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Good vs. Bad Witches in Renaissance Art

The witch casts from inside a magic circle drawn on the forest floor. Far in the background a gold-washed pastoral landscape and Italianate fortress dwell safely away from this sorceress and her wiles. Above, a gray ominous sky threatens an unnatural storm; already the trees seem to shiver in fear of its winds. At her side, mysterious animals dwell in wait: a dog, a bird, and a duckling. These creatures anxiously tarry around a collapsed suit of armor whose knight has vanished. The witch's hands wield spellcraft tools, a cryptogram tablet and a flame-tipped wand burning herbs in a brazier. Dosso Dossi's *The Enchantress* (c. 1520, oil on canvas, held in the Galleria Borghese in Rome) pictures witchcraft in a manner wholly unique to the early modern visual record (figure 1). By comparing *The Enchantress* to similar 16th century images of witches, a formal breakdown of this panel reveals a story about courtly artmaking, epic poetry, transforming identities, and magic both wicked and restorative. *The Enchantress* is illustrative of the complexities of Renaissance fears and preoccupation with witchcraft, women, and power.

Dosso Dossi

The court of Duke Alfonso II d'Etse (1533 – 1597) of Ferrara (in what is now the Emilia-Romagna region of Northern Italy) fostered a vibrant art culture in which Dosso Dossi (1489–1542) served as a court painter. In his compendium *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors & Architects* (its three volumes published between 1550 and 1568) Giorgio Vasari, one of the forefathers of art history, wrote:

> Dosso was much beloved by Duke Alfonso of Ferrara: first for his good abilities in the art of painting, and then because he was a very pleasant and amiable person—a manner of man in whom the Duke greatly delighted. Dosso had the reputation in Lombardy of

> executing landscapes better than any other painter engaged in that branch of the profession, whether in mural painting, in oils, or in gouache…[1]

Dossi was contemporaries with another Ferrarese court artist, poet Ludovico Ariosto (1474 – 1533). Of their collaborative relationship, Vasari adds: "And so, together with the gift of the birth of the divine Ludovico Ariosto that the Fates gave to Ferrara, they turned to give birth to Dosso, thereby accompanying the pen with the brush."[2] *The Enchantress* is Dossi's crossdisciplinary reference to Ariosto's chivalric romance *Orlando Furioso*.

Orlando Furioso

Published in 1532, *Orlando Furioso* (*The Frenzy of Orlando*) is an epic poem. In short, its forty-six cantos follow Orlando, a fictional errant knight sworn to Charlemagne who has forsaken his Christian duties in his struggle with madness induced by a chaotic series of enemies and lovers and lovers turned enemies. Like many Renaissance writers, Ariosto included a virtuous character named Ruggiero, a supposed ancestor of the d'Este, created to please his patrons and insert them into the story. The fantastical narrative includes a sea monster, hippogriff, wizard, and a rivalry between two witches: the kindly Melissa and the evil Alcina.

Are You a Good Witch or a Bad Witch?

The Enchantress is a poem-born puzzle. Does this sorceress intend healing or hindrance? Dossi's titular enchantress is an ambiguous figure; she may be the helpful witch Melissa, or the malignant sorceress Alcina. The earliest written documentation concerning this painting dates to more than a century after its completion, in a 1650 Villa Borghese inventory, where it was

[1] Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors & Architects*, (London: Macmillan and Co., 1878), p. 140.
[2] Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors & Architects*, (London: Macmillan and Co., 1878), p. 139.

referred to simply as "maga" meaning "female enchantress."[3] In the story, the wicked Alcina transforms her lovers into pitiful animals and even trees, as seen in the painting. One such spiteful metamorphosis reads: "*Have from Alcina seigniory and throne/But shalt be sure to join the common flock/Transformed to beast or fountain, plant or rock*."[4]

Melissa later undoes Alcina's maleficium (a period term for malignant magic):

> *Which to Melissa, prompt her time to seize,*
>
> *To loose her vassals that in misery were,*
>
> *Afforded all convenience and full ease;*
>
> *—To range, at leisure, through the palace fair,*
>
> *And so examine all [Alcina's] witcheries;*
>
> *To raze the seal, burn images, and loose*
>
> *Or cancel hag-knot, rhomb, or magic noose.*
>
> *Thence, through the fields, fast hurrying from that dome,*
>
> *The former lovers changed, a mighty train,*
>
> *Some into rock or tree, to fountain some,*
>
> *Or beast, she made assume their shapes again…*[5]

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[3] Christopher Wood, "Countermagical Combinations by Dosso Dossi," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics,* 49-50 (2006), p. 155.

[4] Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando furioso*, Edited by Lanfranco Caretti (Milano: R. Ricciardi, 1954), LI.

[5] Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando furioso*, Edited by Lanfranco Caretti (Milano: R. Ricciardi, 1954), XIV - XV.

The Enchantress refuses to directly depict the poem or to inform the viewer at which part of the narrative it is paused. Are we looking at Alcina enacting her dark will, or Melissa sparking her liberating counterspell? The figure sits passively in the center of the composition, ignoring the viewer and rendering herself nonthreatening. In the period, witches were known to be deceptive, so this could be a treacherous witch masquerading as a helpful one.

Some scholars have offered a third identity for this character: Circe, the ancient witch in Homer's *Odyssey* who entraps the hero Odysseus and his crew on her mystical island. This painting was identified as *Circe* in a 1790 inventory of the Villa Borghese.[6] Some sources (such as the Scala Archives) label *The Enchantress* as *Circe* in their digital catalogue. However, this interpretation is weakened by the existence of another painting by Dosso Dossi, *Circe and Her Lovers in a Landscape*, dated c. 1525 (figure 2). Held in the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C., this painting's title remains undisputed. Notice how differently the figures are presented; one nude, the other clothed, one's face is slightly elongated, while the other's is more rounded, and, perhaps key, one witch is surrounded entirely by animals while the other is flanked by human presence, albeit distantly. According to period witch fears, the eviler the sorceress, the further she resides from normality. Dossi was clearly preoccupied with the image of the witch, and through these paintings offered two coeval visual interpretations of women wielding magic.

Orlando Furioso is a story about the fluidity of identity, its characters constantly switching roles through spells and enchanted fountains. In the end, the reader is left with the sense that holding onto a fixed sense of self is impossible. Dossi cleverly plays with this ambiguity and layering of identity. Perhaps *The Enchantress* is meant to be both Alcina and Melissa simultaneously, an either/or vacillation that keeps the viewer confused and engaged,

[6] Christopher Wood, "Countermagical Combinations by Dosso Dossi," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics,* 49-50 (2006), 163.

much like a poem. Any woman, within the period's primitive insistence on a strict gender binary, could be a witch.

"Melissa was the sage enchantress' name"[7]

All is dark; the woods have changed. *The Witches* (1510, chiaroscuro woodcut in two blocks, printed in gray and black, held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art) have come (figure 3). Hans Baldung Grien (1484/85 – 1545), a German painter and printmaker and the pupil of Albrecht Dürer, was another Renaissance artist who explored the image of the witch. The artist has signed his work by including his monogram dangling from a plaque on a tree. Like Dossi, he was also probably inspired by witches in Classical literature such as Circe. Woodcuts are a type of print medium that exploded in popularity during the Renaissance. Because woodcuts were cheaper and faster to produce than paintings, artists were able to make stranger, more experimental subject matter without eating up as many resources. Surprisingly, when comparing this print, a much more typical image of a Renaissance witch and the period beliefs lurking behind this visual trope, to our central case study, *The Enchantress* only waxes stranger.

While witch persecution is often associated with the Middle Ages, this is a common misconception. Instead, the height of witch trial fervor was during the Renaissance. The Catholic Church didn't officially condemn witchcraft until the late 15th century, in a series of Papal Bulls (religious laws). It is at this time that a rise in imagining the witch, both in visual and literary art, first emerged on a pan-European scale.

Perhaps the most immediately striking difference between Dossi's painting and Baldung Grien's print is that the singular magic-user has been replaced by a coven, a gathering of witches. According to the deeply sexist thinking of the time, six witches would be much more

[7] Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando furioso*, Edited by Lanfranco Caretti (Milano: R. Ricciardi, 1954), LXVI.

intimidating than one, because women in groups are suspect. This coven showcases a range of ages and body types, meant to warn the reader that witches may be old or young, ugly or alluring.

In striking contrast—literally—to *The Enchantress*, the figures in *The Witches* are embroiled in nighttime. Gone are the sunny climes of generalized Emilia-Romagnan hills. The grayscale darkness harnessed by Baldung Grien falls in line with period beliefs, which held that witches worked their evils under cover of darkness. Armed only with candles, rushlights, or oil lamps, Renaissance peoples nightly encountered a darkness that our modern experience cannot recreate, one that was dense, impenetrable, and full of terrors. It is in this setting *The Witches* deceive the day. Note the hatch lines and pocks Baldung Grien uses to layer the darkness, from which an uninviting forest emerges and blends.

Further obscuring their nefarious purposes, Baldung Grien's witches are wreathed in smoke. Clouds drift across the night sky so that no starlight can shed, and a cauldron (banded with faux writing, perhaps meant to emulate Hebrew lettering) belches a thick billow of vapors, bilious and flecked with unidentifiable chunks of their horrid feast. The connection between witches and miasma (haze or mist) lies in the period belief that diseases such as the Bubonic Plague were spread by bad air. In a period well before germ theory, witches were often blamed for disease outbreaks.

It is telling that *The Enchantress* is barely smoky. One could argue, however, that blurriness is embedded into the paint itself, as Dossi used the *sfumato* technique: a careful, precise delineation of shades so that forms seamlessly blend. By stark contrast, Baldung Grien's seemingly endless series of exquisite, interlocking lines reinforces this sense of blurry movement in the foggy air. A print like this would have been printed into two layers from two separately

carved plates, then inked in two separate colors: one black, one gray. For both compositions to correctly line up to form the final whole required enormous skill and meticulous planning.

Baldung Grien further employs the hatch marks central to the woodcut medium to emphasize the witch's bodies: marked, wrinkled, and naked. Nudity in the print acts as a key signifier that these figures are in fact witches. By roaming naked, these witches have in effect unsexed themselves, refusing the boundaries of honorable womanhood. Hair flying unbound, toes splayed, limbs entangled, they revel in their nakedness.

The Enchantress is clothed. She wears a turban, a patterned bodice over a puff-sleeve underlayer, and a gold-fringed shawl drapes her legs, adding more modesty. Pomegranates and lion motifs provide mysterious symbols that refuse pinning down. Sandals twine her feet. Covered in proper layers, her body is neither distorted nor grotesque. Festooned in blue, red, and an abundance of gold, *The Enchantress*' costume may be described as "Orientalizing," an amalgamated, Western projection of what a person from what would now be called the Middle East might wear, with no basis in specific sartorial reality. This vibrant outfit would have been read as unusual to the early modern viewer, and therefore strange and exotic. She is wrapped in magical trappings.

Naked or clothed, a sure sign of a witch's wildness was her connection with nature, eschewing the indoor sterility and rigidity of civilization. The animals provide a shared affinity across the print and the painting. In Baldung Grien's conception, animals are both victims (the cow skull and the malformed bird writhing on the plate) and familiars (the cat crouched in the corner and two goats, one screaming, the other a flying mount).

Animals partake in the core rituals at work in *The Enchantress* too. Unlike her printed sisters, Dossi's witch casts her spell for the benefit (?) of the dog at her left. The dog's eyes are

hauntingly human, a clue to its identity as a knight who has fallen afoul of a curse, robbed of his humanity and, more importantly, his masculinity, symbolized by the abandoned armor. His compatriots lounge in the background, perhaps exhausted from questing, but with a spiky sword nevertheless drawn at the ready. Is this part of the composition a moment out of synch with the rest of the panel, a time before the evil transformation took place? Or have these lucky knights already been freed?

Pinioned in the corner, obviously still held prisoner is another set of victims, dangling above the piteous dog. The enchantress directs the viewer to a shock; follow her gaze if you dare. The bundle of creepy doll-like figures hung from the tree are homunculi, a visualization of the human soul carved out of the body, which was then transformed into a beast.[8] One of the manikins holds praying hands up as if pleading with her to set them free. Art historian Linda Hults has pointed out that these little soul-figures also resemble mandrake roots, which were used in love magic in the period.[9]

Meanwhile, in *The Witches*, another style of transformation takes place, from an earthbound human to an airborne witch. She defies gravity, levitating above human ability. The witches cavort beyond the rules of the human world. These witches are enacting an upside-down sabbath (this print is sometimes identified as *Witch's Sabbath*), an unholy bastardization of the Christian Eucharist ritual. Note the chalice, the food (including a hank of limp, phallic sausages), the defiled altar cloth, and the paten. Instead of atonement of sin and everlasting life, this mass brings torment and death. There is no escape.

Bewitching the Beholder

[8] Christopher Wood, "The Votive Scenario," *Res* (Cambridge, Mass.), no. 59/60 (2011), p. 208.

[9] Linda C. Hults, *The Witch as Muse: Art, Gender, and Power in Early Modern Europe*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2005), p. 189.

Rife with visual intricacies, Dosso Dossi's *The Enchantress* is a painting asking the viewer to analyze it like a poem. One last layer to consider: the magic circle. The magic circle was a protective shape used to transact magic, seen in this page from a fifteenth-century copy of Florentine philosopher Brunetto Latini's thirteenth-century encyclopedic manuscript *Livre de Tresor*, depicting the magician Zoroaster standing within a magical circle and holding a mystical text (figure 4). He commands two offended demons to do his bidding with a gesture. Dossi's circle, like many lines from Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, can be read in many ways at once. The panel is almost perfectly square (69 ¼ x 68 1/2") perhaps to highlight by contrast the magic circle within the frame.[10] Note also the strange faux writing, yet another element meant to exoticize the central figure without placing her in any actual non-European cultural context. With the circle, Dossi may also be making a clever allusion to a common early modern story that genius artists can draw a perfect circle freehand, which the famous Italian painter, architect, and mosaicist Giotto di Bondone was credited with (an anecdote first recorded in Vasari's *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors & Architects*, and one Dossi probably knew). Perhaps the most haunting property of *The Enchantress*' magic circle is the fact that it is broken. Interrupted by the bottom edge of the frame, the painter intentionally left this gap open to ensnare further interpretations. Perhaps the breach portends that the magic within, whether for good or evil, will leech uncontained. Are you, the viewer, the victim of enchantment, or complicit in demonic deeds? Or are you a witch? Regardless of the answers, one truth is clear: after centuries, *The Enchantress* continues to charm.

[10] Christopher Wood, "Countermagical Combinations by Dosso Dossi," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics,* 49-50 (2006), p. 166.

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See also: Project Gutenberg: *Orlando Furioso*

Images

Figure 1: Dosso Dossi, *The Enchantress*, c. 1520, oil on canvas, held in the Galleria Borghese in Rome.

Figure 2: Dosso Dossi, *Circe and Her Lovers in a Landscape*, c. 1525, National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C.

Figure 3: Hans Baldung Grien, *The Witches*, 1510, chiaroscuro woodcut in two blocks, printed in gray and black, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Figure 4: The Magician Zoroaster, (copy of) Brunetto Latini, *Livre de Tresor*, 1425. MS 39844, f. 51.