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Satan: A Biography (review)

James H. Morey

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REVIEWS

Henry Ansgar Kelly. *Satan: A Biography*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006. xiii, 360 pp. ISBN 0-521-60402-8, \$19.99.

The distinguished former director of UCLA's Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies here provides a comprehensive look at not just one, but two "biographies" of Satan. There is the "old" or "original" biography, based on a strict reading of biblical and apocryphal texts, where Satan is a neutral divine functionary with a job to do, and the "new" biography, based on what Kelly calls misreadings and elaborations of those texts, where Satan is a rebel and "virtual anti-God" (4). The book reflects a scholarly lifetime of paying attention to Satan, and though the presentation is compressed—often severely—due to the enormity of the subject, the book serves as a reference tool to the reception history of Satan from the Old Testament through patristic exegesis to twentieth-century theology (the general index and the index of biblical and deuterocanonical books help in this regard).

The book is not a biography in the conventional sense of the term (Kelly plays on the title of Jack Miles's *God: A Biography* [New York: Knopf, 1995]). There is no *bio* in the *graph*, as it were. It is as if one were to set out to write the biography of Huckleberry Finn, or any other character whose life is fiction, or at least based exclusively on texts. This is to sidestep the question of whether or not the Devil really exists—Kelly takes no position on the subject—but not to deny that understandings of the Devil have intervened in history with real consequences. Kelly recognizes, but by necessity continually fudges, "the uneasy line between allegedly historical and fictionalized accounts of religious events and themes" (264).

One of the epigraphs to the last part of the book, "Satan in the Modern World," comes from an address by Pope Paul VI in 1972: "It is all a mysterious realm, thrown into confusion by an unhappy drama about which we know very little" (297, quoted again on 316). This epigraph could better serve at the beginning of the book, since there is no consistency in the treatment of Satan given the variety of sources and the time span of their production. Kelly gives the impression in earlier chapters that some kind of core biography could be recovered if one only worked hard enough, but of course it cannot, and Kelly takes aim at the apostates of the original biography whom he accuses of "retro-fitting" (2) accounts to meet pre-suppositions of what the Devil is. We can hardly be surprised by the variety of interpretations through

time; we witness a chronicle of difference and inference, not of error, unless one chooses to privilege one text or interpreter over another. Kelly performs his best work by showing how something as simple as the presence or absence of a definite article in Greek or Hebrew can skew perceptions. Kelly also demonstrates how assumptions—such as the identification of the Eden serpent with Satan, probably first made by Justin Martyr in the second century—have hardened into fact.

There is no shortage of material to draw upon, from the adversarial angel standing before Balaam's ass in Numbers 22, to the watchers in Zechariah, through apocryphal books such as Jubilees, various midrash and targums, the extremely influential *Life of Adam and Eve*, a host of medieval commentaries, and a fog of papal bulls. Here Kelly is in his element, as he takes care to give the necessary historical and chronological context, and to give readers a refresher course in the Bible and biblical exegesis. The Bible has a life of its own, and Kelly rightly operates from the principle that "the Bible was not the same then as it is now" (131). There are frequent reviews, restatements, and internal references forward and back within his own book as Kelly tries to reconcile the accounts and confused timelines, such as whether Satan's fall is pre- or post-human, or even whether it has yet to happen. Lengthy series of questions and a skeptical treatment of each piece of evidence lead, however, to non-conclusions, or at least negative ones, at the end of each chapter.

Kelly's cavalier, colloquial style is remarkable and distracting: "Whoa, wait a minute!" (116); "No way José. Not yet, Josette" (117); "What gives?" (245). Editors at Cambridge, or any other scholarly press, would countenance this style only from an established scholar. The book may hold a record for Cambridge press in the number of exclamation points. The style may be excused, except it masks a more serious organizational problem. Transitions such as "Oh yes, one more thing" (117), "Back to the Angels" (134) and "Let's move on" (253) patch one hodge-podge of material to another. Kelly's admission on page 237 that he is "stumped" on the question of when Satan was put in charge of Hell, and that he intends to "make it a research project for the future—let's move on," risks crossing the line from scholarly camaraderie to mockery. Names are dropped thick and fast, and even Dante, who one would think would qualify as one of the principal crafters of the idea of Satan in the West, gets only a page and a half (265–66). The treatment of Aquinas, though longer (242–56), is unworthy of such a great thinker. The problem becomes more acute in later chapters. For example, the treatment of the Devil's appearances in the *Golden Legend* is little more than plot summary. As a literature scholar, this reviewer found the section on Satan in Literature (265–77) most unsatisfactory. The accompanying section on Satan in

art (277–95, with 15 illustrations) is informative, but I suspect that art historians would also remark on its superficiality. The frontispiece of the “Fall of Satan” from the *Très Riches Heures* of Jean, Duc de Berry, is for some reason inverted (and the inversion is noted), but the result is to show Satan rising, not falling. Since Kelly has set out to debunk the (mostly medieval) new biographers and to rehabilitate Satan’s reputation, the inversion may make sense. We hear echoes of the great debate among scholars of *Paradise Lost* regarding whose side Milton was really on: the Devil’s or God’s. As Stanley Fish has shown, however, the question turns less on texts and authors than on the readers making the interpretations (*Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* [2nd ed., Harvard, 1998]).

On page 229 Kelly helpfully invokes the metaphor of Satan’s *Curriculum Vitae*, a model that in several ways works better than the hypothesis that Satan has a biography. A “course of life” on paper that continues to be updated is exactly the research project that Kelly and a host of other scholars continue to pursue. The documentary record is alive, not the subject itself.

James H. Morey

Samantha Kahn Herrick. *Imagining the Sacred Past: Hagiography and Power in Early Normandy*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2007. 256 pp. ISBN 0-674-02443-5, \$49.95.

The potential of hagiographical writings to offer more than just insights into sanctity has long been known. Hagiographies were generated by clerks and religious communities within their social—as well as religious—contexts, and they can insensibly and sometimes deliberately unveil much about their contemporary worlds. This sort of potential is never more tempting to exploit than when the historical record is otherwise slight. Paul Fouracre and Patrick Geary explored Merovingian and Carolingian society in this way some decades ago. There has been a rising number of such studies of late in English, and Samantha Kahn Herrick’s is the second to take Norman hagiography as a principal focus for such a study.

Herrick studies three less well-known Norman works: the *Vitae* of St Taurin of Evreux and St Vigor of Bayeux, and the *Passio* of St Nicaise, a Norman saint particularly curious in that in his imagined lifetime he never actually entered the duchy. Herrick argues for their composition by different authors in much the same era, the third or fourth decades of the eleventh century. They were composed by authors well acquainted with traditions of past Frankish hagiography, working with precious little in the way of historical or legendary material concerning their early Christian subjects. They are