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Fiendish Attacks. The Devil as Iconoclast and Victim of Iconoclastic Acts

On July 11, 1501, the gambler Antonio Rinaldeschi loses at dice in the Osteria del Fico in Florence. On his way home, he angrily hurls horse dung at an Annunciation fresco on the outside of the church S. Maria degli Alberighi. He is observed, captured and sentenced to death. The attacked fresco, however, soon becomes an object of veneration and the site of miracles. The devotees decide to extend the church such that the fresco is integrated into the interior. The painter Filippo Dolciati is commissioned with a scenic representation of the story that probably served as a predella for the fresco until it was detached and transferred above the main altar in 1771. In Dolciati's panel, the instigator of the blasphemy is made visible: a black *diavoletto* is performing on Antonio's shoulder, an inscription added later describes the gambler as "driven by the devil" ("stimolato dal Diavolo").

William J. Connell and Giles Constable have provided an in-depth study of the case, focusing on the interaction of Florentine institutions, popular religiosity, and political circumstances in the aftermath of Savonarola's execution in 1498 (Connell/Constable 1998). Samuel Edgerton studied the case against the background of Florentine criminal prosecution, while Megan Holmes analyzed it as a paradigm for the function of miraculous images within conflicted zones of urban topography (Edgerton 1985; Holmes 2013). The most recent discussion of the case is Timothy McCall's essay on the significance of an assaulted image of the Virgin for the creation of Bramante's "coro finto" in the Milanese church of S. Maria presso San Satiro (McCall 2019). A fresco above said image tells the story of a gambler who, "con diabolico furore", attacks the figure of Mary with a dagger. Unlike Antonio, this malefactor repents immediately and is soon considered a *beato* himself. What is common to both acts, is the fact that both offenders were gamblers and both were instigated by the devil.

In my article, I will focus on the figure of the devil as suborner of assaults on sacred images and on its flipside, the devil as a victim of defacing. On the basis of studies on Florentine religious experience and Marian piety, on miraculous images, on iconoclasm and pious disfiguration, I will examine religious, political and social motivations for such attacks and the question of the power of images – from the point of view of the devil.

Connell/Constable have shown that the veneration of the violated fresco that became known as the Madonna de' Ricci was promoted by partisans of Savonarola. They could interpret the assault as a sign of the devil's hate of this type of devout images that Savonarola cherished (while rejecting indecent ones). The cult of the fresco provided them with an opportunity to congregate and to rival the famous fresco at SS. Annunziata that was said to have been accomplished by the hand of an angel. The Madonna de' Ricci had neither the nimbus of miraculous origins nor the patina of old age – it was an average mid-15th century image. Yet by its violation, the devil indirectly acknowledged its power and provided an occasion for compensatory miraculous activity.

That the Fiend was behind attacks against sacred images as well as behind idolatry was a common opinion since late antiquity. With the advent of the Reformation, this belief gained new momentum: While Catholics saw the devil as a motivator of Calvinist and Protestant attacks against images, they held him responsible for the worship of icons and the attachment to paraphernalia.

Indeed, from the devil's point of view, cult images pose a multiple danger: (1) they promote faith and thus keep people away from sin and thus from his realm; (2) they have an apotropaic effect; and (3) they serve to cast out demons. Whereas in the Middle Ages, evil spirits were expelled by saints or at their graves; since the 16th century, the ritual of exorcism was taken into the hands of clergymen and often took place in front of devotional images. Especially Mary increasingly became the most important adversary of the devil. Numerous *ex voti* and entries in miracle books testify to her intervention in favor of those who were possessed or plagued by demons.

The devil is not only the instigator of iconoclastic attacks but also their target. As a disembodied spirit, he is dependent on virtual or borrowed bodies to become visible: the bodies of images, statues or possessed human beings. Therefore, the devil, in demonological literature, was often referred to as a painter (cf. Cole 2002, Berns 2020). His reliance on borrowed bodies lead to the belief that one can attack him by attacking these bodies. This happens on a small as well as on a large scale: Images of demons are painted over or erased in books, defaced in paintings or scratched out in frescoes. The educated elite sneered at the lack of distinction between the image and the depicted. However, the veneration of images of grace – with all the emphasis on the difference between image and prototype – was based on an obscuration of this very difference: it was the Madonna embodied in a particular image that was effective against the devil.

At the Italian Academy, I will conduct an in-depth study of the Rinaldeschi case, focusing on the role of the devil. The aim is to correlate the case with other instances of devil-inspired acts of iconoclasm, demonological literature, and Florentine cult practices. What interests me are (1) the analogy between the way Mary was believed to reside in icons and the devil in idols, and (2) his dependence on borrowed bodies, which approximates 'diaboloclasm' to rituals of exorcism. On a more general level, I am interested in the devil as a figure that is central to our understanding of early modern subjectivity. How were inner forces imagined, and how were processes of instigation, inspiration or occupation represented?

The project is a spin-off of my book-project on Early Modern demonology and the cultural history of pacts with the devil focusing on the case history of the Bavarian painter Christoph Haizmann, who, in 1677 claimed to have made a pact with the devil and was exorcised by the help of a Marian statue, Our Lady of Mariazell in Styria, before becoming a monk in Vienna.