

MASTURBATION, MANDRAKE ROOT, AND MISOGYNY: THE BIO- AND
NECROPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF RENAISSANCE *HEXENBILDER*

by

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HONORS THESIS

Submitted to Texas State University
in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for
graduation in the Honors College
May 2020

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am deeply indebted to my thesis supervisor, Dr. Jennifer Stob, and second reader, Mr. Estéban Hinojosa. Dr. Stob has provided unwavering support and wonderful constructive criticism essential to completing this paper. Her profound belief in my work is not to go unnoticed. Mr. Hinojosa lent his unparalleled knowledge of Renaissance art to this project. His suggestions and guidance were invaluable to this thesis. Without their combined help, my thesis would not be the paper it is today.

I would also like to thank Dr. Nicole Taylor for providing valuable advice and suggestions for this paper. I am also grateful to Ms. Tara Spies Smith of Albert A. Alkek Library who assisted me in finding research materials for this project.

Finally, I would like to recognize the unwavering assistance of family. My parents, grandparents, and sister supported me greatly throughout this project. Without their help, this thesis would not have been finished on time.

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ABSTRACT

In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, several artists created prints and drawings of witches, also called *Hexenbilder*. In both German and Italian-speaking areas, artists expressed their cultural and religious understandings of witches and witchcraft. However, these artists also had their own political, social, and religious motives. The twentieth and twenty-first-century theories of biopolitics and necropolitics can assist in examining these motivations. Artists were hoping to educate their audiences about the dangers of witches and how to identify them. Artworks by artists such as Albrecht Dürer, Raphael, and Hans Baldung Grien depicted the horrors and grotesqueness of witches. These artists wanted to make witches' inability to be "good" biocitizens and thus needing to be executed well known. By analyzing *Hexenbilder* through the lens of these interrelated theories, we can better understand the bio- and necropolitical role that artworks played in encouraging and justifying the state-authorized control, persecution, and execution of thousands of women deemed witches.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the Early Modern Period, Europe faced a crisis: a massive influx of witches. To help fight this problem, religious and legal experts published illustrated books to help local magistrates and clerics find and punish witches.¹ Before the publication of witch-hunting manuals in the middle of the fifteenth century, culminating in Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger's *Malleus Maleficarum* (*The Hammer of the Witches*) in 1486, witchcraft was an infrequently charged crime, and prosecution was unsanctioned by the Roman Catholic Church.² However, The *Malleus Maleficarum*, along with Innocent VIII's 1484 Papal Bull *Summis desiderantes affectibus*, resulted in widespread and far-reaching witchcraft accusations and trials.³ The Carolina legal code enacted by Charles V of the Holy Roman Empire was the first law that allowed convicted witches to be put to death. The English Parliament passed similar acts during the reigns of both Elizabeth I and James I that allowed for convicted witches to be sentenced to death.⁴ Witch trials began in earnest in the first decade of the seventeenth century.⁵ Somewhere between 100,000 and a million "witches" were executed during this time.⁶ In central and western

1. Silvia Federici. *Caliban and the Witch*. Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2004, 165-166.

2. Federici, 165-166.

3. H. Sidky, *Witchcraft, Lycanthropy, Drugs, and Disease: An Anthropological Study of the European Witch-hunts*. New York: Peter Lang, 1997, 25-27. Kramer and Sprenger also included the Papal bull in the *Malleus Maleficarum*. See note 2 above.

4. Federici, 166.

5. Sidky, 28.

6. Sidky, 25.

Europe, where these trials were the most common, seventy to eighty percent of convicted and executed witches were women.⁷

Women accused of being witches were overwhelmingly those who failed to perform as “good” biocitizens by their peers and religious institutions because they were unmarried, widowed, and/or childless failing to fulfill their culturally required reproductive and gender roles. Early modern men feared that these women with “deviant” sexualities that excluded men, leading them to declare these women witches. The witch trials were a technology used to control and punish “deviant” women that went outside the established boundaries of sexuality and gender.

Biopolitics is a form of power intending to control biological processes throughout a population via regulatory technologies. These technologies are created by the state to regulate sexual reproduction. One such technology is the *Hexenbilder* created before the dawn of the witch-hunts. These became a way for illiterate Europeans to learn about the dangers of witches and why they should fear them.

According to Michel Foucault, the transition from feudalism to capitalism was also the beginning of biopower in the hands of the people during the Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.⁸ For example, Foucault cites the

7. Hans Peter Broedel. *The Malleus Maleficarum and the Construction of Witchcraft: Theology and Popular Belief*. Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press; Palgrave, 2003, 167.

8. Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality*. American ed. Vol. 1. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978, 135-159.

”medicalization of the family.”⁹ This process involved the rise of medical experts writing treatises on childrearing and vaccination campaigns.¹⁰ These treatises allowed the state to assert control over the discourse surrounding how citizens are produced. While Foucault argues that this turn appeared in the eighteenth century, the evidence from philosopher Silvia Federici better supports this happening during the early modern era.¹¹ Silvia Federici examines the importance that women had in the turn from feudalism to capitalism, a topic frequently ignored by other philosophers and economic historians.¹² These theories work together to explain the persecution of witches in Early Modern Europe.

The work of Foucault and Federici elucidates how the persecution of witches was an attempt to control female embodiment and punish female embodiment that did not align with early capitalist society. Necropolitics expands on Foucault’s concept of biopower. Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe explains that this theory states that the ultimate expression of a state’s power is in its “capacity to dictate who may live and who must die.”¹³ According to Mbembe, this tool has been used by political powers for centuries in varying forms, such as the transatlantic slave trade and the Israeli occupation

9. Michel Foucault. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*. Edited by Colin Gordon. New York: Harvester Press, 1980, 172-175.

10. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 174.

11. Michel Foucault. *The Essential Foucault*, edited by Paul Rabinow, and Nikolas Rose. New York, NY: New Press, 2003, 202; Federici.

12. For example, Federici, 47-50; 191-2.

13. Achille Mbembe. “Necropolitics.” *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11-40. DOI: 10.1215/08992363-15-1-11, 11.

of Palestine.¹⁴ While these two examples seem to be completely different at first glance, they all viewed people as expendable bodies that serve state interests. In executing witches, political and religious powers could control the politics of life, reproduction, and death in their constituencies. By depicting witches as monstrous, disgusting women that live outside of prescribed gender roles, artists argued for their executions as well.

This thesis examines late fifteenth and early sixteenth century drawings and prints from German and Italian-speaking regions. In the period shortly before the witch trials began in earnest, it was important for artists to make the concept of a witch and what she looked like accessible to all denizens of these regions. These prints and drawings depict witches as unable to reproduce correctly, thus being evil and in contact with evil forces and therefore must be put to death. It is important to note that these works, being reproducible prints and drawings, were media that were transportable and accessible, meaning the images' acquisition and dissemination transcended class or regional barriers. By showing them as deviant and grotesque, artists were petitioning citizens and authorities to begin executing witches for their perceived "crimes." Together, the theories of biopower and necropolitics and selected prints by Baldung, Dürer, and Raphael and Raimondi suggest that representations of dysregulated and non-reproductive female bodies were important tools operating within the necropolitical and biopolitical technology of the witch hunts of in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were a technology developed to control and punish dysregulated and non-reproductive female bodies. The images are more than illustrations of the supernatural or the unorthodox, they

14. Mbembe, 21-30.

deliberately condemn women who do not conform to contemporary biopolitical expectations.

II. GENDER AND WITCHCRAFT

Much of the analysis of both the witch trials in general, and *Hexenbilder* in particular, have been on the role of gender, namely the fact that the vast majority of those accused, tried, convicted, and executed for witchcraft were women. Additionally, most *Hexenbilder* depict women as the witches, with men as victims (as in Hans Baldung Grien's *The Bewitched Groomsman*) or as demonic consorts (as in Baldung's Freiburg drawings discussed in the second chapter of this paper). Many of these show women as going against culturally prescribed gender roles, such as leading men with their hair flowing freely in the wind. These women are wretched biocitizens, putting them at risk of execution.

Albrecht Dürer came from a middle-class family of goldsmiths in Nuremberg. In 1497, he began working with an agent to sell his prints outside of the city.¹⁵ According to art historian Linda C. Hults, his interest in witchcraft as a subject began in this period as well.¹⁶ It is important to note that this was also when religious and political authorities in Nuremberg began to prosecute women for witchcraft, with the especially notable case of Margarete Salchingerin in 1489.¹⁷

15. Linda C. Hults. *The Witch as Muse: Art, Gender, and Power in Early Modern Europe*. United States: 2005, 64.

16. Hults *The Witch as Muse*, 67.

17. Hults. *The Witch as Muse*, 66-7.

Of these *Hexenbilder*, one of the best known and most analyzed is Albrecht Dürer's engraving *The Witch* (figure 1.1). The engraving depicts a naked elderly woman riding a goat backward while holding a distaff and one of the goat's horns. Her body is unusually muscular.¹⁸ The goat is held up by *putti*, straining to carry the weight. Two more *putti* are in the foreground, one collapsed, the other about to do so. The woman's hair flies in the opposite direction of the wind as a storm begins to pour in the upper-left-hand corner.

This image shows the inversion of the normal, more specifically sexual disorder. Not only is the woman riding the goat backward, but Albrecht Dürer's monogram is rendered back-to-front. According to Zika, riding backward on an animal was a common punishment for not performing¹⁹ one's gender "correctly" in the Middle Ages.²⁰ Additionally, the goat was a symbol for lust in the period and therefore strongly connected to witches. In the sixteenth century, when this print was created, horns were associated with cuckoldry and gender inversion. The woman depicted in *The Witch* has control over sexuality and the men in her life.

The goat has the tail of a fish or serpent, a motif commonly associated with the Roman god Saturn. The Capricorn was linked to social outcasts and embodied by evil in

18. Zika, 27.

19. The concept of gender being performed comes from Judith Butler. For more see, Judith Butler. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. London: Routledge, 2011. Accessed March 6, 2020. ProQuest Ebook Central, xi-xxiv.

20. 28.

the form of cannibals and witches.²¹ By depicting his witch with a Capricorn (i.e., horned) goat, Dürer shows her as the daughter of Saturn. This means that she can assume her father's sexual aggression and power.²²



Figure 1.1. Albrecht Dürer, *The Witch*. 1500-1501, Engraving on paper, 11.5 x 7.1 cm. The Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts.
<https://www.clarkart.edu/Collection/2985>. Image courtesy Clark Art Institute.

21. Hults. *The Witch as Muse*, 74.

22. Zika, 29.

The distaff coming from thighs forms an “appropriated phallus.”²³ A distaff, commonly used for spinning thread or yarn, usually represents her femininity, but here it becomes a symbol of her assumed masculinity. Her old age and inability to reproduce make this witch’s sexuality particularly abhorrent.²⁴ By combining masculine and feminine traits and sexualities, the witch subverts gender norms and therefore falls victim to biopolitical pressures. While she gained dominance over men, this power made her dangerous and a potential usurper to patriarchal power structures. As such, it became necessary for those in power to execute her in order to remain in power.

Unlike most other prints of the era, *Lo Stregozzo* (figure 1.2) depicts men as witches as well as women. This engraving was made in the 1520s by Marcantonio and Agostino de Musi after Raphael or Giulio Romano. The work evokes the style typical of the Roman High Renaissance while the anticlassical motif does not.²⁵ Although the exact artist remains unknown due to state of the engraved plates, it was produced by the Marcantonio School, of which Agostino de Musi²⁶ was a student.²⁷ Furthermore, this image was extremely easy to sell due to its popularity of the witch motif in the period. This was due to the increase in witch trials and publications on the subject.²⁸ Therefore,

23. Zika, 29.

24. Hulst *The Witch as Muse*, 74.

25. Hulst *The Witch as Muse*, 42.

26. His name is also occasionally given as Agostino Veneziano.

27. Hulst *The Witch as Muse*, 44.

28. Hulst *The Witch as Muse*, 44.

this image would have been widely circulated because of the growing demand for *Hexenbilder* in Rome.

Lo Stregozzo depicts several individuals, both men and a solitary woman, in a procession. The woman rides the skeleton of a large beast, while the man below her rides the remains of a goat with the wings of a bat. At the feet of the woman lie crying babies. Another person at the front of the procession rides a living goat. In the background, plants grow, reaching heights higher than the people in the engraving. As in Dürer's engraving (figure 1.1), the revelers have free-flowing hair. They all appear naked, apart from the trumpet player in the front. It is an image of chaotic nature and the pagan past of Italy.



Figure 1.2. Marcantonio Raimondi and Agostino de Musi after Raphael or Giulio Romano, *Lo Stregozzo* (*The Witches' Procession*). 1520s, engraving on paper, 30 cm x 63 cm (11 13/16 in. x 24 13/16 in.). The Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, Texas.

Notably, *Lo Stregozzo* combines the heroic male nude motif common in Italian High Renaissance art with the “humiliating” naked witch.²⁹ While the nude male bodies

29. Hults *The Witch as Muse*, 42.

seduce the viewer, the naked female body is meant to evoke revulsion.³⁰ This is a procession of men serving an old witch, pulling her chariot of bones and trumpeting before her.³¹ The juxtaposition of youthful male athletes with a haggard woman leading them challenged the widely accepted views of gender in sixteenth-century Rome. As in Dürer's *The Witch* (figure 1.1), this woman subverts expected gender roles and controls and manipulates men to her will.

The witch at the right of the composition has a hoard of infants at her feet. She also has a jar in her arms. This image shows her preparing to use the children for demonic purposes. According to Hults, Italian witch beliefs held that witches kidnapped and “vampirized” infants before turning them into flying ointment.³² Although the image is only vaguely about witchcraft, it carries over elements of female usurpation that previous artists also depicted in their prints and drawings.

The image, inspired by excavations of the first-century Domus Aurea, or Golden House of Nero in the 1480s is a work of *groteschi*. These works were usually fantastical in nature.³³ Therefore, this work uses pagan imagery of Rome's ancient past. This image used a popular motif in order to shape the consensus regarding witchcraft in Rome and the surrounding areas. In so doing, the artists involved would encourage their viewers to prosecute and execute supposed witches.

30. Zika, 125.

31. Hults *The Witch as Muse*, 45.

32. Hults *The Witch as Muse*, 42-43.

33. Hults *The Witch as Muse*, 39.

Both *The Witch* and *Lo Stregozzo* encouraged their viewer to think about how witches had subverted gender roles and usurped male power. In acting out of their culturally prescribed gender norms and mores, witches became targets. Older, postmenopausal women were especially vulnerable due to their lack of sexual reproductive ability. As such, removing them from society by expulsion, and eventually execution, they would no longer be a threat to masculinity and patriarchal power structures.

III. SEXUALITY

As a young artist in Albrecht Dürer's workshop, Hans Baldung Grien was likely exposed to artistic and literary depictions of witches, on which he later modeled his own depictions of witches.³⁴ In Hans Baldung Grien's chiaroscuro prints and drawings from 1512 to 1516, he and his workshop frequently drew witches with defiant and leaking bodies. In this period, chiaroscuro prints and drawings, like the Freiburg witches, were widely circulated among the German-speaking elite. These prints were propaganda to urge the local notable men of Freiburg, especially jurists, that Baldung associated with to persecute and execute "uncontrolled" and "wild" women as witches.³⁵ They were shared with his close group of (exclusively male) friends.³⁶ Baldung's drawings are meant to evoke both sexual arousal and disgust.³⁷ His drawings were also the precursors to future misogynistic depictions of predominantly female witches³⁸ whereas before both men and women could be witches.³⁹

A drawing by Hans Baldung Grien explored one of the defining features of witches: having sexual intercourse with a demon or the Devil himself.⁴⁰ In *Naked Young Witch with Fiend in Shape of Dragon* (figure 2.1), we see a young woman holding a staff

34. Charles Zika. *The Appearance of Witchcraft*. London: Routledge, 2007, 11.

35. Hulst *The Witch as Muse*, 91.

36. Hulst *Witch as Muse*, 24.

37. Hulst *Witch as Muse*, 95-96.

38. Zika, 5.

39. Zika, 24-25.

40. Sidky, 42-45; Smith, 88.

that she is penetrating a dragon-shaped demon with. In the background of the composition, two demonic infants are playing with the dragon. One is flaring the dragon's nostrils, making the dragon grimace in pain, while the other is grasping the tail that the woman is inserting her staff into. Hans Baldung Grien illustrates a two-tongued dragon, with one tongue appearing to penetrate a woman's vagina. At the same time, the witch is penetrating the dragon with a staff, causing the second tongue to curl. These images of penetration suggest cunnilingus, as written by Hults.⁴¹ However, the first tongue could also be viewed as menstrual blood streaming from the woman rather than lashing out from the dragon. Whether a dragon's tongue is performing cunnilingus or a geyser of menstrual flux, both held unsavory and unsanitary connotations in Renaissance and early modern thought. Menstrual blood is symbolic of the female body failing to be a stable, solid, and controlled male body.⁴² It also represents a sexual consummation of the witch's pact with Satan. The hatred of women having such close relationships with demons parallels that of the Biblical Eve taking fruit from Satan in the guise of a snake, thus leading to the downfall of humanity. Women who allegedly "consummated" their relationship with Satan became witches.

41. Linda C. Hults. "Baldung and the Witches of Freiburg: The Evidence of Images." *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18, no. 2 (Oct 1, 1987): 249-276, 269.

42. Belinda Johnston. "Renaissance Body Matters: Judith Butler and the Sex That Is One." In *Butler Matters: Judith Butler's Impact on Feminist and Queer Studies*, 127: Ashgate, 2005, 130.



Figure 2.1. Hans Baldung Grien, *Naked Young Witch with Fiend in Shape of Dragon*, 1515, pen on brown-tinted paper, 29 x 20 cm, Staatliche Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe, <https://www.kunsthalle-karlsruhe.de/kunstwerke/Hans-Baldung/Nackte-junge-Hexe-und-fischgestaltiger-Drache/39F39505474227735CA3BAB20433486E>.

According to Kramer, all demonic and satanic intercourse potentially leads to half-demon, half-witch children.⁴³ In the background of Baldung's work, two "putti"⁴⁴

43. Stephens *Demon Lovers*, 47-48. Stephens has an in-depth explanation of demon reproduction from 63-69.

44. I put *putti* in quotation marks because the ones depicted here are unlike contemporary portrayals of *putti*. For more, see Ian Chilvers. "Putto." In *The Oxford Dictionary of Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

are playing with the dragon. One *putto* is holding open the dragon's nostrils, which appears to give it great pain; the other is holding the demon's tail, allowing the witch to insert her staff into its unholy orifice. The second *putto*, in the left corner, has a look of fear on his countenance. Authorities denounced witches as "inverted mothers"⁴⁵ as they claimed witches inducted their demonic offspring into witchcraft. Kramer held that witchcraft itself began with these half-demon children.⁴⁶ Other times, demonic children simply disappeared, supposedly to be reunited with their evil sires.⁴⁷ These fears are analogous to contemporary early modern and Renaissance fears of impotence. A human male could not inseminate his wife, but a demon or Satan himself could.⁴⁸ Additionally, more witches and "Satanists" being born or converted stood for an obvious religious and political threat for Christian Europe. For both Kramer and Baldung, witches having sexual intercourse with demons represented a threat to both their masculinity and Christendom as a whole.

Another issue that Baldung portrays is the idea that the female body needs to be controlled due to its leaky, fluid, and viscous nature.⁴⁹ The artist presents a body that

45. " Karen Newman. *Fashioning Femininity and English Renaissance Drama*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991, 58.

46. Stephens *Demon Lovers*, 71-72.

47. Stephens *Demon Lovers*, 73.

48. This topic is covered extensively in W. Stephens "Witches Who Steal Penises".

49. Johnston, 137.

needs to be controlled by the “solid” and stable male body.⁵⁰ This depiction of the unregulated (female) body is Baldung urging his viewers to use biopower to regulate witches’ unruly and viscous bodies.

Likewise, in *Witches Preparing for the Sabbath Flight* (figure 2.2), Baldung depicts women with uncontrolled bodies. The untamed and free-flowing hair of the women in both this drawing and *Naked Young Witch with Fiend in Shape of Dragon* (figure 2.1) symbolize their wild and uncontained sexuality.⁵¹ The woman in the lower-left corner is lighting her flatulence on fire. By her feet is a vomiting cat. At the time, cats were a symbol of lust.⁵² The vomit represents the uncontrollable and grotesque nature of their disobedient body. Body fluids were gendered, and the female body was seen as a formless disorder that constantly emitted fluids. In *Witches Preparing for the Sabbath Flight*, the scene portrayed by Baldung represents the chaotic nature of the female body through the bodily fluids emitted by the woman in the bottom left corner and the cat.

50. The history of sex in the European context is too great for this paper and is better described by Johnston in *Butler Matters* and Emily Martin. *The Woman in the Body*. Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 1987, 27-33.

51. Zika, 12.

52. Hulst "The Witches of Freiburg," 254.



Figure 2.2. Hans Baldung, *Witches Preparing for the Sabbath Flight*. C. 1514, Pen and black ink on paper, 28 x 19.7 cm. Available from ARTstor, <http://www.artstor.org> (accessed March 27, 2019).

Another frequent accusation brought up against witches by religious and legal authorities was the murder and consumption of unbaptized infants.⁵³ Babies were said to have been stolen by witches, who allegedly ate the children's flesh for magical and Satanic purposes.⁵⁴ Thus, cannibal witches were the most diabolical and terrifying of all witches.⁵⁵ Infants and children would be brought to the witches' gatherings and sacrificed.⁵⁶ The children's bodies were thought to have then either been consumed or

53. Broedel, 178.

54. Sidky, 33-36.

55. Broedel, 149.

56. Broedel, 124.

used to create magical potions.⁵⁷ Their consumption was likened to a demonic reversal of the Catholic Eucharist, where believers partake in the consumption of what they believe to be the body and blood of Jesus.⁵⁸ Like the witch in *Naked Young Witch with Fiend in the Shape of Dragon* (figure 2.1), these women were also alleged to have participated in “maternal inversion.”⁵⁹ Instead of nurturing children, witches allegedly cooked and ate them.⁶⁰

Compared to Baldung’s depiction of the Virgin Mary in his *Madonna and Child* (Figure 2.3), these drawings of witches show the opposite ideal of womanhood. The Madonna sits enthroned surrounded by the nebulous vision of heaven, cradling the infant Jesus. Unlike the witches, her child is calm and radiant in her lap, not playing with demons. Also different from the witches, Mary is fully clothed from her neck to her feet, not naked and unmannerly witches. The putti surrounding her are not mischievous, but grateful, playing clarinets around her and her son. Mary represented the ideal woman, the opposite of witches. This print shows the difference in Baldung’s depictions between the women that he thought deserved respect and those that did not.

57. Broedel, 128.

58. Broedel, 128.

59. Newman, 58.

60. Johnston, 135.



Figure 2.3. Hans Baldung Grien, *Madonna and Child*. 1515/1517, Woodcut on laid paper, 37.9 x 26.1 cm (14 15/16 x 10 1/4 in.), National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.110016.html>.

As women that fail to conform to cultural ideas of sexual identity for women by doing things such as masturbation, having sex with demons, and/or consuming the flesh of unbaptized children, witches became the ultimate example of terrible biocitizens. In *Naked Young Witch with Fiend in Shape of Dragon* (figure 2.1), Hans Baldung Grien illustrated a woman who allegedly “consummated” her relationship with Satan, thus making her a witch, symbolizing her failure to perform her role as a “good” biocitizen. Baldung’s drawings exemplify the horrific nature of witches, and their inability to be appropriately controlled by biopolitical entities.

Due to witches' chaotic and uncontrollable nature that is highlighted in these drawings, Baldung argues for their executions by the state as well. As such, these become necropolitical drawings that argue for the execution of any woman that "misbehaves" regarding her sexuality. Baldung shows in both *Naked Young Witch with Fiend in Shape of Dragon* (figure 2.1) and *Witches Preparing for the Sabbath Flight* (figure 2.2) that witches must be executed to protect the public.

In depicting these women as monstrous sexual deviants, Baldung argued for their executions at the hands of the state. Importantly, Baldung included images of death and Hell in these two drawings. *Naked Young Witch with Fiend in the Shape of Dragon* (figure 2.1) illustrates a witch along with a demon and her half-demon children. *Witches Preparing for the Sabbath Flight* (figure 2.2) also has images of death. Baldung shows one of these women holding a mock rosary with a fetal skull on it, demonstrating her ability to take life. Not only were these women capable of taking life and dally with demonic forces, they could also be punished, namely, executed for such practices.

IV. THE ROLE OF PLANTS IN WITCH BELIEFS

A third major component of Renaissance *Hexenbilder* is the image of witches demonstrating a knowledge of plants, especially those of the Solanaceae family. Some plants from this family contain hallucinogenic compounds, in particular, tropane alkaloids. Plants containing this compound associated with witches include deadly nightshade,⁶¹ black henbane, and mandrake.⁶² These plants challenged the predominantly male fields of medicine and pharmacology by allowing women to take control of their bodies into their own hands.

Hans Baldung Grien's 1510 woodcut *The Witches* (figure 3.1), shows the power of plants in Early Modern German witch beliefs. The print shows several women in a woodland setting centered around a bursting pot. In the background, a goat and cat accompany the women. One woman in the middle of the image holds up a length of fabric and a platter of plucked birds. Additionally, the composition contains several cooking forks: the woman at the top of the image is flying on one alongside a goat, and a woman at the bottom right is sitting inside a triangle formed by three cooking forks. Both women are holding pots of what appears to be witch ointment.

61. Also known as belladonna.

62. Richard Rudgley. "The Archaic Use of Hallucinogens in Europe: An Archaeology of Altered States," *Addiction* 90, no. 2 (February 1995): 163-164, 164.



Figure 3.1. Hans Baldung Grien, *The Witches*, 1510, woodcut, 36.6 x 25.9 cm (14 7/16 x 10 3/16 in), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, United States, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/416796>.

Witch ointment was a substance that religious authorities alleged that witches used. These ointments contained the previously mentioned Solanaceae plants, along with the rendered fat of unbaptized children.⁶³ When applied topically, plants containing certain hallucinogenic alkaloids are absorbed into the skin of the user.⁶⁴ In using these

63. Stephens *Demon Lovers*, 267.

64. Wade Davis. "Hallucinogenic Plants and Their Use in Traditional Societies," in *Sacred Realms: Readings in the Anthropology of Religion*, ed. Richard Warms, James Garber, and R. Jon McGee (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 204-206.

drugs, especially with the fat of children in the ointment, witches were demonized as bad biocitizens that needed to be put to death.

According to historian Charles Zika, a frequent image in early modern Germany is that of the witch riding a cooking fork (*Ofengabeln*).⁶⁵ For example, in *Witches Preparing for the Sabbath Flight* (figure 2.2), the woman on the far right appears to be rubbing a cooking fork against her vulva, which is suggesting masturbation.⁶⁶ The woman standing in the left of the image also has the fork between her legs. Broomsticks or staves like the ones in *Naked Young Witch with Fiend in The Shape of Dragon* (figure 2.1) may have been used by witches to insert hallucinogenic nightshade plants through their vaginas.⁶⁷ According to Hults, "the drugs in witches' ointments would have aroused sensitive vaginal membranes, a motive that probably also lay behind the greasing of the various staffs on which witches flew."⁶⁸ Vaginas, being mucous membranes, absorb the intoxicating hallucinogens more readily than taking the drugs by mouth or through the skin. Durschmied posits that these drugs allowed for relaxed inhibitions, allowing for the group sex frequently described in confessed witches' testimonies.⁶⁹ He also suggests that

65. Zika, 11, 239. While most modern-day Americans associate witches with brooms rather than cooking forks, this was not the case in sixteenth-century Germany according to Zika. France, however, was depicting witches with brooms.

66. Stephens *Demon Lovers*, 301.

67. Michael J Harner. "The Role of Hallucinogenic Plants in European Witchcraft." In *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*, edited by Michael J. Harner, 125-147. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1973, 131, 128.

68. Hults "The Witches of Freiburg," 258.

69. 171. However, these allegations of group sex largely came from confessions given under duress, namely torture. See Durschmied, 151-2.

masturbation could have been used to alleviate sexual repression among unmarried people at a time when sex was only condoned within the confines of a church-sanctioned marriage.⁷⁰ The image of witches riding on cooking forks may come from the real practices of drug use and masturbation. Other sources, including Hults' 1987 article, only cite Harner for this information. Other scholars, chiefly anthropologists of religion and ethnobotanists support Harner's claim. These include Wade Davis⁷¹ and Richard Rudgley.⁷² However, these scholars' claims remain controversial due to minimal archaeological evidence to support them.

In Albrecht Dürer's 1497 engraving *Four Nude Women* (figure 3.2), Solanaceae plants make another appearance connected to witches. In this print, four naked women stand in a circle, with a skull and bones lying at their feet. To the women's right, a fiery image of hell and the devil appears in an open doorway. Above the women, a ball with the letters "OGH" inscribed on it hangs from the ceiling. OGH refers to prayer, that translated from German means, "Oh God protect us from witchcraft."⁷³ What this ball represents is open to interpretation. Hults writes that this is likely "an enlarged 'male'

70. Durschmied, 171.

71. Davis, 204-206.

72. 163-4.

73. German: *O Gott hüte uns von Zaubereyen*. Hults, *The Witch as Muse*, 62.

mandrake berry.”⁷⁴ Due to the interpretation of the ball as a mandrake berry, art historians have interpreted this image as depicting love magic.



Figure 3.2. Albrecht Dürer, *Four Nude Women*, 1497, engraving, 21.6 x 15.6 cm (8 1/2 x 6 1/8 in), The Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts, United States, <https://www.clarkart.edu/Collection/1358>. Image courtesy Clark Art Institute.

We know that these women are witches because of their nakedness. As German art historian Sigrid Schade has mentioned either nakedness is not a part of being a witch,

74. Hults *The Witch as Muse*, 72. Other ideas that have been proposed include the Apple of Discord and a celestial or terrestrial sphere.

then any naked woman could potentially be a witch if not otherwise explained.⁷⁵

Therefore, we can assume that these women are using mandrake for illicit purposes, such as the previously mentioned witch ointments. Other reasons for the mandrake may be to dominate men and control conception and birth.⁷⁶ By being in control of their reproductive lives, these women went against Renaissance notions of female sexuality. Furthermore, these women challenge male political and social authority and knowledge.⁷⁷ By doing this, witches gained autonomy from men and male-dominated institutions, such as governments and religious institutions.

Hans Baldung Grien used the bodies of old women and dying trees to get his message of necropolitics across in *The Witches* (figure 3.1). The dying trees tell the viewer of this print that these women are also meant to die shortly. The women's ages and wrinkles indicate that they are no longer able to reproduce, making their nakedness terrifying. These women become monsters worthy only of death and destruction.

Likewise, Albrecht Dürer depicted the necropolitical implications of *Hexenbilder* most clearly in *Four Nude Women* (figure 3.2). By portraying his witches alongside a door that leads to Hell and depicts the Devil himself, Dürer showed the final place that these women's souls would rest. Additionally, he placed bones at their feet,

75. Hulst *The Witch as Muse*, 71. What Schade means by this is that witches were depicted as being outside of the sexual norms for society. By being naked instead of the more respectable nude, these women are deemed wicked and terrifying.

76. Hulst *The Witch as Muse*, 72.

77. Hulst *The Witch as Muse*, 72.

demonstrating their ghastly powers. By depicting witches as deadly, Dürer encouraged his audience to execute witches en masse.

By being sexually apart from men, witches became unwanted and despised biocitizens. Their mere existence was enough for artists to portray them as disgusting women that used drugs for illicit purposes. In doing so, these women became targets for political and religious authorities to deem them unworthy of life. As such, they became subject to necropolitics and the dangers of execution.

V. CONCLUSION

The fear of witches that lead to the "epidemic" of witch trials can be explained by biopolitics. Foucault's theory can be applied to these trials by explaining why some people were persecuted over others. Because of their inability to control their lust, women became targets. Women who were unmarried, widowed, or childless were especially at risk because they did not perform their role as "good" biocitizens to get married, stay married, and raise Christian children. Women who were thought to have engaged in "deviant" or "illegitimate" sexualities were also punished. Witch trials were a technology to control people, especially women, and their bodies to follow rules to further the governing body.

Both Italian and German Renaissance artists were concerned with gendered notions of the body regarding witchcraft. While Albrecht Dürer only portrayed women as witches, Italian artists like Raphael, Marcantonio, and Il Musi's work indicated that they believed that both men and women could be witches. Dürer's *The Witch* shows not only the importance of gender and gender performativity in the determination of who was a witch but age as well. As such, it demonstrates the dangers of older women refusing to accept femininity. *Lo Stregozzo* is an example of how ideas of what witches did and who witches were varied based on region, religious sentiment⁷⁸ and time. The concept of the witch was not a single, static idea across Western Europe, but rather numerous variations

78. As previously mentioned, while Dürer and Baldung's works predate the Reformation, both artists were strongly involved in the movement. Additionally, Baldung had already expressed anti-cleric sentiments in his works.

based on the same religious texts that changed over the centuries and based on regional histories and beliefs.

Additionally, these prints and drawings of witches illustrate why these artists and others thought that witches and their deviant sexualities should be persecuted. By depicting witches as cannibals that kill infants, Hans Baldung Grien argued that they should be punished for harming society on a biological level. In showing them emitting bodily fluids, he wanted viewers to see uncontrollable and disgusting bodies that must be regulated by others, namely people with solid and stable *male* bodies.

Likewise, Dürer showed that witches were drug-users that were deceiving men with their ability to control reproduction. This narrative is also expressed by Baldung who furthers it by including the use of fat from unbaptized children in witch ointments. These images exhibit why witches were a menace to society and needed to be killed off to protect the young and vulnerable. *Hexenbilder* exhibit why witches and their bodies needed to be controlled and regulated by the more “restrained” and “civilized” men.

Analyzing *Hexenbilder* also allows for greater discussion of the portrayal of women’s bodies in art history. While this certainly is not new, expanding it back to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries allows for a greater understanding of the role of the male gaze in art.⁷⁹ This fetishistic gaze is particularly obvious in Baldung’s erotica which not only argues for these women being monsters but also sex objects and fetishes. Other artists like Dürer and Marcantonio show that this gaze has the power to turn women into objects and fetishes, it can turn women into demons and villains. As such, these images

79. The concept of the “male gaze” comes from Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 837-45.

can be viewed not only as examples of propaganda to persuade the public to execute witches, but artworks to entice the sexual appetites of powerful men in Renaissance Europe.

Furthermore, interpreting *Hexenbilder* through a women's studies perspective gives the women that were accused of and executed for witchcraft greater agency. Their voices become heard again, without sensationalist rhetoric that dominates much of the media that is about these trials. Knowing the political and religious forces that condemned these women allows for a better understanding of their lives and the suffering that they went through. Women's and gender studies cannot be considered complete without scholarship on these trials and the role that gender and sexuality had to play in them.

By examining *Hexenbilder* through the lenses of biopolitics and necropolitics, scholars can better understand the historical control of human bodies, especially those of women. As mentioned earlier, Foucault wrote his theory under the assumption that biopolitics and the regulation of sexuality were originally widespread during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. However, analyses like this allow for a different, subversive approach to this theory, showing that these processes were in continuous use by political and religious powers since at least the Renaissance.

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