

Thesis report: "Performing Satan: The satanic queer in contemporary British and American popular culture" by Jacqueline Victoria Woroniec

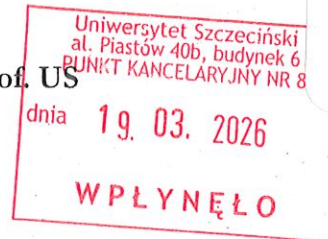
University of Szczecin, Poland

Supervisory Committee: Dr hab. Beata Zawadka, prof. US

Auxiliary supervisor:

Dr Barbara Braid

Thesis Length: 243pp; 5 chapters, plus introduction, conclusion and bibliography.



External Examiner Report by Dr Sorchá Ní Fhlainn (s.ni-fhlainn@mmu.ac.uk), Manchester Metropolitan University, United Kingdom.

Thesis Report:

This thesis examines the Satanic Queer in popular culture and its historical and cultural expression through a rigorous historical and theoretical examination. The work explores queerness and gender, theodicy and hermeneutic enquiry, providing a comprehensive and crisp examination of Satanism, understandings of the devil across multiple religious denominations, and their application to contemporary depictions and understandings of Satanism. Overall, the work displays very compelling argumentation and, at times, excellent and lyrical readings of Satanic history and popular texts that underpin its overall argument. The aim to identify and examine the moving archive of Satanic imagery as a form of cultural dissent and creative expression, to one of a direct creative and creator dialectic; the aims and objectives of the thesis have been achieved here. There is persuasive and insightful evidence of research, especially in chapters one and two, which are exemplary in their presentation of theoretical understandings of the Satanic, and a succinct and highly rigorous explanation of Performance Studies and its application and praxis in later chapters to invoke a 'sense' or 'performance' of Satanic movement across popular culture texts. Later chapters (more on this below) provide an extensive understanding of how Satanic imagery and cultural devils are deployed at times of crisis in the wider culture and the academy, and demonstrate the ongoing and continued morphing of these ideas (chapters 2 on film, popular culture and dissent, and chapters 3 and 4 on the application and appropriation of symbols to signify new creations and usages of symbolic Satanic influence). Given the breadth of coverage in this work, which spans biblical readings, historical application, theoretically complex understanding and application to contemporary invocations of Satanic power and queer politics, and screen texts and cinema history, it is a masterful exercise in control, succinct argumentation, with a sublime lyrical flow. The dissertation confirms the candidate's general theoretical knowledge in the discipline of literary studies and her ability to conduct independent scientific research spanning several interdisciplinary fields. The methodology is appropriate and elegant, with due consideration to its nuances, complexities, and debates, while also articulating its applicability to the research of Satanic symbolism and its continued use as a cultural archive. It is one of the most accomplished doctoral dissertations I have yet examined in my career (in both national and international contexts) and certainly demands close scrutiny of the lineage, playful bricolage, metamodern recycling, and reuse of Satanic discourse that continues to spin in our anxious present. For this accomplishment, I want to congratulate the candidate on this superb achievement.

I find the overall presentation of the arguments to be extremely confident, well-informed across the disciplines, and exceptionally well-written, with clear use of scholarly support to link the close readings to the cultural narratives it seeks to uncover. The five-chapter structure has a logical flow, beginning with the origins of the flow and the operative value of Queer in a performance and camp context, and then succinctly evaluating a cultural archive that circulates to inform concepts, cultural transience, and the devil, devilry, and its ongoing, rhizomatic expression in cultural discourse. The structure is broadly chronological beyond its theoretical introduction to the scientific query which outlines and argues for the transitional meaning and acute cultural expression of Satanic images and iconography; the chapters in turn demonstrate an accumulation of cultural signifiers and reuse of images over a significant breadth of time (in chapters 2 – 5) and across multiple media forms (film, television shows, music videos, art, theological scripture, ancient history). The logic of its order is valid – the work moves its argumentation by chronologically critiquing the use of devilry as a form of opposition to dominant order, moving through to countercultural expression (chapter 2), and on to the contemporary morphing of the devil image to one without a source of its own (and beyond mere simulacrum as expression) as curated in mimicry, remixing and morphing (chapter 3) — this operates as a logical formulation of its contemporary media usage online today. The selection of texts is, in my view, wide-ranging in its coverage of cultural shifts in Gothic Studies and Performance Studies, and the candidate is extremely mindful of the transitions between other disciplines this study requires, from history to theology, anthropology to literary analysis. Moving from scripture and religious invocations to countercultural popular expression and Hollywood cinema (and later television) illustrates the clear methodology at work – it focalises the time, media popularity, and landscape of the studied images of devilry and Satanic imagery in a timely and appropriate manner. The methodology of applying Performance Studies, Gothic Studies and Queer Studies is exceptionally clever and well-informed, also. It utilises the disciplinary means of cultural expression to examine how and why there is an archive of moving, kinetic and creator and fan-created images of Satanic concepts in human culture that are performed, ritualised, reused, recycled, and re-appropriated to push back against dominant patriarchal and heteronormative frameworks. The methodology also conclusively argues that there is a significant history of applying these academic disciplines to examine the cultural persistence of these disciplines and expressions in the contemporary media landscape (chapter 5). The copy is exceptionally clean (I have noted only a very small list of typographical errors), and the writing is so lyrical. The work is so strong that I believe it could be published as both a few articles and a monograph (with the monograph taking a broader scope, with more depth on the texts than here due to word limits). I would be happy to furnish the candidate with further advice on that, if desired.

I am also particularly heartened that the work includes studio-based work (series such as *Good Omens*, *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*, and *Lucifer*, and music videos, (I would also suggest a mention of items for commercial sale, such as Lil Nas X's Satan Shoes in collaboration with Nike?) alongside fan-created materials such as Tumblr posts and creative responses, as this enables you to track and discuss the gamut of creative rhizomatic responses to the cultural diffusion of Satanic Queer practice as well as apply your appropriate theoretical models accordingly. The deployment of Deleuze and Bakhtin, in particular, makes clear the diffuse modes in which these shifts occur, enabling these cultural expressions to take root, and celebrates the upending of social structures and patriarchal social hierarchies that cast off the celebration of difference. You have intellectually charted the joy and recurring cultural need for devils, satanic concepts and the need for queering rigid hierarchies in our cultural experience, particularly through devil comedies, campness, carnival, camp, performance and scripted works as an ever-evolving form of opposition that continually

shifts and moves. As you succinctly state, “[t]he genealogy of the Devil is itself a rhizome, not a tree” (p. 175) Unlike many other PhDs I have examined, your use of theory is genuinely exciting, as it is expressed and applied not merely as a dry means of interrogating theoretical ideas and quotations, but rather as living, breathing, abject, liberating, moving form of cultural praxis (Drag performance, Morphing, fan practices and content creation, collective practices, and commercial impact). It is also especially useful to include screenshots and descriptions of the material here, as you have, to authenticate and make visible the moving form of Satanic Queer. Indeed, as you note, “The Devil is remaking himself because the culture keeps proving that he can” (p. 178), which gives your work authority and wide application in cultural studies while also showing the absolute ambition of this work. Again, I applaud your examination of the creative and content examination of Tumblr as an anti-hierarchical space for such practices (alongside others such as Archive of Their Own, briefly mentioned) as it provides useful discussion of this transition in digital spaces and practices while also leading to Jenkins’ *Textual Poachers* and other remix-remake intertextualities as a vital element in creative fandoms and as a temporal form of signs and circulations.

There is a strong inclusion of necessary cultural critics in Gothic Studies and Satanic Studies. I am delighted to see Faxneld here, for instance, alongside Gothic theorists (Hogle, Ní Fhlainn, Aldana Reyes, Halberstam, Hughes) and the charting of the rise of Performance Studies within academia. An interesting intersection to consider down the line (for publication development, perhaps?) is the near complementary rise of Queer Studies, Gothic Studies and Performance Studies within the academy more generally (1990 – 1991 was absolutely a moment of deep shifts that opened up these disciplines), as well as the beginning of many departments (Performance Studies), the inclusion of Queer Studies in the academy with its own necessary language and frameworks, and the launch of Gothic Studies as a journal after the inception of the IGA. You have identified a significant schism in the academy that brings together these strands in a powerful way and, academically, provides the means to document its rhizomatic cultural practices within the confines of the academy’s own (often too hierarchical) walls.

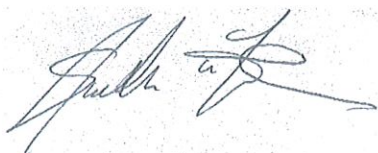
To conclude my report, I believe this work is absolutely superb for its mastery in several fields and the confidence, breadth and genuinely original work on display in this study. The application of this scientific literary study lies in its articulation of cultural knowledge and its transitional nature, from the creation of symbols of dissent in literary studies to understanding contemporary usage in film, art, performance, and newly created online works in writing and digital artefacts. It’s application provides a comprehensive analysis of why these ideas persist and the meaning they provide in human culture as both a historical and contemporary mode of articulating dissent and empowerment for various communities and suppressed voices. This work makes clear the roadmap of its origin and how these concepts morph and shift in contemporary application to push back against brokers of power. The application lies in the rich cultural traditions the study augments, while also critically evaluating its application to our understanding of myths, symbols, countercultural imagery, and its wide circulation in literary and online publications today using appropriate disciplinary lenses. It adds profound depth to this mode of understanding. The argument, overall, about the endurance of this circulation of images, tropes, ideas and various appropriations is never lost throughout its journey, and I do believe it is a genuine and original addition to several fields, including Gothic Studies, Performance Studies, Fan Studies and Literary Studies, as a mode of praxis and cultural expression. It has significantly deepened the knowledge in the field by extending the understanding of the Satanic Queer as not merely an image of historical invocation but rather one of power and vital persistence in contemporary cultural studies.

It provides a clear map of a cultural and scientific concept that has not been examined with such rigour before, using the novel and academic disciplines applied here (Gothic Studies, Performance Studies, Literary Studies, Art, Theology and Cultural History). The writing is exquisite, and the content is both timely and vital in contemporary media discourse. I look forward to your onward journey in academia.

Recommendations:

I recommend that the award of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) be granted to the candidate without hesitation or subject to any further corrections outside of the typographical errors listed below. I also wish to congratulate the candidate, the PhD supervisory team and the university on such superb doctoral work.

The dissertation meets the requirements specified in Article 187(1–2) of the Act of 20 July 2018 – Law on Higher Education and Science. I propose that it be admitted to the further stages of the doctoral procedure.



Dr SORCHA NÍ FHLAINN, BA, MA, MA (HE), PhD, SFHEA

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Typographical errors to be amended:

- P. 42 – behaves *should be* behave
- P. 61 – knight templars *should be* knights templar
- P. 95 – Aldana Reyes in all instances (not Reyes).
- P. 220 – italicise *Good Omens* in bibliography.
