

Oliver Cromwell and the Devil in Worcester

Darren Oldridge

To cite this article: Darren Oldridge (2023) Oliver Cromwell and the Devil in Worcester, *Midland History*, 48:3, 271-285, DOI: [10.1080/0047729X.2023.2266737](https://doi.org/10.1080/0047729X.2023.2266737)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0047729X.2023.2266737>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 20 Nov 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 159



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Oliver Cromwell and the Devil in Worcester

Darren Oldridge

Department of History, Politics and Sociology, University of Worcester, Worcester, UK

ABSTRACT

On the eve of the Battle of Worcester in 1651, Oliver Cromwell was reputed to have sold his soul to the Devil. This article examines the construction of this legend and places it in the larger context of English Protestant thought about the 'ancient enemy'. It argues that the story originally arose from the circumstances of Cromwell's death on 3 September 1658, but later came to focus on events before the battle seven years earlier. The legend illustrates the persistence of ideas about a physical Devil, despite the emphasis on Satan as an invisible tempter in English theology. This portrayal emerged from the polemics of the 1640s and 1650s and had something in common with the demonization of the royalist commander Prince Rupert. But it drew mainly on earlier stories such as the legend of Johann Faust, which provided the core themes in the tale of Cromwell's supposed diabolism.

KEYWORDS

Devil; pact; religion; English Civil War; Battle of Worcester; Oliver Cromwell

In the battle of dates in mid-seventeenth-century England, 3 September rivalled 30 January as a day of celebration and infamy. The latter date marked the execution of Charles I in 1649, an event initially lauded as the dawn of the English republic, but rapidly assimilated into the royalist legend of the king's martyrdom.¹ 3 September also had multiple associations, and in the 1650s at least was connected more securely to the triumphs of the Commonwealth. It was the date of the Battle of Dunbar in 1650, when Oliver Cromwell's army defeated the Scottish forces assembled to restore the deposed king's son; and exactly one year later, the Battle of Worcester that crushed the last military resistance to the new regime. This coincidence was not entirely unplanned: Cromwell himself probably delayed the assault on Worcester because he saw the providential significance of the date.² Subsequently, parliamentarians acknowledged God's hand in the chronology of the last great victories of the civil wars.³ The date was memorialized by days of thanksgiving and mooted as a potential annual holiday.⁴

CONTACT Darren Oldridge  d.oldridge@worc.ac.uk  Department of History, Politics and Sociology, University of Worcester, Henwick Grove, Worcester WR2 6AJ, UK

¹As early as 1649, John Arnoway's *The Tablet, or Moderation of Charles I* (The Hague: 1649) acclaimed the king's martyrdom: see especially Arnoway, *Tablet*, pp. 79–80.

²P. Gaunt, 'Oliver Cromwell's Last Battle', *Transactions of the Worcestershire Archaeological Society*, Third Series, Vol. 20 (2006), 148.

³See, for example, J. Vicars, *A Brief Review of the Most Material Parliamentary Proceedings* (2nd ed. 1652), pp. 26–7.

⁴I. Peck, *Recollections in the Republic: Memories of the British Civil Wars in England, 1649–1659* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 34–5.

The thanksgivings and celebrations fell away with the collapse of the republic in 1660, replaced with royalist commemorations of the king's death and his son's restoration on 'Oak Apple Day' – an occasion whose name recalled the future monarch's escape from Worcester and refuge in an oak tree. Today, 3 September is marked solemnly in the city with a drumhead service for the thousands who perished in 1651.⁵

Remarkably, 3 September was also the date of the Protector's death in 1658. This coincidence gave rise to a curious tradition about the Battle of Worcester that survives today: the story of Cromwell's pact with the Devil. According to the legend, the general sold his soul on the eve of the battle in return for victory and seven years' good fortune. When the terms of this deal expired, Satan claimed his prize at the Protector's deathbed, as he lay raving and tormented in the middle of a violent storm. The pages that follow analyse this diabolical tale. In part, this involves an excavation of the possible origins and transmission of the story, and its various alterations over time. The first part of the article focuses on these things. It argues that the immediate context of the tale was Cromwell's death in 1658 rather than the Battle of Worcester itself, and the earliest version should be read in this light. It was only as the narrative expanded in the eighteenth century that its focus moved to events in 1651.

The legend of Cromwell's demonic pact also relates to a much larger theme in early modern English history: the role of the Devil in Protestant culture. Until recently, the historical study of Satan has focused on witchcraft and demonic possession; and this lens has tended to distort our understanding of the prince of darkness in the period. While many contemporaries were certainly fascinated by accounts of witchcraft and possession, these were by no means the only, or even the main way in which they encountered demonic themes. Indeed, the 'ancient enemy' was an almost ubiquitous presence in English theology and devotional literature and pursued a lively career in cheap print. The second part of this article, therefore, seeks to place Cromwell's satanic pact in this larger context. Specifically, it argues that such tales sustained traditional assumptions about the physical activity of the Devil that appealed to some partisan writers but sat outside the mainstream of Protestant engagement with the spiritual enemy. It also shows that the story of Cromwell's supposed diabolism borrowed extensively from earlier sources, notably the legend of Johann Faust. Viewed from this expanded perspective, Cromwell's alleged tryst with Satan on 3 September 1651 contributes to our developing understanding of demonism in the period.

I

The earliest known account of Cromwell's diabolical pact appeared in the second edition of Clement Walker's *History of Independency* (1660). Walker had supported the parliament at the outbreak of the civil war and was elected to the House of Commons in 1646. Subsequently, he was dismayed by the failure of negotiations to achieve a peaceful accommodation with the king, and by 1648 he was trenchantly opposed to 'Independents' in the army and the parliament; he was removed from the Commons in the purge of December 1648 and remained a coruscating critic of the republic until his death in 1651. Walker's *History of Independency* was published in

⁵A drumhead service is a military religious service which uses drums as an altar.

three volumes during his lifetime. An expanded continuation of the series was printed soon after the Restoration, incorporating new material from an author known only as 'T. M'. It was T. M. who recorded Cromwell's assignation with the prince of darkness:

It was believed, and that not without some good cause, that Cromwell the same morning that he defeated the king's army at Worcester Fight, had conference personally with the Devil, with whom he made a contract, that to have his will then, and in all things else for seven years after from that time (being 3 September 1651) he should at the expiration of the said years have him at his command, to do at his pleasure, both with his soul and body.⁶

The anonymous author did not divulge the source of this information, attesting only that it came from a 'person of quality'. To date this mysterious party has not been identified, though a later tradition claimed that Cromwell's companion Colonel Lindsey had witnessed the pact and conveyed an account of it from the battlefield in 1651.⁷

It is possible, of course, that a version of the story had circulated orally or passed from hand to hand before it reached T. M.'s pages. Alleged appearances of evil spirits were relatively common during the civil wars – and at least two had been reported in Worcester before 1660.⁸ Conceivably at least, a rumour of a meeting of some kind between Cromwell and the Devil may have emerged around 1651, though no contemporary trace of such a tale has yet been found. Unlike other demonic manifestations in the period, however, the story presented in *The History of Independency* was fastened to a future date: Cromwell's death on 3 September 1658. It could not have been written before that date – unless we accept the supernatural assumptions of the narrative itself. The date provided both the underpinning structure of the tale and its claim to credibility. T. M. himself spelt this out: 'Now if anyone will please to reckon from 3 September 1651 till 3 September 1658, Cromwell's death, he shall find it to a day just seven years and no more, at the end whereof he died'.⁹ It was an indication of the defining role of the Protector's death to T. M.'s story that he inserted it into his account of Cromwell's final illness, having omitted it from the detailed description of the Battle of Worcester that appeared earlier in the book.

Viewed in the context of Cromwell's death in 1658 – rather than the Battle of Worcester seven years earlier – the story of his demonic pact reads as a mocking response to the panegyrics that originally accompanied the event. It was a small but crudely effective part of the wider realignment of assumptions that came with the Restoration. Originally, the coincidence of the date of the Protector's death with the anniversary of the victories at Dunbar and Worcester was portrayed in a positive light. In *An Account of the Last Hours of the Late Renowned Oliver Lord Protector* (1659), the anonymous author compared Cromwell's faith on his deathbed to his deportment on those two earlier battlefields, 'when he carried his life in his hand, ready to offer up the same as a willing sacrifice to the great cause of God'.¹⁰ Likewise, John Reynolds' funeral

⁶T. M., *The History of Independency. The Fourth and Last Part* (1660), p. 31.

⁷L. Echard, *The History of England. From the Beginning of the Reign of King Charles the First to the Restoration of King Charles II*, Vol. II (London: Jacob Tonson, 1718), pp. 712–13.

⁸In 1657 a Quaker apprentice supposedly met the Devil in human form in Worcester, and a former royalist soldier told Richard Baxter that he saw a demonic monster on College Green during the wars. *A Sad Caveat to All Quakers* (1657), pp. 8–9; R. Baxter, *The Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits* (London, 1691), pp. 58–9.

⁹T. M., pp. 31–2.

¹⁰*An Account of the Last Hours of the Late Renowned Oliver Lord Protector* (1659), p. 9.

elegy noted the auspicious date of the Protector's last hours, 'On the same day of thanks, design'd to be, For Worcester, and Dunbar's great victory'.¹¹ It was perhaps inevitable that Cromwell's detractors would also note the resonance of the date and seek to tarnish its association with parliamentary triumphs. The story of the general's seven-year bargain with Satan, signed at Worcester and completed on his deathbed, did so with vivid relish.

The supposed consummation of Cromwell's demonic pact exploited another event associated with his death. This was the great storm that lashed southern England on 30 August. The violence of the storm – which blasted travellers and uprooted ancient trees – provided a dramatic natural marker of the Protector's last days, and it was duly assimilated into literary and popular accounts of the occasion. (In one memorable instance, Isaac Newton recalled that as a youth in Lincolnshire he was propelled by the hurricane to a winning jump in a game of leapfrog).¹² Like the portentous date of Cromwell's death, the storm was initially presented as a positive sign by supporters of the regime. To the poet Edmund Waller, the crashing winds sounded the Protector's 'immortal fame', and fallen trees were nature's tribute 'for his funeral pile'.¹³ This interpretation was challenged, however. In 1659 Richard Watson published an anti-panegyric that subverted Waller's tribute verse by verse. Where Waller read the storm as a herald of Cromwell's reception in heaven, Watson saw it as a token of his damnation: the 'winds were all let loose to blow the fire' that would torment his 'cursed soul', and trees threw up their roots to open the chasm of hell.¹⁴ In a more literal fashion, the story of Cromwell's pact with the Devil presented the tempest in the same way. In T. M. version, the storm was further proof of the demonic and unnatural circumstances of his death, which took place in 'such extremity of tempestuous weather that was by all men judged to be prodigious'.¹⁵

It seems, then, that the tale of Cromwell's demonic pact in *The History of Independency* emerged from the details of the Protector's death, and belonged to the wider appropriation of these details into a hostile narrative that accompanied the Restoration. This early version said little about his supposed meeting with the Devil itself. It was almost 60 years later, in the second volume of Laurence Echard's *History of England* (1718), that a detailed account of the alleged encounter was published.¹⁶ An archdeacon in the Church of England, Echard was a prolific historian whose work was cited frequently by later writers; and his influence probably secured the lasting currency of the tale. It certainly established the core elements that are repeated most often today and grounded the story firmly in the events of September 1651 rather than 1658. In Echard's retelling, Cromwell's encounter with Satan acquired an evocative setting and memorable dialogue, as well as a dramatic new explanation for its discovery.

Unlike T.M., Echard inserted the tale of Cromwell's infernal bargain immediately after his account of the Battle of Worcester. He quoted the version published in 1660 – omitting the references to Cromwell's death – and then claimed to have acquired 'a

¹¹J. Reynolds, *Upon the Much Lamented Departure of the High and Mighty Prince Oliver Lord Protector* (1658).

¹²P. Ackroyd, *Newton* (London: Vintage, 2007), p. 10.

¹³E. Waller, *Upon the Late Storme, and the Death of His Highnesse* (1658).

¹⁴R. Watson, *The Storme Raised by Mr Waller* (1659).

¹⁵T. M., p. 32.

¹⁶Echard, pp. 712–13.

more full account never yet published'. His alleged source for this narrative was the first captain of Cromwell's regiment, 'commonly called Colonel Lindsey'. Lindsey claimed that on the morning of the battle he was made to ride with his commander to a woodside near the army encampment. Then Cromwell told him to walk with him into the wood, taking careful notice of everything that he saw and heard. The officer was struck by a strange sense of dread after venturing only a short way inside. He turned pale and began to tremble, then 'was seized with such unaccountable terror and astonishment that it was impossible for him to stir one step further'. Cromwell rebuked his faint-heartedness and strode on, leaving him to witness the scene that followed:

Then advancing to some distance from him, he met with a grave elderly man with a roll of parchment in his hand, who delivered it to Cromwell, who eagerly perused it. Lindsey, a little recovered from his fear, heard several loud words between them; particularly, Cromwell said, 'This is but for seven years, I was to have it for one-and-twenty, and it must and shall be so'. The other told him positively [that] it could not be for above seven; upon which Cromwell cried with great fierceness, 'It should however be for fourteen years'. But the other peremptorily declared [that] it could not possibly be for any longer time; and if he would not take it so, there were others who would accept it.¹⁷

The Devil's negotiating skills prevailed. Apparently satisfied (or resigned), Cromwell grabbed the parchment and returned to his companion. With 'great joy on his countenance', he told him that the day's battle was already won. The two men rode back to the army and Cromwell ordered the attack. Lindsey deserted after the first charge, whereupon his commander sent instructions for his capture dead or alive. He rode day and night and eventually took refuge with a friend called Thorowgood, the minister of an unnamed parish in Norfolk. He told his astonished host what he had seen: Cromwell had 'made a league with the Devil, and the Devil will have him in due time'. More precisely, he 'would certainly die' on the seventh anniversary of the battle. Thorowgood told his twelve-year-old son to record the story in a commonplace book, and by this means it was preserved in the family and eventually found its way into Echard's history.¹⁸

What can be made of this account? Echard himself was clearly sceptical. He warned his readers at the outset that it was 'a thing more wonderful than probable'; and after relating the tale, he invited them wryly to decide how far it 'is to be believed, and how far the story is to be accounted incredible'.¹⁹ Ostensibly however, the archdeacon appears to have believed his own account of the story's provenance. Some details of this seem plausible. The Norfolk minister was possibly Thomas Thorowgood, the rector of Grimston, whose Presbyterian sympathies led him to oppose the army's purge of parliament in 1648 and the subsequent trial of the king.²⁰ This conjecture is supported by a contemporary note in the margin of the copy of Echard's book in Worcester Cathedral Library, which identifies the churchman as the rector of Grimston.²¹ It is possible that a legend of Cromwell's meeting with the Devil was maintained in the

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ For Thorowgood's career and political leanings, see R. W. Cogley, 'The Ancestry of the American Indians: Thomas Thorowgood's *Jews in America* (1650) and *Jews in America* (1660)', *English Literary Renaissance*, 35, 2 (Spring 2005), 304–5.

²¹ I am grateful to the cathedral librarian, David Morrison, for this information.

family, and reached Echard in the 1710s through the ecclesiastical network in East Anglia. The involvement of Colonel Lindsey is harder to verify. A Lieutenant John Lindsey (or Lyndsey) was recorded in Cromwell's regiment of horse in the army of the Eastern Association in August 1643, and was still serving in March 1644.²² His troop was incorporated in the New Model Army in the following year. Lindsey may have obtained promotion and fought at Worcester. If he was the same man, his East Anglian connections may explain his alleged flight to Norfolk.

But serious problems remain with Echard's version of events. If Lindsey deserted on the day of the battle, it is surprising that this was not reported before 1718. While desertion was endemic in the armies of the civil wars, it was notably less common among mounted troops; and the defection of officers occasioned interest and comment in the partisan press.²³ The flight of 'an intimate friend of Cromwell's' was unlikely to have escaped attention.²⁴ It is possible, of course, that a hitherto unexamined source may yet confirm Lindsey's involvement at Worcester; but this would not resolve the deeper problems that arise from the narrative itself. If we take at face value the claim that Cromwell sought a pact with the Devil, it seems bizarre that he would insist on a witness to the deed. More fundamentally, Echard's version of Cromwell's demonic pact, no less than the one in *The History of Independency*, relied on the date of the Protector's death. Indeed, this fact was built into its structure. The drama of Cromwell's negotiation with the Devil turned on the offer of seven years' prosperity, and the general's eventual acceptance of that term. Lindsey subsequently asserted that Cromwell would die in exactly seven years' time, on the same day 'that the battle was fought'.²⁵ When these elements of the tale are considered, it seems clear that it can have originated no earlier than September 1658. The identification of the supposed participants in Echard's text cannot alter this conclusion.

The archdeacon's work provoked both criticism of his methods and renewed interest in the story. In his *Critical History of England* (1726), John Oldmixon mocked Echard's reliance on a dubious chain of testimony: he had taken his account from an unnamed source who had it from the Thorowgood family, who had it from a text supposedly written by a child, who had it from Colonel Lindsey, 'who had it from the Devil himself'. The product of this shadowy transmission was a 'tale which would not bear telling to children and servants about a Christmas fire'. Oldmixon's critique of the story's provenance was well made, though his claim that Echard presented the tale itself 'in the most solemn and serious manner' was somewhat unfair.²⁶ Anyway, his caustic observations were probably less important than another response to the archdeacon's text. This was the publication in 1720 of *A True and Faithful Narrative of Oliver Cromwell's Compact with the Devil*. This was both the first publication devoted solely to the story and, at the price of sixpence, the first addressed to a mass audience. The pamphlet was composed of extracts from other works. These included both Echard's

²²L. Spring, *The Regiments of the Eastern Association*, Vol. 1 (Bristol: Stuart Press, 1998), p. 21.

²³See D. J. Appleby, 'The Third Army: Wandering Soldiers and the Negotiation of Parliamentary Authority, 1642–51', in *Battle-Scarred: Mortality, Medical Care and Military Welfare in the British Civil Wars* ed. by D. J. Appleby and A. Hopper (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), p. 138; and A. Hopper, *Turncoats and Renegadoes: Changing Sides During the English Civil Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), chapter seven.

²⁴Echard, p. 712.

²⁵T. M., *The History of Independency. The Fourth and Last Part* (1660), p. 713.

²⁶J. Oldmixon, *The Critical History of England, Ecclesiastical and Civil*, 2nd ed. (London: J. Pemberton, 1726), p. 147.

account and the original tale in *The History of Independency*, as well as Clarendon's description of the Protector's character and death. It also contained two documents 'never before printed': a letter supposedly written by Cromwell's daughter Elizabeth during her father's last illness, and notes allegedly taken from the pocketbook of John Thurloe, the secretary to the council of state, in the same period.²⁷ Both included details that seemed to confirm Cromwell's deal with the Devil.

The new documents in *A True and Faithful Narrative* are curiosities. The notes attributed to Thurloe described two visits he made to the Protector's sickbed. During the first of these, Cromwell 'ordered me to take a bond out of a little ebony casket and to burn it, saying the completion of it was well nigh come to pass'. In the second meeting, on 27 August, Cromwell apparently predicted his own death and damnation on the coming 3 September. The undated letter from Elizabeth also concerned her father's behaviour during his sickness. Most dramatically, she recorded his conversations with an unseen interlocutor:

When he and I are only sitting in his bedchamber together, he seems very often talking with a third person, and cries 'you have cheated me, the purchase was intended by me for seven years' longer, I will not be so served'.

If the letter is genuine, it must have been written before 6 August, when Elizabeth herself died. By this time her father was already seriously ill. It could be argued that the behaviour described in both texts arose from the delirium that attended Cromwell's final illness; and on this reading, the Protector himself may have been the unwitting source of the story of his deal with the Devil. It is more probable, however, that the documents were fabricated. For a start, their appearance in a work produced to prove Cromwell's demonic pact is hardly encouraging. Secondly, Elizabeth's letter does not ring true. By all accounts she was particularly close to her father, but the text is filled with contempt for him at a time when he was physically vulnerable: it calls him a hypocrite and usurper, and a 'monster of mankind, whom I must yet, to my extreme sorrow, call father'.²⁸ Lastly, the information revealed in both documents relates specifically to the version of Cromwell's meeting with the Devil published by Echard in 1718: namely his failed negotiation for an additional seven years of prosperity, and his possession of a written bond that confirmed the final deal. If these details came from the Protector's deathbed, it is surprising that neither of them was mentioned in the printed account of the pact in 1660. It seems more likely that they derived from Echard's book, which was published just two years before the pamphlet appeared.

The printed accounts of Cromwell's pact in the early eighteenth century furnished the tale with tangible details: the physical meeting in a wood, Cromwell's argument with the Devil, and the parchment that sealed their arrangement. These details had theological implications which are considered in section two; but they also helped to embed the tale into popular traditions. At some point the story acquired a named location – or rather, two different ones: Perry Wood to the east of Worcester, and the nearby village

²⁷*A True and Faithful Narrative of Oliver Cromwell's Compact with the Devil for Seven Years* (1720), title page. I am grateful to Tony Spicer for drawing my attention to this pamphlet.

²⁸*True and Faithful Narrative*, pp. 9–10, 11, 13.

of White Ladies Aston.²⁹ Echard described the setting of his tale at some length in 1718 but did not identify the place. This indicates, perhaps, that the rival locations were established only later. Perry Wood was a natural candidate, as the parliamentary army had encamped there in the days before the battle.³⁰ In 1790 a map of the area identified ‘Cromwell’s Oak’, which may have been associated with the story. The version that placed the narrative at White Ladies Aston was recorded by an unnamed ‘Worcestershire lady’ in 1892, alongside other local tales associated with the civil wars. As well as these geographical details, other new elements appeared in later recorded versions of the story. These also diverged in interesting ways. The 1892 account replaced Colonel Lindsey with a new witness, Mr Justice Symonds. After Cromwell and the Devil had concluded their business, Symonds asked the ‘gentleman in black’ if he could also expect good fortune – only to be told that the last of his family ‘would perish by the hangman’s rope’.³¹ Around 1905, according to an informant of the folklorist Alan Smith, children would visit Perry Wood to search ‘for the site of the cottage that had been Oliver’s local headquarters, and where he had conversed with the Devil in a great thunderstorm’.³²

These examples suggest that the story was remarkably pliant. It could apparently assimilate village traditions: the Symonds were a gentry family in White Ladies Aston, and the local variant of the tale incorporated the execution of one of its members for murder in 1707. The elements of the narrative could also be rearranged: it seems that the version described to Alan Smith transposed the storm at Cromwell’s deathbed to his meeting with the Devil. This flexibility, no doubt, helps to explain the endurance of the tale. So too does its compelling anti-hero: the obvious villain of post-Restoration politics, but also the ‘brave wicked man’ who dared to haggle away his soul to the Devil.³³ Most of all, though, the story exploited and reflected the role of Satan in early modern English religion and culture. It also illustrated, in miniature, some of the complexities and ambiguities of that role. These are addressed below.

II

While the history of the Devil remains dominated by studies of witchcraft, some scholars have recently explored the role of the spiritual enemy in the wider culture of English Protestantism.³⁴ One theme to emerge from this research is the importance of demonic temptation. While Christians had always recognized Satan’s subversive influence in the human mind, this activity was, as Nathan Johnstone observes, ‘elevated by Protestant theologians to the single most important aspect of his agency’.³⁵ This involved a corresponding neglect of the Devil’s physical manifestations. Similarly, the author’s research has found that English writers presented Satan as an unseen tempter

²⁹R. Palmer, *The Folklore of Worcestershire* (Eardisley: Logaston Press, 2005), pp. 42–3.

³⁰I. Gentles, *The New Model Army in England, Ireland and Scotland, 1645–1653* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 408.

³¹Palmer, pp. 42–3.

³²A. Smith, ‘The Image of Cromwell in Folklore and Tradition’, *Folklore*, 79, 1 (1968), 36.

³³*True and Faithful Narrative*, p. 26.

³⁴N. Johnstone, *The Devil and Demonism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: CUP, 2006); D. Oldridge, *The Devil in Tudor and Stuart England* (Stroud: History Press, 2010), and *The Supernatural in Tudor and Stuart England* (London: Routledge, 2016), chapter four.

³⁵Johnstone, p. 106.

and instigator of falsehood.³⁶ These assumptions gave him an intimate role in the spiritual life of the individual, which Michelle Brock has described, in the context of contemporary Scotland, as the ‘internalisation of the demonic’.³⁷

This inward experience of the Devil was allied to a profound awareness of his desire to deceive. ‘It is the Devil’s method’, wrote Richard Baxter in 1673, ‘to delude the understanding’; his goal was ‘false erroneous thoughts’.³⁸ Satan’s love of falsehood was illustrated in the terms used to describe him in devotional texts: he was ‘the lying spirit’, ‘the spirit of error’, the ‘father of lies’, or simply ‘the liar’. At a time of confessional conflict, the Devil’s campaign to mislead the unwary inevitably took religious forms: he disguised himself in false versions of Christianity and sought to beguile well-meaning people ‘under the name of the gospel’.³⁹ This ploy reached its zenith in the Catholic Church but was also manifested in separatist congregations of various kinds. Still more subtly, the enemy lulled ordinary churchgoers into a kind of spiritual torpor in which they ignored their own need for salvation and trusted thoughtlessly in superstition. As a result, it was a staple of English devotional writing that most of Satan’s human followers were unaware of their benighted state.

Oliver Cromwell’s tryst with the Devil needs to be viewed in this larger context. The concept of the demonic pact, in which an individual deliberately entered a formal arrangement with the spiritual enemy, occupied a nuanced place in English religious culture. The pact was important to learned writers on witchcraft, who saw it as integral to the crime.⁴⁰ It also served as an exemplary sin in some Protestant literature, most notably the legend of Johann Faust, which originated in Lutheran Saxony and became popular in England from the 1590s.⁴¹ But the concept was in some ways poorly aligned with the understanding of the Devil described above. Whereas demonic pacts were often imagined as physical encounters with the prince of darkness – such as Cromwell’s supposed ‘conference personally’ with him in 1651 – theologians and devotional writers were more concerned with his hidden operations in the mind. This tendency encouraged some English theorists of witchcraft, such as William Perkins and Thomas Cooper, to propose a spiritualized version of the pact: a ‘secret and mental’ covenant that required no outward expression at all.⁴² The idea of the pact also focused attention on wicked or reckless individuals who knowingly consorted with demons. It was possible to dramatize the subtleties of fallen human nature through the portrayal of such characters, as Christopher Marlowe did in his penetrating adaptation of Faust around 1593; but in less sophisticated hands, the idea that Satan won souls by striking bargains with the wicked risked diluting his more subtle and ubiquitous methods. The authors of works of religious instruction were keen to point out that all unredeemed

³⁶Oldridge, *Devil*, pp. 23–31, 45–52.

³⁷M. D. Brock, ‘Internalising the Demonic: Satan and the Self in Early Modern Scottish Piety’, *Journal of British Studies*, 54 (2015), especially 29–31.

³⁸R. Baxter, *The Christian Directory, or A Summ of Practical Theologie* (1673), pp. 11, 89.

³⁹G. Gifford, *A Dialogue Betweene a Papist and Protestant* (1599), p. 72.

⁴⁰W. Perkins, *A Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, 2nd ed. (1610), p. 167; T. Cooper, *The Mystery of Witchcraft* (1617), pp. 64–6; R. Bernard, *Guide to Grand-Jury Men* (1627), p. 216.

⁴¹On the Lutheran roots of the Faust legend, see E. M. Butler, *The Fortunes of Faust* (Stroud: Sutton, 1952), and J. Burton Russell, *Mephistopheles: The Devil in the Modern World* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 58–66.

⁴²Cooper, p. 69.

men and women belonged to the Devil, not only obvious sinners of the kind that might sign away their souls.⁴³

Unsurprisingly, Satan did extensive service in the English Civil Wars. Propagandists on all sides exploited his role as the mastermind of false and deadly beliefs. As the father of lies, he was presented often as the seductive voice that led opponents to overthrow true religion. At its most subtle, this approach permitted sympathy for the victims of satanic deceit, whose good intentions were subverted by the enemy disguised as an ‘angel of light’.⁴⁴ In this vein, the anonymous author of *A Blow at the Root* (1650) lamented the Devil’s sway over well-meaning sectaries who followed the ‘false lights’ of a pretended reformation: he laboured ‘to corrupt the friends of truth from the truth, and to engage the people of God against their God, their gospel, their glory, their true interest’.⁴⁵ Likewise, the royalist poet John Quarles had Satan promoting ‘the work of reformation’ to a tender-hearted Christian.⁴⁶ Texts of this kind implied that all unwary Christians, not merely the wicked, might fall prey to Satan’s ‘strange and subtle engines’ of destruction.⁴⁷ As Nathan Johnstone has argued, such thinking went beyond the mere ‘demonisation’ of religious opponents to encourage a kind of vigilant self-reflection.⁴⁸

This subtle engagement with the spiritual enemy did not, however, prevent the Devil from appearing in less nuanced ways in the 1640s and 1650s. Perhaps inevitably, the supposed wickedness of individuals on both sides of the conflict was illustrated by their dealings with Satan. As early as autumn 1642, some parliamentary pamphlets implied that the king’s camp followers included witches; and a witch allegedly captured at Newbury in 1643 attributed her power to the Devil.⁴⁹ In a pungent tale from 1654, a cavalier drank a toast to Satan in a tavern in Salisbury; he then vanished from his chamber, leaving only a foul smell and a broken, bloody window.⁵⁰ On the royalist side, polemicists described the tormented death of the regicide Thomas Hoyle in 1650: he was apparently beset by demonic visions before he hanged himself with the Devil’s assistance.⁵¹ Satan appeared at the bedside of the king’s executioner, Richard Brandon, to stop him from repenting.⁵² Philip Herbert, the parliamentary Earl of Pembroke and Montgomery, was guided through his career by ‘the Devil in man’s shape’, and died raving in his bed as the fiend came to collect his soul.⁵³

In these and other instances, it appears that popular traditions concerning the Devil were appropriated to the needs of partisans on both sides. This process was assisted, no doubt, by the outpouring of supernatural tales of all kinds that accompanied the wars. As James Sharpe has noted, the conflict boosted significantly ‘the literature of apparitions and wonders’.⁵⁴ It was unsurprising in this context that the concept of the

⁴³William Perkins made this point emphatically in *The Foundation of Christian Religion* (1591), which went through over 20 editions before 1660.

⁴⁴2 Corinthians 11:14.

⁴⁵*A Blow at the Root. Or, Some Observations Towards a Discovery of the Subtilties and Devices of Satan* (1650), pp. 8, 17.

⁴⁶J. Quarles, *Gods Love and Mans Unworthiness, Whereunto is Annexed A Dialogue Between the Soul & Satan* (1651), p. 93.

⁴⁷*A Blow at the Root*, p. 162.

⁴⁸Johnstone, pp. 248–9.

⁴⁹M. Stoye, *The Black Legend of Prince Rupert’s Dog: Witchcraft and Propaganda during the English Civil War* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2011), p. 145; *A Most Certain, Strange and True Discovery of a Witch* (1643).

⁵⁰S. Clarke, *A Mirrour or Looking-Glasse Both for Saints and Sinners*, 2nd ed. (1654), pp. 92–3.

⁵¹*The Rebells Warning-Piece* (1650), pp. 5–6.

⁵²Johnstone, p. 244.

⁵³*Rebells Warning-Piece*, p. 8.

⁵⁴J. Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness: Witchcraft in England, 1550–1750* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1996), p. 142.

demonic pact appeared in propaganda during the 1640s. The best documented example was the claim that Prince Rupert, the leader of the royalist cavalry, had made a bargain with the Devil in the shape of a dog. The emergence of this myth has been closely examined by Mark Stoye, who argues that it stemmed initially from the efforts of parliamentarian pamphleteers to associate Rupert with the Devil in the early months of the war, and was subsequently augmented by royalist satirists who mocked the credulity of their opponents. For Stoye, this response had the unplanned effect of solidifying the myth of Rupert's diabolism and may have contributed to the East Anglian witch trials of 1645–7. He traces the various elements of the story to themes that were circulating in cheap print by the early 1640s: the demonic familiars of witches, which sometimes took the shape of dogs, and Rupert's reputation as a 'hard man' magically impervious to gunshot. These combined in the legend that the prince had made a pact with a satanic dog that preserved him from harm in battle.⁵⁵

There are some notable similarities between this myth and the later tale of Cromwell's demonic pact. Both stories borrowed heavily from popular ideas about the Devil and placed his activity squarely in the physical world; both involved men famed (and feared) for their military triumphs; and both ascribed these triumphs to infernal assistance. Interestingly, Stoye suggests that the king's propagandists were initially less willing than their opponents to resort to accusations of witchcraft, including the pact. Indeed, it was their inclination to lampoon such beliefs that inadvertently propagated the myth. By the 1650s, however, royalist pamphleteers had learned the value of a more populist approach.⁵⁶ It seems reasonable to assume that the pressures of war led both sides to incorporate a popular version of the demonic pact in their arsenals of propaganda. The tale of Cromwell's bargain with the Devil was a late example of this process.

The parts from which this tale was assembled have still to be examined. Inevitably, one element was the providential significance of the date of Cromwell's death. By the mid-1650s, it seems that 3 September was associated with supernatural events. This is suggested by a pamphlet in 1654 describing a 'dreadful apparition' witnessed by soldiers at the garrison at Hull. The men saw two phantom armies, dressed in red, appear in a flaming night sky. It was noted that the wonder took place on 3 September, a day 'remarkable for two notable and famous victories' for the parliament.⁵⁷ While this charged date was appropriate for otherworldly happenings, other ingredients in the story were taken from popular literature. Here the most important source was the tale of the German sorcerer Johann Faust. Aspects of the Faust myth had been attached to Prince Rupert in the 1640s, with one newsbook referring to his 'necromantic dog, his Mephistopheles'.⁵⁸ In Cromwell's case, the borrowings were more fundamental. The account of his pact in *The History of Independency* had a narrative structure identical to Faust's: namely, a deal with the Devil for a fixed number of years, followed by its wretched consummation. In the earliest English version of the legend, published in 1592, the magician traded his

⁵⁵Stoye, *passim*. See pp. 18–21 for the concept of 'hard men'; pp. 37–9 for early portrayals of Rupert as demonic; chapter five for familiar spirits; and pp. 151–8 for the myth of Rupert's pact in the East Anglian trials.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, p. 167.

⁵⁷*More Warning Yet. Being a True Relation of a Strange and Most Dreadful Apparition* (1654), pp. 1–3.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, p. 135.

soul for 24 years of prosperity.⁵⁹ This term was repeated in Christopher Marlowe's play, and the broadside ballad *The Just Judgment of God Shew'd on Dr John Faustus*, which was apparently circulating in the first half of the seventeenth century.⁶⁰ The idea of a demonic pact for a fixed time recurred in popular accounts of other Faust-like figures. Around 1630, a ballad described how a woman in London exchanged her soul for a period of pleasure before the birth of her child. Like the German magician, to whom she was explicitly compared, she was seized by the Devil once her time was up.⁶¹ In a comic tale in 1631, the magician Peter Fabell escaped a similar fate by outwitting the Devil. Fabell had clearly learned from Faust's mistakes, as he negotiated a pact for which 'no time or term was set'.⁶²

The correspondence between the story of Cromwell's pact and the Faust legend extended beyond their narrative structure. Both tales culminated in a dreadful storm, signalling the Devil's return to claim the protagonist's soul. In the original English account of Faust's demise, 'there blew a mighty storm of wind against the house, as though it would have blown the foundation thereof out of his place'.⁶³ Marlowe's stage directions for the play indicated a crash of thunder in this climactic scene.⁶⁴ This tradition persisted into the 1650s. In Thomas Bromhall's compendium of demonic apparitions, *A Treatise of Specters* (1658), the sorcerer's death was accompanied by 'a huge noise, and the very shaking of the whole house'.⁶⁵ The idea of Satan raising storms was rooted in traditional culture and the biblical story of Job, so its incorporation in the tale was quite natural.⁶⁶ It appeared in other stories of Faust-like figures: in a ballad dated between 1647 and 1660, a profiteering farmer made a deal with the Devil only to have his crops and barns blasted by an unnatural tempest.⁶⁷ Even without the idea of a pact, the 'tempestuous weather' a few days before Cromwell's death could be portrayed as demonic.⁶⁸ Indeed, royalist poets and satirists linked it to his damnation as early as 1659: according to one, 'the Devil carries him away in a tempest, which makes the nurses squeak, and the children cry'.⁶⁹ When the Protector's career was presented as a Faustian tale in the following year, the storm that preceded his death provided a natural ingredient in the story.

Laurence Echard's expansion of the tale in the early eighteenth century also adopted familiar tropes. One notable example was the location of Cromwell's assignation. Again, the Faust legend offered a model. Faust met the demon Mephistopheles in a 'thick wood' in the English version of 1592.⁷⁰ When Marlowe's sorcerer resolved to master the art of conjuration, his companions advised him to do so in a 'solitary grove'.⁷¹ While English Protestants were reluctant to attach supernatural powers to physical sites, they

⁵⁹*The Historie of the Damnable Life, and Deserved Death of Dr John Faustus* (1592), p. 7.

⁶⁰C. Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus and Other Plays* (Oxford: OUP, 1995), pp. 147–8; *The Just Judgment of God Shew'd on Dr John Faustus* (c. 1640).

⁶¹*Strange and Wonderfull News of a Woman Which Lived Neer unto the Famous City of London* (c. 1630).

⁶²*The Life and Death of the Merry Devill of Edmonton* (1631), A4r.

⁶³*Historie of the Damnable Life*, p. 81.

⁶⁴Marlowe, pp. 182, 244.

⁶⁵Thomas Bromhall, *A Treatise of Specters* (1658), p. 111.

⁶⁶Job 1:19.

⁶⁷*A Warning-Piece for Ingroosers of Corne* (c. 1647–60).

⁶⁸T. M., p. 32.

⁶⁹*The Lord Henry Cromwells Speech in the House* (1659), p. 5. See also Richard Watson's *The Storme*, cited above.

⁷⁰*Historie of the Damnable Life*, p. 2.

⁷¹Marlowe, pp. 144, 191.

acknowledged that evil spirits could take advantage of remote places to tempt the unwary. In *The Combat Betweene Christ and the Divell Displayed* (1606), William Perkins observed that Satan ‘delights in desert and forlorn places’.⁷² The association between the Devil and woods was apparently strong in popular culture. In 1593 the Essex demonologist George Gifford noted, dismissively, the belief that spirits could speak to witches from inside hollow trees.⁷³ Men and women encountered the Devil in forests in cheap print throughout the seventeenth century. According to a chapbook in 1661, a Staffordshire man was waylaid in a wood by a stranger with gleaming eyes, who vanished ‘in a horrible flame of fire’.⁷⁴ The belief that conjurors could summon spirits in forests also persisted: a magical tract attached to the third edition of Reginald Scot’s *Discoverie of Witchcraft* in 1665 identified woods as suitable places for necromancy.⁷⁵ By placing Cromwell’s meeting with the Devil in a wood, Echard was following a long-established tradition.

Other aspects of the archdeacon’s account drew on familiar motifs. The parchment with which Cromwell supposedly sealed the pact was a common trope. Here, once more, the story of Faust contained a famous precedent. In the original version, the magician agreed a six-point written ‘obligation’ with the Devil; and a written contract appeared in subsequent retellings of the tale.⁷⁶ Similar undertakings featured in the East Anglian witch trials in the 1640s and, by the time of Echard’s *History of England*, the notorious trials in New England in 1692.⁷⁷ The Devil’s appearance as a man was also conventional. The folklorist Roy Palmer has suggested that this figure was based on William Guise, a Worcester clothworker who warned the parliamentary forces of a raid on their camp on 29 August; but it seems equally plausible that he was a familiar type for the prince of darkness.⁷⁸ In this case the story of Faust was one model among many: the Devil appeared often ‘in the shape of a man’ in ballads and chapbooks in the seventeenth century, and in allegations of witchcraft. In the confession of the Huntingdonshire witch Joan Wallis in 1646, for example, he appeared ‘like a man something ancient’.⁷⁹

Clearly, the original tale of Cromwell’s demonic pact, and its subsequent elaboration, relied substantially on older narratives – and the legend of Faust was the most important of these. This can be illustrated by one further addition to the myth. The pamphlet *A True and Faithful Narrative of Oliver Cromwell’s Compact with the Devil* suggested, via the document attributed to John Thurloe, that the Protector kept a casket in his bedchamber containing the bond he made with Satan. This was presumably an extrapolation from Echard’s previous account; but it also borrowed from Faust. The magician kept his written pact with the Devil ‘in store’ for the remainder of his life, and it ‘was found in his house after his most lamentable end’.⁸⁰ It is not necessary to imagine that the authors of such embellishments kept the story of Faust beside them:

⁷²W. Perkins, *The Combat Betweene Christ and the Divell Displayed* (1606), p. 6.

⁷³G. Gifford, *A Dialogue Concerning Witches and Witchcrafts* (1593), J4v-Kr.

⁷⁴*A Wonder in Stafford-shire* (1661), p. 6.

⁷⁵R. Scot, *The Discovery of Witchcraft*, 3rd ed. (1665), pp. 215–6.

⁷⁶*Historie of the Damnable Life*, 5–7; Marlowe, pp. 152, 199; *The Just Judgment*.

⁷⁷M. Gaskell, *Witchfinders: A Seventeenth-Century English Tragedy* (London: John Murray, 2005), p. 171; E. Reis, *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 131–5.

⁷⁸Palmer, pp. 37–8, 42.

⁷⁹J. Davenport, *The Witches of Huntingdon* (1646), p. 13.

⁸⁰*Historie of the Damnable Life*, pp. 6–7, 9.

rather, they drew on the common legacy of a widely disseminated narrative. *The Historie of the Damnable Life of ... Dr John Faustus* alone went through 12 editions up to 1710, alongside Marlowe's play and a much-reprinted ballad. The main ingredients of Cromwell's demonic adventure were familiar to all, and easily exploited as the legend developed.

The depiction of the Protector as a Faustian villain sheds an interesting sidelight on the history of the Devil in England. It indicates the persistence of ideas about his external manifestations and activities that were only loosely aligned to the Protestant emphasis on the interior experience of temptation. While the main source for the story of Cromwell's alleged pact belonged to the reformed tradition – albeit in German Lutheranism rather than Swiss or English Calvinism – it nonetheless emphasized the Devil's physical attributes rather than his unseen operations in the mind; and it drew attention to the unique folly of a wicked individual rather than the exposure of all fallen men and women to demonic wiles. The image of Cromwell as a signally depraved man meeting the Devil in person had an obvious appeal to polemicists in 1660. It is striking, however, that almost all the material details of this meeting appeared only in the early eighteenth century. It was then that a gloomy wood grew around the scene, the Devil's appearance was described, and a parchment was placed in Cromwell's hand. The late arrival of these elements suggests the continued vitality of the idea of a physical Devil.

This observation should be coupled with another. While Archdeacon Echard – or his unknown source – added most of the external components to the story, these were not presented as straightforwardly factual. On the contrary, Echard noted the improbable nature of his tale and offered it to readers as an entertaining 'diversion'.⁸¹ This contrasted with the spare and serious tone of the original account. It is tempting to see this as a small instance of the wider scepticism about the activity of spirits that characterized some intellectuals in the English Enlightenment. But while the archdeacon described Cromwell's supposed meeting with the fiend with an air of detached amusement, the attitude of his readers is harder to guess. It is made harder still by the reproduction of his text in a much shorter and cheaper pamphlet that framed the episode rather differently: as a 'true and faithful narrative' accompanied by documents that apparently proved its claims.⁸² Presumably, many readers came across the detailed version of Cromwell's assignation with Lucifer for the first time in this pamphlet. Some may have viewed it as mocking entertainment; but others may have taken it more seriously than Echard originally intended.

It is the legacy of Echard's text, and its less reputable spin-off, that 3 September 1651 is remembered in Worcester not only for the last battle of the English Civil Wars, but also a demonic pact in a secluded wood. There is a diabolical irony here. If Cromwell chose the date of the battle to express his faith in the guiding hand of God, his decision eventually contributed to a somewhat different outcome: the myth of his engagement with the Devil. Visitors to the city today can reflect on these things in one of the rooms in the Commandery, the beautiful museum that was once the headquarters of the royalist army. Here the Protector's death mask is suspended against a scarlet

⁸¹Echard, p. 712.

⁸²*True and Faithful Narrative*, title page.

backdrop. Below the cast, a panel recounts the story of his alleged meeting with the Devil in Perry Wood. The text describes the resonant coincidence of the date of Cromwell's death, and then asks the question that his enemies framed in the years that followed: 'Had he purchased victory by selling his soul?'

Disclosure statement

The author reported no potential conflict of interest.

Notes on contributor

Darren Oldridge is Professor of Early Modern History at the University of Worcester. His publications include *The Supernatural in Tudor and Stuart England* (London: Routledge, 2016) and *Strange Histories*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2018). He is currently writing a study of demonology in sixteenth and seventeenth-century England.