The Black Mass as Play: Dennis Wheatley’s The Devil’s Riders Out

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Abstract

Literature—at least serious literature—is something that we work at. This is especially true within the academy. Literature departments are places where workers lack love over texts carefully extracting and sharing meanings, for which they receive monetary reward. Specialised languages are developed to describe professional conversations about texts. Books and journals are the main vehicles of mass communication, but as so often is the case they communicate well the tastes of the academic community. In the seventies, when Gothic studies was just beginning to establish itself, there was a perception that the genre was “bleak literature of surfaces and sensibilities” (Alan Clark 1994). Early specialists in the field noted this prejudice; David Punter wrote of the genre’s “difficulty in establishing respectable credentials” (403), while Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick hersed her work would “make it easier for the reader of respectable nineteenth-century novels to write ‘Gothic’ in the margin” (4).

Gothic studies has gathered a modicum of this longed-for respectability for the texts it treats by deploying the methodologies used within literature departments. This has yielded readings that are largely congruent with readings of other sorts of literature; the Gothic text tells us things about ourselves and the world we inhabit about power, culture and ideology. Yet the Gothic remains a production of popular culture as much as it is of the valorized literary field. I do not wish to argue for a redefinition of the grand divide described by Andreas Huyssen, but instead to suggest that we have missed something important about the ways in which popular Gothic—and perhaps other sorts of popular text—function. What if the popular Gothic were not a type of work, but a kind of play? How might this change the way we approach these texts?

Johan Huizinga noted that “play is not ‘ordinary’ or ‘real’ life. It is rather a stepping out of ‘real’ life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own. Every child knows perfectly well he is ‘only pretending’, or that it was ‘only for fun’” (8). If the Gothic sometimes offers playful texts, then those texts might direct readers not primarily towards the real, but away from it, at least for a limited time. This might help to account for the wicked spectacle offered by Dennis Wheatley’s The Devil’s Riders Out, in particular, its presentation of the black mass.

The black mass is the parody of the Christian mass thought to be performed by witches and diabolists. Although it has doubtless been performed on rare occasions since the Middle Ages, the first black mass that we have substantial documentary evidence was celebrated in Hampshire on Boxing Day 1516, by Montague Summers; it is a satisfying coincidence that Summers was one of the Gothic’s earliest scholars. We have record of Summer’s mass because it was watched by a non-participant, Anatole James, who was “bored to tears” as Summers recited tracts of Latin and practiced homosexual acts with a youth named Sullivan while James looked on (Medway 382-3). Summers claimed to be a Catholic priest, although there is some doubt as to the legitimacy of his ordination. The black mass ought to be officiated by a Catholic clergyman so the host may be transubstantiated before it is blasphemously consumed. In so doing, the mass de-emphasises interpretive meaning and is an assault on the body of Christ rather than a mutilation of the symbol of Christ’s love and sacrifice. Thus, it is not conceived of as a representation of sexual violence. The black mass in Wheatley’s novel is a collaborative form of sexual play more than spiritual warfare; by asking an acquaintance to observe the mass, Summers formulated the ritual as an erotic performance.

The black mass was a favourite trope of the English Gothic of the nineteen-sixties and seventies. Dennis Wheatley’s The Devil’s Riders Out features an extended presentation of the mass; it was first published in 1934, but had achieved a kind of genre-specific canonicity by the nineteen-sixties, so that many Gothics produced and consumed in the sixties and seventies featured depictions of the black mass that drew from Wheatley’s original. Like Summers, Wheatley’s mass emphasised ecclesiastical settings and, significantly, featured a voyeur or voyeurs watching the performance. Where James only wished Summers’ mass would end, Wheatley and his followers presented the mass as requiring interruption before it reaches a climax. This version of the mass recurs in most of Wheatley’s black magic novels, but it also appears in paperback romances, such as Susan Howatch’s 1973 The Devil on Lammas Night; it is reimagined in the literary and genuinely eerie short stories of Robert Aickman, which are just slow thankfully coming back into print; it appears twice in Mervyn Peake’s Gormenghast books. Nor was the black mass confined to the written Gothic, appearing in films of the period too: The Kiss of the Vampire (1963), The Witches (1966), Satan’s Skin, aka Blood on Satan’s Claw (1970), The Wicker Man (1973), and The Satanic Rites of Dracula (1974) all feature celebrations of the Sabbat, as, of course do the filmed adaptations of Wheatley’s short story “The Devil’s Riders Out” (1969) and To the Devil a Daughter (1974).

More than just a key trope, the black mass is a critical element of the English Gothic of the sixties; narratives were structured so as to lead towards its performance. All of the texts mentioned above repeat narrative and trope, but more importantly, they loosely repeat experience, both for readers and the characters depicted. While Summers’ mass apparently made for tiresome viewing, textual representations of the black mass typically emarce the pageant and sensuality of the Catholic mass in question, involving music, incense and spectacle. Often animalistic sex, bestiality, infanticide or human sacrifice are staged, and are intended to fascinate rather than bore.

Although far from canonical in a literary sense, by 1969 Wheatley was an institution. He had sold 27 million books worldwide and around 70 percent of those had been within the British market. All of his 55 books were in print. A new Wheatley In hardcover would typically sell 30,000 copies, and paperback sales of his back catalogue stood at more than a million books a year. While Wheatley wrote thrillers in a range of different subgenres, at the end of the sixties it was his ‘black magic’ novels which were his most popular. He first published the black mass in 1934, the year in which he developed their most substantial audience in the sixties. When The Satanist was published in paperback in 1966, it sold more than 100,000 copies in the first ten days. By 1973, five of these eight black magic titles had sold more than a million copies. The first of these was The Devil Riders Out which, although originally published in 1934, by 1973, helped by the Hammer film of 1968, had an international cult following. “Poe and Hesse” (1991) making it a popular title in college libraries. The title of Wheatley’s black magic stories provide a good example of the way that texts persist and accumulate influence in a genre field, gaining genre-specific canonicity. Wheatley’s apparent influence on Gothic texts and films that followed, coupled with the sheer number of his books sold, indicate that he occupied a central position in the field, and that his works were influential, for a long time, as a “sacred text”, if not a “scripture”, of the genre.

Wheatley’s black magic stories apparently developed a new readership in the sixties. The black mass perhaps became legible as a sacrificial, nightmarish version of some imaginary Npoy gathering. While Wheatley’s Satanists are villainous, there is a vaguely apoplectic air about them; they listen to uncanonical music, dance, participate in unconventional sexual practice, and glut themselves on various intoxicants. This, after all, was the age of Hair, Oi! Culticital and Or magazine, “an era of personal liberation, in the view of some critics, one of ‘freedom’” (Morgan 149). Without suggesting that the Satanists represent hippies there is a contextual releventancy available to later readers that would have been missing in the thirties. The sexual zeitgeist would have lowered later readers to pornographically and pleasurably imagine the liberated sexuality of the era without having to approve of it.

Wheatley’s work has since become deeply, embarrassingly unfashionable. The books are racist, sexist, homoerotic and committed to a basically fascist vision of an imperial England, all of which will repel most casual readers. Nor do his works provide an especially good venue for academic criticism; all surface, they do not reward the labour of careful, deep reading.

The Devil Riders Out narrates the story of a group of friends locked in a battle with the wicked Satanist Mocata, “a pot-bellied, bald headed person of about sixty, with a profusion of coarse stubble, firey eyes, limp hands, and a most unattractive lip” (11), based, apparently, on the notorious occultist Aleister Crowley (Bils 145-6). Mocata hopes to a confront the scale of the Great War by performing the appropriate devilish rituals. By ledged by aged spy Duke de Richelieu and gargulous American Rex van Kyn, the friends combat Mocata in three substantial set pieces, including their attempt to disrupt the black mass as it is performed in a seclusive avild in Wiltshire.

The Devil Riders Out is a rippling story. Wheatley’s narrative is urgent, and his simple prose suggests that the book is meant to be read quickly. Likewise, Wheatley’s protagonists do not experience in any real way the crises and collapses that so frequently trouble characters who struggle against the forces of darkness in Gothic narratives. Even when de Richelieu’s courage fails as he observes the Wiltshire Sabbat, this failure is temporary; Rex simply treats him as if he has been physically wounded. However, the black mass is not merely a means of trauma and its sequelae. The moralised psychological states which often interest the twentieth century Gothic are excluded here in favour of the kind of emotional fortitude found in adventure stories. The effect is remarkable. Wheatley retains a cheerful tone even as he depicts the appalling, and potentially repellent representations become entertainments.

Wheatley describes in remarkable detail the actions that his protagonists witness from their hidden vantage point. If the Gothic reader looks forward to gleeful blasphemy, then this is amply provided, in the sort of sardonic style that Lewis’ The Monk manages so well. A cross is half stomped into matchwood and inverted in the ashes; a racing pigeon informs us that the demonic priests are eating “that little baby or perhaps some unfortunate child that they have stolen and murdered”. Rex is chilled by the sound of a human skull rattling around in their cauldron (117-20). The mass offers a special quality of experience, distinct from the everyday texture of life represented in the text. Ostensibly waiting for their chance to liberate their friends, they dress up in phony vampire costumes, and engage in the popular vampire fad of the time.

The narrative focus shifts from Rex and de Richelieu’s observation of the mass, to the wayward medium Tarlint’s independent, bespelled arrival at the ritual site, before returning to the two men. This arrangement allows Wheatley to extend his description of the gathering, reiterating the same events from different characters’ perspectives. This would be unusual if the text were simply a thriller, and relied on the ongoing release of new information to maintain narrative interest. Instead, readers have the opportunity to “view” the salacious activity of the Satanists a second time. This repetition delays the climactic action of the scene, where the Duke

Tanith, although conveyed to the mass by some dark power, is delayed and she too becomes a part of the mass' audience. She saw the Satanists... tumbling upon each other in the disgusting nudity of their ritual dance. Old Madame D’Urfe, huge-buttocked and medallion-chested, the dance of the ritual nowpaints her old and worn body. ‘The young woman who had only just reached maturity; the Bobo, dark-skinned, fleety, hideous; the American woman, fragrant, lean- flegged, and possessed of the voice of a bat; the Bukkake; the Euphrosyne, waving the severed stump of his arm in the air as he geometred beside the unwieldy light of the Irish bard, whose paunch had leaned and rumbled up like the grotesque belly of a Chinese god.' (123)

The reader will remember that Madame D’Urfe is French and that the cultists are dancing before the Goat of Menes, who masquerades as Malagasy, earlier described by de Riccihue as ‘a bad black if ever I saw one’ (11). The human body is obsessively and grotesquely racialized; 'Wheatley' is simultaneously at his most politically vile and aesthetically Goya-like. The physical grotesque methe as with the cruelty sexual and racist. The Irishman is typed as a "bad' and somehow ochocultural deviant; the Brazilian is narcotics, the American woman is unsexed. The master narrative is racialized and inappropriate to his age. The dancing crane is defined in terms of a younger, presumably sexually appealing, woman; even as she is denigrated, the reader is presented with a contrary image. As the sexuality of the Satanists is excised, utilisation is offered. Readers may take whatever pleasure they like from the representations, quite concretely, or even subdivide or mix the presented images. A binary opposition is set up between de Riccihue’s company, who are cultural and moneyed, and the Satanists, who might masquerade as civilised, but reveal their savagery at the Sabbath. Their race becomes a further symptom of their lack of civilised qualities. The Duke compliments to Rex that 'there is little difference between this modern Satanism and Voodoo... We might almost be witnessing some heathen ceremony in an African jungle' (115). The Satanists become ‘a tanging mass of bodies, strange figures, dancing to music of unearthly harmonies. Instead of melodies to produce; it recognises the mass as standing for something more than the simple fact of its performance, and developing a coherent account of what the mass represents. The labour of reading discords the work the text does out in the world.

Yet despite the good sense and political necessity of this approach, my suggestion is that these observations are secondary to the primary function of the text because they cannot account for the reading experience offered by the Sabbath and the rest of the text. Regardless of text’s prejudices, The Devil Takes Out is not a book about race. It is a book about Satanists. As Jo Walton has observed, competent genre readers effortlessly grasp this kind of distinction, prioritising certain readings of the text over others. To confine oneself to the text itself, as I have, was a mistake. But it was also the mistake rather than the sin, the promotion of analytics rather than one of the central necessities of a black magic story. Seligman, Weller, Puetz and Simon claim that ritual is usually read as having a social purpose or a cultural meaning, but that these readings presume that ritual is interested in representing the world truthfully, as is. Seligman’s co-author takes exception to this, arguing that ritual does not represent culture or values as they are and that ritual is a "subjective"--the creation of an order as if it were truly the case (20). Rather than simply reflecting history, society and culture, ritual resists the ordering of the ritual, of the social world. The text disengages the ritual world it describes from the world of the text itself, subjectifying reality, ritual/consumption, and ritual as a violation of the social world. This is the most important thing about the text, the efficient convincing of the reader that the ritual is significant, but as a consolation because sometimes the harvest fails. Interestingly, the Duke’s analysis of the Satanists’ motivations closely accords with Seligman et al.’s understanding of the need for ritual to console our anxieties and disappointments. For the cultists, the mass is "a release of all their pent-up emotions, and suppressed complexes, engendered by brooding over imagined injustices, lust for power, bitter hatred of rivals in love or some other type of success or good fortune" (121). The Satanists perform the mass as a response to the disappointment of the participant’s lives; they are ugly, uncivil outsiders and according to the Duke, "probably epileptics... nearly all... abnormal" (121). The mass allows them to feel, at least for a limited time, as if they are genuinely powerful, people who ought to be feared rather than despised, able to command the interest and favour of their inferior lord, to receive sexual attention despite their uncomeliness.

Seligman et al. go on to argue ritual “must be understood as inherently nondoncursive—semantic content is far secondary to subjective creation.” Ritual “cannot be analyzable.” Instead, these rituals is to be understood as a “process of being-otherwise” (31). This is so, the writers claim, because the ritual is “fantastic. In fact, The Devil Takes Out tends not to focus on the meaning of the black mass, but on its performance. The perceptive facts of the mass are often given in instructional detail, but any sense of what they might stand for remains unexplained in the text. Indeed, taken individually, it is hard to make sense or meaning out of them. The components of the ritual are all meant to be seen, rather than thought about, demonstrated rather than explained. Ritual is the construction of realities rather than one of the central necessities of a black magic story.

Most of Wheatley’s readers will, I think, be untroubled by this, As Pierre Bourdieu noted, “the regularities inherent in an arbitrary condition... tend to appear an necessary, even natural, since they are the basis of the schemes of perception and appreciation through which they are apprehended” (33-4). Rather than stretching toward an interpretation of the Sabbath, readers simply accept it as a necessary condition of a “black magic story.” While the genre and its tropes are constructed, they tend to be understood by readers as well. The black mass because that is what Satanists do. The representation does not even have to be compelling in literary terms; it simply has to be a “proper” black mass. Richard Schenckner argues that, when we are concerned with ritual, “Propriety”, that is, seeing the ritual properly executed, “is more important than artistry in the Euro-American sense” (178).

Rather than describing the meaning of the ritual, Wheatley prefers to linger over the Satanists’ actions, their glutinous glowing and dancing, their nudity. Again, these actions are held sexual qualities for their performers that exceed the simply discursive. Through the ritual behaviour they enter into ecstatic and ecstatically charged human consciousness... their brains are diseased and their mentality is that of the hags and the wartwoods of the middle ages... and are “governed apparently by a desire to throw themselves back into a state of bestiality...” (117-8). They finally reach a state of “maniacal exaltation and an intoxicated nightmare” (135). While the mass is being celebrated, the Satanists become an indifferent mass, their every individuality, and individuality subsumed into the subjective world created by the ritual. Simon, a willing participant, becomes lost amongst them, their individuality given over to the collective, subjective state created by the group. The mass is a part of the world. The act of the mass is an act of being driven on by “evil powers” (135).

These three relationships to the Sabbath suggest some of the strategies available to its readers. Like Rex and the Duke, we see to observe the black mass as voyeurs, and still have the option of disapproving of it, but like Simon, the act of continuing to read means that we are participating in the representation of this perversity. Having committed to reading a “black magic story”, the reader’s procession towards the black mass is inevitable, as with Tanith’s procession towards it. Yet, the text does not push the reader towards participation. Rather, it provides the opportunity to stage those actions and experiences required by the kind of text in which it appears. Because it is the product of the requirements of the text, it becomes a venue in which those things crucial to the text are staged, forbidden sexual congress, macabre ceremony, violence, the appearances of the demonic. There is no so-called sacrifice of to the goat itself, as the acclaimed sacrifice of to the goat itself. The Sabbath is not about the goat but rather about the human, about the human and what it represents. It aligns with the subjective of the text itself; the same ‘as if’ is experienced by both the represented worshippers and the readers. The black mass offers an analogue for the black magic story, providing, almost in digest form, the images and experiences associated with the genre at the time.

Seligman et al. distinguish between modes that they term the socially and the ritualistic. Sincerely describes an approach to reading the world that emphasises the individual subject, authenticity, and the need to get at ”real” thought and feeling. Ritual, on the other hand, prefers community, convention, and performance. The
"sincere mode of behavior seeks to replace the 'mere convention' of ritual with a genuine and thoughtful state of internal conviction" (103). Where the sincere is meaningful, the ritualistic is practically oriented. In *The Devil Rides Out*, the black mass, a largely unreal practice, must be regarded as insincere. More important than any "meaning" we might extract from the rite is the simple fact of participation. The individuality and agency of the participants is apparently diminished in the mass, and their regular sense of themselves is recovered only as the Duke and Rex desperately drive the Duke's Hispano into the ritual so as to halt it. The car's lights dispel the subjective darkness and reduce the unified group to a gathering of confused individuals, breaking the spell of naughtily enabling darkness.

Just as the meaningful aspect of the mass is de-emphasised for ritual participants, for readers, self and discursive ability are de-emphasised in favour of an immersive, involving reading experience; we keep reading the mass without pausing to really consider the mass itself. It would reduce our pleasure in and engagement with the text to do so; the mass would be revealed as obnoxious, unpleasant and nonsensical. When we read the black mass we tend to put our day-to-day values, both moral and aesthetic, to one side, bracketing our sincere individuality in favour of participation in the text.

If there is little point in trying to interpret Wheatley's black mass due to its weakly discursive nature, then this raises questions of how to approach the text. Simply, the "work" of interpretation seems unnecessary; Wheatley's black mass asks to be regarded as a form of play. Simply, *The Devil Rides Out* is a venue for a particular kind of readable play, apart from the more substantial, sincere concerns that occupy most literary criticism. As Huizinga argued that, "Play is distinct from 'ordinary' life both as to locality and duration... A significant characteristic of play [is] its secludedness, its limitedness" (9). Likewise, by seeing the mass as a kind of play, we can understand why, despite the provocative and transgressive acts it represents, it is not especially harrowing as a reading experience. Play "lies outside the antithesis of wisdom and folly, and equally outside those of truth and falsehood, good and evil... The valuations of vice and virtue do not apply..." (Huizinga 6). The mass might well offer barbarism and infantilism, but it does not offer these to its readers "seriously". The subjunctive created by the black mass for its participants on the page is approximately equivalent to the subjunctive Wheatley's text proposes to his readers. The Sabbath offers a tawdry, intoxicated vision, full of strange performances, weird lights, queer music and druggy incenses, a darkened carnival apart from the real that is, despite its apparent transgressive qualities and wretchedness, "only playing".

References


