

**Review: Sarah Bartels, *The Devil and the Victorians: Supernatural Evil in Nineteenth-Century English Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2021) 236pp. ISBN-978-0-367-44420-4, £120.00.**

HAYLEY SMITH

SARAH BARTELS'S *THE Devil and the Victorians* invites readers on a journey across a range of nineteenth-century cultural and religious landscapes, with a view to identifying and assessing the various guises and conceptualisations of the Victorian Devil. In doing so, Bartels provides an exploration into the Devil's complex representations in nineteenth-century religion, folklore, occultism, popular culture, literature and theatre, demonstrating the continually ambivalent and fluid relationship between the Devil and his contemporaries. Focusing specifically on the role of the diabolic in Victorian England, *The Devil and the Victorians* thus seeks to negotiate a complicated site of conflicts and intersections between theological, popular, and creative perceptions of the Devil. Challenging the 'still relatively common perception among historians that the Devil was only of minor cultural and theological relevance in a nineteenth-century English context', Bartels presents readers with ample evidence that the Devil continued to retain a hold on the Victorian imagination.<sup>1</sup>

Given the level of scholarly interest in the supernatural in nineteenth-century England, there is a surprising silence surrounding the Devil.<sup>2</sup> Research has instead often focused on the role of Spiritualism and other contemporary occult movements, not least because of their 'striking popularity' during this time.<sup>3</sup> Bartels suggests that this 'neglect is related to the broader issue of the lack of research

---

<sup>1</sup> Sarah Bartels, *The Devil and the Victorians: Supernatural Evil in Nineteenth-Century English Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2021), p. 224.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example: Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World. Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England, 1850-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); and Alison Butler, *Victorian Occultism and the Making of Modern Magic* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Oppenheim, p. 160.

into the modern diabolic'.<sup>4</sup> The most extensive investigations into the nineteenth-century Devil to date include David L. Pike's *Metropolis on the Styx: The Underworlds of Modern Urban Culture, 1800–2001* (2007) and Per Faxneld's *Satanic Feminism: Lucifer as the Liberator of Women in Nineteenth-Century Culture* (2017). These studies, however, do not offer the broader cultural and religious history necessary to understanding the significance of the Victorian Devil, situating Bartels's research as a crucial intervention in the field.

Any discussion of Victorian religion and spiritual belief (or disbelief) must contend with the so-called 'crisis of faith', a term used to describe the shifting attitudes towards organised religion throughout the century. Bartels navigates this with ease, pointing out that the Devil did not simply disappear from Victorian society because of this contemporary religious crisis. Rather, 'tradition and innovation' can 'coexist', Bartels argues, 'with older ideas about evil being both rigorously challenged and passionately defended as well as constantly remodelled and repurposed'.<sup>5</sup> The identity of the Victorian Devil becomes, therefore, a story of adaptation and transformation, as much as one of controversy and decline. Bartels must be praised for the breadth of primary sources she utilises throughout *The Devil in the Victorians* to exemplify this argument, including – amongst others – newspapers and periodicals, fiction and poetry, books on spiritualism, religion and folklore, broadsides and ephemera.<sup>6</sup> Although the vast array of material used in this survey attempts to mitigate any evidential gaps, as Bartels herself acknowledges, most of the sources have middle- and upper-class origins. Consequently, Bartels's discussion of the popular role of the Devil in Chapter Four forms a relatively brief part of the work. The relative lack of source material written by or for the working classes poses a greater challenge in understanding the Devil's place within this segment of Victorian society.

Nevertheless, Bartels's study provides an impressive range of cultural backdrops against which she grounds her investigation into the Victorian Devil. The first chapter examines the theological Devil, surveying the diverse ways in

---

<sup>4</sup> Bartels, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

which he featured in the beliefs and practices of contemporary religious denominations, from the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church to Nonconformist and Secularist groups. Despite his increasingly complex and protean role in the nineteenth-century imagination, the Devil, Bartels notes, could also appear in his traditional form, as a 'safe-guarder of cultural morality'.<sup>7</sup> The first chapter, therefore, immediately illustrates Bartels's argument, as readers learn how the diabolic was perceived as both traditional and yet strikingly modern – a concept in a constant state of adaptation and change. Chapter Two similarly examines the mutability of the Devil, this time placing the figure within a folkloric context in which he was treated with seriousness and humour alike. A constant presence in Victorian folklore, the Devil presents himself, Bartels suggests, through direct encounters, the landscape, flora and fauna, entertainment, magic, and as a 'scapegoat for [...] inexplicable and devastating problems', from disease to crop failure.<sup>8</sup> Bartels recognises that opinions on the folkloric Devil were divided but argues that ultimately such differences only serve to highlight the figure's continual presence, persistence and adaptability.

Bartels's third chapter turns to the occult Devil in Victorian England. While the Devil has been considered in passing within scholarship surrounding nineteenth-century spiritualism and occultism, Bartels's study offers the first sustained assessment of the role that the Devil played – amongst other groups and movements – in mesmerism, spiritualism, occultism, and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.<sup>9</sup> Bartels goes on to argue that the ambiguous role of the occult Devil in these controversial and nonconformist environments was often symbolically charged, with the diabolic appearing to exemplify 'whatever an individual disagreed with or wished to define themselves in opposition to', or as an 'emblem of spiritual rebellion'.<sup>10</sup> Once again, Bartels captures the ever-present yet ever-changing nature of the Devil in Victorian culture; there in all his subversive possibility. Moving on to consider the Victorian conceptualisation of the Devil in

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Owen Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture, 1736-1951* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> Bartels, p. 147.

popular culture, Chapter Four reflects upon the versatility of the diabolic in 'pastimes enjoyed chiefly by the Victorian lower classes', thereby working towards, if never fully attaining, a more holistic view of the Devil across different socio-economic backgrounds.<sup>11</sup> According to Bartels, the Devil infiltrated popular culture, from the English language to broadsides, and from popular literature to live entertainment, such as Punch and Judy shows. The chapter aptly focuses on the 'murky interrelationship of humour and horror' which defined the popular Devil, revealing the figure's ambivalence as crucial to his marketability in contemporary culture.<sup>12</sup>

In the final chapter, Bartels considers the various representations of the Devil in nineteenth-century literature and theatre. Acknowledging the Victorian humanisation of the literary and theatrical Devil, Bartels explores the significant influences acting upon writers' conceptions of the diabolic, including the Satan of John Milton's epic *Paradise Lost* (1667) and the influence of the Faustian legend, appearing in versions like Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust* (1808). Bartels investigates how the publication of Goethe's *Faust* at the beginning of the century inspired and influenced a range of works that employed the diabolic in both verse and prose, demonstrating the legend's ubiquitous place in contemporary literature. Bartels concludes that 'Victorian writers took advantage of the Devil's mutability, with their work veering from the nonsensical humour of the pantomime to the terror of the ghost story', with laughable figures like the 'Demon King' of the Manchester Queen's Theatre 1886 Christmas production and Marie Corelli's chilling *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895) populating the same literary and theatrical landscape.<sup>13</sup> This variety of representations reveals the creative potential of the Devil's plasticity for nineteenth-century writers and theatre-makers, and once again attests to his widespread presence in the Victorian cultural imagination.

Bartels's study consequently demonstrates the constant existence of the Devil throughout a range of cultural and religious landscapes in Victorian England, continually revealing the complexity, ambivalence, and shifting nature of the

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 180.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 208–210.

diabolic in the nineteenth century. While *The Devil and the Victorians* certainly employs a wealth of material, there may be further room for research to investigate contemporary representations of the Devil amongst other visual and auditory media, like art and popular music. Such investigations might – in part, at least – help to fill the evidential gap in source material pertaining to the working classes, and allow critics to further account for the sensorial dimensions of the Devil in the popular imaginary. Nevertheless, Bartels’s work convincingly challenges the implication that the Devil was of little importance to nineteenth-century culture, showing that the Devil was not simply in the details, but at large in Victorian society.



BIOGRAPHY: Hayley Smith is a PhD candidate at Canterbury Christ Church University. Her research seeks to recover and re-examine the life and literary career of a neglected late-Victorian author, called Thomas Anstey Guthrie (1856-1934), who wrote under the pseudonym ‘F. Anstey’. Her research interests include Victorian popular fiction, nineteenth-century fantasy and children’s literature, Gothic fiction, and contemporary horror.

CONTACT: [h.smith8@canterbury.ac.uk](mailto:h.smith8@canterbury.ac.uk)