



FACULTY OF ARTS
Charles University

Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

Opponent's Report on B. A. Thesis

Magic in Christopher Whyte's Novels

by Markéta Karlasová

This is a well-structured, coherently written thesis on elements of “magic” in the novels of Scottish author, poet and translator Christopher Whyte. The three main chapters of the thesis each focus on one of Whyte's four novels to date, following a similar pattern of analysis. Each chapter and its individual subheadings ask the same set of questions about the “origin”, “use” and “limits” of magic and the fantastic in the respective narratives. Two more subheadings follow in each case, in which diverse aspects of the novels' imaginative worlds and the narratives' particular agendas are discussed. Whyte has dedicated much of his work to the social and psychological issues related to gender oppression and has worked to promote queerness and hybridity as sources of productive plurality and otherness. While this focus is reflected in the latter part of each chapter, the thesis' impact would have been stronger, in my view, had the discussion of the role of “magic” in the novels' narrative structures and the “queerness” and “otherness” of their protagonists been more thoroughly integrated.

Whyte is perhaps better known as author of poetry in Scottish Gaelic and his novels have received limited critical attention. The thesis clearly sets out to amend this with its systematic exploration of the author's major works. But while one of the drawbacks of researching lesser-known material is the dearth of critical literature, Ms Karlasová has made utmost use of the available sources (notably MacDonald, MacKenzie and Wilson). Indeed, the choice of relevant quotations and their skilful incorporation in the text is one of the strong points of this thesis. Another strength is the background theoretical research. The passages in which Bakhtin's words on the carnivalesque (p. 36) and Todorov's concepts of “the fantastic” and “the marvellous” are used are excellent – see, for example, Chapter 2 (p. 2) and Chapter 3 (p. 30). Todorov's structural analysis is also summoned (explicitly or indirectly) wherever the genre of Whyte's respective novels becomes point of discussion. However, since Todorov's monograph is identified in the abstract and the introduction as the thesis' key theoretical frame, it should have been introduced more thoroughly and the relevant terminology should have been explicated much earlier in the text.



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The thesis is written in clear, accomplished English though argumentation becomes more fluent and the style more consistent from Chapter 3 on. Chapter 1 (Introduction) and Chapter 2 on *The Warlock of Strathearn* feature frequent typographical mistakes and occasional lapses in sentence structure. The footnotes and bibliography have been formatted with appropriate care.

In terms of its topic and execution, the thesis meets the requirements of a B. A. thesis. I therefore **recommend the thesis for defence and propose that it be graded very good (2)**, depending on Ms. Karlasová's performance at the defence and her response to questions, some of which are included below.

In view of the above comments, I propose the following points for discussion during the thesis defence:

1. I was puzzled by the repeated reference to Whyte's use of magic as a "neutral force". Qualifying comments such as the following – "Each of Whyte's characters is capable of both 'good' and 'evil'; despite the special powers at work they are still entirely human. The neutrality of magic is a topic is [sic] further explored in *The Cloud Machinery*, where it's evident that magical power is a natural result of curious exploration" (p. 17) – were even more confusing. I do not see how the observation that "there is no universal 'evil' and no universal 'good' magic, its use always rests entirely on the individual and their choices" makes magic a "neutral" force. Could Ms Karlasová elaborate on this concept in general and illustrate her points by examples from one or two of the novels?
2. Could Ms Karlasová talk about the generic span of Whyte's novels and expand on the usefulness of Todorov's theory for her study of the Scottish author's works?

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