The Witches of Goya

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Images of witches are a recurrent theme in Francisco de Goya's iconography. His fascination for this forbidden world of superstition and mystery was shared by members of his circle, both artists and patrons. Around 1797, the Duchess of Osuna commissioned Goya to execute a series of six paintings on the subject. The most significant of these works for gender studies are two which exclusively depict female witches—*The Spell* and *The Witches' Sabbath* (Figures 1 and 2), Museo Lázaro Galdiano, Madrid.

These two paintings have been previously interpreted by Edith Helman as a critique of the Spanish Inquisition,[1] while Nigel Glendinning has seen them as an example of enlightened aristocracy's fascination with the irrationality and superstition of the Dark Spain.[2] While informative, these interpretations appear too limited, especially if we take into consideration the relation between the artist's own conception of the topic and the role played by the patron—in this case the Duchess of Osuna—in determining the meaning of images.

Stressing the interface between artist's intention and patron's desire in the reading of these paintings, I will show that, through the depiction of witches, Goya was addressing the issue of female sexuality and the position of women in late eighteenth-century Spain. I will begin by discussing the way in which the artist's careful "selection" of characters and narrative unveils his intention. While in both of these works Goya depicts female witches involved in acts that counter traditional roles accorded to women in male-dominated societies, male witches are conspicuously absent. Through this act of selection, Goya purposefully reverts in his representation to the notion of the "witch stereotype." This stereotype has been explained by feminist theorists as an attempt to neutralize women's power when it appears as a threat to the established order of a patriarchal society.[3] Nevertheless, it is my belief that Goya's intention was to celebrate—rather than condemn—the subversive role of the witch. In order to emphasize this point, I will establish connections between the paintings and the Duchess of Osuna. I will portray the Duchess as a woman of her time, in the context of innovative social practices that subverted traditional social—and sexual—taboos. I will finally try to relate these paintings to Goya's own attitude towards women. Using his works as visual evidence, I will show that the artist celebrated woman's sexuality, while condemning her historical subjugation in patriarchal Spain.

Edith Helman has pointed to the connection between these paintings and the *Auto de Fe de la Ciudad de Logroño,*[4] the account of a trial of witches celebrated in the seventeenth century, reprinted in 1812 by the playwright Leandro Fernández de Moratín.[5] Similarities between this document and the painted images, in addition to the close friendship between writer and artist, make possible to suggest that Goya was familiar with this source before its second publication.[6] This document describes the demonic activities of a group of witches, both male and female, in the Basque town of Zugarramundi. Their satanic festivals—which took place at night, in a place called *El*

1 Edith Helman, *Trasmundo de Goya*, (Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 1963) 186-199.

2 Nigel Glendinning, "Goya's Circle," *Goya and the Spirit of Enlightenment*, ed. Alfonso E. Pérez-Sánchez and Eleanor A. Sayre (Boston, Toronto and London: Little, Brown and Company, 1989) xxi. Unfortunately, not one single work has been totally devoted to the analysis of these two paintings, or of the series as a whole. Folke Nordstrom, *Goya, Saturn and Melancholy,* (Stockholm: Almquist & Wiksell, 1962) devotes one chapter of his book to the series, but he is mainly concerned with establishing its literary sources. Santiago Sebastián, "Iconografía de la Brujería, de Ribera a Goya," *Goya Revista de Arte*, 238, (1994): 205-210, discusses them briefly, following Nordstrom literary interpretation. An interesting and useful reading is provided by Margarita Moreno de las Heras' catalogue entries in Pérez-Sánchez and Sayre 62, who has rightly pointed to the sexual overtones of these images, while Thomas Crow, "The Tensions of Enlightenment: Goya," *Nineteenth Century Art: A Critical History*, ed. Stephen F. Eisenman, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994) 89, underscores the sexual meaning of the *Witches' Sabbath* but sees it as an act of condemnation of the sexual license of the eighteenth century Spanish court.

3 See for example, Christina Larner, *Witchcraft and religion: the politics of popular belief,* (Oxford and London: Blackwell, 1984), and Marianne Hester, "Patriarchal reconstruction and witch hunting," *Witchcraft in early modern Europe: Studies in culture and belief*, ed. Jonathan Barry, Marianne Hester and Gareth Roberts (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 1996) 288-306,

4 Helman 188.

5 Leandro Fernández de Moratín, "Auto de fe, celebrado en la ciudad de Logroño en los días 6 y 7 de noviembre de 1610, con notas," *Obras de D. Nicolás y D. Leandro Fernández de Moratín* (Madrid, 1848) 617-631.

6 This document was first published in 1611 by Juan de Mongastón. It is possible that Moratín had a copy of it long before he decided to republish it in 1812 (right after the Inquisition had come to an end). On details regarding Moratín and the publication of the *Auto de Fe*, see for example, Luis Felipe Vivanco, *Moratín y la Ilustración Mágica* (Madrid: Taurus Ediciones, 1972).

Aquelarre—are portrayed as sexual orgies. Witches of both sexes practiced sexual intercourse with the devil, who appeared to them in the form of a he-goat.[7] After he was satisfied, the congregation engaged in collective sexual intercourse, regardless of sex or blood relationship. The *Auto* reveals details of an untamed female sexuality—the devil appeared to female witches in their homes, and crawled into their beds. A woman accused of witchcraft had confessed that the devil was in bed with her almost every night; he talked to her and touched her as if he were her husband.[8]

Witches were also accused of sucking children's blood through their brains and genitals. Pins and needles were used to prick their heads and backs. It was claimed that witches would sometimes kill the infants after sucking their blood, strangling their bodies and biting their throats until they asphyxiated them.[9]

Other unlawful acts thought to be performed by witches are vividly portrayed by the *Auto de Fe.* For example, witches were said to desecrate Christian images, profane tombs, and feast on corpses. Witches supposedly collected lizards, salamanders, toads and snakes, with which they manufactured different poisons, powders, and ointments. These were used to destroy the crops or the cattle, or to harm or kill other people.

The *Auto de Fe* and Goya's two paintings of witches bear indisputable connections; however, the artist does not limit himself to a visual illustration of the verbal account. Rather, it seems that Goya constructed these paintings through a deliberate appropriation and rejection of images—images recorded in the *Auto de Fe* itself, images kept in the popular memory and, to a lesser degree, images that derive from classical mythology.

In *The Spell*, Goya has depicted a group of female witches who try to cast a spell on the frightened figure in the foreground. One of the witches carries a basket with infants, while another pricks the body of a newborn with a needle. The imagery clearly derives from the *Auto de Fe*'s description of witches sucking the blood of children, an idea that is reinforced through the depiction of bats following the group of sorceresses. As stated in the *Auto de Fe,* both men and women engaged in such deviant behavior. The old Estebanía de Telechea, for example, had confessed of having murdered her own granddaughter. Similarly, one of the accused men, Miguel de Goyburu, had confessed of having killed a number of men, women, and children by sucking their blood through their brains and genitals.[10] In another work from the same series, *Flying Witches* (Figure 3), Goya depicts male sorcerers in the act of sucking the blood from another human being. But the artist chooses to depict exclusively female witches as murderers of infants—an act that subverts the traditional role of woman as mother.

In *The Witches' Sabbath* (Figure 2), the devil as he-goat is encircled by a group of female witches. On the right, two women present him with offerings of live infants. To the left, on the ground, lies the skeleton of a dead child, while the corpses of three infants dangle from a twig that rests on a witch's shoulder. Edith Helman has noticed the connection between this painting and a passage of the *Auto de Fe,* in which two women sacrifice their own children as an offering to the devil.[11] The idea of the murdering mother is once again present. However, a closer analysis of the painting suggests further intentions. Through the use of symbols that remind us of Dionysiac rituals, Goya endows the scene with subtle sexual overtones.

The he-goat has traditionally been conceived as a lascivious animal, a symbol for impurity. In Antiquity, it was associated with Aphrodite and Dionysus. Likewise, satyrs were depicted with goat horns. Furthermore, in moralistic bestiaries, the he-goat appears as a personification of Lust.[12] Margarita Moreno has rightfully noticed that Goya has stressed the lustful connotation of the he-goat through the crowning of vine leaves.[13] The he-goat thus appears as Dionysus in a Bacchanal; Goya purposefully establishes a connection between the witches' Sabbath and the sexual excess of Dionysiac cults.

According to the *Auto de Fe,* male witches engaged in sexual pleasures as well, but Goya avoids depicting this. Thus, although the themes of the paintings might derive from this document, Goya has adjusted the meaning of images—perhaps to accommodate them to the popular discourse on witches.

In these two paintings, Goya depicts witches as women who either search for sexual gratification outside the boundaries of marriage, or as women who reject motherhood: that is, witches as women who have subverted the established order of patriarchal society. These two images could be seen as complementary, since female sexuality was only allowed within marriage and had as its purpose reproduction.

In an essay on witchcraft and patriarchy, Marianne Hester has rightly pointed out that in male-dominated societies, women are conceived as

> . . .morally weak by comparison with men, but this could also make them appear ultimately stronger than men. Women's supposedly insatiable and immoral sexuality was likely to lead them into allegiance with the devil who could fulfill their sexual desires even better, so it was feared, than mere mortal men."[14]

The threat implied by woman's sexuality was brought under masculine control through the institution of marriage, a space in which her actions were brought under surveillance. Witch-hunts, writes Hester, are a projection of the fears of men, since they are motivated by the idea that women are not complying with the roles assigned to them by marriage.[15]

7 Fernández de Moratín 618.

8 Fernández de Moratín 625.

9 Fernández de Moratín 629-630.

10 Fernández de Moratín 629-630.

11 Helman 188.

12 Isabel Mateo Gómez, cited in Moreno de las Heras 62.

13 Moreno de las Heras 62.

14 Hester 295.

To return to patriarchal order, the witch had to be destroyed. She was either burnt at the stake or, as was common practice in Spain, her power was neutralized—she was reformed and re-integrated into society.[16] Hélène Cixous has stated that the role of the sorceress is ambiguous, both anti-establishment and conservative at the same time. She is anti-establishment because she shakes up the public by performing acts that transgress "accepted" norms of behavior: "The sorceress heals, against the Church's canon; she performs abortions, favors non conjugal love. . . ." But this role is "conservative because every sorceress ends up being destroyed, and nothing is registered of her but mythical traces."[17]

One side of the ambiguity that is pertinent to this discussion is the idea of the sorceress as anti-establishment.[18] This notion is expressed in the confessions provided by the witches of Zugarramundi, and emphasized in Goya's paintings. In the *Aquelarre,* the woman is the queen. Although there is a king, he is subservient to female authority. The power of the queen is second only to the devil. But the devil is just an embodiment of her own desire. The *Aquelarre,* in this sense, is an imaginary space in which hierarchies and orders are subverted: a space at the margins of society in which women are allowed to project their own sexual fantasies. It is this idea of the *Aquelarre*, and of the witch, that Goya chooses to depict. He eschews the "fallen" witch of trials who, through confession, exorcises her evil, as well as the witch destroyed at the stake. Rather, Goya recreates the myth in all its power.

Thomas Crow has argued that these paintings reveal an act of condemnation of the "sexual license and corruption" of the Spanish aristocracy. Specifically, he refers to the amorous triangle formed by Charles IV, Queen María Luisa, and Manuel Godoy—both her lover and Prime Minister of Spain.[19] Crow fails to acknowledge, though, the fact that these paintings were commissioned by the Duchess of Osuna, whose behavior towards men—as will be seen later—was not too different from María Luisa's. Furthermore, these paintings were to be hung in the Duchess's boudoir in her country estate in La Alameda[20]—that is, in her own private domain—and therefore the images of witches might have carried a personal meaning for her. In order to underscore this significance, I will now turn to describe the Duchess of Osuna in the context of contemporary social practices in Spain.

The Duchess was the paradigm of the emancipated woman in Spanish enlightened circles. In her times, she was celebrated for her refined taste and for her knowledge of culture. In Madrid and in *El Capricho,* as her country residence was called, she surrounded herself by intellectuals—notably, Leandro Fernández de Moratín and José Ramón de la Cruz—with whom she discussed art, theater, bullfights, and even social reforms.[21] She and her husband advocated modern pedagogical ideas and stressed their role as parents in the education of their children.[22] Her intellectual achievements expressed a rupture with Spanish norms, which had traditionally denied women the right to education.

Despite her close affective ties with her husband and children, the Duchess enjoyed (just as Queen María Luisa) the company of other men, and didn't find any impediment in exhibiting herself with a *cortejo,* a male escort, in public events.[23] This type of behavior, however, was not something out of the ordinary. In fact, the Duchess was responding to the new social conventions adopted by Spanish aristocracy.

Until the eighteenth century, the lives of Spanish women had been constrained by a series of social traditions and norms. In *El Sí de las Niñas*, Fernández de Moratín writes:

> This is what is called to raise a girl properly: teach her to lie and to hide her most innocent passions. . .Everything is allowed to them, except for sincerity. As long as they don't say what they feel, as long as they pretend to abhor what they want the most . . .they are considered to be well raised; and an excellent upbringing is considered to inspire in them fear. . .and the silence of a slave.[24]

Marriage was the main tool of repression. The only acceptable role for a woman was that of a wife and a mother. Single women were just a commodity to be marketed to the best suitor, their most valuable attribute being modesty. When a woman got married, she passed from being under the author-

15 Hester 294-295.

16 Gustav Henningsen, *The Witches' Advocate: Basque Witchcraft and the Spanish Inquisition (1609-1614),* (Reno: U of Nevada P, 1980) 22.

17 Hélène Cixous, "The Guilty One," *The Newly Born Woman* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986) 5. In this essay, Cixous establishes a connection between the sorceress and the hysterical woman.

18 Lynda Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: witchcraft, sexuality and religion in early modern Europe,* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) 19-20, has pointed out that although witch-hunts have usually been interpreted as projections of a male-dominated society, witches were not mere passive recipients of male discourse: "The fantasies. . .[the witch] wove, though often forced from her through torture, were her own condensations of shared cultural preoccupations. . .witches themselves carried out cultural work, creating the narrative of the witch anew, making sense of emotions and cultural process."

19 Crow 89.

20 Cf. Moreno de las Heras 59 and Crow 89.

21 Carmen Martín-Gaite, *Usos amorosos del dieciocho en España,* (Barcelona: Editorial Anagrama, 1987) 107-108.

22 Moreno de las Heras 40 and Crow 82.

23 Martín-Gaite 147, brings into discussion an anecdote of the life of the Duchess. She had arrived to a party in the company of her mother-in-law and their corresponding escorts, neither of them their husbands. At some point, the Duchess sent to her husband, who was present at the party, a tray with candy. The Dutch ambassador, who was sitting next to her, asked if she didn't want to send him something else—perhaps a pair of horns. But this allusion to her cuckolding her husband did not seem to bother her at all.

24 Leandro Fernández de Moratín, "El sí de las niñas," *Obras de D. Nicolás y D. Leandro Fernández de Moratín,* 437. Author's translation.

ity of the father to that of the husband.[25]

But the Spanish élite had developed, by the end of the eighteenth century, a series of customs that contested female subjugation. Interestingly, it was married women, like the Duchess of Osuna herself, who benefited the most from these practices, since they did not have to worry about restraining their conduct in order to find a good husband.[26] Carmen Martín-Gaite has noted the way in which women from the nobility, as expressed in the paradigmatic figure of the Duchess of Alba, rejected the formalities of their society and adopted the more relaxed attitude of *majas*—lower class women renowned for their beauty and the licentiousness of their manners. In the name of *majismo,* as the imitation of the lower classes was called, the aristocracy developed attitudes such as *despejo,* which meant to have no obstacles. A woman with *despejo* was outspoken, looked men in the eye, talked to them without blushing.[27] Another term associated with *despejo* was that of *marcialidad,* which referred to a woman's interest in displaying herself to her admirers.[28]

A second practice common in eighteenth century Spain was the *cortejo.* As previously mentioned, the *cortejo* was a single man who served as an escort to married women. The *cortejo* escorted a lady to parties, accompanied her on walks, and entertained her with his conversation. At the same time, the *cortejo* was expected to present her with gifts and, in some cases, to contribute to household expenses.[29] But this relationship was probably not just innocent friendship. The playwright Ramón de la Cruz, for example, portrays it as forthright adultery. In one of his *sainetes*, *Oposición al Cortejo*, a married woman tells her *cortejo* that it is for him that she has to tolerate a thousand remarks from her husband, as well as a lack of respect from her servants. She can only hope that her husband does not remember one day that he is a husband, and feel obliged to lock her in a convent.[30]

The significance of these practices resides in the fact that they allowed the Spanish noblewoman of the eighteenth century to transgress the norms imposed on her by tradition. On the one hand, she had been able to acknowledge her own desire, and to express herself as desirable. On the other, as inferred from Ramón de la Cruz's *sainete,* she had been able to challenge the notion of marriage as a space of domination, and of the husband as a repressive figure.

The transgressive behavior of women in late eighteenth century Spain is, in this sense, not too different from the historical discourse of witches. As an emancipated woman, the Duchess of Osuna could have commissioned these paintings as a way of celebrating the mythical image of the witch as rebellious to the male establishment. A new conception of womanhood was being developed in late eighteenth-century Spain. But what was Goya's own position regarding this matter? The artist's attitude towards women is visually recorded in images of his own creation. Woman's subjugation and domination in Spanish society is questioned in many of his works. In the second plate of *Los Caprichos* (Figure 4), for example, Goya criticizes the imposition of marriage upon women. "They say yes and give their hand to the first who comes," reads the inscription of the engraving. His critique acquires a harsher tone in *For Marrying as She Wished* (Figure 5) Museo del Prado, Madrid, which depicts a woman racked upon an *escalera,* a torture device used by the Inquisition to punish its victims. This horrific scene conveys—and condemns—the repression of female desire.[31]

By contrast, these two images may be juxtaposed to Goya's own perception of female sexuality, as evidenced in the *Maja Desnuda* (Figure 6), Museo del Prado, Madrid. In this painting, the artist brings to the surface the intrinsic power of womanhood. The tendency towards abstraction leaves out specific details but focuses on woman's sexual attributes—eyes, breasts, and navel. Moreover, the *Maja* confronts the viewer.[32] Her powerful outward gaze disrupts any attempt to objectify her. She is not the passive recipient of male desire. Rather, she seems to consciously display her body in an attempt to provoke a reaction from the observer.

Thus, as expressed in the *Maja Desnuda*, Goya recognizes the sexual power of woman and, in my belief, celebrates it through his paintings. In light of this argument, I would suggest that Goya's intention in the depiction of witches remained close to the Duchess of Osuna's own perception—the vision of the witch as a woman who had acknowledged her own desire and, in doing so, had attempted to subvert the domination of patriarchal society.

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25 Martín-Gaite 113-115.

26 Martín-Gaite 130.

27 Martín-Gaite 119.

28 Cf. Martín-Gaite 30.

29 Martín-Gaite ch. 1

30 Ramón de la Cruz, "Oposición al Cortejo," *Doce Sainetes,* ed. José Francisco Gatti, (Barcelona: Editorial Labor, 1972) 225. *Sainetes* are one act, satirical plays.

31 John Ciofalo, "Unveiling Goya's Rape of Galatea," *Art History,* 18 (1995): 477 ff.

32 Janis Tomlinson, *Goya in the Twilight of Enlightenment,* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1992) 117 ff., and "Burn It, Hide it, Flaunt It: Goya's *Majas* and the Censorial Mind," *Art Journal,* 50.4 (1991) 59-64, has interpreted the interest in the display of the female body in the *Maja Desnuda*, as a response to social practices such as *marcialidad.* Nevertheless, she argues that the sexual power of this *Maja* was neutralized through the creation of the dressed version, in which female sexuality is identified with artificial construction. She then argues that the artist has further undermined the *Maja*'s sexual power by dressing her as a gypsy, thus identifying her with a member of the lower classes. But for noble women, as we have seen, the imitation of the lower classes was a way of breaking with repressive conventions of Spanish society, and thus I would argue that the dressing of the *Maja* as a gypsy might be a response to this new attitude developed by the aristocracy.

Figure 1. Francisco de Goya, *The Spell*, 1797, Museo Lázaro Galdiano, Madrid.

Figure 2. Francisco de Goya, *The Witches' Sabbath*, 1797, Museo Lázaro Galdiano, Madrid.

Figure 3. Francisco de Goya, *Flying Witches*, 1797, private collection. After Folke Nordstrom. *Goya, Saturn and Melancholy* (Stockholm: Almquist & Wiksell, 1962) 167.

Figure 4. Francisco de Goya, *They say 'yes' and give their hand to the first comer, Los Caprichos*, plate 2, 1797. After Alonso E. Pérez-Sánchez and Judith Gallego, *Goya: The Complete Etchings and Lithographs* (Munich and New York: Prestel for Fundación Juan March, 1994) 34.

Figure 5. Francisco de Goya, *For Marrying as She Wished*, Album C, 1810, Museo del Prado, Madrid.

Figure 6. Francisco de Goya, *Maja Desnuda*, 1800 , 1797, Museo del Prado, Madrid.