

Witches, Exorcists and Tribunal Judges

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I pay attention to billboards and the language of advertisements. How are they made? In a clumsy or imaginative way? Literally or metaphorically? In front of the Auchan hypermarket, I passed a funny advertisement for hats which made use of an idiomatic phrase “keep it under your hat.” The next billboard had no graphics, which at first confused me. It claimed disapproval of women wearing men’s clothes. Or maybe also women’s clothes worn by men? Apparently, for a while, it was accompanied by a symmetrical billboard with an absurd quote, as a parody. From that moment on, I was on the lookout for Old Testament quotes around the city. Another billboard was about “committing an abomination,” that is – as I guessed – homosexual relations. I look forward to what quotes will come next. Maybe something about slaughtering your enemies along with the women, children and cattle? Or maybe I will come across the commandment: “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live” [*The 21st Century King James Version*, Ex. 22:18].

The author of the first billboard with the quote about garments doesn't know the history of clothing. They probably think that men have always worn pants and women dresses to the ground. Meanwhile, in ancient Greece and Rome, and in Hellenized Palestine, the dress of the two sexes wasn't very different. The toga and women's cloak (*peplum*) looked similar – a loose outer garment. And what about the Scots in the kilts? Is this already a third gender?

Homophobia, revived by the hierarchs of the Catholic Church and by the ideologues of Law and Justice, is associated in the popular consciousness (that of the left) with both antisemitism and witch-hunting. Labeling the “other” as “stranger” is the first step on the path to exclusion, leading to “the relegation from the human family” (this is the voice of Henryk Grynberg). We are still in the EU; we haven't yet reached for the Old Testament system of punishment. As singer Bartosz “Fisz” Waglewski said in an interview: “It seemed that, at least in big cities, homophobia would end up in the dustbin of history, next to raising the dead with electricity, burning witches or harassing the left-handed. [...] Sometimes it's the refugees, other times gays, then the teachers, and then artists” [Waglewski].

How do you defend yourself against witches in the 21st century? One can easily imagine a witch hunt in the middle of Europe. What if they could be blamed for all the private, social, and global evils – from Mr. Jan's stroke and Mrs. Kasia's infertility to global warming and the coronavirus pandemic? If the reward for the informer was

a portion of the victim's estate, the relevant offices would be flooded with denunciations. For the time being, there isn't a new law against witches, but after the verdict of the Constitutional Tribunal, new forms will emerge. This is because witches and servants of Satan (this is the archaic language used by bishops) took part in the black marches. Today, in response to the Women's Strike protests, the misogynistic language has become harsher: "leftist terrorists," "manipulators, ruthlessly pliant green-eyed mantises" (Robert Tekieli) or simply "a type of aggressive, vulgar little whore" (Rafał Ziemkiewicz), and in the language of the Church hierarchs the "witch" is making a comeback [Wysocki].

These are examples of the figure of the witch in a metaphorical and didactic role. Witches were tempted by Satan, but also tempted others to evil. They enjoyed seducing, harming and blaspheming. Within pop culture, the witch has become a puppet and Satan a little fiend. In the cinema, the figure of the witch is meant to entertain, even in a horror film, unless we are dealing with a historical work. In the latter case, the imagination of the viewer is dominated not by love spells and sabbaths, but by images of torture: in Ken Russell's *The Devils*, a priest pours holy water over the torture instruments used to break bones. Here piety is a mask of sadism. In Kamień Pomorski, they unearthed the skeleton of a witch buried with a brick in her mouth (so that she wouldn't rise from the grave and avenge herself), and with the bones of her tibia drilled through while she was still alive.

In Słupsk, guides show tourists the Witches' Tower, where accused and tortured women were imprisoned. There is always some laughter among the visitors, as if drowning defenseless women in the Słupia River used to be fun. This is why I don't like the witch-on-a-broomstick dolls, which you can buy at a souvenir stall in Słupsk, next to amber figurines.

The person of the witch is associated with a double legend: a dark one, which is today revived by bishops; and a light one, which presents women accused of witchcraft as someone "in the know"¹: herbalists, healers and midwives. Contemporary therapeutic workshops and post-New Age "women's circles" allude to this legend and archetype of the Woman Who Knows. Today we feel honored to be called witches or sorceresses.

In his study of witches in Polish lands *Between the Devil and the Host: Imagining Witchcraft in Early Modern Poland*, American historian Michael Ostling calls the myth of the wise witch, persecuted for being different in a repressive society, a romantic legend and links it to Jules Michelet's book *Satanism and Witchcraft* [Ostling]. In his reflections and in numerous statistical studies, this myth has not been confirmed by facts. Women "in the know," who held important social positions on the edge of what was generally accepted, comprised only several percent of all those accused of witchcraft in the First Republic of Poland. Most of those persecuted for witchcraft were ordinary "women from the neighborhood" – relatives, neighbors and acquaintances of

1 "Wiedźma" – a witch – comes from the word "wiedzieć": in Polish, to know (trans. note).

the accusers. The accused usually came from the lower social strata. One of the factors was probably a genuine belief in witchcraft and fear of an attack of invisible evil, but the main motive turned out to be envy and greed. The victim could be either a beautiful young woman who rejected the advances of a suitor, or a lonely widow whose relative wanted to seize her property. It was a way to easily get rid of an unwanted wife or mistress. Suspicion of witchcraft was sometimes a form of antagonism and feud between families, similar to the world of the mafia. In a small town in England, two families killed each other off in this way.

In the popular consciousness, witch-hunting is often associated with the Dark Ages, which is a historical misunderstanding. Stakes didn't ignite en masse until modern times. Paradoxically, the momentous and progressive invention of the printing press contributed to this. Expert manuals such as *The Hammer of Witches* by Jacobus Sprenger and Henricus Institor, and *The Demonology* by James I, King of Scotland – much like today's internet revelations – sparked a wave of hate against women conspiring with the devil.

The belief in witchcraft and the phenomenon of witch-hunting still operates in Africa, where the accused are most often children and old people, according to the mechanism of scapegoating: the community burdens the "other" with its sins in the face of failures and threats from various sides. It seems that, just as in Europe, it isn't obligatory to believe in witchcraft to abuse the socially approved mechanism of excluding the weak. The accusa-

tion of witchcraft is enough to have fewer people to feed at home. African towns are full of homeless children rejected by their families. Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, is considered the city of “the children of the sorcerers” [“Niewinni czarodzieje”]. Exorcism of suspected sorcerers is carried out by shamans and pastors of new evangelical churches.

I’m haunted by a photograph from the biweekly “Forum” showing the burning of a “witch” on a pile of old tires at a garbage dump in Papua New Guinea. Around the pyre, excited witnesses, adults and children take pictures and shoot videos with their cell phones. In several African countries, protected villages for witches and sorcerers are being established thanks to humanitarian organizations. They also offer refuge to albinos and black people affected by vitiligo, who are in danger of being mutilated or killed because their organs supposedly have magical functions.

Is the example of the persecution of women and children in Christian Africa cause for concern and compassion? On the contrary. The fervent faith of the people of this continent arouses delight from our native columnists on the right. In “Newsweek” (2010), Robert Tekieli admired those who really believe in the miracle of the Eucharist and at the same time, in magic and witchcraft, in contrast to the “lukewarm” Catholics in Europe. Never mind that they go to mass in the morning and to shamanic rituals in the evening, and that their deep faith makes them look for victims among the weakest. They simultaneously recognize “the

reality of demonic forces and the power of the sacraments,” the columnist rejoices, seeing a bright future for Christianity in Africa. In that case, are we allowed to look down on (...) people who hunt witches on other continents?

Witch-hunting in Africa seems like a tragedy from another reality, from another era. Meanwhile, women in Poland are now experiencing a wave of persecution that could be compared to witch burning. The Dark Ages are not just a historical category. In 21st-century Europe, women accused of attempting to “abort the fetus” are no longer sentenced to public death, but there are efforts to seek their incapacitation. The verdict of the Constitutional Tribunal prohibiting abortion due to severe genetic defects of the fetus means the practice of social control over the female body and deprives women of the right to decide about their own lives. The former Minister of Health Konstanty Radziwiłł proclaimed that Polish women – in contrast to Polish men – aren’t responsible, that they will pop the morning-after pill like candy and that it must be made difficult for them. What’s next? Limited access to contraception, penalties for non-church sex education, but there will also be a reward: religious education on the matura exam, which Minister Przemysław Czarnek is debating with the representatives of the Episcopate. As “Polityka” columnists Sylwia Chutnik and Grażyna Plebanek predict: “The treatment of infertility has been removed from the list of the objectives of the government, the same government that is trying to figure out how to completely ban abortion (publishing the verdict striking out abortion for

embryopathological reasons is not enough for them) and sexual education. [...] We are expecting posts in schools for exorcists who will expel gender and LGBT demons from the bodies of young people. Soon it will be possible to make money on excursions to Poland the Open-Air Museum. [Chutnik and Plebanek].

In 1811, on Polish soil, the last witch in Europe was burned at the stake. It was Barbara Zdunk from Reszel in Warmia, accused of arson by witchcraft. And today Poland has really become an open-air museum, the last “witch” prison in Europe.

And where are we headed? The magazine “Polonia Christiana” affiliated with Ordo Iuris put a new commandment on its cover: “It is time to forbid divorce,” while billboards with a slogan written in child’s scribble: “Love each other Mom and Dad” appeared around the city.

As in the witchcraft trials, the Church institution is using secular, state power to carry out its plan of cleansing the country of modern “abominations.” Again, women will suffer and die because of the decisions of religious fanatics. Defending the life of the unborn at the price of disenfranchising women hides a chasm of misogyny and sadism similar to hunting down witches. By the will of the mighty of this world, a woman ought to give birth, baptize and bury a child in order to receive a ‘funeral allowance’ from her homeland... and a room of her own to despair in solitude.

It also seems that the contemporary equivalent of the psychosis of witch-hunting is the popularity of exorcisms in Poland and the fear of possession in the circles of people who believe in “personal evil.” Father Waław Oszejca wrote in “Tygodnik Powszechny” about the “fashion for possession,” “demon hunters,” and the profession of “undoing magic.” Exorcists who are recognized as effective play the role of celebrities: they appear in the media and publish autobiographies and memoirs, like the late Gabriele Amorth, the highest-ranking specialist from the Vatican, author of *My Battle Against Satan* (2018), and Matt Baglio, author of the book *The Rite: The Making of a Modern Exorcist* (2009). Are these accounts sensational? Rather not, because the described cases of possession are surprisingly similar.

Poland is in the vanguard of possessions and ensnaring: the World Centre of Exorcism is being established in Poczernin near Szczecin. Only here does the monthly “Exorcist” come out, in which you can read accounts of sinners reported straight from hell. In one of the issues of this magazine, I was moved by the story of my namesake, who writes “Letters from the Beyond.” Poor Anna was condemned because she was of weak faith: “neither cold nor hot.” Coincidentally, you can’t learn anything about the institution of hell, for example, if there are fireproof smartphones, if they still use tar, or if there are already electric grates like on the banks of the Ganges.

In an Episcopal letter, the Catholic Church distanced itself from the psychosis of possession and the popular “masses

for evil spirit expulsion.” Unfortunately, while discrediting minor demons, it has fallen into the trap of the biggest ones; fighting the demonic ideology of gender and civil rights of LGBT people, it has negated the evangelical idea of equality of all people. As Education Minister Przemysław Czarnek stated, “It’s time to put an end to this idiocy of human rights, of some kind of equality. They are not equal to normal people.” [Golus]. And what does he offer women? They should be giving birth instead of pursuing careers because God called them to bear children. Not only are these words misogynistic, but they foreshadow further erosion of women’s civil rights and are a threat to the Istanbul Convention that protects women from domestic violence. Welcome to Gilead!

Unfortunately, as in the realm of witchcraft, it is mostly women who are singled out by Satan. In all films on the subject of possession, both documentary and fiction, the protagonists are young women and girls.

Konrad Szołajski’s documentary *Walka z szatanem* [Fight with Satan] features three girls, Karolina, Basia and Agnieszka, who agreed to tell their stories of possession and having the process of their exorcisms filmed [*Walka z szatanem*]. Karolina fell in love with a nun and wanted to get rid of the “demon of homosexuality”; Agnieszka dared to tell a priest during a religious education lesson that she was a non-believer. In both cases, possession is connected with a deep sense of guilt and is experienced as a punishment for sin.

The director tries to understand the victims of possession. He approaches different authorities of Church and state seeking an explanation. He talks to the families, exorcists, religious scholars, therapists who believe in the power of Satan, and skeptics on the clerical and secular side. One of the rationalists is the philosopher priest Andrzej Kobyliński, who diagnoses the mental disorders of the “possessed” and the crisis of the Church. Father Kobyliński claims that the Catholic Church in Poland has found itself on the side of magic and superstition, private revelations and publicly demonstrated faith in the power of Satan. He points to the process of the “pentecostalization” of the Polish Church, the popularity of forms of Pentecostal religiosity, that is, collective magical rituals, focused on emotions and sensations: trances, collapses, and hypnosis phenomena. In the country where Father John Bashobora attracts thousands of followers to a stadium, the devil feels right at home.

Szołajski said online that *Walka z szatanem* is “a film about my horror” and fascination with the unusual spectacle: “In *Walka z szatanem*, my own emotions were important. And in this film it was my own amazement that was the basic category which guided me. For a long time, I couldn’t believe what I saw” [Staszczyszyn].

The viewer, however, doesn’t have to share his sense of horror at the presence of the Evil One, but suffers along with the heroines, who are victims of physical and psychological violence. To me, filming their humiliation seems a form of abuse, especially in the close-up frames of their faces. Is

this framing technique supposed to help us learn about the individual, as in Kazimierz Karabasz or Krzysztof Kieślowski's work? Or is the purpose to depict Satan's activity – like in a horror movie? Satan, however, remains out of the frame, and what we can see are the representatives of the Church, associates of the Prince of Darkness. I was reminded of the image of the Last Judgment in the Church of St. Cecilia in Rome, where angels help the devils drive the damned to hell.

The director refrains from comment. Szołajski's documentary is two-fold: you can watch it as a record of the priests' committed fight with Satan, but you can also put Satan into parentheses and be horrified by the suffering of the victims of exorcists and the condition of the Church.

I wonder, how is it that documentary testimonies and fictional narratives are so similar? The possessed always blaspheme and curse God, vomit nails, beat up exorcists, and sometimes urinate in the wrong places. The three girls in Szołajski's documentary behave similarly to the heroines of William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* and Maciej Bodasiński's *Egzorcyzmy Annelise Michel* [The Exorcism of Annelise Michel], as well as the nuns in Ken Russell's *The Devils*. Szołajski's heroines had to stand out in some way, similarly to Mother Joan of the Angels from Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz's short story, who didn't want to be the same as the other nuns.

Does art make use of life here, of testimonies of possession and exorcism, or is it the other way around: does life imitate conventional depictions in literature and film?

Why doesn't Satan attack atheists and agnostics but harasses Catholic women? Hence, the conclusion that the enslaved girls from Szołajski's film should be radically cut off from the Church, from Jasna Góra, from expulsion prayers, and the care of church therapists who fed their sense of guilt and fear of condemnation. Fortunately, this is what happened. As we read before the closing credits, the girls became adults, freed themselves from their families and destructive therapists, and began independent lives.

Reading the reports of exorcists and watching horror movies, I had a sense of the degradation of the Lucifer myth. How do we reconcile the image of Satan spitting on the sacred, afraid of pre-conciliar Latin, with the figure of the proud Prince of This World from the Gospels? In the literary tradition, we have fascinating figures of Evil, such as Lucifer by John Milton, Mephisto by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Lucifer by Juliusz Słowacki, Satan by Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Thomas Mann, or Tadeusz Miciński's Lucifer, who was the patron of rebellion and revolution. Each of these figures is an ambivalent entity. Lucifer was sometimes a romantic and tragic hero, and his fall became a metaphor for human fate. In contemporary narratives on possession, the figure of the devil has changed radically.

The existential drama of Lucifer presented in literary masterpieces has turned into a soap opera. Unlike the director of *Walka z szatanem*, I suppose that neither possession

and exorcism, nor the reports from the witch trials hide the mystery anymore. Is possession a separate category of mental illness? Are witches victims of paranoid delusions or neighborhood envy? I don't know, but it seems to me that we are dealing here with banal evil rather than the plotting of the Prince of Darkness.

At the turn of the 21st century, Lucifer returned to the stage of human psychomachy in Philip Zimbardo's book *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil* (2007). Since his famous prison experiment (1971), Zimbardo has been studying evil, of which – in favorable circumstances – average people are capable. Today social psychologists most often deal not with the evil present in such individuals as psychopaths or extreme narcissists, but the one that is lodged in the psyche of every person. They are intrigued by human nature, which is contradictory, hypocritical, duplicitous and Luciferian. Through this metaphorical description of human psyche, Zimbardo wants to draw attention to the fact that those who are most exposed to Lucifer's temptations are not the people who disregard moral norms, but idealists: those who strive for perfection and purity and who want to radically separate good from evil, whose carriers are always the others. The first step on Lucifer's path is to adopt the pattern of thinking us–them. The researcher lists seven steps leading from exclusion to the annihilation of the other. This process is hidden in the title of a moving book by Magdalena Środa, *Inny, obcy, wykluczony* [The Other, Stranger, the Excluded] (słowo/obraz terytoria Gdańsk 2020). The fourth part of the title could be “the dead”...

As Father Kobyliński said in an interview for “Gazeta Wyborcza”: “The hate that is widespread in Poland stems from our messianism. Instead of thinking how to reconcile with each other, we assign historical roles to ourselves, and we blame others for our failures” [Kobyliński]. Returning to Słupsk and the Witches’ Tower, I wonder how much longer the tales of witches and torture will be accompanied by tourists’ giggles. Other countries have already come to the realization that these women need to be honored just like the victims of all other persecutions. In London, secular and religious associations have taken under their care an unconsecrated cemetery where convicts, witches and prostitutes were buried. And in Norway, a remarkable monument to “witches” burned at the stake was created by one of the most prominent sculptors of the 20th century, Louise Bourgeois, who designed an eternally burning chair surrounded by mirrors. The mirrors convey to each other and to heaven the memory of the innocent, cruelly martyred women.

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