as more violent than the previous ones, an attack that was neither hidden ('occulte') nor in a dream ('per somnium').[44] The devil's words were an escalation on the devil's visible appearance before Benedict with flaming eyes. Yet the devil's words are usually passed over in silence or their significance downplayed. The incident has been described as a humorous game and an example of the devil 'teasing Benedict';[45] again, these are not very different from older interpretations that the devil was 'condescending to make a pun on the name of a saint',[46] and neither are they dissimilar from interpretations of the devil's words in the story of the nun and lettuce. However, these interpretations do not do justice to the place of the incident within the sequence, the manner in which the devil is given a more distinct form in this attack, and, above all, Gregory's own words on the severity of it.

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[41] Gregory, *Moralia* iii.10.18.

[42] Dendel, *Satan unbound*, 57–8.

[43] 'Prius enim hunc uocabat ex nomine. Cui cum uir Dei minime responderet, ad eius mox contumelias erumpebat. Nam cum clamaret, dicens: "Benedicte, Benedicte", et eum sibi nullo modo respondere conspiceret, protinus adiungebat: "Maledicte, non Benedicte, quid mecum habes, quid me persequeris?"': Gregory, *Dialogues* ii.8.12.

[44] Ibid. ii.8.10.

[45] Straw, *Gregory the Great*, 64.

[46] Dudden, *Gregory the Great*, ii.368.

Far from being a 'condescension' or an example of 'teasing', this outburst was an extremely dangerous attack. In the *Moralia*, Gregory identified words as a means of diabolical attack: the devil attacks from the front with wounds and from the side with words.[47] Of the devil's attacks on Job, Gregory wrote 'for he inflicted the words after the wounds'.[48] It is the same for Benedict: the devil only resorts to words once other attacks had failed. The devil's words form the culmination of the devil's series of attacks on Benedict and ought to be considered the most sophisticated and threatening.

The devil began by proclaiming Benedict ('Benedicte, Benedicte') and ended by cursing him in a pun on his name ('Maledicte, non Benedicte'). The devil spoke these words because he could not bear Benedict's actions – his destruction of pagan temples – in silence.[49] In contrast, Benedict responded to the devil's insults with silence.[50] It was this silence that caused the devil to break forth in insults.[51] Thus the devil manipulated language in order to curse and lie, whilst the saint bore insults in patience and silence. Thus, on its simplest level, the devil represents vice (speech) whilst the saint represents virtue (silence). The devil's pun – a manipulation of language – exacerbated the sinfulness of his speech in contrast to the saint's silence.

The significance of the devil's words becomes most apparent when they are considered in light of Scripture. The question 'why do you persecute me?' that the devil asks of Benedict is identical to that which Christ asks of Saul.[52] In the Acts of the Apostles, Saul, a persecutor of Christians, was blinded by a light from Heaven on the road to Damascus. A voice called out to him, asking 'Saule, Saule, quid me persequeris?' After this Saul was converted, becoming known as Paul.

The phrase 'quid me persequeris' occurs five times in Gregory's corpus.[53] On four of these five occasions the phrase is placed in the mouth of Christ (quoting Acts): it is only this once that it is uttered by anyone other than Christ. Gregory was therefore aware that these words belonged to Christ (and it would be silly to think otherwise); his decision to place them in the devil's mouth should be considered deliberate. Just as Christ called out Saul's name twice ('Saule, Saule'), so the devil calls out Benedict's name twice ('Benedicite, Benedicite'). This repetition was included to make the connection with the conversion of Saul explicit. This is also the first time that Benedict sees the devil in his true form, just as in Acts it is the first time that Saul sees Christ. In Scripture Christ is surrounded by light whereas in the *Dialogues* the devil is engulfed by fire. The three biblical accounts of Saul's conversion are not entirely consistent, but whilst there is a contrast between what Saul and those around him see and hear, there is also a contrast in the *Dialogues* between what Benedict and those around him see and hear; finally, both stories feature the themes of persecution and conversion. It is therefore clear that this conflict between Benedict and the devil was modelled on the conversion of Saul.

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[47] Gregory, *Moralia* iii.10.17.

[48] 'Verba enim post uulnera intulit': ibid. iii.8.14.

[49] 'Sed haec antiquus hostis tacite non ferens': idem, *Dialogues* ii.8.10.

[50] 'uir Dei minime responderet', ibid.

[51] See n. 43 above.

[52] Acts ix.4; xxii.7; xxvi.14.

[53] Gregory, *Moralia* iii.13.25; xxx.1.3; xxxi.16.30; *Homilia in evangelia* 34; *Dialogues* ii.8.12. This is according to a search of the Library of Latin Texts, Series A (LLT – A) database that can be found at http://www.brepolis.net/.

This was not a 'humorous game' or mere 'taunting': it was a complex attack in which the devil used the weapon of language in an attempt to overthrow Benedict's allegiance to Christ. Benedict/Maledict is a parallel of Paul/Saul: Christ renames Saul, who converts from bad to good, and the devil renames Benedict, who (so the devil hoped) would convert from good to bad. In this inversion of Saul's conversion, the devil positioned himself as a persecuted innocent trying to make a disciple of his persecutor. Christ converted Saul by appearing in a blaze of light, crying 'quid me persequeris' and, later, renaming his enemy; the devil attempted to convert Benedict by appearing in a blaze of fire, crying 'quid me persequeris', and renaming *his* enemy. As with the story of the nun and lettuce, it is the devil's words that hold the key to the interpretation of the story: he is claiming that Benedict is cursed when he is not; he is claiming Christ's innocence as his own; and he is attempting to convert Benedict. Thus by his speech the devil is revealed to be a liar, a blasphemer and a recruiter who was trying to make Benedict truly Maledict.

The devil's cry of 'Benedict, Benedict!' and subsequent protests of innocence resemble the stories in the Synoptic Gospels in which demons proclaim Christ and then ask him what he wants with them.[54] This is a frequent *topos* in saints' *Lives* and consequently it would be very easy to dismiss the devil's excuses – like those in the story of the nun and the lettuce – as mere hagiographic *topoi*. Certainly, this scriptural allusion would have been evident to the original audiences of the *Dialogues*. However, it should not be considered as either/or, as neither the connection with Acts nor that with Matthew is perfect, for the very simple reason that Gregory was intending that the devil bring about a garbled version of both stories. The devil is pretending to speak within the parameters allowed to him by Scripture whilst in fact presuming to utter the words of Christ; he is presenting himself as an Angel of Light whilst recapitulating the deliberate miscommunication of God's word that occurred in Eden. The ambition of the devil is always to confuse and deceive, and the purpose behind this mingling of two biblical stories (Matthew and Acts) is the re-enactment of a third: the devil's corruption of language in order to bring about the fall of humankind.

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[54] Matt. viii.29; Mark v.7; Luke viii.28.

In his words to Eve, the serpent had spoken enough truth for his lie to sound like God's word.[55] The devil had pretended to utter the word of God, but by making an addition to God's command, all veracity in his repetition was lost.[56] Indeed, the devil pretends to be an angel of the light,[57] not lying outright, but poisoning truth with lie.[58] Gregory created an approximation of this type of deception by giving the devil's words to Benedict multiple resonances with Scripture. Thus, as the devil's speech confuses by evoking the words of both Christ and the devil, it is a re-enactment of the 'archetypal seduction through language'[59] that one finds in Genesis.

Similarly, the devil's protests of innocence to both Equitus and Benedict resemble the 'patched-together excuses' that the first parents offered in explanation for their disobedience. Adam and Eve's clothing of themselves has been interpreted as the first parents taking 'leaves' from Scripture and using them as 'coverings' for their sin;[60] likewise, the devil quotes from Scripture (either directly or in sentiment) in order to defend himself. In his words to Equitus, the devil claimed for himself the right to answer God (or the saint) that was denied to him in Eden, thus placing himself in the more elevated position of humanity; in his words to Benedict, he claimed for himself the innocence of Christ, thus claiming that he is God himself. In both his protests of innocence, therefore, the devil is not only patching together excuses from Scripture, but also re-enacting Lucifer's attempt to be greater than he is.

The devil's words to Benedict and the sequence leading up to them demonstrate that speech is one of the most powerful weapons in the devil's arsenal. When the story of the nun and lettuce is viewed in light of this second story, the devil's words to Equitus are revealed as an attack and not just an excuse. As the devil's form of attack acts as a 'gauge' of holiness, the devil's attack on the nun for eating the lettuce is analogous to the devil's attack on Benedict's attempt to control his appetite, whilst his words to St Equitus are equivalent to his words to St Benedict. It is in light of this that the devil's words of 'What have I done? What have I done?' should be understood: they are a diabolical attack of the most grave kind. The devil is a false exegete whose interpretation of events cannot be trusted: his suggestion that he was a passive participant in either of these stories should not be given any credence.

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[55] Gen. iii.4–5.

[56] Ambrose, *De paradiso* xii.36, in *Ambrosius Mediolanensis: De paradiso*, Library of Latin Texts, Series A, Turnhout 2010, http://www.brepolis.net/. This edition is based upon that of C. Schenkl, CSEL xxxii/1, Vienna 1897.

[57] 2 Cor. xi.14. Gregory says that the devil was acting as the angel of the light in Gen. iii.5 when he promised good things: *Moralia* iv.1.6. See also xxxiii.33.57.

[58] Gregory, *Moralia* v.15.32.

[59] Jager, *Tempter's voice*, 99.

[60] Ibid. 75.

How, therefore, should the devil's attack on the nun be understood? It is Gregory's words and not the devil's that provide an answer. In the third dialogue Gregory used the dialogue form to provide explanations for many of his stories. One such story concerned a priest called Stephen who, struggling to untie his boots, called out to his servant 'Come, devil, untie my boots!'[61] Suddenly, his boots began to untie themselves, and he realised that it was the devil who was untying them. Terrified, Stephen ordered him to leave, saying that he had been speaking to his servant; the devil left him.[62]

This story is similar to that of the nun and lettuce in its ostensible triviality and the two are often discussed together: the devil is not, it has been said, presented in all the tales as as harmless as he is in these.[63] These are also the two – and only two – stories singled out from the *Dialogues* during a discussion of early medieval humour.[64] If the story of the nun and lettuce contains the example *par excellence* of Gregory's harmless devil, the story of Stephen and his laces comes a close second.

This story is contained on either side by dialogue between the two characters. Immediately prior to the story, Gregory said that the devil always watches for anything in our thoughts ('cogitatio'), words ('locutio') or deeds ('opera') in case he should find anything with which to accuse us before God.[65] He is also always standing nearby ready to deceive us.[66] Immediately after the story Peter replies that it is very laborious to stand continually as though in battle.[67] The lesson of this story was not, therefore, that the devil is harmless, but that the devil is always present and ready to attack at any opportunity. The devil had been lying in wait for Stephen, and it was a careless couple of words – 'Come, devil' – that gave the devil the opportunity to approach him. Gregory frequently warned – particularly in his letters – that sin could make a person or the Church vulnerable to the devil by creating a hole ('foramen'), entrance ('aditus') or place ('locum') through which he could enter;[68] and in his words to Peter in the *Dialogues*, Gregory indicated that the devil is always waiting for us to make a mistake in thought, word or deed.

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[61] 'Veni, diabole, discalcia me': Gregory, *Dialogues* iii.20.1.
[62] Ibid. iii.20.2.
[63] Huber-Rebenich, 'Hagiographic fiction', 204.
[64] Shanzer, 'Humour', 40
[65] Gregory, *Dialogues* iii.19.5.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid. iii.20.3.

This *modus operandi* can also be found in the story of the nun and lettuce. The devil's first sentence – 'I was sitting on the lettuce' – indicates that the devil was lurking (with intent) near the nun and corresponds with Gregory's constant reiterations that the devil is a prowling lion.[69] The devil's second sentence – 'She came and ate me' – reveals the circumstances that allowed the devil to enter the nun: her greedy consumption of the lettuce without the sign of the cross. Reading these two stories in light of Gregory's exegesis, homilies and letters demonstrates that they are hagiographic manifestations of the moral found across Gregory's corpus that one must exercise constant vigilance against a very cunning devil.

Peter Brown spoke of the period between Augustine and Gregory as one in which there was 'a new interest in the *peccata levia*, in the "sinfulness of everyday life"'.[70] This idea can be seen alongside Robert Markus' argument for an 'ascetic invasion' in which the secular was enveloped by the sacred, and ascetic values were increasingly adopted in the towns and cities.[71] Markus ended his work with the observation that 'The massive secularity of John Chrysostom's and of Augustine's world had drained out of Gregory's. There was little room for the secular in it. The devil was close, always ready to swallow up the world and the flesh.'[72]

The stories of the nun and the priest support these arguments insofar as they are themselves arguments that ascetic values need to be adhered to at all times and by everyone: the devil lies in wait for all, not just those in the desert; and hell is the destination for those guilty not only of *crimina*, but also those who have indulged in an angry word here or greedy bite there. The observation that the tale of the priest's laces is an example of 'something ordinary observed – only the ordinary has gone sour'[73] is accurate. The ordinary has become sour because it is now judged as severely as one would judge a monk in the desert, and is found to be wanting. The devil in these stories is neither harmless nor comic, but extremely dangerous and terrifying, and is given an entrance by what may appear to be the slightest sins. If one were to answer the devil's question 'What have I done? What have I done?' – a question on which the original audience may have been meant to reflect[74] – the answer would certainly not be 'nothing'.

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[68] 'foramen': idem, *Homiliae in Hiezechihelem prophetam* 1.7.6, ed. Marcus Adriaen, CCSL clii, Turnhout 1971; 'aditus': Gregory, *ep.* ix.220; 'locum': *ep.* ix.219.

[69] 1 Peter v.8; Gregory, *ep.* v.41; *Moralia* v.21.41.

[70] Peter Brown, 'Gloriosus obitus: the end of the ancient other world', in W. E. Klingshirn and M. Vessey (eds.), *The limits of ancient Christianity: essays on late antique thought and culture in honor of R. A. Markus*, Ann Arbor, Mi 1999, 289–314 at p. 310. Also see Peter Brown, 'The decline of the empire of God: amnesty, penance, and the afterlife from late antiquity to the Middle Ages', in C. Walker Bynum and P. Freedman (eds), *Last things: death and the apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, Philadelphia, Pa 2000, 41–59, and 'The end of the ancient other world: death and afterlife between late antiquity and the early Middle Ages', *Tanner Lectures on Human Values* xx (1999), 19–85.

[71] R. A. Markus, *The end of ancient Christianity*, Cambridge 1990, 15, 199–211.

[72] Ibid. 228.

[73] Shanzer, 'Humour', 40.

Scholarship on the *Dialogues* was for a long time dictated by the perception that the work differed from and was somewhat inferior to Gregory's other writings. There was surprise that the author of the *Moralia* could also be the author of the *Dialogues*, and this led some to question whether Gregory believed the stories that he wrote or if something else was at play.[75] Whilst many of these questions are now considered irrelevant, scholarship on the *Dialogues* has not progressed in a linear fashion but has continued to return to older questions even whilst new discoveries have been made. Thus in 2003 John Moorhead believed it necessary to argue that the *Dialogues* should be understood within the context of early medieval hagiography, even though several commendable works had already done just that.[76] This haphazard progress is in part due to the distorting effect of Francis Clark's arguments on the scholarship; it is also the result of the vast number of works written on Gregory and the varied genres in which he wrote.[77]

However, the manner in which the story of the nun and the lettuce continues to be interpreted suggests that there may be an additional explanation for the *Dialogues*' complicated and somewhat anomalous historiography. The story is in many ways the epitome of all that was once seen as different or problematic about the *Dialogues*: whilst the *Dialogues* are no longer dismissed as the 'joker in Gregory's pack', their devil continues to be seen as humorous or comical; and whilst the *Dialogues* are now rarely criticised as naïve, retellings of this story continue to attract this particular adjective. This story is rarely met with the ridicule of a century ago, but as was the case then, some modern reactions may say more about modern sensibilities than Gregory's own understanding of the devil in everyday life. The recurrent portrayal of the devil as an underwhelming figure may point to the low-key, perhaps unconscious endurance of the kinds of assumptions about the devil and the miraculous that led to the *Dialogues* being viewed as different and problematic in the first place: this lack of a complete sea-change in approaches to medieval saints' *Lives* may in turn explain the *Dialogues*' tortuous historiography. Gregory's story presents a world-view very far removed from that of many people in the modern day, and, as a monk and exegete, his most natural reaction would have been to understand it using the tools of Scripture and exegesis; yet it could be said that it is the devil's interpretation – that the devil was not really doing anything – that fits most easily with modern sensibilities. As the *Dialogues* are frequently studied separately from Gregory's other writings, there has been little to counter this under-appreciation of the influence of Scripture and exegesis on this story.[78]

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[74] A point suggested by Carolyn Donohue.

[75] An early manifestation of this is W. F. Bolton, 'The supra-historical sense in the *Dialogues* of Gregory I', *Aevum* xxxiii (1959), 206–13. For a more recent example see McCready, *Signs of sanctity*. McCready asks a similar question albeit with an understanding of early medieval hagiographic genres.

[76] John Moorhead, 'Taking Gregory the Great's *Dialogues* seriously', *Downside Review* cxxi (2003), 197–210.

[77] For an idea of the extent of the scholarship see Robert Godding, *Bibliographia di Gregorio Magno (1890/1989)*, Rome 1990, and Francesca Sora D'Impero, *Gregorio Magno: bibliografia per gli anni 1980–2003*, Florence 2005.

Interpretations of this story have for too long circled the concepts of humour, harmlessness and naïveté, whereas instead the story should be read in conjunction with Gregory's exegesis of Genesis iii and his warnings regarding the dangers of diabolical speech. The story is a lesson on sin, language and the ubiquity of the devil in which the devil is extremely dangerous and the story is not trivial but profoundly disturbing. John Moorhead has argued that we should take the *Dialogues* seriously: in order to do this, we must also take the devil seriously.

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[78] It may not be a coincidence that it has often been French scholarship or that by those with a professed religious affiliation, such as Claude Dagens (a Catholic bishop) or Adalbert de Vogüé (a Benedictine), that has often explored the spiritual, scriptural and theological dimensions of the *Dialogues* most thoroughly. However, there are certainly many exceptions to this which can be found throughout this article.