

A COMPARISON OF THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN IN THE NORTHERN
RENAISSANCE AND MODERN DAY: THE OCCULT, FEMALE SEXUALITY,
AND THE MEDIA

By

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Abstract

In this essay I will compare depictions of women in Northern Renaissance prints and the modern media in order to reveal the roots of stereotypical representations of women. Women who go against the status quo are represented as witches so as to prey on societal fears of female sexuality and dominance. Printmaking and the modern media both represent women with a binary understanding of femininity. How these stereotypes of women are represented in the media today have roots in Northern Renaissance prints that were heavily influenced by the *Malleus Maleficarum*, the first treatise on witches and the occult. This treatise utilized gendered stereotypes to describe witches, thus generating a fear of the occult that manifests as a fear of female power, particularly as it pertains to sexuality. Part one focuses on the *Malleus Maleficarum* as it was applied to various works of art during the 15th and 16th centuries. Part two will prove that the iconographic references utilized during the Northern Renaissance have continued on as unconscious bias within society, manifesting in the way women are represented in the media. Understanding these roots is an important step towards understanding why women have historically been relegated to a second-class status.

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Introduction

Society today is a product of societies past. The way in which women are represented throughout art has had a profound effect on the way in which women are treated in society. Representation matters: it can affirm gender stereotypes, relegate women to second class status, valorize masculinity over femininity, and contribute to the continuation of gender oppression. The gendered stereotypes and hierarchies that our contemporary society operates in accordance with have roots in various historical periods. With art history as my lens, in this paper I will argue that the various tropes' artists use when representing women in the media today are based on ideas and stereotypes brought forth from the Northern Renaissance. The Northern Renaissance will be defined here as the art historical and cultural period ranging from the 15th to the 16th century in the northern region of Europe. Looking at prints, paintings, and primary documentation from this period in comparison to today's political cartoons, media, and other cultural objects reveals the arcane patterns of women's representation.

Stereotypes are at the base of every institution as either unconsciously or firmly held belief systems. These inaccurate perceptions continue to exist even as societies progress because they become entrenched in public thought, existing pervasively at both the individual and the structural level. Investigating the roots of gendered misconceptions that have been ingrained into the minds of a society reveals that these ideas have been circulating well before now. Increased attention to feminist art history, originating in the 1960s with the feminist movement, underscores the idea that the representation of women in art has patterns that cross both time and place. These stereotypical understandings of femininity are not only reaffirmed through art and cultural production but have also been created and enforced through these means. Feminist art history seeks to understand how artistic representations of women inform everyday societal

power structures because, “like other feminist scholars, feminist art historians have built [their] work upon the postmodern precept that the circulation of power in society is not natural but culturally manipulated and directed” (Broude and Garrad, 1). Prevalent ideas of what it means to be a woman today are amplified through the representation of women in the media.

We are currently in the age of mass media; people are faced with a daily onslaught of images that “paint” women in the fashion of widely held stereotypes. News organizations flood television screens with stories illustrating gendered violence, social media features endless amounts of naked and airbrushed women, political cartoons use femininity as a punchline and advertisements target the most archaic perceptions of what it means to be a woman as if there is any one way. With the mass amounts of media viewership we experience today, it is inevitable that the images being produced and shared would have an effect on the collective thought and structure of a society. Contemporary art forms, though vastly different in styles and mediums, contain relics of the Northern Renaissance in the form of archaic and stereotypical representations of women. This is as true today with news reports, advertisements, and social media, as it is with the circulation of 16th century printmaking and audiences interacting with Northern Renaissance oil paintings.

Feminist theory has at its core the concept of ‘the personal is political,’ meaning that what happens in the political/public sphere effects the personal/private sphere and vice versa. This idea, crafted in the 1960s by Carol Hanisch, can be applied to art history as a discipline because it encourages a consideration of how social thought both effects and is affected by art. The political and social standing of women is linked to the domestic issues they face, and have faced, throughout history. Art exists in both the public and private, informing each one in different ways. For example, art can be political propaganda and art can be portraits of loved

ones. Social issues often utilize art to cross the public and private sphere and attempt to mold them together. For example, news coverage that is centered around the political sphere is delivered in short bursts to an at home audience through *images* that communicate whichever opinion or bias they hold. The media establishes various biases, stereotypes, and opinions that are then translated into political and public action. The onslaught of media evoking certain stereotypes about women alters how the public will treat women. Tropes such as the overly sexualized woman, or the woman who is seen as shrew and conniving (witch-like) that are shown to men and women solidifies ideas as accurate portrayals of femininity because of the frequency with which they are forced onto the public. This is just as true now, as it was in the Northern Renaissance; while media as we know it today did not exist during the 15th and 16th centuries, the circulation of cultural products had a similar effect as will be discussed below.

Part 1 – The Northern Renaissance

Why the Northern Renaissance?

I have found that the Northern Renaissance is the most applicable area of art history to consider when tracing patterns of how women are represented in works of art because of the prevalence and variance of works that are about women and femininity. While the Northern Renaissance built upon and was affected by ideas and writings originating from as far back as the ancient Greeks, the Renaissance resulted in a time period more conducive to discussions surrounding societal power structures and female representations.

An important concept that influenced the Northern Renaissance and the years leading up to it was Galen's writings on the Four Humors. Galen was a Greek physician that lived from 130 A.D. to 200 A.D., whose medical writings remained influential for centuries. Galen believed that

the human person was composed of four humors: phlegm, black bile, yellow bile and blood. These humors were connected to four temperaments: sanguine, choleric, melancholic, and phlegmatic. These humors needed to exist in a state of balance in order to remain healthy, as an excess of any one of these humors were indicative of a physical illness or an emotional imbalance, which were able to be physically detected because, “if the humors became visible as in vomiting or in the excretion of mucus through coughing, they serve as symptoms of illness” (Stelmack and Stalikas, 257). Essentially, the humors were various fluids that when excreted in excess amounts were indicative of a corresponding illness. Women were seen as having an imbalance of these humors. Since women menstruate, for example, they have an excess of fluids which means their temperament was out of balance. They were emotional, and therefore weaker and should be kept out of the public sphere.

An influx of images about women and femininity allowed for the Northern Renaissance to have a much more profound effect on the arts and media today rather than, for example, the time period beginning around the 5th century, known widely as the medieval period. During this time period, “artistic activities in general were poorly recorded and the lives of women, unless they were of noble birth, were barely acknowledged – or were even deliberately excluded from mention – by medieval authors” (Kurmann-Schwarz, 128). The *Bayeux Tapestry*, a work produced by women, was the only work of art produced during the Medieval age that had any female figures in it. The only three women are not active players in the tapestry, which tells the story of William the Conqueror, but are depicted as family members (Scene 1, Image 1) as in the wife of Edward the Confessor, who is being placed under the protection of King Harold at Edward’s deathbed, as fleeing women (Scene 3, Image 2), and as a ‘Mysterious Lady’ (Scene 1, Image 3) (Reading Museum). While this may offer some critique of women as either in need of

protection or as mysterious and shady, there are no more images with which to compare this interpretation. Medieval images were less likely to be accurately socially representative because they were largely dictated by the upper classes and religious figures, who were mostly male (Kurmann-Schwarz, 141-142). Therefore, as women were not represented in art and literature it is impossible to fully understand any possible influences that the artistic representation of medieval society would have had on media today.

Women were either left out of the artistic realm, thus diminishing their role in society, or were merely positioned in works of art as devotional figures, or role models for other women. In addition to this, “medieval images are rarely socially representation, their subject matter being heavily informed by the culture of the upper classes” (Kurmann Schwarz, 141) making it hard to analyze how society structured in accordance with the artistic realm. The topics of female sexuality, their power and bodies, and femininity in general is not touched upon with as much consideration as it was during the Northern Renaissance. The Northern Renaissance considered womanhood, sexuality, and gender roles in a much more fluid way, permanently marking the way societies would consider these topics and their resulting power dynamics.

Many representations of women in art were meant to serve as teaching guides for women, on how to be more pious and proper. Early Christian art, that is art produced during the formative stages of Christianity, formed a basis for many of the restrictions and boundaries that were placed on women in the years continuing. However, it is not so much images as it is the Bible, and other Holy texts, that led to the power structures and hierarchies at play during the early years of Christianity as an organized religion. For example, Eve ate the forbidden fruit, casting humanity out of paradise, a punishing moment that I will discuss later on. The Bible provided a framework for the role that women have, as it states that they “will be saved through

childbearing, provided she continues in faith and love and holiness – her chastity being taken for granted” (1 Tim 2:8-15). The focus on religious art during this period is what makes it an unreliable source for the stereotypes and patterns of women’s representation that have lasted until today due to: secularism, politics, and the foundation of numerous other religions that limited the rights and position of women in society.

Fear of Female Sexuality and Power

A common and easy way to portray and discuss sexuality is through the human body. The female nude is a vessel with which artists can discuss different variations or critiques of female sexuality. Often this sexuality is connected to a sense of deviance, of powerful women who have become dangerous because their sexual desires are not concurrent with beliefs on how women should behave. When analyzing a work of art it is important to consider the gaze: who is the *audience* and/or the *subject* looking at. The gaze of a piece is often used by artists to flip the script, as the figure in the piece looking out at the audience reflects dominance, upsetting the pre-established power dynamics of the audience and the subject. Female power is synonymous with her sexuality as they are both matters of dominance versus submissiveness. When it is a woman looking out at the audience, especially if that woman is nude, the artist is hinting at a perversion of how women are supposed to behave. This behavior, prior to the Renaissance, exhibited by them forever locked with their gaze cast down in submission to male power.

The way the female figure is represented is laden with contextual clues as to both how women were perceived and how women were meant to act. Beginning with Galen’s writings, women were seen as existing in excess: an excess of humors and therefore an excess of emotions. Women are greedy as Eve was the one, not Adam, who wanted more knowledge and

ate from the forbidden fruit. Thus, the gluttonous, excessive woman was created. To be gluttonous implies an insatiability in regard to not only food and other worldly pleasures, but to sexual desires. The woman who wants sex was written off as devious and witchlike. Women were doomed to be forever condemned for daring to want: to want sex, to feel hunger, to crave power.

Gluttony, being one of the seven deadly sins, was theologically linked as being related to both food and sin. In *On Fasting* by Tertullian, an Early Christian author, the linkage between the sinful desire for hunger and thirst and the sinful desire for sex is lined out and later became a part of Christian literature. He writes, “lust without voracity would certainly be considered a monstrous phenomenon; since these two are so united and concrete, that, had there had been any possibility of disjoining them, the pudenda (genitals) would not have been affixed to the belly itself rather than elsewhere. Look at the body: the region (of these members) is one and the same” and “through love of eating, love of impurity finds passage” (*On Fasting*). These ideas further prove that depicting Gluttony as a woman is a way artists can portray both religious (evidenced by *On Fasting*) and social (*Naked Woman on a Mound*, Image 4) anxieties surrounding women, sexuality, and power.

In art, Gluttony was depicted as a female figure with an overextended stomach. Since Gluttony is connected to sexuality and not just to food and drink, a woman with a large, overexaggerated stomach and excessive flesh is representative of a deviant woman who steps out of the institutions and constrictions that society has placed on them (Moseley-Christian, 183). A paragon of Gluttony in works of Northern Renaissance art is Jacob Mathams', *Gluttony* from 1593 (Image 5). The figure signifying gluttony has an overextended and fleshy stomach that sags downwards while she brandishes a tray holding food and clutches a container of unknown drink

to her body. The figure is looking out at the viewer which grants the subject power over the audience since she is not merely an object to be put on view. Women who were dominant, a trait given for merely looking in someone's eyes, were attacked on the basis of their sexuality because they upset gendered power structures that exist at the very essence of social interactions. This accusation of female sexuality, and thereby female power, as dangerous or unnatural has lasted until today.

An example of how the depiction of Gluttony, as it relates to both physical and sexual desires, played on societal fears of women keying into their sexual power is Rembrandt's *Naked Woman Seated On a Mound* c. 1631 (Image 4). This image depicts a naked woman with excessive and overexaggerated flesh seated on a mound. While women were typically desired for being curvy during this time, there was a thin line between being desirable and being gluttonous. Hinting at a sexual aggression and dominance within the woman, she boldly looks out at the viewer. Placing this woman in the outdoors on a mound accomplishes two things: denotes the women as 'wild' and 'other' since she is literally outside of normalcy, and further hints at women's sexual and physical aggression as the mound she is seated on draws attention to her body (Moseley-Christian, 183-186). Both of these works of art demonstrate the underlying fears that Northern Renaissance society had concerning women and power – since women were meant to be pious and submissive, a woman who was seemingly in touch with her own sexuality was a threat to the status quo and was someone to be feared and looked down upon.

Female sexuality takes on an aura of sinfulness as it is synonymous with breaking away from societal barriers. Framing women as gluttonous, a cardinal sin, and consistently admonishing women for their sexuality and for daring to take up more room than was allowed of them has had profound effects on media today. The media encourages women to be smaller, to

take up as little room as possible, and to be proper, pure and/or sexually submissive. The critique of women as being too powerful, too sexual, or too gluttonous has caused the diet culture that dominates the media today. The weight of a woman has continued to be a way to condemn her as even in the Northern Renaissance being too curvy was depicted as being sinful because she wanted too much. Women are also still seen as the greedier and insatiable sex, an idea stemming from the dialogue surrounding women during the Northern Renaissance. If women see themselves as consistently condemned, both socially and in artistic depictions, there is going to be a social response. The response here being the insatiable need to be smaller while still being *acceptably* curvy and not *gluttonously* curvy.

Women as Witches: The Fear of the Occult and *Malleus Maleficarum*

One common depiction of women that has continued until today is that of the witch. Witches were used in Northern Renaissance art in order to depict women because they embodied the various misconceptions surrounding femininity. Female sexuality has long been, and continues to be, a source of contention in society. The *Malleus Maleficarum* was a widely read and believed treatise of witches and witchcraft. Published in 1486 by a Catholic clergyman named Heinrich Kramer in Germany, this treatise created an image of witches that would spur on societal fears of the occult. This anxiety of the occult would come to translate, due to the ways in which witches were represented in Northern Renaissance culture, as a fear of women.

The art produced during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries established the associations between social ideas concerning women and their place in society with witchcraft and the operations of the occult. Witches became ways to reference the dangers that women presented in society when they did not behave as pious, passive characters. Specifically, women that were in

charge of their own power and sexuality, who stepped out of the carefully crafted gender roles they'd been forced into. Powerful women being seen as threats to society at large is, therefore, not a new concept, and one that has unfortunately crossed the thresholds of the archaic and into today.

Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528), a German painter and printmaker, painted various images of witches. Durer had high circulation during the Northern Renaissance, due to his “all-embracing activity and authority both as an artist and as a writer, to his travels in Italy and the Netherlands, and to the easy transportability of his greatest works – his engravings and woodcuts” (Stechow, 85). One of his engravings concerning the occult is entitled *The Four Witches* from 1497 (Image 6). The image is in an indoors scene depicting four naked women standing in a circle in the middle of the room. At first glance the image appears to be a painting of four average women, but at a closer look various occult references come to light: to the right of them is a doorway with a demon looking figure peering into the room, and in the middle of the circle is a skull. Skulls serve as a reference to the inevitability of death, a *memento mori*. The painting points to the sexuality of the women, as there are four naked women and no male present, solidifying the association with female sexuality and witchcraft.

The *Four Witches* was produced eleven years after the publication of the *Malleus Maleficarum* and the influence of this treaty on the understanding of witches and witchcraft can be viewed in this work. The *Malleus Maleficarum* states that witches are able to reach their full dangerous potential when the devil is working through them, “that in order to bring about some effect of magic, the devil must intimately cooperate with the witch” (Kramer, 12-21). The demon lurking in the background does is a signifier in the image, referencing this idea that the devil is able to bring about his torment onto humanity through women as his vessel of choice. The

nakedness of these women supports the idea that women emboldened in their bodies and their sexuality are either dangerous or have been tainted by the devil. Three years after Dürer's *Four Witches*, he completed another engraving entitled *Witch Riding Backwards on a Goat* (1500) (Image 7). This image depicts a woman with an old, haggish looking face and long hair billowing out behind her as she faces a storm, backwards on a goat. Four putti surround the goat, forming a ring shape that is also seen in his *Four Witches*.

Women have been accused of falling more readily for the devil's tricks dating all the way back to the Bible, to Adam and Eve. As the author of the *Malleus Maleficarum* was a ranking member of the Catholic church, it is likely that this idea of women being weaker and more likely to fall for the devil's tricks comes from Genesis. Eve having fallen for the temptations of the devil and eating the forbidden fruit, casting humankind out of the Garden of Eden, tainted with original sin. Thus, the stereotypes of women being weaker and more likely to be tainted by the devil and women as sexually deviant combine to frame women as witchlike and thereby a danger to society.

Hans Balding Grien's image entitled, *Bewitched Groom* (1510) (Image 8) exemplifies the very real feelings of anxiety and fear surrounding the assumed powers that witches could hold over men. This wood engraving features a man flat on his back in a bewitched state. Standing in the doorway is a muscular horse, the only figure in the print that is looking back at the audience. To the left of the bewitched man is a woman with an old and haggard face similar to that of Dürer's *Witch Riding Backwards on a Goat* from 1500. She is brandishing a large palm as she looks down upon the man. The man has been made powerless in comparison to not only the witch, but also to the strong horse behind him. This emasculation and bewitchment, having possibly been led to some harm by the women in the background, is

illustrating a fear that the *Maleficarum* presents – that women, who are more likely to fear prey to the devil and the occult (as evidenced in both the Bible and Kramer’s treatise), will be able to hurt men. Presumably where it will hurt them the most, in their masculinity, I.E. their sexuality and power.

The idea represented in this image, that witches could control and do harm to men (including bewitching them) is represented in the *Malleus Maleficarum* through various sections, many of which pertain to emasculation and castration. For example, the treatise is organized by question and answer, and there are various questions that pertain to power that witches have over men: “Whether Witches may work some Prestidigitator Illusion so that the Male Organ appears to be entirely removed and separate from the Body”, “Whether witches can by some Glamour Change Men into Beasts”, “How, as it were, they Deprive Man of his Virile Member,” and “Of the Way how in Particular they Afflict Men with Other Like Infirmities.” The fixation on castration, emasculation and bewitchment in this document solidifies the fear of female sexuality and power, in the sense that it would diminish the power that men held, often over women that they were in a position of power over.

While witches are no longer a prevalent fear in society, the representation of the witch is still utilized to accomplish similar goals. Witches in the Northern Renaissance were not depicted with the green skin, warts, and crooked nose that we know of today; however, it is not what the witches look like, but what it means to be representing women as witches in the first place. Witches today have taken on a much more cartoonish look, made famous from popular culture images: green skin, occult items (magic wands, cauldron, potions), black robes and hats, and flying brooms. These characteristics, both those utilized during the 15th and 16th centuries, and those used today, are still easily recognizable as pertaining to the occult. This recognition leads

the viewer to associate the image with what we have come to understand about witches, as discussed above.

If Not a Witch, Then What?

The representation of women was often like two sides of a coin. When representing everyday women, there are two common patterns: the witch or the pious virgin. The witch representation can come in different guises, for example: a lady of the night, or a powerful woman looking the viewer in the eyes. Essentially any women who does not do what is asked of her based on prescribed gender roles falls under this category. The other category that women belong in is that of the ideal woman – the pure, virginal woman who behaves as according to her station. This dichotomy stems from the two different ways women were depicted: rebellious women who refused to remain docile and women who accepted their status in society.

An example of a proper Northern Renaissance women can be found in Hans Memling's painting entitled *Portrait of a Young Woman* (1480) (Image 9). Hans Memling (1430-1494), a German painter, depicts a woman in a black garment with a translucent veil, a religious necklace around her neck, and hands clasped in front of her. Her eyes are slightly downcast, looking just away from the viewer as she assumes the subservient and pious role that was befitting a proper woman. Rogier Van der Weyden's *Portrait of a Lady* (1460) (Image 10) shares a striking resemblance to Memling's *Portrait of a Young Woman*, which was created twenty years later.

Eve: The Original Power Sinner

Women have often been blamed for various events in human history, a notion that has yet been put to rest. This stems back to the biblical creation story of Adam and Eve. Eve caused humankind to be cast out of paradise because she disobeyed God and fell prey to the temptation

of the devil. Eve is the root cause of why, as supported by the *Malleus Maleficarum*, it was believed that women were more likely to succumb to evil. This idea was previously stated by Galen and his four humors.

Adam and Eve remained a common theme throughout the Northern Renaissance, establishing similar stereotypes about women as images of witches do, only this time under the guise of religion. Religion was and continues to be a guiding force interwoven with public thought. Eve became the poster child for negative opinions of women. For example, *The Fall of Man* by Albrecht Dürer (Image 11). The title itself hints at the religious tragedy that has befallen *man*, while the subject encapsulates the blame that was placed on women for this.

Part 2 – 21st Century Aftereffects of The Northern Renaissance

Media: Modernity's Low Art

There is no one definition as to what can be considered art as it is relative to the contemporary moment that it exists in. In the 21st century, the media is the mechanism with which the highest quantity of information, images, and other cultural products are able to reach the largest number of viewers. The media is a means of mass communication, including but not limited to: the internet, various social media platforms, television and the news. Essentially, the media is composed of any form of broadcast that reaches mass amounts of viewers. Media both shapes and represents public thought and popular culture in the same ways that so called “lower arts” did in the Northern Renaissance. While found on television sets and smart phones as opposed to museums and prints, the media today has an unprecedented reach that communicates images based on stereotypical perceptions of femininity and masculinity to an ever-growing viewership. This is parallel to the proliferation of Northern Renaissance prints. Thanks to the

invention of the printing press in the late 15th century, authors and artists alike were able to extend the reach of their work. The printing press is therefore akin to the modern broadcasting station. Advertisements, movies, political cartoons and social media all feature artistic images and styles with layers of meaning just as other academic methods of artistic production do (sculpture, painting, printmaking, etc.).

Art classified as “high art” is typically understood to be academic, meaning it belongs to the realm of the salons, museums, exhibitions, etc. On the opposite side of the spectrum, art that is deemed “low art” does not meet the standards associated with academia and utilizing expensive materials. Having these two distinctions creates intrinsic associations of positive versus negative. John Fisher points out in his discussion of high art versus low art that, “even though ‘high’ and ‘low’ read as adjectives of contrasting quality, we should not equate the high/low distinction with a third distinction, that between good and bad art” (Fischer, 528). Since the media is an institution designed to distribute images and other cultural products to a general audience, one may be quick to denounce media as ‘low art’. ‘Low art’ that typically represents everyday concerns that have little to no impact on the artistic world, but possibly a strong impact on the public. Therefore, taking the stance that ‘low art’, including the media, is less than other forms of artistic production diminishes the impact that the media has on the structures and gendered hierarchies prevalent in our society today

Media, thus, falls into the category of low art. However, this does not mean it should be ignored because it is key when attempting to analyze both the ways in which women are viewed and how they are treated and positioned within a society. Low art being connected to everyday life more closely than high art makes it more representative of societal thought and of how society operates (hierarchically, politically, and socially). Therefore, understanding the media is

key to understanding how a society operates. This is the same today as how looking at prints and other works of art is necessary to understanding how society operated during the 15th and 16th centuries. Media is modernity's low art because it exists as a part of everyday life with little emphasis placed on its artistic merit. However, the media reflects society's hierarchical gendered power structures and stereotypes accurately, exposing that which exists unconsciously in the mind of every person. This is why the media is considered an art form as well as an important vehicle for understanding how power operates in a society

Applying the *Malleus Maleficarum* to Political Cartoons

Regardless of political party, female candidates for high power positions are often depicted with references to the occult, or as overt caricatures of a witch. Iconography, an important tool during the Northern Renaissance and in media today, links ideas, assumptions, or other references to recognizable objects for the viewer to quickly pick up on. Portraying a woman as a witch is a way to associate a specific woman (or women in general) with various negative characteristics: power hungry, ugly, cruel, or too masculine, to name a few. While society today does not have fear of the occult at the forefront of public thought, archaic assumptions of powerful women as nefarious, sexually deviant, and dangerous are still communicated through the image of the witch. The political realm is where these archaic comparisons between women and the occult reveal similarities between the way women were regarded in the Northern Renaissance and the way they are regarded today.

The Northern Renaissance established the witch as a stand-in for a dangerous and powerful woman. Dangerous in the sense that they are to be feared for two reasons: they represent affronts to and attacks on the status quo and they are capable of causing harm. The

media today still utilizes the archaic representations and stereotypes of women and femininity that were discussed in part one. This iconography is now often used as a propagandistic tool utilized with increased frequency in the political/public sphere. It is worth note here that this iconography exists outside of the realm of partisan politics – meaning whether conservative or liberal, the representation of women remains an attack on gender under the guise of political difference.

Open Season (Image 12), a political cartoon by artist A.F. Branco, produced in 2017 depicts six women and one male as witches, poised with guns as they “hunt” after the newly elected president. While only one of the female witches has a name (Nancy Pelosi, current Speaker of the House), it is clear that the majority of figures (their hats marking them as belonging to various news organizations) are female because of their long hair and similarities to the Nancy Pelosi figure. The *Malleus Maleficarum* emphasizes that women are more likely to be overtaken by superstition and fall prey to the occult because of three reasons: “they are more credulous; and since the chief aim of the devil is to corrupt faith, therefore he rather attacks them,” “they are more impressionable, and more ready to receive the influence of a disembodied spirit,” and “they have slippery tongues, and are unable to conceal from their fellow-women those things which by evil arts they know” (Kramer, 43-44). In today’s terms, falling for the devil’s tricks is understood as being more likely to fall for political corruption. This is a clear continuation of the idea that women are more likely to fall for the devil’s tricks because of stereotypical understandings of femininity as established during the Northern Renaissance.

The Clinton Witch (Image 13) is a political cartoon done by Ken Catalino that depicts Hilary Clinton, former Secretary of State and presidential candidate, as a witch. She is riding on a broom, wearing a black hat and cape, while being followed by two easily recognizable

caricatures of witches. They are clearly marked because of their green skin and overexaggerated noses; Clinton is wearing the same clothing and flying on the same broom, however the other witches are saying “I told you --- she’s too wicked to get caught”, in reference to Clinton. *Time to Ditch the Witch* from 2016 (Image 14) by Ben Garrison is another political cartoon that made the rounds during the most recent presidential election. It features President Trump chasing after a witch-like Hilary Clinton while riding a bald eagle. Hilary is haggard looking with the staple green skin, black clothing, and broom. The two captions on the image say, “crooked Hillary” and “Trump will ditch the witch”.

It is no coincidence that these two images which depict Hilary Clinton as a witch were circulated during the time of her candidacy for the presidency of the United States. For as was established during the Northern Renaissance, a woman who is powerful is relegated to the status of witch. In this case, by painting Hilary, a serious female contender for the presidency of the United States, as a witch, adversaries are not solely attacking her political point of view but her gender. There are no images of men as occult beings because masculinity is not attacked as femininity is. This is because, as established in the *Malleus Maleficarum* and still utilized in media representations of women today, women are seen as more readily falling prey to corruption, as power hungry, and as too wicked to exist in the public sphere.

Advertisements: 21st Century Printmaking

While political cartoons and propaganda offer a clear view of women in power, advertisements, which have a hold on every aspect of media, offer insight on gendered stereotypes of sexuality. For instance, the oversexualization of the female body leading to voyeuristic gawking at women. Women in advertisements are objectified and their personalities

diminished until they are equitable to whichever product the, company is pushing. Women's bodies continue to be a subject of discussion in widely circulated cultural products. From Northern Renaissance print making to modern day advertisements, the female body is put on view for male consideration. Either to condemn for being too sexual, or to oversexualize, as is the case in today's climate.

There are four main gender messages that are communicated through advertisements: Women are domestic and motherly, women are not powerful decisionmakers, women need men for security, and women are sex objects with no other discernable personalities (Courtney and Lockertez, 92-95). These gendered stereotypes about women are circulated to audiences through the media – socializing people to believe that these stereotypes are intrinsically true about the female gender. If people are trained to see women in this light it is inevitable that hierarchical power structures will form with men at the top and women at the bottom.

Conclusion: Why Does This Matter?

The media in the 21st century has an iron grasp on many institutions that have a profound effect on both the private and the public sphere. Advertisements are inescapable, and companies are finding more and more ways to target certain audiences in purposeful ways through iconography that appeal to the strictest gender stereotypes. The way women are portrayed in the media cements negative assumptions of femininity that then effect the very real lives of women. For example, if people are faced with an onslaught of images that depict women as oversexualized or too powerful, people will begin to believe this (consciously or unconsciously), and that will affect women who are trying to run for political office (as discussed above), for women in the workplace, for young girls who are stereotyped before their lives have even begun.

History does not exist in a vacuum. Ideas and stereotypes, including those concerning gender, though they exist in the subconscious of society have been interwoven in public discourse and art over the course of centuries. In order to fully grasp why we think the way we do, it is necessary to look backwards in time. The Northern Renaissance played a key role in establishing the way women would be represented and thought of for centuries past the original articulation of these ideas. Whether 'positively', as a forever pure, virginal figure, or as 'negatively', as gluttonous, sexually deviant, and witchlike, women are trapped under the domineering force of their own public representations. The parallels between these stereotypes today and these stereotypes during the Northern Renaissance reveals that our perceptions of women, particularly in the media, are archaic relics of a time we socially and politically claim to have moved past.

Images



Image 1: *Bayeux Tapestry*, c. 1070, Scene 1



Image 2: *Bayeux Tapestry*, c. 1070, Scene 2



Image 3: *Bayeux Tapestry*, c. 1070, Scene 3



Image 4: *Naked Woman Seated on a Mound*, Rembrandt van Rijn, 1651



Image 5: *Gluttony (Gula)*, Jacob Matham, 1593



Image 6: *Four Naked Women*, Albrecht Dürer, 1504



Image 7: *Witch Riding Backwards on a Goat*, Albrecht Dürer, 1500

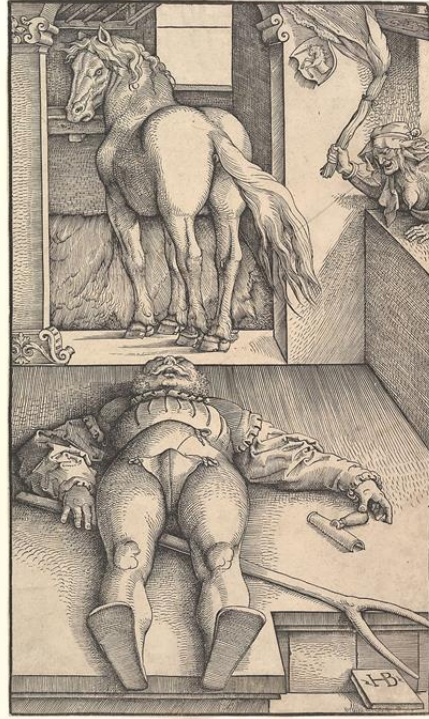


Image 8: *Bewitched Groom*, Hans Baldung Grien, 1544



Image 9: *Portrait of a Young Woman*, Hans Memling, 1480

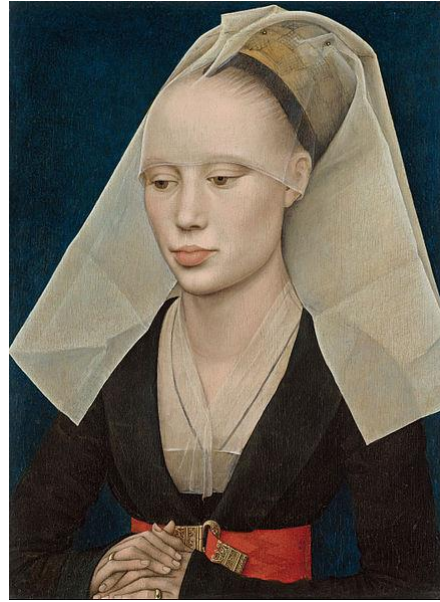


Image 10: *Portrait of a Lady*, Rogier van der Weyden, 1460



Image 11: *The Fall of Man*, Albrecht Dürer, 1504



Image 12: "Open Season", A.F. Branco, 2017



Image 13: "The Clinton Witch", Ken Catalino, 2015



Image 14: “Time to Ditch the Witch”, Ben Garrison, 2016

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Image 5:

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Image 6:

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