

AUGUSTINE'S TROPE OF THE CRUCIFIXION AS A TRAP FOR THE DEVIL  
AND ITS SURVIVAL IN THE ENGLISH MIDDLE AGES

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**Abstract:** This article revisits St Augustine's memorable trope of Christ's cross (or crucifixion) as a trap (*muscipula*) for the Devil. Its aim is to appraise the precise nature of what Augustine says, so as to assess more accurately the impact of his metaphor on writers and artists of later ages. I begin by closely examining the four sermons in which Augustine sets out his notion of the cross-as-*muscipula* in order to show how varied and complex is his treatment of this idea, then survey the evidence of its survival in a range of theological and other writings of the Middle Ages. I argue that the situation is rather less straightforward than it has been presented as being, and that the available evidence does not indicate widespread survival or strong continued influence, even though scattered references to the idea are indeed to be found. It is necessary, therefore, to be wary of assuming that Augustine's trope is the invariable source of references to mousetraps in general, and to the Devil's mousetrap in particular, that are found in the works of later ages.

**Keywords:** St Augustine, Christ's cross, crucifixion, redemption, *muscipula*, trap, Devil, Middle Ages, Middle English literature

The phrase *muscipula diaboli*, as used by St Augustine in a sermon of c. 396–97 to explain the dynamics of the redemption,<sup>1</sup> has in recent decades been cited by scholars in a variety of disciplines as the apparent source of images – visual as well as verbal – of metaphorical mousetraps in works from the Middle Ages and later. The phrase is typically translated as “the Devil’s mousetrap”, by which is meant – though this is not always apparent in the attendant discussions – “a mousetrap *for* the Devil,” rather than “a mousetrap *belonging to* the Devil” (the Latin construction employs an objective genitive, rather than a possessive genitive, to indicate the relationship between *muscipula* and *diabolus*). The distinction in sense is critical because, in broad terms, Augustine declares that the Devil was defeated through being trapped by Christ’s crucifixion – the cross itself being the trap (*muscipula*) for catching the Devil – and he develops this memorable idea in three later sermons by continuing to use the word *muscipula* in connection with the vanquishing of the Devil through the crucifixion, though not the collocation *muscipula diaboli* itself. For the scholars already mentioned, this striking notion of a “mousetrap” for catching the Devil casts light on a variety of later works, among them the account of Christ’s death in the Old Norse translation of the Gospel of Nicodemus, the *Niðrstigningar Saga*, in which the cross is said to fall onto the Devil, so that he is caught “like a mouse in a trap;”<sup>2</sup> Chaucer’s portrait of the Prioress, for her

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<sup>1</sup> Sermon 263, examined in detail below. The following abbreviations are used: AV = The Holy Bible, Authorized King James Version; CCCM = Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis (Turnhout 1966–); CCSL = Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina (Turnhout 1953–); CSEL = Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum (Vienna 1866–), <<http://www.csel.eu/>>; MED = *Middle English Dictionary*, ed. Hans Kurath et al. (Ann Arbor 1952–2001), online at <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>>; NPNF<sup>1</sup> / NPNF<sup>2</sup> = *A Select Library of the Christian Church: Nicene and Post Nicene-Fathers*, Series 1 / Series 2, edd. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA 2004); PL = *Patrologiæ Cursus Completus*, Series Latina, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne, 221 vols (Paris 1844–98); PLS = *Patrologiæ Cursus Completus*, Series Latina, Supplementum, ed. Adalbert Hamman, 5 vols (Paris 1958–74); STC = *A Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland and Ireland ... 1475–1640*, rev. W. A. Jackson, F. S. Ferguson and Katharine F. Pantzer, 3 vols (London, 2nd ed. 1976–91).

<sup>2</sup> James W. Marchand, “Leviathan and the Mousetrap in the *Niðrstigningarsaga*,” *Scandinavian Studies* 47 (1975) 328–38 (esp. 328, 333–34). This is one of three images of entrapment, the others being found in the similes ‘like a fish on a hook ... or a fox in a snare’; the translations are Marchand’s.

inclination to weep at the sight of a mouse caught in a trap;<sup>3</sup> the Annunciation Triptych (also known as the Mérode Altarpiece) in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, for its depiction of what appear to be two mousetraps in connection with Joseph's carpenter's workshop;<sup>4</sup> Hamlet's name for his short dramatic composition, "The Mousetrap," designed to "catch the conscience of the king;"<sup>5</sup> and even discussions of the redemption by colonial American theologians such as Jonathan Edwards and Increase Mather.<sup>6</sup>

It is the contention of the present article that matters are not, however, as straightforward or clear-cut as they have been presented as being, and that critics have tended to rest content with the repetition of a few short phrases from Augustine's sermons to verify their interpretations of later works with little or no regard for the complexities or nuances of the contexts in which those extracts occur. Indeed, in some cases it is not always evident that critics are strongly conversant with Augustine's writings in their original form, relying instead on secondary sources and partial translations in such a way that a number of misconceptions have entered their discussions, with attendant clouding of important issues. The upshot is that echoes of, if not direct allusions to, Augustine's image of a divine "mousetrap" for the vanquishing of the Devil have been found in some very unexpected quarters. For all these reasons I propose to re-examine in some detail the four homiletic passages in which reference is made to the sacrifice of Christ as a *muscipula* for the Devil so as to establish precisely what Augustine says and, equally important, how he says it. These passages occur in four separate sermons ranging over more than a quarter of a century of Augustine's thinking (c. 396/97 – c. 426) and, as I shall show, there are subtle, but important, differences between them in terms of structure, presentation, emphasis, and phraseology. Being aware of these differences is essential for assessing the relevance of Augustine's soteriological trope for references to mousetraps in the writings and other artworks of later ages.

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<sup>3</sup> Notably, Stephen P. Witte, "*Muscipula Diaboli* and Chaucer's Portrait of the Prioress," *Papers on Language and Literature* 13 (1977) 227–37; Emerson Brown, Jr., "Of Mice and Women: Thoughts on Chaucerian Allusion," in *Chaucer and the Craft of Fiction*, ed. Leigh A. Arrathoon (Rochester, MI 1986) 63–84, esp. 77–80; Richard Rex, "*The Sins of Madame Eglentyne*" and *Other Essays on Chaucer* (Cranbury, NJ 1995) 105–119, esp. 116–19.

<sup>4</sup> Meyer Shapiro, "'Muscipula Diaboli', the Symbolism of the Mérode Altarpiece," *The Art Bulletin* 27 (1945) 182–87. Other objects in Joseph's workshop are examined for their symbolic value by Charles Ilsley Minott, "The Theme of the Mérode Altarpiece," *The Art Bulletin* 51 (1969) 267–71. High-quality images of the altarpiece, now ascribed to the Workshop of Robert Campin, and dated c. 1427–32, can be viewed on the Metropolitan Museum's website: <[www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org)>.

<sup>5</sup> John Doeblner, "The Play within the Play: the *Muscipula Diaboli* in *Hamlet*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 23 (1972) 161–69.

<sup>6</sup> Linda Munk, *The Devil's Mousetrap: Redemption and Colonial American Literature* (New York and Oxford 1997) 3–4, 17–23.

Three issues to note before looking at Augustine’s sermons: the first is that the notion of a *muscipula diaboli* occurs widely, especially in pre-Hieronyman Patristic writings, in an entirely different sense from that outlined above, namely, as an image for temptation and sin. That is, it figures the trap(s) laid by the Devil for the garnering of human souls: the sort of trap that the youthful Augustine, yearning for worldly experience, hoped to find on his way to Carthage: *Veni Carthaginem ... quaerebam quid amarem, amans amare, et oderam securitatem et viam sine muscipulis* (“I came to Carthage, searching for something to love, loving to love, and hating security and a path free from traps”).<sup>7</sup> This *muscipula (diaboli)* as the trap of temptation to sin is decidedly *not* what Augustine is referring to in the sermons under discussion here; and yet, as I shall show, these sermons assume a familiarity with that idea for their full effect to be apparent.

It is also important to note that the word *muscipula* is frequently used by Augustine and other thinkers familiar with the pre-Hieronyman *Vetus Latina* scriptures, for in those texts *muscipula* is the standard translation of Septuagint παγίς (*pagis*) – a trap, but not a mousetrap.<sup>8</sup> Matters are different in the Vulgate, since Jerome avoids the word *muscipula* altogether, opting instead for *laqueus* (“noose,” “snare”) especially in his second redaction of the psalter, the influential Gallican Psalter, made around 389–392 from Greek and Latin sources.<sup>9</sup> In his subsequent translations of the Psalms and other books using Hebrew sources, Jerome continues to use *laqueus* in place of *muscipula*, together with a variety of other terms that he felt more accurately reflect *Hebraica veritas*, “the Hebrew truth,”<sup>10</sup> among them *decipula* “lure,” *fovea* “pit,” *rete* “net,” *sagena* “fishing net,” *scandalum* “stumbling block.” In consequence, the *muscipula diaboli* of early writers and others drawing on pre-Hieronyman terminology<sup>11</sup> became the better-known *laqueus diaboli* (“the snare of the Devil,” *sc.* the snare of sin) of later writers, with the concomitant result that *muscipula* draws attention to

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<sup>7</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, ed. James J. O’Donnell, 3 vols (Oxford 1992), 3.1.1 (I, 23). See also the Pseudo-Ignatian Epistle to the Philadelphians, III.1, which refers to διαβόλου παγίδος (translated as *muscipula diaboli*): *Patres Apostolici*, ed. Francis Xavier Funk, rev. Francis Diekamp, 2 vols (Tübingen, 1913), II, 172–73.

<sup>8</sup> See Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *Greek–English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (Oxford 1996) s.vv. πάγη, ἦ; πῆγνυμι, “trap;” metaph[orically] “trap, snare;” G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford 1961–68) s.v. παγίς, ἦ.

<sup>9</sup> These issues are discussed by Theresa Gross-Diaz, “The Latin Psalter,” in *The New Cambridge History of the Bible: From 600 to 1450*, ed. Richard Marsden and E. Ann Matter (Cambridge 2012) 428–29.

<sup>10</sup> Jerome uses the phrase in a letter (no. 112, §20) to Augustine: PL 22:929.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Chromatius of Aquileia (d. c. 406/7), *Tractatus XXX in Mathaeum VI, 19–21*, I.2 (CCSL 9A, 341, ll. 14–15); Pseudo-Chrysostom, also referred to as Chrysostomus Latinus, *Sermo 5*, in PLS, IV, 754; Quodvultdeus, bishop of Carthage (d. c. 453/4), *De accedentibus ad gratiam I*, III, 2–3 (CCSL 60, 442); *De symbolo*, I.i.10 (CCSL 60, 306).

itself today, through its unfamiliarity to anyone accustomed to the Vulgate, in a way that would not have obtained in Augustine's day.

Finally, there is the related issue of precisely what Augustine means by the word *muscipula* – a topic that I have already dealt with elsewhere, and so shall not be considering further here.<sup>12</sup> Suffice it to say briefly that it seems to me very unlikely that Augustine intended *muscipula* to be understood as “mousetrap.” Although the word indubitably denotes a mousetrap in Classical Latin, as is indicated by the elements from which the compound derives (*mus* “mouse” + *capere* “to catch”),<sup>13</sup> *muscipula* appears to have become more broad-ranging in meaning in the 4th-century North African demotic found in the *Vetus Latina* scriptures used by Augustine. As Augustine's own writings show, he frequently identifies *muscipula* with the traps of hunters and fowlers,<sup>14</sup> and nowhere does he associate the word with mice or mousers, rats or rat-catchers.<sup>15</sup> For this reason, and to avoid confusion, I propose to use the Latin word *muscipula* itself wherever possible, and to translate it as “trap” whenever a translation is needed. Only where there is compelling evidence that the restricted sense of “mousetrap” is required will that construction be used.

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<sup>12</sup> “St Augustine and the Devil's ‘Mousetrap’,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 68 (2014) 409–15.

<sup>13</sup> See *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, ed. P. G. W. Glare, 2 vols (Oxford 1982), s.v. *muscipulum* ~i n. The word was originally either neuter or feminine in gender, but in later usage the feminine form came to predominate, as can be seen from citations in the *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* (Leipzig 1900–), VIII, 1697–98, s.v. *muscipula*, -ae f. et *muscipulum*, -i n.

<sup>14</sup> For example, Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, Ps. 9, §§15, 28; Ps. 30, Enn. 1, §5; Ps. 34, Sermo 1, §§10, 11; Ps. 56, §14; Ps. 63, §10; Ps. 65, §16; Ps. 68, §7; Ps. 90, §4; Ps. 123, §12; Ps. 139, §§8, 9; Ps. 140, §23; Ps. 141, §9 (CCSL 38.66–67, 71, 187, 306–8; CCSL 39.704, 813, 850, 922–23, 1256; CCSL 40.1833, 2016–17, 2042–43, 2051–53). *Contra Adimantum*, §26 (CSEL 25, 184); *In Iohannis evangelium tractatus*, Tractatus 1, §14, ll. 1–5 (CCSL 36, 8). See further the remarks in the *Augustinus-Lexikon*, ed. Robert Dodaro, Cornelius Mayer, Christof Müller et al. (Basel and Stuttgart 1986–), s.v. *Muscipula* (IV, 123).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. the emphasis given to the notion of the moustrap by Dallas G. Denery II, *The Devil Wins: A History of Lying from the Garden of Eden to the Enlightenment* (Princeton NJ and Woodstock 2015) 67–76, and see also the elaborate interpretations offered by Jacques Berchtold, *Des rats et des ratières: Anamorphoses d'un champ métaphorique de saint Augustin à Jean Racine* (Geneva 1992) 21–56. I am not convinced by Berchtold's hypothesis that *muscipula* consititutes a near-anagram (“anagramme presque parfaite”) of *speculum*, from which Augustine creates an “herméneutique du mystère” in the image of the *ratière* (a translation Berchtold prefers to *souricière*).

### **The Sermons: The Crucifixion as a Trap for the Devil (Sermons 263, 265D, 134, 130)**

In spite of their differences, all four sermons adumbrated below deal with the well-established notion that Christ's death defeated the Devil in order to free humankind from sin and death: a liberation that makes possible the atonement, the reconciliation of humanity with God.

Elaborating on how this fits into Augustine's overall soteriological thought is a task well beyond the scope of this essay, not only because Augustine formulated no systematic theory of the redemption, but also because of the sheer range and richness of his writings on the subject, and the diversity of modern critical approaches to his thinking.<sup>16</sup> For this reason I shall restrict myself to observing that, broadly, these sermons accord with many ideas that Augustine expresses elsewhere, though with a certain added color befitting homiletic delivery to a relatively unsophisticated audience.

Within these sermons, Augustine characterizes the Devil as the commander of death (*praepositus mortis*), who exults in that power to the extent that he fails to perceive Christ's divinity cloaked in his mortality. However, when the Devil brings about the death of the innocent Christ, he overreaches himself, exceeds the authority granted him by God through the sin of Adam and Eve, and consequently loses his power over humanity.<sup>17</sup> In these respects, Augustine's thinking fits into the general pattern of the so-called "abuse-of-power theory" in Patristic thinking, which explains how the Devil is manoeuvred by the Godhead into forfeiting his dominion over this world in the form of death: the Incarnation deceives him into thinking that the miracle-working Christ is merely an exceptional mortal creature, and so an uncommonly desirable quarry to claim in death. The climax of this stratagem is presented by different thinkers in various ways, one of them being the metaphor of a fish drawn to a baited hook, as it is here expressed by Pope Gregory the Great (d. 604):

Dominus itaque noster ad humani generis redemptionem veniens, velut quemdam de se in necem diaboli hamum fecit. Assumpsit enim corpus, ut in eo Behemoth iste quasi escam suam mortem carnis appeteret. ... In

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<sup>16</sup> The topic is usefully surveyed by Joanne McWilliam, "The Study of Augustine's Christology in the Twentieth Century," in Joanne McWilliam (ed.), *Augustine: From Rhetor to Theologian* (Waterloo, Ontario 1992) 183–206.

<sup>17</sup> See Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 13.11–14 (PL 42:1025–28): *Quadam justitia Dei in potestatem diaboli traditum est genus humanum ... [cap. 12] Non autem diabolus potentia Dei, sed justitia superandus fuit. [cap. 13] ... Quae est igitur justitia, qua victus est diabolus? Quae, nisi justitia Jesu Christi? Et quomodo victus est? Quia cum in eo nihil morte dignum inveniret, occidet eum tamen. [cap. 14].* ('By the justice of God in some sense, the human race was delivered into the power of the devil; ... But the devil was to be overcome, not by the power of God, but by His righteousness. ... What, then, is the righteousness by which the devil was conquered? What, except the righteousness of Jesus Christ? And how was he conquered? Because, when he found in Him nothing worthy of death, yet he slew Him.') Translation from NPNF<sup>1</sup>, III: *Augustin: On the Holy Trinity, Doctrinal Treatises, Moral Treatises*, 175–77.

hamo ergo eius incarnationis captus est, quia dum in illo appetit escam corporis, transfixus est aculeo divinitatis.<sup>18</sup>

(And so our Lord, coming for the redemption of the human race, made as it were a type of hook of himself for the death of the Devil. For he assumed a body so that in this that Behemoth would strive for the death of the flesh as if it were his bait. . . . He [the Devil] was, accordingly, caught in the hook of his [Christ's] incarnation because, while he pursued in him the bait of the body, he was pierced through by the barb of his divinity.)<sup>19</sup>

In other words, the Devil was “caught” by Christ’s divinity (a hook) that was baited with his mortality (flesh), an idea that can be traced back to *The Great Catechism* of Gregory of Nyssa (d. c. 395).<sup>20</sup>

In Augustine’s formulation of an equivalent notion, the divine subterfuge culminates in a trap (*muscipula*), identified variously as Christ’s cross (Sermons 263, 265D, 130) and Christ’s mortal flesh (*carnem mortalem*, Sermon 134). As Augustine figures the event, the Devil is deceived by Christ’s mortality (also expressed as his blood, *sanguis*, or his flesh, *caro*), as if by bait (*esca*), and so lured into a trap (*muscipula*) prepared specifically for him.<sup>21</sup> As Augustine goes on to explain, by claiming power over Christ in death the Devil was, however, merely making possible the miracle of the resurrection, which brought about his own downfall and concomitantly the redemption of mankind. This idea is expressed in several ways in the sermons that I examine below: sermons that are usefully read in the order in which they are believed to have been written. For we find Augustine not only modifying his

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<sup>18</sup> Gregory the Great, *Moralia (Moralium libri sive expositio in librum beati Job)*, XXXIII, cap. 7 (PL 76.680–81). In quoting Latin passages I have, for the sake of consistency, regularized the use of *i/j* and *u/v*.

<sup>19</sup> Except where otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

<sup>20</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Oratio catechetica magna*, cap. 24 (NPNF<sup>2</sup>, V: *Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic Treatises, Etc.*, 494). The idea is repeated many times by, among others, John of Damascus (d. 754), *De Fide orthodoxa*, III, cap. 27 (NPNF<sup>2</sup>, IX: *Hilary of Poitiers, John of Damascus 71–72*). For a detailed study of Gregory’s trope and related ideas, see Nicholas P. Conostas, “The Last Temptation of Satan: Divine Deception in Greek Patristic Interpretations of the Passion Narrative,” *The Harvard Theological Review* 97 (2004) 139–63.

<sup>21</sup> See the useful comments of Suzanne Poque, *Le langage symbolique dans la prédication d’Augustin d’Hippone: Images héroïques*, 2 vols (Paris 1984), I, 21–28. Also, Werner von Koppenfels, *Esca et Hamus: Beitrag zu enier historischen Liebesmetaphorik* (Munich 1973) 39–43.

idea of the Devil being trapped by Christ's death, but also amplifying and even simplifying it over time.<sup>22</sup>

The earliest, and in many ways the most ambitious and sophisticated in its exposition of the crucifixion – and the cross specifically – as a trap for the Devil, is **Sermon 263**, “On the Ascension”, which is believed to have been composed around 396–97.<sup>23</sup> Augustine begins by eulogizing Christ's resurrection and ascension as the fulfilment of his glorification (*Glorificatio Domini nostri Jesu Christi resurgendo et ascendendo completa est*),<sup>24</sup> then progressively introduces the idea that Christ's death on the cross was the final confrontation between two antagonists, which would see the apparent victor overthrown in his moment of triumph. Augustine leads up to this moment by declaring that Christ ransomed humankind by his crucifixion (*Pretium nostrum dedit, cum penderet in ligno*), and that his identity was obscured so that he could be judged and so, of course, be put to death (*Occultum enim oportebat eum venire, ut judicaretur*). Augustine then expatiates with some relish on the irony of the Devil's apparent triumph in bringing about Christ's death, explicitly contrasting the power the Devil gained by leading astray the first man, Adam, with the defeat he suffers as a result of enforcing that power over Christ, the antitype of Adam: in his defeat, the Devil loses Adam (*sc. humankind*) from his snare (*Tropæo suo diabolus victus est. Exsultavit enim diabolus, quando primum hominem seducendo dejecit in mortem. Seducendo primum hominem, occidit: occidendo novissimum, primum de laqueis perdidit.*) At this point, the sermon introduces the distinctively Augustinian figure of Christ's cross as a trap (*muscipula*) for the Devil in a passage full of resonant imagery.

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<sup>22</sup> For more detailed expositions of the major Patristic theses concerning the redemption, see Stanislas Lyonnet and Léopold Sabourin, *Sin, Redemption, and Sacrifice: A Biblical and Patristic Study* (Rome 1998) 203–16; Louis Richard, *La Mystère de la rédemption* (Tournai 1959), translated as *The Mystery of the Redemption* by Joseph Horn (Baltimore and Dublin 1959) 141–74; Jean Rivière, *Le Dogme de la rédemption: essai d'étude historique*, 2nd ed. (Paris 1905), translated as *The Doctrine of the Atonement* by Luigi Cappadelta, 2 vols (London 1909), II, 136–57; Jean Rivière, *Le Dogme de la rédemption chez Saint Augustin* (Paris 1933), esp. 37–74 (‘Le “droit” du démon’), 127–154 (‘Application de la “justice”: l’abus de pouvoir’), 179–206 (‘Le sacrifice du Christ et le démon: son efficacité’); J. A. MacCulloch, *The Harrowing of Hell: A Comparative Study of an Early Christian Doctrine* (Edinburgh 1930) 199–216. The major issues are usefully summarized by C. W. Marx, *The Devil's Rights and the Redemption in the Literature of Medieval England* (Cambridge 1995) 7–17.

<sup>23</sup> The standard work on the classification and dating of Augustine's sermons is Pierre-Patrick Verbraken, *Études critiques sur les sermons authentiques de saint Augustin*, Instrumenta Patristica 12 (The Hague 1976). Alternative dates for particular sermons are discussed where appropriate below.

<sup>24</sup> *Sermo CCLXIII*, §1 (PL 38:1209–10).



Exsultavit diabolus quando mortuus est Christus, et ipsa morte Christi est diabolus victus: tanquam in muscipula escam accepit. Gaudebat ad mortem, quasi praepositus mortis. Ad quod gaudebat, inde illi tensus est. Muscipula diaboli, crux Domini: esca qua caperetur, mors Domini. Et ecce surrexit Dominus noster Jesus Christus. Ubi est mors quae pependit in ligno?<sup>25</sup>

(The Devil exulted when Christ died, and by this same death of Christ the Devil was conquered: as if he took the bait in a trap. He was rejoicing at the death, as if he were the commander of death. That at which he rejoiced was there stretched for him. A trap for the Devil – the cross of the Lord: the bait with which he was to be caught, the death of the Lord. And behold, our Lord Jesus Christ rose again. Where is the death that hung on the wood [i.e. the cross]?)<sup>26</sup>

Comparing this passage with a tractate such as the *De Trinitate* is to highlight its hortatory and homiletic qualities, its rhetorical density, and its propensity to expound doctrine by means of narrative, even dramatic, techniques, many of which qualities are apparent in its most noteworthy and most frequently cited feature: the gnomic statement *Muscipula diaboli, crux Domini*, which, in order to maintain a sense of the Latin syntax, I have rendered as “A trap for the Devil – the cross of the Lord”. This utterance is in many ways the rhetorical highlight of the passage and one that is impossible to render into idiomatic English without losing many of its distinctive qualities. These include: (i) its symmetrical structure, with its two constituent phrases balancing one another to indicate a close relationship between their respective referents (*muscipula – crux*); (ii) the tropes of homeoteleuton and, more specifically, homeoptoton, found in the repetition of identical forms of the genitive case in the two correlated phrases (*diaboli – Domini*); (iii) an inversion of normal word order, so that the predicate precedes the subject in order to foreground the phrase *muscipula diaboli*, which the listener subsequently realizes is being used in an unexpectedly new sense. By this I mean that Augustine’s audience would have been familiar with the much-repeated notion of the *muscipula diaboli* as a trap laid by the Devil for capturing human souls; but in this sermon the correlating phrase *crux Domini* reveals that *muscipula* is here being used to indicate a trap laid for the Devil. In other words, the genitive inflection of *diaboli* in *muscipula diaboli* would have been customarily understood as a possessive genitive, but in this sermon it is being made to operate unexpectedly as an objective genitive to yield the sense “The Lord’s cross was a trap for the Devil”. What makes this formulation even more interesting is that it is the only example in Augustine’s writings where *muscipula diaboli* is used in this way; elsewhere the phrase is always to be understood in its commonplace formulation as referring to a *muscipula* that belongs to, and is laid by, the Devil. Augustine can accordingly be seen,

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. (PL 38:1210).

<sup>26</sup> Translation mine. Here, as elsewhere, I have often deliberately eschewed fluent, idiomatic modern English in order to give as close a sense of the Latin as possible.

not only to be introducing a novel soteriological idea – that Christ’s cross was a trap for the Devil – but to be doing so in a memorable, perhaps a radical, way: by taking a familiar phrase and redefining it – reimagining it – in a manner that must have had a startling effect on its first hearers. Its force is to emphasize the complete overthrow of everything that had heretofore pertained: by claiming Christ in death, the Devil loses his power in death; and the device for which he has been most feared (the *muscipula* of temptation and sin) has been destroyed by his stepping into a *muscipula* of a divine nature.

It will be seen that the remainder of this sentence – *esca qua caperetur, mors Domini* – is structured in much the same way. Here, too, we find two symmetrical phrases syntactically inverted so that the predicate, containing a metaphor (*esca* “bait”), precedes the subject, its literal referent, Christ’s death. Once again, the effect is to highlight a singular soteriological idea – namely, that the possibility of bringing about Christ’s death acted for the Devil like bait in a trap – thereby drawing attention to Augustine’s reading in such a way as to make it more memorable.

One further point that needs to be made about the passage examined above is that it survived into later ages slightly reworded. One formulation occurs in an early Cistercian breviary of the twelfth century, another in a pseudo-Augustinian sermon on the Ascension, both of which include the pivotal statement, somewhat prosaically rephrased by the inclusion of finite verbs: *Muscipula diaboli crux Christi est: esca qua caperetur, caro Domini fuit.*<sup>27</sup> The gist of Augustine’s idea is preserved here, though the sophistication of his presentation is not.

**Sermon 265D**, also “On the Ascension”, is believed to have been composed some two decades later, in 417–18, an interval that of itself poses questions about the centrality of the *crux–muscipula* (the cross-as-trap) trope in Augustine’s thinking.<sup>28</sup> Be that as it may, Augustine here explains his ideas about the *crux–muscipula* rather more expansively than he did in the earlier sermon, and also gives more space to characterising the Devil (the “commander of death” in Sermon 263 above) in terms of his uncontrollable desire to wield power through death, a proclivity that can accordingly be understood as contributing directly to his downfall. The main principles expressed in this sermon are not much different from what we have seen before: Christ’s mortality ensures his death on the cross, and so constitutes the bait that draws the Devil to claim him as his victim; this then allows Christ’s resurrection to take place, and with it the conquest of death and of the Devil.

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<sup>27</sup> Thus Sermo XLIV, *De Ascensione Domini*, §3, in *Patrum Nova Bibliotheca I: Sancti Augustini novos ex codibus vaticanis sermones*, ed. Angelo Mai (Rome 1852) 88–90 (p. 89). See also *The Primitive Cistercian Breviary*, ed. Chrysogonus Waddell, Spicilegium Friburgense 44 (Fribourg 2007) 316–17 (§VIII).

<sup>28</sup> I use the phrase *crux–muscipula*, which I have synthesized from Augustine’s various formulations in the sermons under discussion here, in order to avoid the potential for ambiguity implicit in the construction *muscipula diaboli*.

A major difference with Sermon 263 is to be found, however, in Augustine's emphasis on the corporeality of Christ, introduced by an explicit rejection of the Manichaeian heresy that denies this doctrine and hence that of the resurrection also (*Manichaei dominum Christum spiritum dicunt fuisse, non corpus, totumque illud in figura corporis ...*).<sup>29</sup> Hence, when Augustine turns to the issue of Christ's sacrifice cancelling humanity's "debt" and deleting the "bond of sin," he focuses on the oblation of Christ's flesh and blood, rather than the more abstract concept of his mortality (*Attulit Christus in carne mortali sanguinem fundendum, quo deleteretur chirographum peccatorum*).<sup>30</sup> This emphasis continues into the explanation of how the Devil is overcome, which begins with a rhetorical question to Augustine's congregants:

Quid ergo miraris? Certe vita est Christus: quare mortua est vita? Nec anima mortua est, nec Verbum mortuum est: caro mortua est, ut in ea mors moreretur [*sic*]. Mortem passus, mortem occidit: ad leonem escam in laqueo posuit. Piscis si nihil vellet devorare, in hamo non caperetur. Mortis avidus diabolus fuit, mortis avarus diabolus fuit. Crux Christi muscipula fuit: mors Christi, immo caro mortalis Christi tamquam esca in muscipula fuit. Venit, hausit et captus est. Ecce resurrexit Christus: mors ubi est?<sup>31</sup>

(So why are you astonished? Certainly, Christ is life; wherefore did life die? Neither did the soul die, nor did the Word die: the flesh died so that through it death might die. Having suffered death, he killed death: he placed bait [*escam*] in a snare [*laqueo*] for the lion. If a fish should wish to devour nothing, it would not be caught by a hook [*hamo*]. The Devil was longing for death, the Devil was greedy for death. The cross of Christ was a trap [*muscipula*]: the death of Christ or, more particularly, the mortal flesh of Christ was like the bait [*esca*] in a trap [*muscipula*].<sup>32</sup> He [the Devil] came, he swallowed, and was caught. Behold, Christ rose again: where then is death?)

Aside from an obvious echo of St Paul's erotema *Ubi est mors victoria tua, ubi est mors stimulus tuus?* (1 Cor. 15.55),<sup>33</sup> this passage is noteworthy for replacing the epigrammatic,

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<sup>29</sup> Sermo 265D §1, in Dom Germain Morin (ed.), *Sancti Augustini Sermones post Maurinos reperti*, Miscellanea Agostiniana 1 (Rome 1930) 659–664, at 659.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 661 (§4).

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 662 (§5).

<sup>32</sup> It should be remembered that the primary sense of *esca* is 'food', with 'bait' being a particularized, transferred sense that can be understood both literally and metaphorically. Both senses are apparent in Augustine's statement, for the Devil feeds greedily on death.

<sup>33</sup> AV: 'O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?'. All quotations from the Vulgate are taken from *Biblia sacra iuxta Vulgatam versionem*, ed. Robert Weber, 2 vols (Stuttgart 1969), with punctuation added by myself.

verbless utterance *Muscipula diaboli, crux Domini* of Sermon 263 with a far more prosaic statement that includes a finite verb: *Crux Domini muscipula fuit*. Similarly, the complementary notion, highly condensed in Sermon 263, that Christ's death was the bait in the trap (*esca qua caperetur, mors Domini*), is here expanded into a discursive simile that is fully self-explanatory: *mors Christi ... tamquam esca in muscipula fuit*. It is tempting to wonder whether those original gnomic utterances of Sermon 263, which have received so much modern scholarly attention, were perhaps too enigmatic for Augustine's congregants, prompting him to explain his ideas more simply in later iterations.<sup>34</sup> This may account also for the more concrete identification of the bait with Christ's mortal flesh (*caro mortalis*), which also serves to reinforce a recurring theme in the sermon as a whole, namely, the reality of Christ's physicality: the corporeality of him who was simultaneously Word, soul and flesh (*Verbum, anima et caro*).<sup>35</sup>

It is also interesting to see how Augustine leads up to his own distinctive metaphor of the *crux-muscipula* with two other images of the Devil being caught by baited devices, first as a lion – a common identification in Patristic writings, drawing on 1 Peter 5.8, Psalm 9.29 and Amos 3.4 – then as a fish, an understated echo of Gregory of Nyssa's non-scriptural trope referred to above. It is as if Augustine is acknowledging that the general notion of the Devil being caught in a trap by the crucifixion is not new, before developing it further in his own inimitable way.

The third Augustinian homily that refers to Christ's death on the cross as a *muscipula* is **Sermon 134**, probably also composed around 417, but possibly as late as 420.<sup>36</sup> This sermon is built upon John 8.31–34, Christ's assurance to his followers that he brings freedom from sin: verses that are perhaps best known by the words, "And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (AV, John 8.32). The freedom that concerns Augustine is, of course, freedom from sin and death, and he introduces the notion of falling into the servitude of sin through a comparison with a freeman being captured by barbarians (*Ingenuus est aliquis captivatus a barbaris, ex ingenio factus est servus*).<sup>37</sup> As an image of the Devil, this marks a notable shift in emphasis, because it indicates that the Devil is to be considered as a captor (*captivator*, §6) who has gained his rights of possession through violence. He may still be considered as wielding power by right, as in Sermon 263 above, but those rights are

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. Augustine's declaration, in his anti-Manichean commentary on Genesis, that he was expressly writing for a lay audience that may not have been able to follow the elevated language and complex theological arguments typical of his earlier work on Manichean issues: *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* I.I.1 (CSEL 91, 67).

<sup>35</sup> *Sermo* 265D, §7 (p. 663).

<sup>36</sup> See Verbraken, *Études critiques* (n. 23 above) 86. A date of c. 417 is proposed by Edmund Hill (trans.), *The Works of Saint Augustine: Sermons III/4 (94A–147A) on the New Testament* (New York 1992) 341.

<sup>37</sup> *Sermo* CXXXIV, §3 (PL 38:742–46, at 744).

explicitly oppressive in origin and nature. Indeed, there is a manifestly different tone to this sermon, even a dramatic quality, as Augustine apostrophizes variously his audience, Christ, and the Devil himself.

Veni, Domine; veni, Redemptor, veni: agnoscat te captivus, fugiat te captivator; tu esto mihi liberator. Ille me perditum invenit, in quo diabolus nihil quod caro agit invenit. Invenit in illo carnem princeps huius sæculi, invenit: et qualem carnem? Mortalem, quam possit tenere, quam possit crucifigere, quam possit occidere. Erras, deceptor, non fallitur Redemptor: erras. Vides in Domino carnem mortalem, non est caro peccati: similitudo est carnis peccati.<sup>38</sup>

(Come, Lord, come Redeemer, come! Let the captive acknowledge you, the captor flee from you; may you be my liberator! He in whom the Devil found nothing that flesh engendered, found me when I was lost. The prince of this age found flesh in him – yes, he found it: and what sort of flesh? Mortal [flesh], which he was able to hold, which he could crucify, which he was able to kill. You err, deceiver; the Redeemer is not mistaken; you err! You see in the Lord mortal flesh, [but] it is not the flesh of sin: it is [merely] the semblance of the flesh of sin.)

It is within this context that Augustine presents his image of the Devil falling into a trap, though with an important modification from what we have seen before. In this sermon, it is not the cross that is the Devil's *muscipula*, but Christ's mortal flesh – which in Sermon 265D constitutes the bait in the trap – and Augustine makes no mention here of the separate notion of bait. In the relevant passage, quoted here, it will be seen that Augustine is not ostensibly explaining the significance of the resurrection to his congregants, and not even addressing them directly. Rather, he is apostrophizing the Devil, first with a number of accusations, and then with a series of triumphant rhetorical questions:

Veritas loquitur: *Veniet princeps mundi huius, et in me nihil inveniet.*  
[...] Decepisti innocentes, fecisti nocentes. Occidisti innocentem; peremisti quem non debebas. Redde quod tenebas. Quid ergo ad horam exultasti, quia invenisti in Christo carnem mortalem? Muscipula tua erat: unde laetatus es, inde captus es. Ubi te exultasti aliquid invenisse, inde nunc doles quod possederas perdidisse.<sup>39</sup>

(Truth says: “The prince of this world will come, and in me he will find nothing.” [John 14.30] You deceived the innocent, made them guilty. You killed the innocent one; you wasted one that you had no business with. Surrender what you were holding! Why then did you exult at that hour? – because you found in Christ mortal flesh? It was your trap

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., §4 (PL 38:744).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., §6 (PL 38:745).

[*muscipula tua*]: whence you rejoiced, thence were you captured. Where you exulted to have found something, thence you now bewail the loss of what you had possessed.)

In other words, “The very source of your delight was your ruin!”, a sentiment that gives this passage an entirely different tone from what we have seen so far. The notion of Christ’s sacrifice as a trap for the Devil is here expressed in exultant terms; even, perhaps, with a note of relish over an enemy drawn to his destruction. The allegory is also, as I have already indicated, somewhat simplified in dispensing with the differentiation between trap and bait made elsewhere: implicitly, it would seem, Christ’s mortal flesh – which, as we have seen, is in reality only *similitudo ... carnis peccati* (cf. Romans 8.3) – serves as the amalgamation of trap and bait for defeating the Devil, the “barbarian” who has captured humanity and subjected it to the servitude of sin.

There is also another dimension to this extract that becomes apparent only when seen in the light of what precedes it, and that is a long discussion of the implications of Paul’s description of Christ as *eum qui non noverat peccatum pro nobis peccatum fecit*, “him who did not know sin, [God] made to be sin for us” (2 Cor. 5.21).<sup>40</sup> Augustine refers to Old Testament oblations to argue that sacrifices made in expiation for sins are themselves called sins (*peccata dicta sunt sacrificia pro peccatis*), and that the innocent victim offered in atonement for sin was itself (or himself) also referred to as “sin” (*ipsa victima quae offerebatur pro peccato, peccatum nominabatur*).<sup>41</sup> So too with Christ, who was made a sacrifice for sin (*sacrificium pro peccato factus est*): though innocent of sin he was made to become sin so that, with his death, *Peccatum oblatum est, et deletum est peccatum. Fusus est sanguis Redemptoris, et deleta est cautio debitoris* (“Sin was offered, and sin was effaced. The blood of the Redeemer was poured out, and the bond of the debtor was cancelled”).<sup>42</sup> This is not, of course, to say that Christ was in any sense guilty of sin, for he himself declares that the Devil will find none in him (*in me nihil inveniet*: John 14.30). It means, rather, that the Devil mistakenly believed Christ’s death to be like that of every other sinful human being, and so exulted in it, only to fall into a trap that deprived him of his power.

This trap, as we have already seen in Augustine’s apostrophizing of the Devil, is *muscipula tua* (“your trap”), a phrase that neatly encapsulates the poetic justice of the reversal that takes place in the entrapment of the Devil. For up to that moment the Devil, the “prince of this world”, had been the arch-deceiver, the principal layer of the *muscipula* of sin that leads to death. By claiming power over Christ in death, however, the Devil falls into a *muscipula* that

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<sup>40</sup> AV: “For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin.”

<sup>41</sup> Cf. St Hilary of Poitiers (d. c. 368), who quotes Isaiah 53.4–5, 2 Cor. 5.21 and Romans 8.3 when exploring this idea: *Missus namque est in peccati carnis similitudine; portans quidem in carne peccata, sed nostra*. (“For he was sent in the guise of the flesh of sin; bearing sin indeed in the flesh, but ours.”) *De Trinitate*, X, §47 (PL 10:380–81).

<sup>42</sup> PL 38:745.

is “his” (“yours” in terms of the apostrophe) in every sense: that is, it is a *muscipula* designed to entrap him specifically, but it is also, I suggest, implicitly the *muscipula* that he has hitherto wielded over humankind. In other words, *muscipula tua* comprehends both senses of the phrase *muscipula diaboli* that we have already encountered: “a trap for the Devil” (with objective genitive) and “a trap of the Devil” (with possessive genitive). And what this means is that the Devil effectively became his own victim by falling into what was essentially his own trap, *quod possederas* (“what you had possessed”).

Finally, **Sermon 130**, which contains evidence of having been composed after 426,<sup>43</sup> takes as its text the account of Christ’s miraculous transformation of the five loaves and two fishes to feed the multitude at Bethsaida (John 6.5–14). This sermon is rich in exegetical metaphors, with Augustine first construing the bread as an image of Christ: *Ipse est panis, qui de coelo descendit: sed panis qui reficit, et non deficit; panis qui sumi potest, consumi non potest* (“He is the bread that descended from heaven, but a bread that restores and never diminishes, which can be eaten, but never eaten up.”<sup>44</sup> Christ is then presented as a trader (*mercator*), with whom Augustine pleads “buy us” (*O bone Mercator, eme nos*), since we are both his creatures and his slaves, whom he made and whom he has redeemed: *Servi tui sumus, creatura tua sumus: fecisti nos, redemisti nos*.

These ideas lead up to Augustine’s reflections on the redemption, which he introduces by describing Adam as having been seduced by the Devil, “the prince of this age” (*princeps huius saeculi*),<sup>45</sup> and humankind as having been on the point of becoming his home-born slaves (*vernaculi* – that is, slaves that are the children of slaves, and so born into slavery). But Christ turned the tables on the Devil, the deceiver (*deceptor*), by luring him into a trap (*muscipulam*) baited with his own blood (*sanguis*):

Incidimus enim in principem huius saeculi, qui seduxit Adam et servum fecit, et coepit nos tanquam vernaculos possidere. Sed venit Redemptor, et victus est deceptor. Et quid fecit Redemptor noster captivatori nostro? Ad pretium nostrum tetendit muscipulam crucem suam: posuit ibi quasi escam sanguinem suum. Ille autem potuit sanguinem istum fundere, non meruit bibere. ... Ille quippe sanguinem suum ad hoc fudit, ut peccata nostra deleret.<sup>46</sup>

(For we have fallen under the prince of this age, who seduced Adam and made him a slave, and began to possess us as his home-born slaves. But the Redeemer came, and the deceiver was defeated. And what did our Redeemer do to our captor? To ransom us, he set his cross as a trap [*muscipulam*]: he placed his blood there as bait [*escam*]. Although he

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<sup>43</sup> Edmund Hill, *Sermons, III/4* (note 36 above) 314, n. 1; 315, n. 16.

<sup>44</sup> *Sermo CXXX*, § 2 (PL 38:726).

<sup>45</sup> Cf. John 14.30: *princeps mundi huius*, “the prince of this world.”

<sup>46</sup> PL 38:726.

[the Devil] had the power to shed this blood, he did not deserve [i.e. merit the right] to drink it. . . . As you see, he [Christ] shed his blood for this purpose: to obliterate our sins.)

Once again, this passage has many distinctive features of its own. In the first place, the metaphor of the *muscipula* and its bait are once again more plainly set out than in Sermon 263, and Augustine tones down his rhetorical flourishes to declare in the most straightforward terms that Christ set his cross as a trap (*tetendit muscipulam crucem suam*) and baited it with his blood (*sanguinem suum*), rather than with his flesh (*caro*) as in Sermon 265D above. Also noteworthy is the way that Augustine defines the nature of Christ's sacrifice as the paying of a ransom (*ad pretium*), and his depiction of the limits of the Devil's powers over the mortal Christ by means of the ghoulish image of the Devil's wanting to drink Christ's blood. The proper way to drink that blood will, of course, henceforth be by way of the Eucharist, a sacrament that has already been anticipated by the earlier evocation of Christ as the eternally nourishing bread descended from heaven. We also find here a strong emotional register, most noticeable in the note of exultant triumph over the vanquishing of the Devil: the "deceiver," the "captor," who was dangerously close to acquiring permanent rights over humanity as his "home-born slaves." And it is noteworthy how Augustine elevates Christ's role, not just in defeating the Devil, but also it would seem in the setting and baiting of the trap. There is a Christological dimension to this sermon that is not found to the same extent in the other sermons expounding the metaphor of the *muscipula* that brought about the defeat of the Devil.<sup>47</sup>

### **The Survival of Augustine's Trope Reconsidered**

It need hardly be said that there is a great deal more that can be explored in the four passages quoted above, and in the sermons from which they come. For example, there is implicit in all of them a degree of acceptance of the doctrine that the Devil was actively deceived by Christ's humanity, and that this deception was deliberately engineered by God – a notion that causes considerable unease to modern theologians, as it did to Anselm, who explicitly rejects the idea, since *Veritas itaque nullum fallit* ("Truth surely deceives no one"). For Anselm, the Devil could only have been victim of his own self-deception.<sup>48</sup> But Augustine plays down the idea of *pia fraus*, emphasizing instead the Devil's greed as the real cause of his readiness to

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<sup>47</sup> These sermons accord well with Gustaf Aulén's "dramatic" conception of the redemption as one of conflict and victory: *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, trans. A. G. Herbert (London 1931) 20.

<sup>48</sup> Anselm, *Meditatio redemptionis humanae (Meditatio III)* in *S. Anselmi Cantuariensis Episcopi, Opera Omnia*, ed. Franciscus Salesius Schmitt, 6 vols (Edinburgh 1946–61) III, 85 (lines 30–36). For a modern view, see R. W. Dale, *The Atonement* (London 1894) 277, who dismisses the idea of God deceiving the Devil as a "rude and coarse hypothesis" that is "intolerable, monstrous, and profane."



take the bait offered him, and nowhere is there any underscoring of the defeat of the Devil through trickery. In Augustine's words in Sermon 130, *victus est deceptor*: "the deceiver was defeated," rather than being deceived.<sup>49</sup> It is also evident that Augustine has no single, static formulation of his *crux–muscipula* trope, and that each sermon is distinctive in its treatment of the idea. As with so many other aspects of Augustine's thought, the image is modulated and altered over time, given new emphases, and adapted to suit the didactic purposes of different sermons and perhaps different congregations. As Jean Rivière observes, Augustine seems to have been fascinated by the image of the *muscipula*, so that he is seen exploring its expressive potential in many ways: "On a vu d'ailleurs que l'image de la *muscipula* est par lui, non seulement retenue, mais caressée avec un visible plaisir."<sup>50</sup>

With the exact words and images of these sermons in mind, we may turn again to the question of the impact of Augustine's metaphor on the works of later ages, and what might be counted as evidence of its influence. I have already noted that somewhat revised versions of Sermon 263 appears in an early Cistercian breviary and in a manuscript compendium of pseudo-Augustinian texts found in the Vatican Library, and that these texts preserve the notion that Christ's cross was a trap for the Devil, with Christ's flesh serving as bait: *Muscipula diaboli crux Christi est: esca qua caperetur, caro Domini fuit*.<sup>51</sup> But it is Sermon 130 – or part of it at any rate – that appears to have had the most enduring afterlife, not least because a long excerpt from it is included (slightly reworded) in what was probably the most influential theological textbook of the Middle Ages: Peter Lombard's *Sentences*.<sup>52</sup> Lombard (d. 1160) also quotes briefly from this sermon in his commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews 2.11–18 by repeating Augustine's crucial words, *Sed venit Redemptor, et victus est deceptor. Et quid fecit Redemptor captivatori nostro? Tetendit muscipulam, crucem suam posuit ibi quasi escam sanguinem suum*.<sup>53</sup> And we also find this section of Sermon 130 (without always mentioning Augustine as the source) cited in sermons by Hermann von Rein (fl. 12th C), Hildebert of Tours (d. 1133), Martin of Léon (d. 1203), St Anthony of Padua (d.

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<sup>49</sup> Cf. Linda Munk, who writes of Augustine revising "the trope of 'the deception of the Devil', the deceiver deceived": *The Devil's Mousetrap* (note 6 above) 20. Such language is not found in the sermons under consideration.

<sup>50</sup> Rivière, *Le dogme chez Saint Augustin* (note 22 above) 331. See further *ibid.* 117–26, 137–46, 320–38, and Rivière's earlier essay, "'Muscipula Diaboli': Origine et sens d'une image augustinienne," *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 1 (1929) 484–96.

<sup>51</sup> Note 27 above.

<sup>52</sup> Peter Lombard, *Sentences*, Book III ('On the Incarnation of the Word'), dist. 19, cap. 1, §5. See *Magistri Petri Lombardi Parisiensis episcopi, Sententiae in IV libris distinctae*, 3rd ed., 2 vols, Spicilegium Bonaventurianum 4–5 (Grottaferrata 1971–81) II, 120.

<sup>53</sup> Lombard, *Collectanea in epistolam ad Hebraeos 2:11–18* (PL 192:421).

1231) as well as in the hugely influential *Glossa Ordinaria*.<sup>54</sup> A brief quotation also appears in a work, probably of the fourteenth century, once attributed to Aquinas.<sup>55</sup> What is particularly noteworthy about these later iterations of Augustine’s figure of the *crux–muscipula* is their brevity and the absence of explanation, elaboration or even discussion. The complexity and nuances of Augustine’s sermons are stripped away, leaving only a condensed rendition of his idea: one in which Augustine’s words are treated as sufficing on their own, so that nothing more need be said. But this also means that there is a dearth of the reflective glossing that would indicate widespread rumination on his figure, which in turn suggests strongly that it did not enter mainstream discussions of the redemption, as Jean Rivière corroborates with his comment that, “On n’en retrouve, en effet, qu’assez tard dans le Moyen-Age de rares échos chez des écrivains dont un seul est de premier plan.”<sup>56</sup>

In addition to the passages cited above, there is also a fascinating allusion to Augustine’s trope in an Anglo-Latin work of the twelfth century, the *Conflictus inter Deum et Diabolum*, which presents “a dispute between Christ and the Devil on the theological question of the redemption of man, set in the form of a trial or disputation.”<sup>57</sup> In the proem setting out the basis of this dispute, we are told, *pia fraus Christi malignam fraudem diaboli exarmavit et venenum quod mundo per primos parentes infudit divine pietatis antitodo in muscipulam crucis exterminavit* (“the noble lie of Christ disabled the evil fraud of the Devil, and by means of the divine antidote of piety in the trap of the cross drove out the poison which, through [our] first parents, was poured into the world”).<sup>58</sup> For our purposes, this is an intriguing statement because it shows absorption of the Augustinian idea into a wider discourse in which it is expressed in a novel formulation, that of *muscipula crucis* (“the trap of the cross”), with no reference to Augustine himself. I have been unable to discover any other instance of this

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<sup>54</sup> Hermanni de Runa, *Sermones Festivales*, Sermo XC, “In nativitate Domini” (CCCM 64, 416, ll. 150–54); Hildebert of Tours, *Sermones in tempore*, IX, *In nativitate domini sermo primus* (PL 171:385); Martin of Léon, *Sermones*, IV, *In natale domini* §25 (PL 208:362); St Anthony of Padua (Antonius Patavinus), “Sermo Dominica in ramis palmarum,” III.9, in *Sermones Dominicales et Festivi*, ed. Benjamin Costa et al., 2 vols (Padua 1979) I, 199–200; *Bibulum Sacrorum cum Glossa Ordinaria ... et Postilla Nicolai Lyrani*, 6 vols (Venice 1601), VI, col. 818 (gloss on Paul’s Epistle to the Hebrews 2.14).

<sup>55</sup> “De venerabili sacramento altaris”, cap. 28, in *S. Thomae Aquinatis Opera Omnia*, ed. Robert Busa, 7 vols (Stuttgart 1980) VII, 681 [164 XSA].

<sup>56</sup> Rivière, *Le Dogme de la rédemption chez Saint Augustin* (note 22 above) 321.

<sup>57</sup> William Marx, “An Edition and Study of the *Conflictus inter Deum et Diabolum*,” *Medium Ævum* 59 (1990) 16–40 (17). Marx characterizes the *Conflictus* as one of many “learned tracts which were not of central theological interest, but more in the tradition of the university exercise”: *ibid.* 17.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* 28, ll. 3–5.

precise phrasing, but it suggests that the core idea may have had wider currency than the known written evidence suggests.

Although there can be no cause for doubting that notions of divine duplicity continued to play an important role in medieval thinking about the redemption, especially in popular works such as the Middle English mystery plays,<sup>59</sup> the immediate question to consider is what evidence can be cited to sustain claims that there was a well-established tradition in medieval thinking “that raises the catching of mice into an act of religious affirmation and even allegorizes the mousetrap as Christ capturing the Devil;”<sup>60</sup> or that “Chaucer, and everyone else of his time, would have been familiar with the figure of Christ’s crucifixion serving as bait—a mousetrap, as it were—to trap the Devil.”<sup>61</sup> Passing over the way in which the second statement confounds the pivotal division between trap and bait that is so important to Augustine’s figure, we must object that the available evidence simply does not support these confident assertions, or the further conclusions their authors make. Richard Rex, for example, cites Henry of Lancaster’s allegorical *Livre des Seintes Medicines* as evidence of the wide dissemination of Augustine’s *crux–muscipula* trope. But mice and the trapping of them are not found in Henry’s treatise, which deals extensively with a different allegory: the digging-out of foxes as an image of the destruction of sins buried deeply in the soul.<sup>62</sup> The alleged “evidence” seems to me to be either overstated or misinterpreted, and for the same reasons I have difficulty in reading Augustine’s complex, challenging image of the trapping of Satan in Chaucer’s depiction of the Prioress’s “charity” misdirected into tearful sentimentality over “a mous / Kaught in a trappe, if it were deed or bledde.”<sup>63</sup>

Further light is cast on the issue by an incontrovertible citation of Augustine’s image in English vernacular literature, namely Caxton’s translation of Jacobus a Voragine’s *Legenda Aurea* (*Golden Legend*, compiled 1255–1266), one of the most popular works of the Middle Ages. In chapter 51 (elsewhere, cap. 53), dealing with Christ’s passion (*De passione domini*), Jacobus sets out four principal benefits accomplished by the redemption, among them the

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<sup>59</sup> See, for example, David W. Lee, “The Temptation of Christ and the Motif of Divine Duplicity in the Corpus Christi Cycle Drama,” *Modern Philology* 72 (1974) 1–16; William Marx, “The Problem of the Doctrine of the Redemption in the ME Mystery Plays and the *Cornish Ordinalia*,” *Medium Ævum* 54 (1985) 20–32 (28–29).

<sup>60</sup> Brown, ‘Of Mice and Women’ (note 3 above) 77.

<sup>61</sup> Rex, *The Sins of Madame Eglentyne* (note 3 above) 105.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. 163, n. 46. See E. J. F. Arnould, “Henry of Lancaster and his *Livre des Seintes Medicines*,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 21 (1937) 352–386, at 375–82.

<sup>63</sup> *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn, gen. ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston 1987): “General Prologue,” 144–45. See also Paul G. Remley, who observes that “no Chaucerian has mentioned a well-attested non-Augustinian tradition of the *muscipula diaboli* in works written in England ca. 700–1350 A.D.”: “*Muscipula Diaboli* and Medieval English Antifeminism,” *English Studies* 1 (1989) 1–14.

defeat of the Devil. Beginning with an allusion to the catching of the Leviathan with a hook in Job 40.20 (*Numquid poteris capere Leviathan hamo?*),<sup>64</sup> Jacobus proceeds to expound how Christ hid the hook of his divinity (*hamum sue divinitatis*) under the bait of his humanity (*sub esca humanitatis*), so that the Devil, wishing to take the bait of flesh (*capere volens escam carnis*), was captured by the hook of divinity.<sup>65</sup> Jacobus then cites the related idea of the cross as a trap (*muscipula*) from Augustine’s Sermon 130, citing the three key sentences that we have already seen elsewhere:

De hac prudenti captione dicit Augustinus: “Venit redemptor et victus est deceptor; et quid fecit redemptor captivatori nostro? Tetendit muscipulam crucem suam, posuit in ea escam sanguinem suum.”<sup>66</sup>

(Concerning this foreknown deception Augustine says: “The Redeemer came and the deceiver was defeated; and what did the Redeemer do to our captor? He stretched out the trap of his cross, [and] placed in it the bait of his blood.”)

Here we might expect to find a highly influential source for the transmission of the *crux–muscipula* image into wider medieval culture. But when Caxton translates this passage in 1483, the phrase *muscipulam crucem suam* is simplified as “his crosse,” with the pivotal notion conveyed by *muscipula* omitted:

Of this wyse takyng sayth saynt Austyn Oure redemptour is comen / and the deceyuer is vaynquysshed / And what dyde our redemptour / he leyde out his bayte to our deceyuour and aduersayre / he hath sette forth his crosse / And within he hath sette his mete / that is his blood /<sup>67</sup>

We may with justification suspect that Caxton decided to simplify his source because he considered the idea of the cross as a mousetrap to be unfamiliar, if not downright anomalous, to the English public.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> The Vulgate reads, *An extrahere poteris Leviathan hamo?*; AV (Job 41.1), “Canst thou draw out leviathan with an hook?”

<sup>65</sup> Iacopo da Varazze, *Legenda Aurea*, ed. Giovanni Paolo Maggioni, 2nd ed. Millennio medievale 6.3, 2 vols. (Florence 1998) I, 346. Jacobus here strongly echoes the thinking of Gregory the Great on the same passage in Job (40.19–20), quoted above (see note 19).

<sup>66</sup> *Legenda Aurea* (note 65 above) I, 346–47.

<sup>67</sup> William Caxton, *The Legende Named in Latyn Legende Aurea* (1483), STC 24873, sig. [b8<sup>v</sup>] (fol. 16<sup>v</sup>).

<sup>68</sup> Medieval English glossaries, such as the *Promptorium parvulorum*, the *Catholicon Anglicum* and John of Garland’s *Dictionarius*, translate *muscipula* as *mowsfalle*, *mowse trape*, *musse stocke*; other terms recorded by MED, s.v. *mous* (n.) 2. (a), include *musetoch*, *mouse snacche*, *moose cacche*. It would have been fascinating had Caxton used one of these English formulations in his translation.

Medieval artworks also fail to associate the crucifixion directly and explicitly with a mousetrap. The most celebrated example that has been put forward in support of such a connection is the Mérode Altarpiece, referred to at the start of this essay, but that is a work depicting the Annunciation – not the crucifixion – as its main subject, and with Joseph’s workshop (and its possible mousetraps) on a side panel.<sup>69</sup> To be sure, the cross is represented on the main panel, but in miniature, being borne over the shoulder of a tiny figure of the Christ-child who is descending on a beam of light towards the Virgin. But any connection between this minute image and the two possible mousetraps on the Joseph panel cannot be described as overt or conspicuous, whatever the viewer’s iconographic literacy.

The point can be made more easily by considering a work that is rich in representations of traps, both demonic and divine, as illustrations accompanying important events in the great drama of salvation. The Hours of Catherine of Cleves, made in Utrecht c. 1440 and illuminated by the so-called Master of Catherine of Cleves, contains three significant *bas-de-page* illustrations depicting spiritual entrapment.<sup>70</sup> The most conventional in many ways is of a fowler with live decoys setting a trap for birds in a tableau that counterbalances a half-page miniature of an angel leading souls out of a fiery hellmouth.<sup>71</sup> The visual allusion of the fowling figure is most likely to Psalm 123.7 (*anima nostra sicut passer erepta est de laqueo venantium*), as well as Proverbs 6.5 and Jeremiah 5.26, passages that were seen as referring to the Devil and his stratagems for ensnaring human souls.<sup>72</sup> Somewhat more occluded is a scene of a fisherman scooping fish out of a floating wicker basket – a device used for holding caught fish for easy retrieval. This is usually interpreted as symbolising the “corporeal prison of the soul,” with reference to the Incarnation, depicted in the main image above, but it has also been read as an allusion to the Leviathan of Job 40.19–20, and so to Christ as the baited hook.<sup>73</sup> The third and most significant for our purposes is a tableau of a pair of infants, representing the Christ-child and the infant John the Baptist below a miniature of the

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<sup>69</sup> The identification of mousetraps in the Joseph panel is usefully questioned by Irving L. Zupnick, “The Mystery of the Mérode Moustrap,” *The Burlington Magazine* 108 (1966) 126–33.

<sup>70</sup> New York, The Morgan Library and Museum, MSS M.917 and M.945. For a facsimile edition, see *The Hours of Catherine of Cleves*, Introduction and Commentaries by John Plummer (New York 1966). High quality images can also be viewed online at <<http://www.themorgan.org/collection/Hours-of-Catherine-of-Cleves>>.

<sup>71</sup> MS M.945, fol. 107<sup>r</sup>: the page pertains to Compline for the Monday Hours of the Dead.

<sup>72</sup> The image is examined in detail by B. G. Koonce, “Satan the Fowler,” *Mediaeval Studies* 21 (1959) 176–84.

<sup>73</sup> MS M.945, fol. 85<sup>r</sup>: Sunday Hours of the Trinity, None. These rival interpretations are articulated by Plummer, *Hours of Catherine of Cleves*, no. 37 (and repeated by The Morgan Library and Museum website), and Meyer Shapiro, “A Note on the Mérode Altarpiece,” *The Art Bulletin* 41 (1959) 327–28.

Visitation, the meeting of their pregnant mothers (Luke 1.39–56).<sup>74</sup> What is remarkable about the depiction of the infants Jesus and John is that they are shown in a complex visual allegory of bird-catching. Jesus sits between a pair of framed nets with a tethered decoy in front of him, while John sits inside a wicker hide, holding the lines that will spring the nets on their quarry. In the right-hand margin above them hovers a red dragon-like creature with a gaping mouth, suggestive of a howling Satan. Clearly, the Incarnation has already taken place (there is a full-page image of the Annunciation on the leaf opposite, fol. 31<sup>v</sup>), so that what we see here is how the corporeal Christ will serve as bait (within a trap) to lure the Devil to his destruction. In contrast with the supposed symbolism of the Mérode Altarpiece, there can be no uncertainty about the painting’s allusion to trapping, for the idea is articulated by means of multiple objects relating to the metaphor. What is more, and perhaps most significant for our purposes, the trap baited with Christ’s mortality is conceived as a bird-trap, not a mousetrap.<sup>75</sup>

In short, there is a distinct lack of evidence to sustain repeated assertions that Augustine’s notion of Christ’s cross as a trap – and a mousetrap specifically – was widely known and frequently alluded to in works of art and literature of the Middle Ages. By contrast, there is a rich tradition of English writers, from Aldhelm onwards, developing the notion of the Devil’s *muscipula* as a figure for temptation and sin, often specifically in the form of, or accomplished by means of, feminine sexual allurements – which may even be understood as the *pudendum mulieris* itself, as in the lyric “Our Ser Iohn,” in which a female speaker boasts that “Ser Iohn ys taken in my mouse trappe.”<sup>76</sup> Another widespread convention takes its inspiration from a particularly influential source, namely, the only occurrence of *muscipulum* (the neuter form of the word) in the Vulgate, in Sapientia (Wisdom) 14.11.<sup>77</sup> The relevant passage, which I here quote from both the Vulgate and a version of the Wyciffite Bible, forms

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<sup>74</sup> MS M.945, fol. 32r: Hours of the Virgin, None.

<sup>75</sup> It is tempting to see a potential connection with Augustine here. As the *Augustinus-Lexikon* (note 14 above) observes, Augustine frequently uses the term *muscipula* to indicate a baited trap, particularly one used for catching birds: “... eine mit einem Köder (<esca>) bestückte Falle, insbesondere für Vögel, präzisiert.”

<sup>76</sup> “Our Ser Iohn”, l. 15, in *Medieval English Lyrics*, ed. Theodore Silverstein (London 1971) 133–34. See also the early thirteenth-century homily based on the Biblical account of Jeremiah in the pit (Jer. 38.6–13), which identifies the Devil’s mousetrap (*pes deofles musetoch*) as lascivious and seductive women: *Old English Homilies and Homiletic Treatises*, ed. Richard Morris, EETS OS 34 (1868) 53. Other examples are discussed by Remley, “Medieval English Antifeminism” (note 63 above) 2–9.

<sup>77</sup> Jerome’s translation of the scriptures had, as I have mentioned already, eliminated the Old Latin term *muscipula*, and he had also rejected the Book of Wisdom as uncanonical. In spite of this, a *Vetus Latina* version of Wisdom became attached to Jerome’s version of the Bible, which means that the single instance of the neuter form *muscipulum* in the Vulgate is a relict, a survivor from the *Vetus Latina*, and in no way evidence of Jerome’s use of the term.

part of a long condemnation of idolaters and idolatry, presented as the impious man and his ungodly deeds, both of which are declared to be odious to God (*similiter autem odio sunt Deo impius et impietas eius*: Sap. 14.9).

Propter hoc et idolis nationum non erit respectus,  
quoniam creaturae Dei in odium factae sunt,  
et in temptationem animis hominum,  
et in muscipulum pedibus insipientium. (Sap. 14.11)

For that and to the maumetis of nacions shal not ben reward; for the  
creaturis of God in to hate ben mad, and tempting to the soule of men,  
and in to a mouscacche to the feet of vnwise men.<sup>78</sup>

Read allegorically, the idolatry warned of in this passage could be given imaginative contemporary currency, as by the anonymous fourteenth-century English devotional treatise, *Book to a Mother*, which cautions against the evil seductions of *ma(u)metrie* – “idolatry,” in the figurative sense of the worship of worldly goods and vices.<sup>79</sup> Correspondingly, the scriptural *muscipulum* is no longer just a “moustrap,” but the Devil’s mousetrap specifically, designed to delude the unwary into sin. According to *Book to a Mother*, hardened sinners take great pains to seem attractive (*semliche*) to simple people in order to lure them into iniquity. Their enticing *mametrie* can thus be understood as *þe deuelis ches*, the bait with which the Devil lards his mousetrap (*mouse-cacche*) for the catching of admiring fools (*folis*), trapping them in sin as if they were merely *his muse and his ratouns*:

Perfore þei þat ben so blend wiþ synne ... cacchen wiþ here mametrie,  
as it were wiþ þe deuelis chese, his muse and his ratouns: þat ben folis  
foule and blake þorw þer horrible synnes ... þat þis maner speche be soþ  
... and þei ben þe deuelis mouse-cacche wiþ here maumetrie, witesseþ  
Holi Writ and seiþ: þat all creatures ben mad in uengeaunce and be þe  
deuelis mouse-cacche to cacche wiþ folis.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> *The Holy Bible ... made from the Latin Vulgate by John Wycliffe and his Followers*, ed. Josiah Forshall and Frederic Madden, 4 vols (Oxford 1850) III, 109. Cf. Douay-Rheims: “Therefore there shall be no respect had even to the idols of the Gentiles: because the creatures of God are turned to an abomination, and a temptation to the souls of men, and a snare to the feet of the unwise.” Catholic Bible: Douay Rheims online: <[www.drbo.org](http://www.drbo.org)>.

<sup>79</sup> See MED, s.v. *maumetri(e)* n. 1.b.

<sup>80</sup> Adrian James McCarthy (ed.), *Book to a Mother*, *Elizabethan and Renaissance Studies* 92 (Salzburg 1981) 116–17. For the notion that all creatures are made in vengeance, see Wisdom 14.11, quoted above, and Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) 39.35 *omnia haec ad vindictam creata sunt* (“these were all made for vengeance”).

It will be apparent that Biblical *muscipulum* has here been amplified into *muscipulum diaboli*, “þe deuelis mouse-cacche,” through the author’s understanding of scriptural interpretation, rather than the words of scripture itself.<sup>81</sup>

To conclude, there appears to have been widespread currency in medieval England for interpretations of the *muscipula* (~um) deployed by the Devil as a mousetrap, whereas Augustine’s memorable soteriological trope of Christ’s death on the cross, and of the cross itself, being a *muscipula* for defeating the Devil, though briefly repeated by several important authorities, does not seem to have entered popular or vernacular traditions to the extent that has been claimed for it. Furthermore, in no way can it be claimed to have played a significant role in any major systematic thinking about the redemption, either orthodox or heterodox. Detailed theorizing about why that should be so must lie beyond the scope of this article; suffice it to say that the absence of Augustine’s figure from the hugely influential writings of Gregory the Great is likely to have had something to do with it, just as Gregory’s use of the image of the baited hook gave an added sanction of authority to that idea. Then there is the thorny issue of accommodating the implications of divine duplicity inherent in the notion of a trap,<sup>82</sup> which could also be why Augustine himself never uses the image in his own formal treatises on the redemption, but confines it to vivid homiletic orations. In any event, as I have shown, Augustine gives expression to his metaphor with considerably more variation, and with many more nuances, than has generally been acknowledged by modern critics who draw on it to expound references to mice and mousetraps in medieval and early modern works of art and literature. With these points in mind, it would seem prudent for critics to be more circumspect in interpreting medieval references to rodents and their traps before assuming that Augustine’s metaphor of the *crux–muscipula* invariably lies behind them.

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<sup>81</sup> McCarthy (ed.), *Book to a Mother* (note 80 above) lxxv, 243, notes a number of correspondences with the writings of Robert Holcot, especially his lectures on the Book of Wisom.

<sup>82</sup> Without focusing on this issue specifically, Denery, *The Devil Wins* (note 15 above), 71–83, discusses the issue of divine deception and how it was accommodated by medieval Christian thinkers.