The devil, so-called hellish creatures and imaginary animals decorate most choir stalls, to the great pleasure of today's visitors. Not all of them have subsisted, for different reasons, mostly because these motifs were too suggestive. In fact, the representation of diabolical creatures often has sexual connotations — obvious or implicit — but anyway disturbing to each wave of puritanism.

Such representations in art are so numerous and full of delectable details that they often excite the curiosity of scholars. Concerning the choir stalls of medieval Savoy, the devilish decoration did not hold their attention, partly because the destructions of the Reformation period and of the 18th and 19th centuries have only left the "wise" subjects. Fortunately some of the carvings did survive, however, allowing us to imagine the richness of the original sets of stalls.

The Different Contexts of Representation of the Devil

At the end of the Middle Ages, the theme of the devil appeared in different artistic contexts:

1) The devil was involved with the legends of saints, as in the representations of Saint Michael or in the Temptation of Saint Antony. (Fig 1)

2) The devil was figured in certain scenes of the Life of Jesus, as in the Temptation of Christ.

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1 This article is a slightly modified version of a paper given at Kalamazoo (May 1996), at the 31st International Congress on Medieval Studies, Western Michigan University. The author would like to thank Dr. Elaine C. Block for her kind offer of publishing it in this *Profane Arts* issue.
3) In depictions of the Last Judgment, Satan is shown in hell, surrounded and helped by a multitude of fellow devils, as in the works of Memling and Bosch.²

4) Finally, Satan may be found displaying his triumph in the procession of vices, when the seven deadly sins are led to hell.³

The devils featured in the choir stalls do not generally belong to this context of representations. Moreover, there is a difference between the stalls from northern Europe (England, the Netherlands, Belgium, the north of France and of Germany) and those from southern Europe (central France, Switzerland and Italy). Whereas in northern Europe, we can see complete scenes telling a story on one misericord, in southern Europe, devil-related creatures are carved as isolated elements. They are generally unique figures, located either on misericords, armrests or on the upper section of end panels.

The following examples are taken from the choir stalls situated within the limits of the ancient duchy of Savoy, which, in the 15th century, included parts of France, Italy and Switzerland.

The Devil

It could be said that there exists a "classic portrait" of the devil, derived from the depictions of the satyrs and of Cerberus in ancient Greece. In classical representations, either on paintings, woodcuts or engravings, Satan and his messengers — the demons — are

² For more information on the demons represented by Jerome Bosch, see Jean Wirth's article "La démonologie de Bosch," dans Diables et diableries - La représentation du diable dans la gravure des XVe et XVIe siècles, sous la direction de F. Rodari et J. Wirth, Genève, Cabinet des Estampes, 1976, pp. 71-85.

³ The procession of vices was a favorite subject at the end of the 15th century, often chosen to adorn small remote churches. The subject is not rare in the Alps. For a comparative survey, see M. Vincent-Cassy "Un modèle français: les calvacades des sept péchés dans les églises rurales de la fin du XVe siècle", dans Artistes, artisans et production artistique au Moyen Age, colloque international (mai 1983), Paris 1990, pp. 461-487.
generally hairy. Their faces display a grimacing mouth generously provided with large teeth. Most of them possess horns and possibly a beak, which portray their aggressiveness. They often have cloven hooves or clawed paws, as well as membranoid wings like those of a bat, as a reminder of their usual appearance at night or in the dark. Finally, they are always shown gesticulating and making uncoordinated movements. This iconography was well established in the 15th century, in both the art of northern and southern Europe.

In Savoy, there exists one example of this type of devil, which presents most of the characteristics mentioned above. The devil on the officiants' bench at Abondance Abbey shows a mouth widely open in a rictus (Fig 2). The arms and the legs are covered with hair, which seems to be standing on end like the hair on his head. The legs end in carefully carved clawed feet. This creature also has a second face located at the bottom of his back, a motif that we often find in medieval images of the devil. Usually misplaced on the belly (Figs. 1 and 18), this lower face could also be depicted on the buttocks or on the knees of devilish creatures, symbolizing the lustful nature of the demons. The large tongue is extended forward. The devil is licking the churchman, as already suggested by the position of the tongue on the woodcut of the Temptation of Saint Anthony (Fig. 1).

Such a representation of the devil, displaying all the recurring features in one image is, however, rare in the stalls of medieval Savoy. More currently, we find devil-related creatures with a mixture of human and animal features. We may also meet monstrous beasts which combine the anatomy of various animals in fantastic ways. We finally see creatures that only possess one characteristic of the devil, sometimes manipulated into grotesque features. Several examples from these groups will be shortly presented, before concluding with a comment on exorcism and some possible functions of the devil in choir stalls. It should be added that this presentation is by no means a classification, since

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4 Several examples of these devils with a lower face are reproduced in the exhibition catalogue Diables et diableries, op. cit. note 2.
subject matter on medieval choir stalls cannot fall precisely into categories.

**Diabolical Creatures with Human and Animal Features**

The choir stalls of Aosta Cathedral in Italy (1466 - 1469) contain many examples of these imaginary creatures, even though some disappeared in the 19th century. At Aosta, the misericords were so suggestive that, in 1820, the bishop of Aosta asked for the destruction of the more obscene ones, or at least, for their mutilation. However, the majority was kept, partly due to the canons of the Cathedral and to the municipality of Aosta, and partly due to the open-minded intervention of the King of Sardegna.\(^5\)

In order to illustrate the different aspects that diabolical creatures could adopt in medieval woodworkers’ minds, we have chosen eight misericords coming from the Aosta stalls — the most precious testimony to this iconography in medieval Savoy. On the first one, the monster resembles more an animal than a human (Fig. 3). It has pointed ears and a forehead covered with hair extending to the eyebrows, both of which are characteristics for the devil. It is playing a sort of pipe, which, like the bagpipe, symbolizes the primitive instincts of man. Wind instruments were said to express sensual forces, in opposition to stringed instruments which were associated with intellectual activities. The French poet Eustache Deschamps (1346 - 1407) qualified the bagpipe as "the instrument of bestial men". This correlation between the bagpipe, the devil and sex is still more obvious on a well known German woodcut by Erhard Schön (c. 1535).\(^6\) On this woodcut, the head of a fat monk is deformed into a bagpipe, which is being played by a devil with a second face on its abdomen. The lower face is protruding in a somewhat obscene manner. The whole image is a criticism of the sexual liberties taken by churchmen. A small engraved text explains

\(^5\) The reasons why these misericords had to be kept are explained in a long letter written by the canons of Aosta Cathedral to the King Charles-Félix. This letter has been published in extenso by R. Berton in, *Les Chapiteaux et les stalles médiévaux d’Aoste*, Novara 1971, pp. 117-120.

\(^6\) Reproduced in *Diables et diableries, op. cit.*, p. 38.
that the devil is complaining for he cannot play any more such wind instruments because of the abolishment of monarchism.

No description is necessary for the second misericord, that of a man licking his rectum (Fig. 4). This subject matter is associated with lust-tempted creatures. Before Aosta, the motif had already been carved at Geneva, in the choir stalls of the former church of Saint-François de Rive (c. 1445 - 1447). Unfortunately, it has been strongly mutilated in its more "disturbing" features (Fig. 5). Such as it is — an isolated piece of furniture showing but a mutilated figure — the misericord is kept at the Musée d’Art et d’Histoire of Geneva, but not exhibited. It seems highly probable that more of these subjects did occur in choir stalls of the city, but were doomed to disappear as they could not fit into the new ideology of the 16th century.

Figure 6 shows a devil with his head upside down. His forehead is creased into a deep furrow. He shoves his hands entirely into his mouth as if he wants to devour himself. He displays large animal ears and a small goat-beard, typical of satyrs and demons. The goat was considered to be an animal of the devil, as it stood for the damned at the Last Judgment (Matthew 25:32-33). The inverted location of the head and the mouth widely open just under the buttocks of the canons who were sitting on it bring back again the context of vulgarity or dissolute and immoral living already suggested by the creature playing the pipe (Fig. 3).

The different aspects under which the devil could appear were described by a Cistercian abbot of Rhineland origin, Caesarius von Heisterbach (c. 1180 - 1230). In his *Dialogus Miraculorum* (chapters *De Tentatione* and *De Daemonibus*), he explains the

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7 This misericord (inv. F. 323) was, until recently, of unknown origin. Datation and attribution in C. Charles, *Les stalles de Genève au XVe siècle* (à paraître).

8 M. Camille relates the popular or sexual characteristics of misericords to the fact that they are seats and, as such, located under the posteriors of the churchmen. (*Image on the Edge - The Margins of Medieval Art*, London 1992, p. 94.)
diabolical visions that assaulted the monks during prayers, as they started to doze off when sitting precisely on the choir stalls. Demons could adopt the form of snakes, cats, pigs, bears or monkeys, all motifs carved in stalls. They could have horrible faces and enter the choir with violence. As for the monster featured in figure 7, its hair and top of the eyebrows are plated like ears of corn, as if following one of the descriptions of Caesarius von Heisterbach: "Habebat ... crines ... sicut haristas ...". The bodies of two snakes come out of a mouth with large teeth. Their tails reach up to the deformed forehead. The heads of the snakes emerge from the sockets, replacing the eyes.

In figure 8, the monster is half-human, half-animal. Its head shows ears like raised leaves. The arms are covered with long hair; they end in claws, somewhat resembling spider's legs.

On two other misericords at Aosta Cathedral, the craftsman has chosen to figure the devilish aspect by a monstrous anatomic combination (Figs. 9 and 10). The head remains human in spite of the animal ears. However, it is expanded to a size where it becomes the whole body of the creature. The arms and the legs are only tiny appendices. In figure 10, the face ends in a large mouth at the height of the genitals.

Monstrous Beasts

A second group of diabolical creatures consists of monstrous beasts. They extend the already rich iconography of the "standard" devil. As a general rule, all animals with scales, with mouths agape, wings, horns and claws, are representations of devilish creatures

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9 C. von Heisterbach, Dialogus Miraculorum, Coloniae, Bonnae et Bruxellis, edition of 1851, 2 vol. For these representations of diabolical creatures and for the times when they appeared to monks, see IV: 32, IV: 33, IV: 35, V: 5, V: 49, V: 50.

10 C. von Heisterbach, op. cit. V:5: "Alio itidem tempore, cum modicum se movisset a stallo suo ad commonendum fratres, conspexit daemonem inter stallum abbatis atque prioris intrare cum impetu, ipso affectu horribilem nimis."
similar to those which surround Satan in the medieval depictions of hell.

The dragon, a beast composed of heterogeneous components, is the basis of the imaginary repertory of monsters. In Christian culture, it is the symbol of Satan. More or less based upon the body of a snake or crocodile, all transformations or additions are possible according to the ways it was painted, carved or engraved. The dragon can have the legs of a bird, the wings of a bat, the mouth of a dog, or a face nearly human. In the 14th century several splendid dragons were carved on the upper part of back panels on stalls at Basel Cathedral, or, more modestly, on stalls at Berne (Dominikanerkirche) or at Fribourg (Maigrauge Convent). The motif was kept in Switzerland throughout the 15th century (choir stalls of Basel: St. Leonhardkirche; of Geneva: St. Peter Cathedral; of Hauterive or of Moudon). We find it at Aosta Cathedral as well. The dragon in figure 11 has webbed legs and the tail of a reptile. Its vertebrae are projecting, which is another characteristic for devilish animals. The head has human features, indicated by the disposition of eyes, eyebrows, nose and mouth. However two large horns emerge from the forehead. This is quite rare in the representations of demons in medieval Savoy. Its obscene gesture of licking the seat of the misericord is again a sign of lust, probably one of those evidences the bishop of Aosta wanted to delete in the 19th century.

As in the margins of the manuscripts, monstrous combinations are countless. We mention only a small selection of the numerous examples still remaining in woodwork. On a misericord at Aosta Collegiate church of St. Peter and St. Orso (between 1494 - 1504), we see an unusual creation by a medieval woodworker (Fig. 12). The carver has conceived a monster by combining two scallop-shells and the body of a reptile. It also includes the projecting vertebrae on its back, typical of diabolical creatures in medieval choir stalls, whatever the place in Europe. The small church of Laize in Burgundy shelters stalls dating from the 15th century. One of its misericords, showing a face without a nose,
mouth or chin, adds one more example to this series of monstrous portraits (Fig. 13). The lower half of the head is only figured by large scales. On top of the scales, two deep eyes are situated above two big cysts.

Monsters can also be depicted fighting each other. The struggling of monsters may refer to the destructive power of Satan. On the choir stalls at Lausanne Cathedral (partly 1509), the upper section of an end panel is carved in the form of two winged dragons (Fig. 14). They are positioned with their heads entwined and are biting each other’s tails. Some sort of big pustules are sculpted all over their bodies, which is another recurring feature of monstrous beasts. Dragons wrestling still appear in late Gothic-Renaissance choir stalls, as we can see in the church of Brou, in Bresse, dating from 1530. Again located on the upper section of an end panel, the two fiendish animals are evaluating each other before they launch into combat.

Deformations, Abnormalities and Exaggerations

Figures spread out in every direction, men twisted in acrobatic or impossible positions, and deformed and exaggerated faces belong to the repertory of diabolical creatures. Michel Pastoureau underlined the role of abnormality, or simply of a difference from the normal or usual aspect of creatures, in order to represent demons: "La tête joue un rôle de premier plan et équivaut à une véritable 'armoirie corporelle': faciès convulsé; bouche ouverte, tordue, grimaçante; nez raccourci, écrasé, ou, au contraire proéminent; oreilles développées, écartées, animales (âne, lapin); pilosité surabondante et hérissee. Attitudes et dispositions renforcent le caractère inhumain de l'ensemble: nudité, crispation, gestualité désordonnée, disproportions, facialité". These features and forms occur so often that they may be seen as a real iconographical code in the representation of the devil from the 13th to the 15th century. This interpretation sheds light on another

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13 Ibid. p. 90.
possible meaning of some misericords, hidden behind the grotesque aspect of faces like the one at Aosta Cathedral (Fig. 15). This head shows an enormous nose and a wide mouth. The creature stretches its mouth with both hands, showing two long rows of molars. In the place of the usual incisor teeth, the sculptor carved molars in order to reinforce the abnormality. Again at Aosta, a deformed human face, provided with animal ears, illustrates the diabolical connotation of exaggerated features (Fig. 16). On top of the head we can see a cockscomb, a sign which lays emphasis on the lustful nature of demons. (The cockscomb was associated with lust because of the sexual appetite of the cock). On the woodcut of The Temptation of Saint Antony, the Saint is being tempted by a devil, on which we recognize another cockscomb (Fig. 1). The sexual connotation is clearly expressed by the devil’s lower face. The tongue of the grotesque face is situated in the place of the genitalia and, in order to stress the visual element, is pointing towards Antony.

Exorcism or the Victory over Evil

It was not sufficient to represent all sorts of devils and monsters in the choir, the most sacred place of the church. It still had to be shown that the churchmen could overcome them by exorcizing possessed people. Some medieval images show people under the power of demons being exorcized.14 Generally demons appear as mini-monsters emerging from their mouth. At Lausanne Cathedral, an unusual armrest may also be interpreted as the depiction of exorcism. Three heads are covered by one hat. Figure 17 only shows a view of two of them, the third one being visible on the opposite side. Their mouths are vomiting demons in the form of small snakes, toads and lizards.

At Abondance Abbey, the tonsured monk attempts to overcome the devil by placing a stole around his neck and by making the sign of

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14 For example, see monstrous animals with several heads or several feet emerging from the mouth of two exorcized people, reproduced in S. Michon, "Le bestiaire enluminé du Passionnaire de Weissenau (XIIe siècle)", in Unsere Kunstdenkmäler, 1989, N_ 4, fig. 18, p. 390. The entire issue was devoted to lions, dragons and sirens.
exorcism - two fingers directed toward the devil (Fig. 2). The monk has been carved on the side of the panel towards the altar, that is to say, towards the security given by the Church and its instruments. Opposite him, the devil is shown turning away, as if he was leaving the place. The hair on top of the devil’s head is standing on end, suggesting he might be frightened by the monk’s gesture.

Another representation of exorcism is given on an end panel at Montréal, in Burgundy (first quarter of the 16th century). The devil, sitting on his tail, is carved with extra faces on the stomach and on each knee (Fig. 18). Instead of breasts, he has two large round eyes. He is kept prisoner by a stole around his neck, as at Abondance. The victorious man — probably a cleric — holds an open book. Without doubt, the book contains the Holy Scriptures, which have helped him to win. In fact, for the Church, only prayers and faith could contribute to defeat the devil. It is supposed to remind us that, when Christ was tempted by Satan in the wilderness, he repudiated the devil with quotations from the Scriptures. To stress his victory, the man is shown standing, whereas the devil is on the floor in a position of submission. We may look for an explanation of monsters decorating the support of some lecterns from this point of view. In the church of Romont (canton of Fribourg), four medieval lecterns remain inserted into the choir stalls. They consist of four hideous birds showing a man’s face and ears in the form of leaves, used to hold the Holy Books. In other words, the Holy Quotations are located above the monsters, in a position of domination.

Conclusion

We have seen in the carving of choir stalls that the devil could exist in many forms and appear under a great number of disguises. In a similar way, he may fulfil multiple functions. Within the limits of this article, we have considered just a limited number of them.

In the *Golden Legend* by Jacques de Voragine, on nearly every page, temptations and devils are thrust in the path of the saints. In the *Dialogus Miraculorum* by Caesarius von Heisterbach, all types of devils are described. They generally appeared to the monks, precisely when these men were standing or sitting in the stalls.
In the depicted stories of the saints, the devil was partly used to interrupt the succession of holy passages. Always represented as moving, he acted as a good contrast to the divine immobility of saints, having a function similar to the part of evil in theater plays. He wakes up the dozing or inattentive spectators and he entertains. Thus, apart from a function of entertainment, the devil was also the adversary, the antagonist, the one who allowed heroes or saints to show their courage or their holiness.

When canons or other religious congregations commissioned choir stalls in the Middle Ages, they gave permission to the craftsmen to carve abnormal creatures and obscene gestures. Today we admire the open-mindedness of these men and we wonder why they allowed woodworkers to sculpt these motifs rather than the religious subjects one might expect in a church. It is usually said it is because these carvings were normally out of sight of the public and even partly hidden from the churchmen. So, they would have been a sort of private entertainment, to be appreciated only by a selected few.

We do not think it has to do with privacy or a hidden world. The contemplation of these subject matters was most probably a source of pleasure, but not a concealed one. If it was, we would not find similar representations outside the church, on the sculptures of facades and of capitals. On the one hand, excess was tolerated in the church much more than we can imagine today. On the other hand, the represented devil and diabolical creatures proposed to medieval man a permanent recall of temptations. These experiences were supposed to be necessary in order to achieve a higher goal, beyond worldly values. In the medieval religious context, men had to be tempted and to struggle against evil if they wanted to demonstrate it was possible to triumph. In the Middle Ages, like today, if temptations did not exist, opportunities to resist evil would never arise.

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15 We think of the excesses committed at the Feasts of Fools (festum stultorum or asinaria festa), celebrations which various popes tried to forbid, without success. See R. Klein’s article "Le thème du fou et l’ironie humaniste", in La forme et l’intelligible, Saint-Amand 1983, pp. 433-450.
List of Illustrations

Fig. 1: *The Temptation of Saint Antony of Padua*, woodcut from a *Golden Legend* published in 1471, Augsburg, at Zainer's.

Fig. 2: Abondance: Abbey Notre-Dame. Officiants' bench, late 15th century.

Figs. 3 - 4: Aosta Cathedral. Misericords of choir stalls dating from 1466 - 1469.

Fig. 5: Geneva: Musée d'Art et d'Histoire. Isolated misericord from the choir stalls of the former church of Saint François-de-Rive, Geneva, c. 1445 - 1447.

Figs. 6 - 11: Aosta Cathedral. Misericords (1466 - 1469).

Fig. 12: Aosta Collegiate church of St. Peter and St. Orso. Misericord, between 1494 - 1504.

Fig. 13: Church of St. Antony, Laizé (Burgundy). Misericord, 15th century.

Fig. 14: Lausanne Cathedral. Upper section of an end panel, early 16th century.

Fig. 15: Aosta Cathedral. Misericord (1466 - 1469).

Fig. 16: Aosta Cathedral. Armrest (1466 - 1469).

Fig. 17: Lausanne Cathedral. Armrest, early 16th century.

Fig. 18: Montréal (Burgundy), Notre-Dame. End panel of choir stalls dating from the first quarter of the 16th century.

Photographs 2 - 18 by Corinne Charles.

Chargée de recherches sur le mobilier
7, chemin de la Boisserette
CH - 1208 Geneva.
Fig. 12

Fig. 13

Fig. 14