

## CHORAL

### RESEARCHPROJECT (max. 5 pages)

#### APPLICATION FORM TO REQUEST FOR FUNDING FOR JOINTLY SUPERVISED DOCTORAL THESIS

#### TITLE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Witches then and now: from the patriarchal ban to the rehabilitation of female learned and rebels through arts and literatures

#### SUPERVISORS

From recruiting University	First name	LAST NAME	University	Department
Supervisor	Chiara	LOMBARDI	Università di Torino (UNITO)	Department of Humanities/Dipartimento di Studi Umanistici
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Co-Supervisor	First name	LAST NAME	University	Department
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#### 5 main KEYWORDS

Witches, cultural “matrimony”, arts and literature, historical fiction, ecofeminism

#### ABSTRACT (250 words max.)

This thesis project builds on the philosophical reflections developed by Carolyn Merchant in *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (or by Silvia Federici and Alicia Puleo in their respective essays). She argues that the status of women is the result of a systematic subjugation --which runs parallel to the capitalist exploitation of nature-- imposed by the founding fathers of modern science. As a social and mental construct, the enterprise to annihilate all the rebellious women would culminate in the witch-hunts conducted by the Inquisition in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. If the witch figure has inhabited Western imagination for centuries, the last ten years have seen films and novels flourish in Romance-speaking countries (Italy, France, Spain), which fictionalise these same historical facts, highlighting the tension between dissident or learned women (midwives, herbalists, etc.) and a repressive patriarchal order hiding behind the argument of reason.

The purpose of the thesis is to study these historical narratives from a socio-critical and eco-feminist perspective, in order to measure the ability of literature and the arts to work on representations, to deconstruct a cultural heritage imbued with a patriarchal ideology, and on the contrary to rehabilitate an invisible cultural 'matrimony'.

How can rethinking representations of the past ultimately influence the present and the future, at a time when "new witches" – from feminists denouncing gender violence to 'green witches' reinventing new ways of inhabiting the world – are also being hunted down?

## Research aims and methodology

Prior to this study, it will be necessary to :

- Identify and select a corpus of fictional works using a variety of media (mainly literature and film) from closely related cultural, linguistic and geographical areas where Inquisitorial repression was particularly intense during the 16th and 17th centuries, in this case from Romance-speaking countries such as Italy, France and Spain. Here are just a few of the works that can be included in the corpus:

- D'Urbano, *Acquanera*, 2013; Giaquinto, *La ianara*, 2010; Roca Barea, *Las brujas y el inquisidor*, 2023; Marti David, *Las brujas de Arnes*, 2017; Aguëro, *Akelarre* (Film) 2020; Grannec, *Les simples*, 2019; Pecassou, *Le bûcher des certitudes*, 2021; Martinez, *Du domaine des Murmures*, 2013; Kiner, *La nuit des béguines*, 2017.

### Aims

- The main purpose of this thesis is to **study the ability of historically inspired films and novels to deconstruct a social imaginary** world developed in the modern era, a negative representation of the 'witch' woman, seen as a source of disorder to be tamed and dominated (in the same way as nature).

- The study will also correlate this deconstruction with a **possible process of rehabilitation through fiction** (as advocated by ecofeminist philosophers), in the form of recognition of knowledge and skills that have hitherto been depreciated or invisibilised (therapeutic knowledge of plants or special relationships with Nature, e.g.). - Finally, **this status of women will be reassessed from a contemporary perspective**, highlighting the links that are being drawn between the witches of the past and the figures of witches who have emerged with strength in society since the beginning of the 21st century. To borrow an expression from Edmond Cros, how do filmic and literary writings 'remodel' our contemporary collective discourses on these fictions? These three general objectives will involve, as sub-objectives :

- analysing the figure of the witch in contemporary films and historical narratives (post-2010), whose plot is rooted in the 16th and 17th centuries, and which unfold against the same backdrop of patriarchal, social or inquisitorial repression.

- to highlight the relationship between texts and characters about witches and history, both primary texts and twentieth-century historical discourse (Robert Mandrou, Carlo Ginzburg, Brian P. Levack, Robert Muchembled, Gerda Lerner), in order to examine how fiction, in turn, contributes to transforming the image of the witch.

### Critical approach and methodology

The critical perspective we aim to embrace will be twofold, based primarily on a **sociocritical approach** (Ducret, Cros, Zima, Popovic), and **enriched by ecofeminist studies** (Marchant, Federici, Puleo).

The methods for describing texts and images developed by literary and film theories will thus be called upon, stemming from the narratological analysis of the texts and the images analysis, up to the application of the intertextual approach based on cultural and visual studies. The study of the internal organisation of texts, the network of meanings and the tensions that unfold within them, will tend to identify and examine 'constitutive

linguistic alterities', i.e. previous heterogeneous discourses and knowledge, reappropriated and reconfigured, transformed by works of fiction.

This will shed light on the relationship between the works selected from the corpus and the social imaginary, defined by Popovic as the way in which a society conceives its representations of the past (the relationship between the individual and society, its representations of gendered identities and bodies, its relationship with nature) at a given historical moment.

### Methodological details

From a methodological point of view, it will be necessary to adopt a **comparative approach**, between the literary productions of these different countries on the one hand, and between film creation and literary production on the other hand. Critical tools specific to both literary studies and film analysis (Aumont, Joly, Vanoye, etc.) will be used. Finally, the analyses will be completed by studies devoted to the historically inspired novel, such as those by Claudie Bernard, Marc Bertrand, Isabelle Durand-Le Guern, Gérard Gengembre, György Lukacs, Névine El Nossery and JeanYves Tadié.

### Relevance and added-value of the proposed research in relation to the current state of knowledge

The theme of witches is part of the Western cultural heritage and is not original in itself. The figure of the witch at the heart of the Inquisitorial trials against heresy - is a historical phenomenon, and one that has filled the imagination from Antiquity to the present day, from the folk tales of the Middle Ages to contemporary horror films. But this figure has reappeared, first in the twentieth century, both as a literary or cinematic manifestation (Miller's Salem Witches marks a decisive milestone in this resurgence) and as an object of historical or literary research, giving rise to a better understanding of this figure thanks to new perspectives of analysis. Judicial studies, religious and sociological perspectives adopted by historiography, as well as feminist and postcolonial literary approaches have all contributed to this revival.

The originality of this thesis lies in its analysis of a very recent phenomenon (the second decade of the twenty-first century), remarkable in its quantitative dimension (the concentration in a short space of time of numerous artistic events), which would suggest a 'return of the witches' in response to contemporary societal issues. The idea is to rethink representations of the past (through historical fictions) in order to act in the present, and even the future. The specificity of this research is also based on the delimitation of the field of study, i.e. the Romance-speaking countries, where the literary and cinematographic forms of the witch have given rise to far fewer studies than in Anglo-Saxon countries. Lastly, the combined approach of sociocriticism and ecofeminism, which responds to current issues as well as shedding light on discursive otherness and social imaginaries, has not so far been used jointly to examine this type of corpus - at least not to our knowledge - through the plural lens of comparative analysis.

### Interdisciplinary nature of the research together with the alignment with the CHORAL programme and complementarity expertise of the teams

This research is certainly in line with the perspective put forward by the Choral programme. By studying the ability of fiction to challenge past mental representations and question a cultural heritage that carries a patriarchal ideology, it invites reflection on cultural heritages that it is worth preserving, exhuming or revealing.

At the same time, it invites to rediscover or re-assess women's ancestral knowledge, revitalising the very term 'matrimony', a term that has existed since the Middle Ages and was supplanted by 'patrimony' until it reappeared in the 2000s in the writings of authors who wished to emphasise women's role in cultural development.

The research project at the crossroads of history and fiction thus draws on a **variety of disciplinary fields**; moreover, the choice of the corpus itself, which aims to reflect the places where the social imaginary of the witch is embedded and disseminated, prompts researchers to adopt a **multidisciplinary approach**, ranging from comparative literature to the study of the moving image.

**The future supervisors** of the thesis, Professors Chiara Lombardi of the University of Turin and Pascale Peyraga of the University of Pau, are specialists in humanities disciplines that are both related and complementary. This will enable them to cover all the disciplines, linguistic and geographical areas and timeframes involved in the research project.

**Chiara Lombardi** is Associate Professor in Comparative Literature and Literary Criticism in the Humanities Department at the University of Turin and has been qualified to supervise research in this discipline since September 2018. She specialises in the study of literature from the Renaissance to the present day, and her research regularly takes her back and forth between the modern and contemporary periods. She studies in particular the metamorphoses of literary genres, forms and characters from a diachronic perspective, but also from a synchronic perspective, through studies that draw on a variety of linguistic and cultural fields. The fact that she specialises in the modern period, but not exclusively, means that she has in-depth knowledge of the societies and mentalities that gave rise to the social imaginaries that raise our interest in this co-direction project.

Furthermore, both her teaching and research activities demonstrate her in-depth knowledge of Italian, as well as French and Spanish, cultural fields. In this respect, we would highlight her comparative work on contemporary characters in English (James Joyce, John M. Coetzee), Italian (Alberto Moravia, P.P. Pasolini), French (Michel Houellebecq) and Spanish (Javier Marias) authors, as well as her participation in a national research project (PRIN 2008-2010) on the presence of Spain and Spanish culture in the Italian press in the twentieth century. She is responsible for several Erasmus agreements, notably with France and the University of Reims, and has also taken part in numerous conferences in France, at the Sorbonne University in Paris, Grenoble and Lille, for example. Last but not least, her specialisation in comparative literature does not preclude her knowledge of the visual arts, as demonstrated by her recent participation, in November 2023, in a symposium entitled 'Feminae agentes: letteratura, arti e multimedialità', where female characters were at the heart of the debates.

**Pascale Peyraga** has been a professor of Hispanic Studies at the University of Pau since 2010, and is a member of the ALTER (Arts/Langages: Transitions & Relations UR 7504) laboratory at UPPA, as well as an associate member of the OIKOS Ecocriticism Research Workshop at the University of Perpignan. She specialises in the relationship between visual arts and literature in the Iberian worlds, and has also taught Spanish civilisation, which has given her an extensive knowledge of the historical contexts and ideological currents of the modern and contemporary periods in the Iberian Peninsula.

Her research, initially devoted to the theory of literature and transgenerativity, has gradually turned towards committed forms of art and literature, ecopoetics and ecofeminism.

As such, she co-directed the projects "Femmes artistes, les formes de l'engagement" (2016-2018) and "L'art en partage citoyen" (2017-2019), at the intersection of the artistic, the political and the ecological, both of which resulted in collective publications. She coordinated the European Erasmus Mundus Design Measures project: PRIARTEC - 'Arts and ecologies: imaginaries, narratives and practices' (2022-2023), organised a study day in May 2023, 'Langues de terre et paroles d'eau', on environmental issues, and is currently coordinating, in collaboration with the UAEM (Mexico), a seminar on ecofeminism, 'Enraizadas. Mujeres, creación, medioambiente y ecoterritorialidad'.

## Output plan including publication and dissemination activities

This section only covers the doctoral student's stays at the universities where he or she is based, with periods of research secondment aimed at furthering his or her knowledge, scientific exchanges and the dissemination of results to associations and research bodies. This plan does not presume any opportunities for publications or participation in scientific events that are unknown at this time.

### o 1st year of thesis (2024-2025)

- September 2024-August 2025: Doctoral research carried out at the home university (UNITO, Turin, Italy)

- Spring 2025: **Participation ('presentation') in the II Seminar Enraizadas. Mujeres, creación, medioambiente y ecoterritorialidad** (UAEM - UPPA - UPVD) (online)

### o 2nd year of thesis (2025-2026)

- September 2025-November 2025: research stay in Spain, at the Public University of Navarre (UPNA, Pamplona, Spain) of the UNITA Alliance, then at the *Grupo de Investigación en Ecocrítica* (GIECO) of the University of Alcalá de Henares (Spain).

In Pamplona (UPNA):

- ✓ –Discussions with Amaia Nausia Pimoulier, historian specialising in the modern period in Navarre, author of a thesis and several works on the status of women in patriarchal society in the 16th and 17th centuries-
- ✓ Meetings with the Navarre group of the organisation La Memoria de las Brujas, Campaña por la memoria de las mujeres perseguidas por brujería (<http://memoriadelasbrujas.net/>).
- ✓ **Participation (paper) in the III Encuentro feminista internacional sobre la caza de brujas** (check with the organisers for the dates of the event).

In Alcalá de Henares (GIECO, <https://gieco.web.uah.es/wp/>):

- ✓ Research stay at GIECO, whose research areas include ecocritical theories and their application to textual analysis (ecofeminism, ecopostcolonialism, etc.) as well as the study of Nature as Otherness (nature's relationship with other marginalised groups, etc.). Article proposal for the journal Ecozon@, founded on the initiative of GIECO and the European Association for the Study of Literature, Culture and the Environment).

- December 2025-October 2026: 11-month assignment in the co-supervising university of the UNITA alliance, UPPA (Pau and Bayonne, France).

- ✓ September 2026: round table at the Espace culturel du Parvis in Pau, with authors from the corpus.
  - ✓ October 2026: Participation in the **doctoral day of the ALTER laboratory** (UPPA). Presentation of the thesis and its progress.
  - ✓ October 2026: **Participation in the Journées de l'Ecole Doctorale SSH de l'UPPA.**
- ### o 3rd year of thesis (2026-2027)

- From November 2026: Finalization of the thesis project at the home university (UNITO, Turin).

## Estimated schedule

### o First year of thesis (September 2024 - August 2025) - September

2024 - January 2025:

- ✓ precise state of the art, both from a theoretical and thematic point of view
- ✓ delimitation of the corpus of study: identification of potential works related to the issues raised, definition of selection criteria, justified choice of the works selected.

- February 2025 - August 2025:



2 tasks carried out in parallel:

- ✓ theoretical readings to underpin the doctoral reflection and research
- ✓ analysis of the works in the corpus from the perspective provided by the thesis topic
- **2nd year of thesis (September 2025 - August 2026)** - September

2025 - November 2025:

- ✓ continued analysis of the corpus
- ✓ further historical and theoretical studies (research stays in Spain)

-December 2025 drawing up a detailed

- ✓ thesis plan

- January 2026 - August 2026 start of writing (elements of introduction, problematisation,

- ✓ writing of the first part)

- **3rd year of thesis (September 2026 - August-September 2027)**

- ✓ continuation and completion of writing
- ✓ defence in September 2027