Tegan Recker

Senior Seminar

Prof. Chris Platts

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Wicked Women: The Illustrated Broadsheet *Witches' Sabbath in Trier* as an Othering Mechanism in 16th Century German Print Culture

The witch trials of early modern Europe occurred from the 1400s through the 1700s, killing about 50,000 people, and still occupy the imaginations of those today. Over half of those who died were executed in Germany, the heartland of witch persecution.[1] One of the largest witch hunts in Europe happened in the sixteenth century, in the Catholic Archdiocese of Trier in Southwest Germany, where over 792 people were executed for witchcraft, while persecutors consequently gained material wealth.[2] Seventy five to eighty five percent of the accused were women, and a third of those executed were members of the nobility class.[3] A copper-plate engraved broadsheet from 1593, *Hexensabbat (Witches' Sabbath) in Trier* (Fig. 1), printed in Erfurt and published in a book by Thomas Sigfridus and titled "Richtige Antwort auff die Frage: ob die Zeuberer und Zeuberin mit ihrem zauber Pulfer, Kranckheiten, oder den Todt selber beybringen können …" (Correct answer to the question: whether the sorcerers and sorceresses can bring about illnesses and death with their magical powder…) , depicts a chaotic witches' dance or sabbath, accompanied by German text that labels certain sections of the piece with rhyming couplets. Dozens of witches participate in rituals, gather around cauldrons, fly through

[1] Warfield, Abaigeal. Witchcraft Illustrated: The crime of witchcraft in early Modern German ... Accessed February 1, 2024. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctv2gjwnfd.25.
[2] Some historians have estimated that more than 1,000 people were executed in the Trier witch trials, but unfortunately many of the historical records regarding the trials have been destroyed or lost.
[3] Robert Walinski-Kiehl. Social History 25, no. 3 (2000): 346–48. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4286684.

the air, burn buildings, cause bad weather, and participate in sexual activity. The composition is incredibly dense, packed full with witches, animals, bones, and a gluttonous feast in the very left, with numerous references to the witches' sabbath myth that had formed by the late sixteenth century. This broadsheet that references the bloody Trier witch trials is the main focus of my research project, with two other images to situate the piece within the iconography of witches and print culture of sixteenth century Germany. Broadsheets like this one were a commodity, reporting sensationalized stories of witchcraft accompanied by visual representations of witches that reflected misogynistic ideas about women and actual witchcraft beliefs.

Beginning in the fifteenth century, mass media in the form of prints was being developed and popularized in early modern Germany. Woodcuts and broadsheets were relatively cheap to produce, and would have been within the purchasing power of the literate upper middle class, including merchants, professionals, and artisans. These prints were affordable copies of popular devotional images, illustrated early printed books, and were used to spread news and propaganda.[4] *Witches' Sabbath in Trier* (Fig. 1) is a broadsheet, a type of single-sheet print. The rise of print media in Germany coincided with the development of a new concept of witchcraft: all magic involved a pact with the devil and renouncing God, and witches were conspiratory, rather than acting as individuals.[5] A major contribution to this new notion of witchcraft was the *Malleus Maleficarum (The Witches' Hammer)*, a treatise on witchcraft by Heinrich Kramer (d. 1505) and Jacob Sprenger (d. 1495), published in 1487, which I will discuss in more detail later in this paper in relation to women and *Witches Sabbath in Trier* (Fig. 1). This legal and theological book essentially laid out a guide on how to detect and punish witches, codifying local folk beliefs and Christian views of witchcraft. *The Witches Hammer* was so popular in

[4] Moxey, Keith. *Peasants, warriors and wives popular imagery in the Reformation*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2004. 19-34
[5] Warfield, Abaigeal. Witchcraft Illustrated, 459

German-speaking countries that it was reprinted twenty eight times between its publishing date and 1600, and accepted by both Protestants and Catholics.[6]

Naturally, witchcraft became a new subject that was explored in print media by artists by the turn of the fifteenth century.[7] One artist who was fascinated with witchcraft was Hans Baldung Grien (1484-1545), a German artist, printmaker, and pupil of Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) who began depicting witches in the early sixteenth century. His 1510 chiaroscuro woodcut, *The Witches* (Fig. 2), was incredibly influential in establishing the iconographical prototype of the witch that persisted and evolved through the rest of the sixteenth century.[8] A group of three nude witches can be seen gathered around a cauldron with billowing smoke, surrounded by bones, cooking tools, and phallic sausages which were associated with penis-stealing. They are preparing a salve that gives the power to fly to a witches' sabbath, which was thought to be applied to the women's bodies and especially their genitals. One witch in the top of the scene is already flying backwards on a goat, which suggests illicit sexual activity.[9] The witches' power seems to be derived from female sexuality, whose nudity, loose hair, and poses are sexually suggestive. The act of cooking around a fire and the presence of kitchen tools inextricably links the activity of witches to those of women and the home, but as a diabolical inversion of these homemaking tasks, just as witches invert the proper gender order in the early modern view. Baldung's depiction characterizes witchcraft as destructive, chaotic, and gendered,

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[6] Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Malleus maleficarum." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, November 30, 2023. https://www.britannica.com/topic/Malleus-maleficarum.
[7] Zika, Charles, 'The Witch and Magician in European Art', *The Oxford History of Witchcraft and Magic* (Oxford, 2023; online edn, Oxford Academic, 23 Feb. 2023), https://doi-org.uc.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/oso/9780192884053.003.0005, accessed 18 Mar. 2024.
[8] Petherbridge, Deanna. "Leaking, Shrieking, and Venomous Bodies." Essay. In *Visions of Enchantment: Occultism, Magic, and Visual Culture*, 50–65. Fulgur Press, 2019.
[9] Zika, Charles. *Exorcising our demons: Magic, witchcraft, and visual culture in early modern europe*. Leiden, 241-242. Brill, 2003.

a theme that runs throughout later sixteenth century scenes of witchcraft, including *Witches' Sabbath in Trier* (Fig. 1). *The Witches* (Fig. 2) was not widely available since it was a one-off drawing, but other artists were certainly familiar with the scene. A few copies survive, and Baldung's iconic image of witches gathered around a cauldron persisted in the sixteenth century through less detailed versions of the scene that were circulated as book illustrations. One of these versions of the scene, *Witches on a Night Ride* (Fig. 3), is thought to be the first, and can be found in the first edition of *Die Emeis* (The Ants, c. 1516/17), a collection of Lenten sermons on contemporary beliefs by Johannes Geiler von Kaiserberg.[10] This woodcut possibly came from Baldung's workshop, and is a bit crude compared to the chiaroscuro print it is based off of, which is characteristic of the easily mass produced woodcuts used as book illustrations.[11] It shares many elements with *The Witches* (Fig. 2); three nude witches surround a cauldron in the forest, preparing to fly to a witches sabbath, and bones are scattered throughout the foreground. There are also new elements, such as devils, watching and possibly directing the women's activity, and a codpiece flying from a banner that the right-most witch holds. The codpiece references the 'stealing of the codpiece', a common expression for gender conflict and the inversion of the gender order.[12] She confidently holds and waves this banner, implying that she has successfully dominated the sexual order. The inclusion of this visual metaphor emphasizes the perceived (and serious) threat of witches and their sexuality to the order of the world, as seen by the patriarchal and Christian society of early modern Germany. Print media like *Die Emeis* allowed the viewer to read about real-life stories of witchcraft and visualized witches' crimes with recognizable symbols and metaphors that drew on iconographical prototypes created by Baldung and Dürer. These images and texts would have been tantalizing or even terrifying

[10] Britannica, "Malleus maleficarum."
[11] Petherbridge, "Leaking, Shrieking, and Venomous Bodies.", 59
[12] Zika. *Exorcising our demons…,* 264-265

entertainment that could spread and confirm deeply misogynistic beliefs about witchcraft, further entrenching the witch as an other in this cultural context.

It is important to establish that early modern Germany was largely a patriarchal and Christian culture. The role that this context assigned to women in the sixteenth century was very limiting, and deeply intertwined with female fertility and connections to men. Early modern Germans viewed the world as ordered by God, and witches were a direct threat to this order.[13] Biblical ideas were projected onto women and their bodies, and were an important factor in the disproportionate persecution of women as witches. Christian theologians viewed the physical difference of women's bodies to men's as intellectual inferiority and weakness, a belief that is fundamentally misogynistic. This weakness made women more susceptible to the devil's influence, which is quite apparent in the story of Adam and Eve and original sin.[14] Eve yields to the temptation of the forbidden fruit, also encouraging Adam to eat it, dragging her husband down into sin. Another important aspect of the story is their nakedness, which they only become ashamed of and cover after sinning. Eve's sexuality is often linked to Adam's fall to temptation, highlighting the danger of female sexuality and their bodies. Due to this first sin, Eve and her body became the "Devil's gateway" for all of humanity, and God punished women eternally by making them subordinate to men, and childbirth painful.[15] Since the first woman was considered to be the source of original sin, it is no wonder that in the early modern period, women were seen as inherently more sinful than men, and therefore more likely to fall to the devil and commit the crime of witchcraft. Many witchcraft treatises maintain this biblically-rooted, misogynistic view

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[13] Lehmann, Hartmut. "The Persecution of Witches as Restoration of Order: The Case of Germany, 1590s-1650s." *Central European History* 21, no. 2 (1988): 107–21. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4546114.

[14] Polinska, Wioleta. "Dangerous Bodies: Women's Nakedness and Theology." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 16, no. 1 (2000): 45–62. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25002375.

[15] Polinska, "Dangerous Bodies…", 48-49

of women, including *The Witches' Hammer.* In fact, in the 1948 English translation of the book, women are mentioned nearly 300 times.[16] To Kramer and Sprenger, it was obvious that "...a greater number of witches is found in the fragile feminine sex than among men...". This assumption was based in clerical tradition, but their assertion that harmful magic was solely the domain of women was a new and influential idea.[17] The authors spend a chapter of the text describing the weaknesses and sins of women through different examples, establishing women's inherent flaws as the root of all witchcraft. Above all, carnality and lust was characteristic of the witch; sexuality was a motive for their magic, a source of their power, and sexual or marital dysfunction was often a result of their rituals.[18] While *The Witches' Hammer* was one of many texts written in the fifteenth century attempting to codify and explain witchcraft, it is particularly relevant to *Witches' Sabbath in Trier* because it is a book written by and about Southwest Germans. Kramer and Sprenger constructed the witch by drawing on traditional folk belief, such as superstitions about female nocturnal spirits, and adapting these vernacular stories and traditions into a Christian theological framework. The familiarity of these beliefs to common people made it more convincing than treatises by their contemporaries. *The Witches' Hammer* continued to be available and widely read throughout the sixteenth century, shaping the persecution, beliefs about, and visual representations of witches.[19]

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[16] Kramer, Heinrich, and Johann Sprenger. "Malleus Maleficarum by Heinrich Kramer - Complete Text Online." Translated by Montague Summers. by Heinrich Kramer - Complete text online - Global Grey ebooks, 2023. https://www.globalgreyebooks.com/online-ebooks/heinrich-kramer_malleus-maleficarum_complete-text.html#ch2.

[17] Broedel, Hans. *The "malleus maleficarum" and the construction of witchcraft: Theology and popular belief*. Manchester University Press, 2013. 168-176

[18] Broedel, *The "malleus maleficarum",* 177

[19] Broedel, *The "malleus maleficarum",* 20-100

Another important idea to understanding early modern attitudes about women was the female life course, defined as maid, mother, and widow.[20] Of course, the biological and social reality of women's lives were far more complex than this triad of fertility, but the construction of this life course reflects what was expected of and thought about women at certain ages. The maid is defined by her lack of a husband, while the mother is at the peak of this life cycle; she is under the authority of her husband, sexually mature, and producing children. The widow is also defined by the absence of her husband and her inability to reproduce, often depicted in art as repulsive.[21] Of these three, widows and old women in general were most often associated with witchcraft and depicted as witches. According to Lynn Botehlo on page 195 of "Old Women and Sex: Fear, Fantasy, and a Defining Life Course in Early Modern Europe", "Witches were like old women: both were infertile, domestically unnecessary, and jealous over the fecundity of others – and ultimately, both were dangerous." For example, Baldung created many of his witch prints from an actual model, an older woman, consequently helping to cement the hag stereotype in relation to the image of the witch. Since post-menopausal women were no longer capable of producing children, they were symbols of anti-fertility, just as witches were.[22] Despite their infertility, old women's sexual desires were thought to be stronger than at any other point in their lives. Early modern medical practices based on humoral theory posited that the female "seed" or womb dried up with old age without the flow of menstrual blood, meaning that sex with an old woman could cause a man to be "sucked dry" and was therefore quite dangerous.[23] The medical view of old women and sex closely resembles popular belief about the chaos that witches could enact: stealing penises, terminating pregnancies, tempting men, and engaging in orgies at witches'

[20] Botelho, Lynn. "Old Women and Sex: Fear, Fantasy, and a Defining Life Course in Early Modern Europe." Clio. Women, Gender, History, no. 42 (2015): 189–99
[21] Botelho, "Old Women and Sex…", Pg. 189-191
[22] Botelho, "Old Women and Sex…", Pg. 192-193
[23] Botelho, "Old Women and Sex…", Pg. 195-198

sabbaths. This association between witches and old women had serious ramifications in witch hunting practices, as a significant number of women accused and executed for witchcraft were impoverished women over forty who lacked a male protector, which was clearly a vulnerable position that was considered to be outside of the acceptable role for women. While old women were usually associated with witches, depictions of witchcraft often showed a variety of age groups, even in Baldung's early sixteenth century prints, such as *The Witches* (Fig. 2). This is because the old witch and the young maid were often one in the same; the old hag could use magical charms to disguise herself as a beautiful young maid.[24]

All three of the archetypes in the early modern female life course can be seen participating in witchcraft and other immoral behavior in *Witches' Sabbath in Trier.* Beautiful young maids are seen riding on goats in the foreground, an animal associated with illicit sexual activity.[25] In the bottom left corner of the piece there is a pregnant woman with long flowing hair participating in some sort of ritual, as two older women place their hands on her stomach. This detail shows how witches were seen to be dangerous to motherhood and pregnancy. Finally, there are many widow figures throughout the piece. Due to the nature of the engraving and how tiny each figure is, age is not shown through facial wrinkles, but through the body in features like sagging breasts. While there are even male sorcerers and participants in the Sabbath, it seems that women are the ringleaders here; there are far more women, they are nearly all depicted nude, and are literally running wild, causing destruction and chaos in the scene. In contrast, the male participants are all clothed, and the sorcerers are shown in a more scholarly and dignified fashion, reading tomes and using magical instruments. The women's nudity highlights the perceived danger of female sexuality and autonomy in the early modern period, and also recalls

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[24] Petherbridge, "Leaking, Shrieking, and Venomous Bodies.", 51
[25] Zika, *Exorcising our demons*, pp. 242

the nudity of Eve in the Garden of Eden. The sixteenth century, with the reformation and counter-reformation movements, was a time of increased scrutiny of women's lives and sexualities. Authorities cracked down on brothels, dress, ornament, and adultery, and female sexual desire was at the root of these concerns.[26] The demonic power of female sexuality as perceived by the early modern German imagination is quite clear in *Witches' Sabbath in Trier.*

It was within this cultural context and climate of witchcraft belief that the Trier witch trials took place. At least 792 people were executed for witchcraft in the electorate of Trier from the late 1500s to mid 1600s; although a significant number of powerful men were persecuted for witchcraft, eighty eight percent of those victims were women.[27] These statistics show that the misogynistic demonological ideas popularized by *The Witches' Hammer* likely prevailed in Trier. Although *Witches' Sabbath in Trier* referenced these historical witchcraft trials in its accompanying text, the image itself does not contain many compelling similarities to actual witch confessions in the Trier region, so it will not be useful to explain the trials in more extensive detail.[28] One aspect of witch persecution in Trier that is valuable to discuss is weather magic, which was thought to be the most prevalent and dangerous form of magic, and does appear in the background of the broadsheet.[29] Johannes Dillinger, who wrote a comparative study of the Trier witch trials includes *Witches' Sabbath in Trier* (Fig. 1)*,* mentions that there are no striking parallels between the images and the actual events, but I argue that the presence of weather magic in the broadsheet is a compelling similarity between the two, and would have been a familiar popular belief to a sixteenth century German viewer of this print. There were

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[26] Zika, *Exorcising our Demons…,* pp. 238
[27] Dillinger, Johannes, and Laura Stokes. *"evil people" a comparative study of witch hunts in Swabian Austria and the Electorate of Trier*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009. 192
[28] Dillinger, *"evil people",* pp. 52
[29] Dillinger, *"evil people",* pp. 48-49

widespread crop failures in Germany in the 1570s and 1580s, the decades directly before the broadsheet was made, resulting from what scholars now know as a mini ice age. At the time, in the counter-reformation climate that made authorities accustomed to violent punishment, the rising popular anxiety of the mid-late 1600s, and the witchcraft concept circulated in *The Witches' Hammer,* witches were a likely culprit.[30] Poor, mountainous regions were hit the hardest by these crop failures, meaning that rural, disadvantaged people (especially women) on the fringes of society were most often accused of this *maleficium* (harmful magic). A Jesuit from Trier, Peter Binsfield, wrote about the crop failures, claiming that witches hated their fatherland and destroyed the local vineyards with weather magic. While it may seem strange or superstitious to a modern point of view, witches were a real threat that made perfect sense through the theological and demonological framework that sixteenth century Germans were familiar with, and an attractive scapegoat for their economic hardship. Witch persecution meant that people could find, punish, and kill the roots of evil causing their misfortune: a legion of witches sent by Satan himself to destroy God's order in the world.[31] This "othered" population was more often than not poor women, and like Eve, their bodies and minds were suspiciously scrutinized as possible vessels for evil. Witches' wild rides and harmful magic, all rooted in their dangerous sexuality, caused chaos in the world ruled by God and patriarchy. In early modern Germany, witch persecution was a way to restore this order and control perceived evils.[32]

Overall, *Witches' Sabbath in Trier* (Fig. 1) is a broadsheet that depicts a witches' sabbath, with parallels to actual beliefs about witchcraft in the early modern period. It was a part of the thriving print culture of Germany, which disseminated the iconography of the witch established

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[30] Lehmann, "The Persecution of Witches…", pp. 110-115
[31] Lehmann, "The Persecution of Witches…", pp. 110-117
[32] Lehmann, "The Persecution of Witches…", pp. 117-119

in Baldung's highly influential prototypes, through crude and affordable woodcuts. The image of the witch reflects misogynistic ideas about women, rooted in the Bible, the female life course, folklore, meaning that women were far more likely to be witches. The *Witches' Hammer* codified these ideas in the late 1500s, and continued to shape popular belief and the persecution of witches. A theme that runs through all of these ideas, texts, and images about witches is lust and dangerous female sexuality as a root of power, which is apparent in the naked and eroticized bodies of *Witches' Sabbath in Trier.* This print, likely a terrifying and fascinating form of entertainment, helped to spread and confirm misogynistic ideas about witches in early modern Germany.

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https://doi-org.uc.idm.oclc.org/10.1093/oso/9780192884053.003.0005, accessed 18 Mar. 2024.

Figure 3. *Hexensabbat in Trier,* engraving, attached to Thomas Sigfridus, *Richtige Antwort auff die Frage* (Erfurt, 1593). Ithaca, N.Y., Carl A. Kroch Library, Cornell University.

Figure 2. *The Witches,* Hans Baldung, 1510, Woodcut, 15 5/16 × 10 5/8 in., The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Figure 3. *Witches on a Night Ride,* woodcut, Johann Geiler von Kaysersberg. *Die Emeis* (The Ants). Strasbourg, 1517.