The Italian Devils of Anglo-Saxon Literature

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Every culture has its images of evil and its personifications of wickedness. The English-speaking world possesses a literature and dramatic tradition rich in devils. There are deceivers, troublemakers, outlaws, corrupters, traitors, chiselers, killers, monsters, parasites, criminal masterminds, and endless other variations of human wickedness and malice.

The Anglo-Saxon world's literature and drama is also rich in foreign devils. Among the foreign devils the Italian villain is the perennial favourite. From the Age of Elizabeth to the present, the Italians have supplied the drama and literature of the English-speaking world with more foreign devils than any other people. Other nations have supplied foreign devils; however, no nation has supplied them as consistently as Italy.

The Italian devils possess that mixture of qualities which enable us to recognize them as both descendants of Lucifer and precursors of *The Godfather.* Sinning against God and society, they are in conflict with their origins. They display an awesome satanic grandeur in their fiendish attempts to control or to destroy the lives of others.

The Italian devils are an essential part of the English-speaking world's centuries-old image-making of Italy. The literary and dramatic tradition of the Italian devil has undoubtedly preconditioned the English-speaking world's relations with Italians, clerics and laymen. The Italian devil of the criminal monk tradition, affirmed from the Age of Elizabeth to the Age of Victoria and the present, continues to cast his sinister shadow over the Vatican.

The recent appearance of the Italian devil Giovanni della Paresi, a Dominican theologian, assures us that the Italian criminal monk tradition is far from dead. Like the other Italian churchmen in Peter Van Greenaway's novel, *The Judas Gospel* (New York: Atheneum, 1972), Giovanni della Paresi is driven by cupidity, power lust, and fanaticism.

Giovanni della Paresi sets out to defend the Vatican against a blackmail attempt. An avenging dark angel and criminal monk *par excellence,* Giovanni della Paresi eventually murders all the blackmailers. Returning to Rome, he expects to be rewarded for his fanatic loyalty to the Pope; instead, he is the victim of a devilish Vatican double-cross.

Giovanni della Paresi enjoys all the characteristics of the 18th Century Gothic novel's Italian criminal monk: 'Terrors, real or imaginary, wheeled and darted above his head like bats endowed with the evil of secondsight' (162); '. . . unmoving as a medieval gargoyle high above Paris, ready to gnaw at the entrails of any creature daring to question the virginity of Notre Dame' (164); a man 'trained to deliver eschatological threats' (171); '. . . daring perdition at every step to return with a prize greater than Satan's title deeds to hell' (237); a man 'who had intensively studied the habits of spiders in his orphanage days' (154); 'What remained of his soul quivered with the very ecstasy of fear in the presence of truth revealed' (157); he has 'the appearance of belonging to superhumanity' (170); his 'atrabilious eyes pushed futile distractions aside' (177); he possesses 'the dark, imperious cast of countenance that could threaten and command with a single glance' (212). He feels 'the need of a disquieted spirit for solitude' (161). He is described as 'fighting against remorse, the unfamiliar enemy' (162).

The Italian devil and criminal monk, Giovanni della Paresi, stalks his victims with 'the deadly advantage of knowing exactly what he was doing' (175). He terrorizes his victim with a tapping that sounds 'like an imperious summons from Hell's inner sanctum' (179). His face appears in the window of his victim's home 'expressionless, until it broke into a smile, slow as a hearse' (180). He moves in on his victim 'with animal intensity' and is 'guided by an uncanny sense of direction' (182) as he tracks him down through the heavy fog of the English countryside.

In vain does his victim switch on all the lights in the house to dispel 'the powers of darkness' besieging him. The victim is 'surrounded by one man's malevolence' (181); he is 'paralysed' as his Dominican 'tormentor' knocks on the door with a 'twee brass devil' (181). Finally, 'Terror had racked his mind from its socket' and the sight of 'a dark figure seeming to hover above him' accompanied by the 'oozing horror clutching at his legs' (183) signals the *coup de grace* for the victim.

Giovanni della Paresi, like the Italian criminal monks of the 18th Century Gothic novel, is more than a mere human. He is an Italian devil. He has been endowed with the qualities of a 'superhumanity' which traditional Christian theology generally reserved to demons. The appearance of such preternaturally malevolent monks suggests the human imagination's ongoing experience of the demonic. Possibly Peter Van Greenaway intended that his diabolical Dominican should be a contribution to contemporary demonology. His Italian Dominican devil, like the demons of the extra-canonical Jewish literature, inflicts grievous harm upon human beings and behaves like the angel of darkness, Belial.

Van Greenaway's timing for the arrival of his Italian devil and criminal monk is perfect. The occult revival welcomes Satan's second coming in many forms, according to *Time*'s cover story (June 19, 1972), and the Italian criminal monk has been a traditional form for his coming which has met with considerable success in the course of English literary history.

Nor does London-born Van Greenaway overlook the Mafia, another organisation through which Italian devils wield an almost preternaturally malevolent influence upon large segments of mankind. For Van Greenaway, the Italian criminal monk and the Italian criminal laymen of the Mafia work hand in glove for the achievement of their diabolical purposes. 'If the church wasn't behind it (i.e. the Mafia), how could it exist? . . . Every big organisation needs its hatchet men. These people don't care if you belong to Hell's Angels so long as you're a good little Catholic. . . . The Mafia is part of the family: the black sheep of the family. And they've nothing to fear by delegating the job' (i.e. murder) . . . (165).

Giovanni della Paresi has a remarkable family pedigree in the literature and drama of the English-speaking world. He is among the most recent offspring of that large family of Italian devils populating that world from the time of Queen Elizabeth. He comes from that mysterious world of Italy into which English-speaking writers and playwrights have reached to create those devils symbolising the mysterious forces of evil which all mankind at sometime experiences. The demonic powers attributed to these Italian devils correspond in large measure to those realities which St Paul has described as the 'principalities and powers', to those personal forces in history which contribute to the refusal of God, to the temptation of men, and to the perversion of the world.

The criminal monk Giovanni della Paresi and the Italian devils populating the current spate of Mafia literature reveal the traditional way in which the Anglo-Saxon world thinks of Mediterranean Man in particular, and of swarthy people in general. Darkness, danger and mystery are closely associated concepts in the Anglo-Saxon imagination.

The ubiquitous Italian devils of Elizabethan tragedies and Gothic novels brought these works an atmosphere of terror and mystery, of intrigue and crime. They generally derived from the character of Machiavelli's prince. Often, they are all criminal monks, symbols of a hated Popery; occasionally, they are even villain-heroes. They are almost entirely the product of the imagination. Few authors of the Elizabethan tragedies and Gothic novels had ever visited Italy. Their descriptions of the scene, for which they were frequently indebted to travel books and histories, were sketchy. Small wonder that the *Capo* of current Mafia literature resembles the Machiavellian intriguers of the Elizabethans and the Fatal Men of the Romantics, archetypal Italian devils.

Van Greenaway's Dominican and Puzo's *Godfather* are Italian devils with distinguished Elizabethan and Gothic 18th Century predecessors. Despite the centuries that separate them, they share much the same qualities. Theirs is the loneliness of guilt-ridden manipulators who must always guard themselves from exposure to the truth of their operations. They are victimisers living in fear of being discovered for what they are. Theirs is the confraternity of evil and mutual distrust.

The exotic and mysterious presence of Italy was strongly felt in the Elizabethan theatre, where the favourite background became the darkened Italian palace, with its wrought-iron bars preventing escape; its embroidered carpets muffling the footsteps; its hidden, suddenly yawning trap-doors; its arras-hangings concealing masked ruffians; its garlands of poisoned flowers. Italy made very good copy in Elizabethan England, where it was considered the academy of manslaughter, the sporting place of murder, the apothecary shop of all nations.

The Elizabethan dramatist who made the most of the lurid exotic appeal of Italy was John Webster. Webster, the dates of whose birth and death are lost in conjecture, was the supreme exponent of a school of Italianate horrors which begins with Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* and Marlowe's *Jew of Malta,* and blossoms in the productions of Massinger, Marston, Tourneur, and Middleton. Webster's plays, *The White Devil* (c. 1610) and *The Duchess of Malfi* (1613), each present an Italian scene with two brothers, one a Cardinal, savagely avenging the honour of a sister. Each tragedy is nominally based upon history. Each celebrates the bravery of a defiant woman and depicts the Machiavellian intrigues of subordinate courtiers. Webster's satirical tragedies of modern Italy uncovered a nest of villains in the spirit of his predecessors and in the severest tradition of Christian morality.

John Ford's (1586 - c.1640) drama, *'Tis Pity She's a Whore* (c.1628), is a Senecan tragedy of horrors which employs an Italian setting as appropriate to a tale of lust and murder. English playwrights comfortably assume that the land of Machiavelli and the Pope is the home of vice and crime. Even the same Cardinal, whose robes seem symbolical of crimson murder, adorns the spectacle, as in Webster and Middleton. Italian society is pictured as fallen into depravity. The Papal Court is a nest of corruption; incest and equally dark crimes possess the more intellectual and forcible characters, ignorance and folly make the remainder contemptible. Ford's Italians are snakes in human form; his Parma rivals Webster's Malfi and Ursini or Middleton's Florence and Alicant.

Elizabethan tragedy reflects a prejudice against Italy, which is usually regarded as a cesspool of moral depravity. No subject was more thrilling to the Elizabethan than sin; and no people were more sinful than the Italians. Thomas Middleton (1580 - c.1600) wrote on the supposed depravity of Italian life; Cyril Tourneur (?-1626), in his drama *The Atheist's Tragedy,* employs a setting somewhere in drug-damned Italy to evoke a general sense of iniquity.

Shakespeare's Italian plays are surprisingly free from the usual horrors and thrills. Murders and treasons do not as a rule occur in these plays. He seems to have disdained the cheap appeal of Italian criminality at a time when his English contemporaries were spellbound by the myth of Italian wickedness. Perhaps his acquaintance with Italian things enabled him to take a more sober view of Italian society than the current one circulated by religious fanatics and cherished by the thriller-seeking crowd. He never descends, with Webster, Middleton, Ford, or Tourneur, to depict an Italian court as a scene of unmitigated vice. His *Othello* has none of the anti-Italian venom affected by so many Elizabethan playwrights. The Machiavellian monster does not haunt the imagination of Shakespeare as it beset the mind of Marlowe.

To most Elizabethan authors and playwrights Machiavelli appeared as the devil incarnate, the Italian villain without rival. The pseudo-Machiavellian villain, which presented truly neither Machiavelli's individual precepts nor the balance of his thought as a whole, became a stock character in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. Perversions of his thoughts implied a more bitterly cynical individualism than he had ever implied. Machiavelli's books were considered the grammar of a diabolical creed, of materialism tinged with satanism. His motive for writing *The Prince* was missed: the vision of a liberated Italy, redeemed by the one thing that could unite it, the dominance of a just, firm, efficient leader. Unlike Italy, England was not a country occupied by foreigners, given over to civil conflict for which there seemed no remedy in the ordinary course of political events.

The Italian Gothic devil made his first appearance in Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764). He appears in the writings of seven noteworthy 18th Century authors: there was Walpole's Manfred, Radcliffe's Schedoni and Montoni, Lewis' Coelestino and Flodoardo, Mary Shelley's Castruccio, Maturin's Schemoli and Morosini, Landor's Fra Rupert, and Moore's Zeluco. The criminal monk type was the favourite: Schedoni, Coelestino, Morosini, Fra Rupert, Zeluco, and the pseudo-monk, Schemoli. The tyrant type was also popular: Manfred, Montoni, and Castruccio. The noble outlaw type, Flodoardo, is a predecessor of the Byronic hero. At times these Italian devils are a fusion of Milton's Satan, a rebel in the grand manner, and the sublime criminal, involved in dramatic family affairs.

The Italian Gothic devil thrilled largely feminine audiences through the agonized sensibilities of persecuted young heroines. His motives generally seem inadequate to the torrents of evil unleashed through his machinations. Manfred's interest is in restoring his family honour, Montoni and Schedoni are both motivated by cupidity, by the desire for wealth, which seems much too ordinary a motive for such depths of sadistic villainy. Zeluco is activated by plain and simple bodily lust.

The Italian Gothic devil's appearance is always striking, and often handsome. Of about middle age or younger, he has a tall, virile, stalwart physique, with dark hair and brows frequently set off by a pale and ascetic complexion. His eyes are the most striking of his physical characteristics. Schedoni, for example, has 'large melancholy eyes' which 'were so piercing that they seemed to penetrate, at a single glance, into the hearts of men, and to read their most secret thoughts; few persons could support their scrutiny, or even endure to meet them twice' (Ann Radcliffe, *The Italian.* London, 1811, I, pp. 69f.).

The Italian Gothic devil was always an aristocrat by birth, partly for the sense of power which his nobility confers, and partly for the air of the fallen angel, the air of Satanic greatness perverted. There is also an aura of mystery linked with his birth and upbringing. Towards the end of the novel, for instance, we discover that Schedoni is a count and the uncle of the heroine.

Mystery shrouds the origins, appearance, and entire personality of the Italian Gothic devil. Mystery is his dominant trait; it characterises all his actions. Past secret sins augment this sense of mystery: either family sins, as in the case with Walpole's Manfred, or more frequently, personal sins, as is the case with Schedoni, who, we later discover, has committed fratricide and seduced his widowed sister-in-law before the novel's beginning.

Manfred, Montoni and Schedoni are misogynists, taking great delight in persecuting women. Montoni, for example, persecutes his somewhat simple-minded wife to death to make her sign over her property, and also enjoys hounding his wife's niece. Schedoni calls his patroness and the hero's mother weak and contemptible ('as are all women') when she hesitates over the proposed murder of the heroine. According to the sentiments of the age, cruelty, unkindness and disrespect for women were unforgivable. Such mysogyny makes the villain completely unregenerate.

Montoni and Schedoni show noteworthy connections with the heroic Noble Outlaw of Scott and Byron. Montoni is actually a 'noble' outlaw, since he is a renegade aristocrat who leads a group of banditti from the fastnesses of Udolpho to prey on the villas of the neighbouring rich. His brigands are thieves and cut-throats, squabbling with one another at the slightest provocation. Montoni controls them through force and fear, because they are not bound to him by anything so noble as personal loyalty. This is not like that relationship between a leader and his faithful followers which characterises the Noble Outlaw of Byron and Scott. The Noble Outlaw of the Romantics was born of a merging of the popular ballad outlaw with the Gothic devil.

Manfred, Montoni and Schedoni take their mystery to the grave, spurning any death-bed repentance. Schedoni's depth of mystery, his ingenious mind, his indomitable will, and his unmitigated evil make the hero and heroine, by contrast, seem rather dull. These villains are often solitaries by nature and by breeding. This characteristic enhances their aura of mystery.

Mrs Ann Radcliffe (1764-1823), perhaps more than any other English author of her time, populated the world of the Gothic novel with mysterious Italian devils. The little figures of Italian banditti, which formed decorative details in the landscapes of the Salvator Rosa school then in fashion, came to life in the writings of Mrs Radcliffe, 'the Shakespeare of romance writers', and took on gigantic and Satanic proportions, becowled and sinister as Goya's bogeys. With *A Sicilian Romance* (1790), she had made a little public stir; with *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1792), she had become sensationally successful. However, her Italian villain masterpiece is the character of Schedoni in *The Italian, or the Confessional of the Black Penitents* (1797).

Schedoni, according to Mario Praz (*The Romantic Agony,* 2nd ed., London: Oxford University Press, 1951, p. 58), 'is that source of evil actions in which the British public is forced to believe by its innate Manicheism'. He recalls the Italian Machiavellian monster so popular in the Elizabethan period, as well as the Machiavellians and Jesuits who had been among the abiding features of the English theatre of the 17th Century. He appears when the Enlightenment had pointed to the Catholic monk as an infamy which must be extirpated, and when the recent campaign of European states against the Jesuit Order heightened the sinister image of the priest among English Protestants.

The Italian draws upon the awe of an Englishman discovering the dreadful mysteries of Italy. Mrs Radcliffe expected her readers to identify with the Englishman and thus to prepare themselves for the similar emotions and mysteries they knew they would find in an Italian setting. In *A Sicilian Romance* she had already employed the usual banditti. In this novel she dwelled on exotic Italian names whose very sound communicated that intriguing and somewhat sinful sensuousness which adds to the fascination of Mediterranean lands. *The Mysteries of Udolpho* broadened her image of Italy with the scoundrel and adventurer, Montoni, and with a brief view of the decadent luxury of Venice. Mrs Radcliffe completed this broad picture with the mysteries of Catholicism and the horrors of the Inquisition, described in the emotional chiaroscuro of *The Italian.*

Catholicism and Italy went together for Mrs Radcliffe and her readers, and she played up gaudiness and mystery wherever she could. Awe before the half-hidden and unusual, both always somewhat frightening, expands from the scenes in the convents to the dungeons of the Inquisition. There, pure terror becomes the final state in the exploration of varieties of response to whatever is not English, open, clear, and Protestant. Curiously, Mrs Radcliffe dates *The Italian* at 1758, but describes the Inquisition as it had not been in Italy for over a century before that. But as the climax of all the qualities in Italy that she wanted to bring out, the Inquisition had to be there, whether historically accurate or not, and of course in Rome, the centre of much-hated Catholicism.

Mrs Radcliffe's *The Italian* represents the entry into English literature of the criminal monk, who appears as an instigator of evil and a master of duplicity. The criminal monk is the embodiment of papal treachery, which is essentially Italian treachery. Father Schedoni, the confessor of the Vivaldi family, is a person long hardened in the ways of crime and vice, alarmingly gifted and strenuous, hypocritical, unfeeling and merciless. He is a tool in the hands of the Vivaldi family for the persecution of young Vivaldi's beloved Ellena di Rosalba, a virtuous orphan, who must at all costs be prevented from marrying her beloved.

Schedoni, and the other Italian devils, symbolise the human experience of those malign, superior forces, shrouded in mystery, which evoke terror in their attempts to manipulate the lives of others with all the skill and subtlety incarnate in the fine Italian hand. They engender an awareness of a diabolical influence, which in its impact upon men manifests itself in a wide range of evil effects, extending to the deprivation of human freedom. There is something of Milton's Satan in Father Schedoni, whose 'whole air and attitudes exhibited the wild energy of something not of this earth'.

Mrs Radcliffe's Italian villains wield demonic powers and cause the innocent to suffer for a while. Their evil appears in their lust for power, their jealousy, their joy in malevolence. They move in the demonic underworld of caverns and dungeons in which so much of the evil occurs. They move in a world which has roots in the mythic, subconscious strata of our lives, the levels we can now call archetypal.

Mrs Radcliffe's distorted picture of convent life, amid labyrinthine vaults and corridors, and her Italian devils both reflect and confirm the English image of Italy and its inhabitants. This was an Italy sufficiently within English awareness to become an object of reflection; yet, sufficiently distant so as to remain always somewhat beyond the comprehension of that same awareness. Such an Italy enjoyed the status of the known unknown, at once familiar and mysterious, proximate and elusive, sunlit and obscure. In the undefined chiaroscuro of Italy the English imagination enjoyed the ideal conditions for creating devils that would have been implausible, or considerably less plausible, within an English context. Mrs Radcliffe imagination confronted the mysterious world of Italy with a literary skill which enabled her readers to vibrate with pity and terror, the two most cherished emotions of her age.

Mary Shelley, who gave the world *Frankenstein* (1817), was fascinated by the satanic hero Castruccio, the subject of her book, *Valperga, or the Life and Adventure of Castruccio Prince of Lucca* (1823). In this novel, the innocent Beatrice ends her days in the prisons of the Inquisition. Mary Shelley was familiar with the biography of Castruccio Castracani by Machiavelli, who had determined to write the life of this powerful and ruthless *condottiero* as an example of a prince who had known and followed realistic precepts of acquiring and maintaining power—and power once acquired, had ruled with wisdom. Castruccio had lived in London and had been a friend of Prince Edward, son of King Edward I. He had readily acquired English and introduced Italian fashion for gentlemen. He fled England after having killed a fellow-countryman in a brawl in which Prince Edward himself had intervened. In 1325 King Edward II (the former Prince Edward) pardoned his old friend from Lucca, who was now at the height of his fame and power.

The Italian devil appears as the criminal monk in the play *Venoni, or the Novice of St Mark's* (1808) by Matthew Gregory Lewis (1775-1818). The libidinous abbot, Coelestino, tries with the help of the cruel abbess, Veronica, to seduce Josepha, the beloved of the young noble, Venoni. In his tale, *The Bravo of Venice* (1805), Lewis presents the noble outlaw, Flodoardo. Lewis made a Covent Garden melodrama, *Rugantino* (1805), out of it the same year

Charles Robert Maturin (1782-1824) made eclectic use of his literary predecessors for the creation of his Italian devils. In *The Fatal Revenge, or the Family of Montorio* (1807), these were Walpole and Mrs Radcliffe. The former gave him his castle of Muralto; the latter's monk Schedoni was the model for the infamous Schemoli. The story is a complicated tissue of revenge, treachery, murder, parricide, suicide, black magic, and other elements which made this first novel of Maturin a complete arsenal of romantic terror. The Italian devil is the pseudo-monk, Schemoli, a student of magic and an 'adept' equipped with supernatural physical and psychic powers. In Maturin's third novel, *The Milesian Chief* (1812), the now traditional criminal monk bears the name Morosini and, as the callous confessor of an aristocratic family, continues the work of Schedoni, darkening with his intrigues and sombre apparition the pages of this terror-filled novel.

Walter Savage Landor wrote a great poetical drama, his trilogy *Andrea of Hungary, Giovanna of Naples,* and *Fra Rupert* (the first two in 1838, the last in 1840). At the beginning of this trilogy, Rupert appears as 'the holiest monk on God's earth', a woman-hater, lusting for power.

Three years before Mrs Radcliffe's first novel had been published, John Moore produced the Italian devil Zeluco, in his novel, *Zeluco, Various Views of Human Nature, Taken from Life and Manners Foreign and Domestic* (1786). Lord Byron was most fond of this novel as a child; he mentions it in the preface to *Childe Harold.* Zeluco is an Iago who has absorbed certain of the characteristics of Othello. Jealous of the young German girl, Laura, whom he has married out of revenge, he wrongly suspects that his own son is the fruit of an incestuous love between her and her brother. He strangles the child with the same ease with which, as a boy, he had squeezed to death a sparrow. He is the descendant of a noble Sicilian family. He is a rake tormented by a gnawing conscience. He is ambitious, cruel, and hypocritical, 'a distant offshoot of the Elizabethan monsters produced in hatred against the Latin world by the imagination of Puritans' (Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony,* p. 67). He does not possess that mixture of qualities which makes the Gothic Italian devils on the one hand descendants of Lucifer and, on the other, precursors of the Romantic hero. His temper is 'as inflammable as gunpowder, bursting into flashes of rage at the slightest touch of provocation'. Zeluco presaged Mrs Radcliffe's Italian criminal monk devils.

There are many aspects of the Italian devil which do not seem to be wholly a product of the Anglo-Saxon imagination. When the Italian genius for organisation is perverted, we have elements for Gothic tales of terror in any epoch. Although it would be an exaggeration to affirm that the adjectives 'imperialist', 'capitalist', 'romanità', 'fascist', and 'mafioso', were all made-in-Italy, nevertheless, they serve to describe large segments of human activity through which the fine Italian hand has, at one time or another, exerted a sinister influence. The growing repudiation of these five 'life-styles' represents the rejection of everything that the Italian devils of the Elizabethan and Gothic traditions symbolise. The excellence of human life in any society requires that it be exorcised of its Italian devils.

If Italian devils continue to display considerable expertise in politics, business, social life, religion and crime, it must be remembered that theirs is the advantage of a centuries-old experience. They gave the West its first prolonged experience of imperialism. They helped religion to run awry in the vagaries of romanità and overcentralization. They promoted the usurious practices of Europe's first capitalists, bankers and book-keepers. Machiavellian and Fascist politics, as well as Mafia crime, are among their most distinctive specialities. Small wonder that among foreign devils the Italian devils are regarded as being the most quintessentially diabolical. They are unquestionably dramatic, hence especially well-suited for the theatre and literature.