

Distractions of the devil

By [Scott Poole](#)

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Satan has had an awfully good 2014.

He might get a statue on the grounds of the Oklahoma State Capitol. Actually, he probably won't, but the New York-based Satanic Temple has proposed to have [the goat-headed image of Baphomet](#) built so that it can be seen by all visitors to the state's seat of government. And they also want people to be able to sit in his lap for meditation, and presumably to give him the list of toys they want for the next high unholy day.

The Oklahoma judicial system created a legal headache for themselves when they allowed a monument to the Ten Commandments to appear on Capitol grounds. How exactly can they say no to this new proposal? The religious right shifted its tactics over the last decade or so, moving away from the "we are a Judeo-Christian nation" boilerplate and attempting to use a religious pluralism argument to force Christian symbolism into the state sphere. Perhaps they should have been prepared for a poison pill such as this Satan-shaped one.

Then, [the devil got to Katy Perry](#). Her Grammy performance of "Dark Horse" employed smoke, fire, dark-hooded figures, and images of witches and witch-burnings. Perry, who in the past has been lauded in certain quarters for her "strong Christian background," finds herself proclaimed a Satanist or at least accused of using satanic imagery.

But Perry's performance didn't use satanic imagery so much as it borrowed from the European and transatlantic witch trials (1450-1770). Historians estimate that as many as 50,000 people may have been executed as witches during these centuries, the overwhelming majority of them women. In other words, if Perry employed images of evil, they were from a dark moment in Christianity's history and not the shadow world of some satanic horror film.

In movie theaters, the devil became a proud papa (again) with [Devil's Due](#), which received more attention than it deserved because of a clever viral marketing

campaign. It's worth paying attention to the number of horror movies about satanic babies and births of antichrists that have been appearing with some regularity for more than 40 years. These films reflect how much the politics of the womb have played a role in our cultural nightmares. *Rosemary's Baby* started this trend in the midst of conflict over the pill and a few years before *Roe v. Wade*. *Rosemary's Baby*, by the way, gets a reboot this year in a television miniseries.

Fascination with Old Scratch has waxed and waned since the beginning of the Christian era. Back in the second century, Justin Martyr gave him top billing by picking up on a stray comment by Paul and turning Satan into the serpent responsible for leading humanity into sin.

During the Middle Ages, the Latin Christian West often regarded him as a defeated figure, the church triumphant over him. Dante made him a terrifying creature in the lowest circle of the inferno, but a terrifying creature suspended in ice and burbling like a baby.

I teach a course on the history of Satan in the western world; the 20th-century portion focuses heavily on the devil's trajectory in the United States. My students—20ish, mostly not religious, and given to irony as a primary mode of interaction with the world—tend to see Satan as some weird antique in grandma's attic.

But I hope they learn that this has not been his history, even more recently. In the 1980s and '90s, a panic gripped the United States. A fevered anxiety gave birth to all manner of fears that satanic covens lurked in the night, using day care centers as fronts, hiding in the lyrics of heavy metal albums, and seducing the young through games such as *Dungeons and Dragons*.

Satan's no joke. But our culture turns to him for language of evil because he's much more fun than real-world social problems. Who wouldn't want to talk about the Great Big Bad, cape swirling behind him, instead of about growing income inequality? America's complex class system, which seems to become more rigid all the time, seems awfully taxing to the mind and moral capacities when we can read about Lucifer in all his lurid majesty instead.

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