Anthropology and aesthetics
Countermagical combinations by Dosso Dossi

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1. The witch emerged as a subject in European art in the late fifteenth century, at the very moment when the sacred image was beginning to lose its automatic centrality within the careers of artists and the imaginations of patrons. The witch of painting, engraving, or woodcut figured a lost ground of powerful mimetic magic to which the modern cult image no longer seemed securely connected. The profane, disenchanted artwork offered a different kind of magic. The Enchantress painted by the Ferrarese court painter Dosso Dossi, datable to the second half of the 1510s, is the ideal test of this historical model (fig. 1).1

Dosso's colleague at the court of Duke Alfonso d'Este was the poet Ludovico Ariosto. In the Orlando Furioso, published in Ferrara in 1516, Ariosto reports that the deceptive arts of enchantment, the arts of his fictional witches Alcina and Melissa, are arts "to our age unknown," arti...al nostro tempo ignote (7.73).2 Ariosto so numbers magic among the institutions and folkways of the chivalric past now receding with all swiftness into oblivion. Such a measuring of the gradient between the present and a lost world is virtually the signature device of epic poetry. The Orlando Furioso tells of love adventures in the framework of the Frankish emperor Charlemagne's contests against the Saracen kings of Spain and North Africa in the late eighth century, a pre-history of the Crusades. The poem's internal time is an illogical dreamtime suspended between two remotenesses, temporal antiquity and the cultural east, places of splendid fabrics and efficacious witches and sibyls. Yet in the verse quoted, Ariosto conceives that his own poem belongs to—would be read within—a temporality all too rational. The world external to the poem is the modern saeculum of printed books, classical philology, and growing doubts about the long-term success of the Crusades. Unlike the oral tradition that carried the Roland legend for three centuries until it was written down around 1100, Ariosto's poetry understands too well its own origins in mere authorship. His poem, disillusioned, knows itself to be a counterfeit.3 Later Ariosto points out that magical, prophetic painting has become equally rare, an art "extinguished in our day" (33.5). Romanticism may have invented the idea of a secularized, disenchanted Renaissance. And yet secularization and disenchantment were already aspects of early sixteenth-century culture's self-understanding.

Once there was magic, Ariosto says, and now no longer. Another, metaphorical sort of magic, however, sexual enchantment, might not be entirely a thing of the past (8, 1):

Oh quante sono incantatrici, oh quanti incantatori tra noi, che non si sanno!

How many enchantresses among us! oh, How many enchanters are there, though unknown!

Ariosto's tone is suspect. He speaks as if magic did once exist, but undercuts himself with jocularity, hinting that he believes no such thing. If so, then it is impossible to take seriously Ariosto's profession of regret. He might really be saying not that the debased modern form of magic is sexual enchantment, but that magic was only ever a way of describing the art of allure, indeed only ever a way of accounting for art in general, the various technologies of illusion and fictionalization. "Magic," his text allows, is just a way that some cultures have of designating such things.4 Ariosto is offering sexual enchantment and art, it would seem, as rational explanations of magic that would level the gradient between enchanted past and disenchanted present. Instead of a lost past, he is offering an explained past.

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1. Rome, Galleria Borghese, oil on canvas, 176 x 174 cm.
3. David Quint, Origin and Originality in Renaissance Literature (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), pp. x-xi, 3-6, 23-24, and generally ch. 1 on the predicament of a Renaissance literary culture trying to grasp how poetic intervention in a sequence of texts of merely human fabrication could be construed as "original."
Figure 1. Dosso Dossi, *Enchantress*, ca. 1515–1520. Oil on canvas, 176 x 174 cm. Rome, Galleria Borghese. Photo: Scala/Art Resource, N.Y.
There are then two kinds of disenchantment, naïve and knowing. The first kind regrets what we have lost, while the second realizes that we never were enchanted. The poem makes both kinds available.

Not everyone in Ariosto's society was ready to accept the absolute pastness of the witches' arts. In these very years witchcraft was emerging out of a long shadowy existence in biblical and pagan texts and in popular imagination and re-materializing in courtrooms. In the fifteenth century, after centuries of skepticism and hesitation, the papacy formally accepted the argument that local incidence of witchcraft was to be treated as a form of heresy and so subject to clerical prosecution. The Dominican inquisitorial handbook *Malleus maleficarum*, the "Hammer of Witches," published in 1486 and frequently reprinted, gathered and ratified lore and hearsay, so initiating a vicious cycle of inquiry, discovery, judgment, and yet better-informed inquiry. Clerical and civic authorities sought to unmask and try the witches who hid behind ordinary social and familial roles. Witches had been persecuted and even prosecuted throughout the Middle Ages, but the fearsome chain of judgments began in earnest in the 1480s. The Inquisition purported to expose an invisible community of witches in league with demons and the devil in villages in Italy, France, Germany, Switzerland, Scotland, England, and eventually in Brazil and Massachusetts. By the end of the sixteenth century, perhaps ten thousand, were executed. Trials in Ariosto's northern Italy, and indeed all over Europe, were far more numerous in the second half of the sixteenth century, and no one in 1515 could have foreseen the extent of the catastrophe. Still, the trials and the debate about the reality of witchcraft were well under way already in the first decades of the century. If Ariosto was right that witchcraft was a thing of the past, then what were all the interrogations and treatises about?

It is almost as if the secularization of the fine arts, involving the institutionalization of artistic authorship and of the poetic work, entailed a drastic "looking away" from violence, power, error, reality. By taking up witchcraft as one of its glamorous themes, the autonomous artwork would seem to mock the trial-victims by transposing their mostly unseen bodies into fictional apparition, mimicking the accusations of the inquisitors by representing the witch as alluring. For unlike the harrowed body of the Christian martyr, the punishable body of the witch was unrepresentable. The first images of the witches were the woodcuts illustrating German printed books on witchcraft in the wake of the *Malleus*. In an example from Ulrich Molitor's *De lamiis*, a handbook that went through several Latin and German-language editions beginning in 1488, the women are feasting *a fresco*, roofless and masterless—the nightmare of husbands, for they are obviously plotting something (fig. 2). Such an image is not an identification guide. It does not help anyone recognize the witch beneath the housewife's wimple. The woodcut indeed has no content other than the unreliability of the witch's outward appearance.

The witch showed her true face—she was given her face—in only two places, on the scaffold and in elite, collectible artworks. The violent extraction of the witch from social life, involving an enforced passage into a textual existence as doctrinal question and a subsequent incarnation as a judicial subject, coincided historically with her apparition in art. The two sets of phenomena were complementary. The works of art, poems and...
It is the sort of beauty that painters offer, as Ariosto points out: “As best to feign the industrious painter knows” (quanto me’ finger san pittor industri) (7.11). It was the artistry of painters like Titian or Dosso Dossi, their control over the blandishments of touch and color, that encouraged writers to adduce painting as a metaphor for what enchantresses do to men’s reason.10 In the third edition of the Orlando Furioso (1532), Ariosto again compared the art of the magician to the art of the painter, singling out for mention, alongside the luminaries of art ancient and modern, the two artists closest to him, the brothers Dosso and Battista Dossi (33.2).11 The tautological circle was closed a few decades later when the Venetian critic Ludovico Dolce, in his treatise on painting, invoked Ariosto’s description of the witch Alcina’s appearance as an example that painters might emulate.12 The enchantress, creature of pure surface, pure aspect, emblem of female mutability (6.50-52), the purest test of descriptive power, was serving simultaneously as the paradigm for pictorial versifying and for word-painting.

Ariosto’s friend and colleague Dosso painted two pictures of enchantresses, one in the Galleria Borghese in Rome, magnificently clothed, and the other in the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C., nude (figs. 1, 3).13 Both date most likely from the second decade of

10. Ariosto’s verse was echoed by Lilio Gregorio Giraldi, a Ferrarese scholar and friend of Pico, in his treatise on witches; see Giancarlo Fiorenza, “Studies in Dosso Dossi’s Pictorial Language: Painting and Humanist Culture in Ferrara under Duke Alfonso I d’Este” (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 2000), p. 270.

11. On this mention, and on Vasari’s opinion that Ariosto had overpraised Dosso, see Patricia A. Emison, Creating the “Divine” Artist: From Dante to Michelangelo (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2004), pp. 134, 144. The conceit of the painter as enchanting deceiver, significantly, breaks both with the older “Daedalian” tradition of the artist as manipulator of technology and with the idea of the artwork as a magically efficacious mimetic double of the real. On these traditions, see Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist (1954; reprint New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), pp. 61–90.


the century, around the time of the publication of the *Orlando Furioso*. They both hold tablets bearing cryptic writing or diagrams and are accompanied by animals, apparently men they have transformed. The earliest mention of the Rome picture, in an inventory of 1650, describes her simply as *maga*, female enchantress. Julius von Schlosser in 1900 first saw her as Ariosto’s Melissa, the benevolent witch who undoes Alcina’s spell, reversing the bad magic and converting Ruggiero’s men back into human beings. The suit of armor on the ground suggested the chivalric context.

The Borghese maga wields a wand-like torch and her foot rests on a book of spells. She seems to have unmanned the soldier, separating him from his metallic shell, his social identity. She has in effect “exploded” the man into his bestial and spiritual selves: the animals below, principally the dog, the souls imprisoned in the tree above. She is a witch who has the power to separate soul from body. The curious doll-like figures hanging from the tree in the upper left, *homunculi* in fringed white skirts, with hands clasped in front as if in

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14. Dosso was working in Ferrara from 1513.
prayer, are the disembodied souls of the soldiers, suspended as if in an embryonic state. They are related to the small naked figures that sometimes stood in for souls in Christian iconography. The dog, meanwhile, appears to retain some dim consciousness as he scrutinizes the empty cuirass. Alcina does all this to her lovers in the poem. Later her spell is undone by Melissa's countermagic. The painting does not in fact make it clear which direction the charm is working in, that is, whether the maga has just unmanned the soldier or whether she is a good witch practicing a metamorphic countermagic, undoing a prior spell and so liberating the man from his canine prison. It is not clear, in other words, whether she is Alcina or Melissa or even if she is one of Ariosto's witches at all.

Witchcraft, to adapt the formula of Michael Taussig, was a “savage mirror” held up to mainstream society. In the narrative and the available role, witchcraft was a mimicking and ironizing of society's ways. The rural witch who summoned destructive hail with the jawbone of an animal mocked the rain ritual of the hopeful farmer. The picnicking wives occupied the aristocratic topos of the love garden, familiar from tapestries, frescoes, and engravings. It is not clear exactly who was holding up the mimic mirror, whether it was the accused witches, an internally “colonized” population, or the society itself somehow placing the mirror in the victims' hands, a society at once requiring critique and working to dispel it. Witchcraft was a sacred war between the sexes, between an inside and an outside, waged at the heart of society.

By swerving into irresponsible freedom, the court poet and court painter would seem to have relinquished any capacity they might have had to register reality. Art appears to wash its hands of the real matter of witchcraft, founding itself as an institution on its prerogative of “looking away.” And yet it can also be argued that such a painting as Dosso’s extends the mimetic work of witchcraft. The work turns back witchcraft’s question, perhaps, with a question; meets witchcraft’s mirror with a mirroring of its own. Dosso, like the narrative of the sabbath, the gioco della donna, ironizes the ethos of social love. Duplicitous, his paintings also turn on witchcraft and ironize society’s critics, the witches themselves. Once there are two mirrors, there is no end of it. Art, ungrounded and in perpetual motion, suspends the question of the reality of the witch by provisionally occupying the same kind of “space between” that witchcraft had claimed for itself.

Apart from the few German book illustrations, the surviving images of witches from this period were collective works of art. The earliest was Albrecht Dürer’s so-called Four Witches, his first dated engraving (1497), apparently a rendering of a coven of mature witches initiating a youthful bride (see fig. 10 below). Dürer’s

15. They are not representations of puppets or effigies of the sort sometimes used in sympathetic magic, nor are they people whom Alcina has transformed into plants, as some have argued. The skirts are a puzzle, however; they suggest a relation to the cult images of the New World, in particular the zemi of the Caribbean peoples, effigies made of wood or cloth. Columbus brought examples back to Europe. The zemis and the cult practices associated with them were described by the Milanese humanist Peter Martyr d'Anghiera. Peter Martyr’s accounts of the discoveries circulated since the 1490s and were well known to every lettered person in early sixteenth-century Italy. No known zemi wears a skirt like these, nor are their hands clasped in this manner. Nevertheless, a possible association with the zemi cannot quite be ruled out. For the original descriptions of the zemi by the Catalan priest Ramón Pané and Peter Martyr’s adaptation, see Fray Ramón Pané, An Account of the Antiquities of the Indians, ed. José Juan Arrom (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), pp. 21, 35–37, 47, 51–52. For further descriptions by Peter Martyr, see The Discovery of the New World in the Writings of Peter Martyr of Anghiera, ed. Ernest Lunardi et al. (Rome: Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato and Libreria dello Stato, 1992), pp. 92–95. On the zemi themselves, see Ricardo E. Alegria, “An Introduction to Taino Culture and History,” in Taino: Pre-Columbian Art and Culture from the Caribbean (New York: Museo del Barrio, 1997), pp. 18 ff.

16. Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie, vol. 4 (Freiburg: Herder, 1972), s.v. “Seele.” Nude figures in wax, sometimes with hands clasped in prayer, were suspended near altars as votive offerings; see, for example, the scene represented in the altarpiece at St. Wolfgang in Pipping, ca. 1480; Lenz Kriss-Rettenbeck, Ex voto: Zeichen, Bild, und Abbild im christlichen Votivbrauchtum (Zurich: Feltrinelli, 1962), pp. 78. In the narrative and the available role, witchcraft was a mimicking and ironizing of society’s ways. The rural witch who summoned destructive hail with the jawbone of an animal mocked the rain ritual of the hopeful farmer. The picnicking wives occupied the aristocratic topos of the love garden, familiar from tapestries, frescoes, and engravings. It is not clear exactly who was holding up the mimic mirror, whether it was the accused witches, an internally “colonized” population, or the society itself somehow placing the mirror in the victims’ hands, a society at once requiring critique and working to dispel it. Witchcraft was a sacred war between the sexes, between an inside and an outside, waged at the heart of society.

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19. This act was illustrated in the early editions of Ulrich Molitor, De lamiis; see the publications of Charles Zika (see note 9).

20. Taussig (see note 18), pp. 78–79; and 86: “Mimesis sutures the real to the really made-up.”

engraving of an ugly, distaff-wielding witch riding backwards on a goat dates from a few years later. The Italian engraving known as Lo stregozzo, a grotesque cavalcade, not easily deciphered, cites Dürer's rider (fig. 4).\textsuperscript{22} The German artist Hans Baldung Grien, a pupil of Dürer, commented on the topos of the witches' sabbath in a series of works on paper. His chiaroscuro woodcut of 1510 both complied with and derided the folkloric-inquisitorial account of the nocturnal flights and gatherings (fig. 5).\textsuperscript{23} A pair of fleshy nudes tend to the urn, the chalice, and the row of phallic sausages draped on a cooking-stick—the recipe for impotence. A crone holds an unsavory dish aloft. Two witches are already airborne, one of them balanced on Dürer's goat. Scattered on the ground are the apparatus of witchcraft as attested by the handbooks and the testimony they elicited: human and animal remains, a cat, a mirror, forked sticks for cooking and flying. The devil is absent. Baldung left several collectible drawings on colored paper of similar scenes.\textsuperscript{24} In these drawings he develops the themes of masturbation and lesbianism, interpreting the witches' sabbath psychosexually as a lurid dream generated by the lower body.

Margaret Sullivan argues that the true context of Dürer's and Baldung's images was not the real-life persecutions and trials, but rather scholarly and humanistic interest in classical witch lore.\textsuperscript{25} Patricia Emison makes exactly the opposite case, arguing that

\textsuperscript{22} The engraver is usually judged to be Agostino Veneziano or Marcantonio Raimondi; Patricia A. Emison, "Truth and Bizzarria in an Engraving of Lo stregozzo," Art Bulletin 81 (1999): 623-636. Among other interesting arguments, Emison attributed the design to Battista or Dosso Dossi. Fiorenza (see note 10, p. 309) immediately disagreed. Emison's proposal is suggestive but not conclusive. For a recent defense of Konrad Oberhuber's attribution of the design to Girolamo Genga, see Roma e lo stile classico di Raffaello, 1515-1527 (Milan: Electa, 1999), no. 128, p. 192. Cf. also Hufts (see note 21), pp. 39-46.


\textsuperscript{24} The survival rate of works on paper is low; these must represent a small sample of a much larger body of witch-related work. On the series of Baldung drawings and their copies by other artists, see Carl Koch, Die Zeichnungen Hans Baldung Grient's (Berlin: Deutscher Verein für Kunstwissenschaft, 1941) nos. 62-65, A16-A17, and pp. 30-31. See also Zika, Exorcising our Demons (note 9), pp. 260-262, 277, 283-292. Earlier than any of Baldung's witches is the drawing of a Witches' Sabbath by Albrecht Altdorfer (Paris, Louvre), dated 1506; see Franz Winzinger, Albrecht Altdorfer: Zeichnungen (Munich: Piper, 1952), no. 2. Baldung must have known it or an image like it by or after Altdorfer. Baldung made one painting of the subject, the so-called Weather Witches (1523) located in Frankfurt, Städelisches Kunstinstitut.

\textsuperscript{25} Sullivan (see note 6).
dimensions embedded in vernacular lore. The form of his witches may strike modern beholders as unclassical, but this is our misconception. Baldung himself probably recognized no clear distinction between sources classical and vernacular, high and low.\footnote{27}

Baldung's images comment on the inquisitorial fascination with witch lore in the sense that they expose the textuality of the witchcraft phenomenon. They mirror the inquisitorial narratives back onto the society that invented them and unmask the entire witchcraft phenomenon as a massive fiction. These images move in Taussig's "space between"; they mimic and mock in both directions, first toward society, rhyming with the work of the witches and then immediately recoiling on and doubting the witches. The mimetic practice that such pictures parodically mimic is the inquisitorial persecution that in fact created witchcraft. For witchcraft was not a reality, but a narrative about women's lives and experiences that society compelled women to tell about themselves. The witchcraft narrative forced women by cruel persuasions to perform the identity "witch." The persecution produced the witch. Many women, it seems, chose voluntarily to perform that identity discursively, on a public stage, and so fling themselves self-destructively into the arms of justice, perhaps because it was one of the few discursive identities available to them. Retelling the witchcraft narrative was in many cases the only chance they had to tell anything at all. It allowed them to assume the role of the clear-seer, or the mystic, or the provocative antagonist, even for just a brief moment.\footnote{28}

The early sixteenth-century images of the witch appeared mostly in the small-scale and replicable media: woodcut, engraving, and bronze. These were artifacts that instantly signalled their independence from the Italian engraving Lo Stregozzo, so obviously laden with classical erudition, in fact registers anxieties provoked by the recent trial in Mirandola. She sees the print as an attempt to envision the unseen horrors of the sabbath, even as a kind of "fabricated" evidence of the sabbath's reality.\footnote{26} Surely both are right. Lo Stregozzo was a shaping of text-based erudition to the description of the corso or sabbath as it was emerging in testimony and in print. Baldung's scenes, meanwhile, were ribald and ludic, but also in their own way scholarly. His milieu and clientele in Strasbourg were erudite and sophisticated. Baldung was excavating the pagan

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26. Emison (see note 22).
devotional or liturgical contexts. Dosso’s Borghese picture was bolder in that it took over the scale and format of the sacred image, the altarpiece. Its immediate model was Raphael’s Madonna of the Meadows in Vienna (ca. 1505), not only for the pose and the landscape setting but for the red and blue layers of clothing (reversed by Dosso) and the hair braided like a turban (fig. 6).29 Before 1515, independent paintings on panel or canvas of that size and format, with non-religious subject matter, were scarce.30 All these images, large and small, were distinguished from cult-based pictures by their fictionality. They make no reference to anything real.

Interest in fictionality was dialectically coupled with elite skepticism or impatience with the witchcraft phenomenon. The public for the artwork defined itself as the public capable of exercising independent, skeptical judgment about, for instance, the reality of witchcraft. To take a case from contemporary court culture: Queen Isabella of Castile was consulted about one of her nieces whose apparent sexual recalcitrance had been attributed to the influence of demons, perhaps summoned by a maleficent brother-in-law. Isabella, however, was skeptical, unwilling to resort to supernatural explanations for her niece’s behavior. Such practices, she protested, “should not be asserted or believed among Catholics. It is a wrongheaded opinion of the common people [vulgi].” The Archbishop of Seville and inquisitor-general Diego de Deza tried to convince the queen that this sort of demonic possession was indeed possible and assured her that the doctors of the Church, Thomas Aquinas included, had said so. Still Isabella refused to bend. “I will certainly not believe,” she said, “that a demon can exert any power over those conjoined in matrimony . . . for those things are more due to discord among humans than to interference by powerful demons.”31

Refined and private artworks became zones of pragmatic, psychologically realist skepticism like Queen Isabella’s. Realism about human nature was the natural psychological matrix of a receptivity to fictionality. Fictions only work because they are embedded within a community that share assumptions about the intelligibility of phenomena and the explicability of human behavior. Outside such a set of assumptions, the fictions would be mistaken for marvelous reports or simply for lies. In order for there to be fiction, the realist has to understand realism as a choice, an option; the realist has to have the sense of being surrounded by ordinary-thinking people incapable of lucid judgments about things. The gap between the elected realism and the simple belief-system of ordinary people becomes the space where fictions can be fashioned. The fiction is something like a lie, but it is a staged and protected lie.

Ariosto in the Orlando Furioso repeatedly comments in authorial asides on the improbability of the very

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29. Raphael’s picture was painted for Taddeo Taddei, a merchant and collector. The picture was surely meant for the private residence and not a public or ritual setting and therefore belongs to a middle category between cult image and artwork.

30. Dosso’s Washington maga may be dependent on one of them, Leonardo’s Leda and the Swan (ca. 1506), as Peter Humfrey proposed; Humfrey and Lucco (see note 13), p. 90.

events he is narrating, insisting on the reality and
truthfulness precisely of the most fantastical elements of
his story and so undermining the reliability of his own
narrative. By protesting too much, he concedes that
enchantments and metamorphoses do not really happen
in life. As if any reader thought they did! Ariosto
pretends to tend to the truth-content of his poem long
after anyone still imagined that poems might be in the
business of truth-telling. Ariosto’s pretense of reassuring
his readers that he believes in the events described in
his own poem establishes an Isabella-like realism about
human motivation as the ground against which the
fiction can unfold. Common sense is the fixed grid
against which fiction, a controlled confusion, can move.
All of this had long since been understood by readers of
poetry. Ariosto’s devices are a mere pantomime: For
painting, by contrast, it would be a new game. Authorial
irony is the main thing painting had to learn from poetry
in these years.

Compare a sacred painting that dealt with witchcraft
only a few years before Dosso’s, the scenes from the life
of St. Godelieve, painted in Bruges in the last quarter of
the fifteenth century and now in the Metropolitan
Museum of Art (fig. 7). It is an altarpiece and therefore
a painting prohibited from telling lies. St. Godelieve was
a local martyr of the eleventh century. According to the
legend, Godelieve’s mother-in-law commissioned a
maid to spy on her activities. In the middle ground of
the scene illustrated here, the diminutive spy witnesses
Godelieve’s power to persuade crows to abandon the
fields and instead enter a hut. In the foreground, the
maid reports to the mother-in-law and husband.

Godelieve is accused of possessing demonic powers
and, in the next panel, will be strangled as a witch. The
medieval witch was an anti-saint, a special woman
embedded within society among normal people. The
painting suggests that there is nothing on the surface that
distinguishes between Christian saint and demonic
witch. The painting warns that even a saint, perhaps
especially a saint, is misrecognized. Such an image
instantly identifies the political core of the problem,

32. On the theory of literary autonomy encoded in the lunar
episode of Orlando Furioso, see Quint (note 3), pp. 81–92. See also
Daniel Javitch, “The Advertising of Fictioality in Orlando Furioso”
and Elissa B. Weaver, “A Reading of the Interlaced Plot of the Orlando
Furioso: The Three Cases of Love Madness,” in Donald Beecher et al.,
eds, Ariosto Today: Contemporary Perspectives (Toronto: University of
33. See From Van Eyck to Bruegel (New York: Metropolitan
Museum of Art, 1998), no. 15. Figure 7 reproduces the right third of
the central panel of the altarpiece.
witches was built on spurious inference, guesswork, and extracted confessions.

Godelieve is mistaken for a witch, but not because she was falsely accused of wielding power over birds. The spy was truthful. The saint really did control the crows. The *vita* and the picture did not take the skeptical, rationalist option of deciding that Godelieve in the end never had anything to do with birds, and that the charges against her were entirely trumped up. They did not require such an option, for they had at their disposal a different supernatural explanation at hand, not witchcraft but saintly, divinely endowed powers. The panel's and the *vita*'s constitutional requirement to tell the truth compelled them to stick to supernatural explanations. The fictional poem and painting, by contrast, had the freedom to raise the skeptical possibility that no one ever had any supernatural powers.34

Unlike the Godelieve altarpiece, Dosso's canvases comment skeptically on the prosecution of witches by repeating and extending the work of the witch. At the same time, they comment skeptically on the witch by containing her within a work of artifice. The artwork at this point was already independent of both antagonists, prosecutor and witch. There is no more dramatic index of art's freedom than its refusal to take it seriously. In a formula of Gregory Bateson: "The playful nip denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite."35

At the elite courts, the question was precisely not: Are witches real? For this is like the question: is there a God? If it has to be asked, it is already too late.36 Elite skepticism immediately fed back into the contemporary treatises on witchcraft, whose authors were often humanistically educated and court-based scholars. By asking the ontological question about witches, scholars were inadmissibly attempting to transfer a textual phenomenon into life. To ask the question was precisely to bring the chain of texts to a close, creating it now as the standard tradition of witch lore. Theologians had argued since Augustine that nocturnal sabbaths and metamorphoses were not realities but figments of the erotic imagination provoked by the devil.37 The modern prosecutors partially accepted this idea, making it both harder and easier for them to prosecute. Easier, because it removed the burden of producing evidence of the sabbaths; harder, because whereas the cause of a bestial transformation or a night flight had to be a demon, the cause of a mere illusion might be nothing more than the mind itself. The prosecutorial handbook *Malleus maleficarum*, for instance, tried to find a middle ground. The *Malleus* accepts the literal reality of the nocturnal sabbaths. In the section on transformations, however, the Dominican authors, following the opinions of Augustine and Aquinas, deny that witches can transform people into animals, explaining this instead as an illusion worked by demons.38 Just behind the surface of the argumentation lurks the possibility that the sabbaths, too, are mere illusions; and the further possibility that such illusions, like dreams or fantasies of any sort, might have non-demonic or non-supernatural causes, threatening the whole prosecutorial enterprise. Such were the doubts that had stayed the hand of the Church for centuries: First, uncertainty about whether anyone really possessed the powers of the witch; second, uncertainty about whether belief in witches was an illusion caused by demons or generated by the mind; and therefore third, uncertainty about whether witchcraft amounted to heresy. Those who tried to argue for the reality of the sabbaths, no matter how thoughtful, were instantly caught in logical loops. Scholars found themselves adducing ancient texts, including poetic texts, to prove the reality of modern witchcraft. Both the *Malleus maleficarum* and Molitor's *De lamis* had referred to the mythic and literary personage of Circe, the island enchantress who turned Odysseus's men into swine (*Odyssey* 10), equally familiar from Virgil (*Aeneid* 7) and Ovid (*Metamorphoses* 14). In his treatise *Strix*, Gianfrancesco Pico della Mirandola (1523; Italian ed., 1524) compared the modern witches, ten of whom had just been burned in Mirandola (Dosso's home town, incidentally), to their ancient predecessors.39 It is an old

34. It should be noted, however, that the altarpiece, because it was narrating something that happened in the relatively distant past (four centuries earlier), did not strictly need to decide about the truth content of the *Vita*: it could just tell the story as it found it.
38. *Malleus* (see note 6), part two, question 1, chapter 8.
39. Burke (note 8, pp. 37-38) points out that fictional texts by Ovid and Apuleius were adduced by scholars as evidence for the reality of witches. Apuleius was avidly read at the court of Ferrara in these years. See also the concise account of the interplay between the theological and humanistic accounts of modern witchcraft in Fiorenza
theological reflex, not different logically from using Christ's miracles to reinforce modern belief. In his biography of the lay holy woman Catherine of Racconigi, the same Pico legitimated the reports of her bodily transportations by referring to the ancient philosophers Pythagoras, Abaris, and Empedocles who had been borne aloft by demons. What happened to the philosophers, he argued, "nowadays happens to witches, who are carried to the game of Diana or Herodias, as we have discussed at length in Strix." If demons can do such things, then surely angels can, too, and we should not doubt the living saint Catherine. The loops of unreason grew tighter when modern poetic texts were introduced as proofs. In the first decades of the seventeenth century, events in Torquato Tasso's Gerusalemme liberata were adduced by at least three demonologists either as reliable descriptions of witchcraft or as evidence of its reality. There were both naïve and knowing versions of "humanism": on the one hand, literary authority introduced as an attempt to reground and justify; on the other, literary references introduced as semantic overdetermination, a loading up of the poem or picture with classical lore—Apuleius, Ovid, Theocritus—that was changing its meaning as fast as it was coming into philological focus.

Dosso Dossi returned the prosecutor's question: is she a witch? by creating a kind of picture which declined to answer the even more naïve question: which of Ariosto's witches is she? The picture in Rome may possibly illustrate the following passage (8.14–15) in which the soldiers of Ruggiero had been metamorphosed by Alcina and the beneficient witch Melissa storms the palace and undoes the bad magic, freeing the captives:

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Non lascia alcuno a guardia del palagio:  
il che a Melissa che stava alla posta  
per liberar di quel regno malvagio  
la gente ch'in miseria v'era posta.

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*Indi nei campi accelerando i passi,*  
gli antiq amanti, ch'erano in gran torna  
conversi in fonti, in fere, in legni, in sassi,  
fe' tornar ne la lor prima forma.*

Without a guard she left her palace there,  
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 her witches;  
-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.

The picture may more specifically refer to Melissa's conversion of the knight Astolfo, who had been transformed into a myrtle tree, so restoring him to his armor (8.17). Neither passage is an exact fit. Again, the painting provides no information that would even help us decide which witch she is, Alcina or Melissa. She wears an expression neither malicious, benevolent, nor triumphant, but rather benign, neutral, sovereign, perhaps sybilline. A seventeenth-century painting in Baltimore attributed to Agostino Tassi quotes Dosso but does not help identify the subject. Certainly Dosso could have identified his witch unambiguously if he had


43. The engraved sibyls by Baccio Baldini and Michelangelo's Sistine sibyls are among her models.

44. Baltimore, Walters Art Museum, inv. no. 37.1145. A sorceress in a landscape holds a torch to a brazier; there is armor, a dog, and other curious details, but the textual reference is no clearer than in Dosso. A child-like figure attached to the tree appears to be winged and wearing a plumed skirt, suggesting that Tassi had little idea what to make of Dosso's homunculi. See the entry by Federico Zeri, *Italian Paintings in the Walters Art Gallery,* vol. 2, no. 319 (Baltimore: Walters Art Gallery, 1976) [pp. 447–448] Patrizia Cavazzini, "Towards a Chronology of Agostino Tassi," *Burlington Magazine* 144 (2002):407, was the first to note the connection to Dosso. The brazier and torch resurface in the painting of the Witch of Endor (1526) by Jacob Cornelisz. van Oostsanen in the Rijskmuseum, Amsterdam; for a reproduction see Max J. Friedländer, *Early Netherlandish Painting,* vol. 12, no. 250 (Leiden: Sijthoff, 1967–), p. 115, plate 139.
wanted to. The lack of information suggests that Dosso is deliberately converting the difficulty in recognizing witches into poetics. He refuses to close the word-image gap. In an earlier version of the composition, the maga appears to be looking at a soldier standing at the left with casually crossed legs, a figure now hidden by paint layers but revealed by X-radiography at the time of the recent exhibition. The soldier, if Dosso had allowed him to remain, would have assisted, possibly clinched, the Ariostian reference. Giorgione did the same with his Three Philosophers, where the pentimenti—in this case, removal of explicit references to the Three Magi—rendered the picture more, not less, difficult to decipher. The slight displacement from textual anchorage accomplished by the revision was the point of Dosso's picture, perhaps of Giorgione's as well. By demurring in the face of subject matter, declining to narrate or illustrate, Dosso sets his picture in motion in a more general stratum of meaning. Literature, unable to evade reference to subject matter so smoothly, has to signal such a move by other means. Painting is in effect a subject matter usually brings with it a set of themes and questions that ignite as soon as they are taken over ready-made an entire problematic. The removal of explicit references to the Three Magi—defined. By evading the difficulty in recognizing witches, Dosso's method is cool as the type of the deceitful temptress as the fairies allure, the monsters alarm, the labyrinthine adventures draw you in. The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938), p. 299.

When Ruggiero sees through Alcina's charms. Painting does not have to describe such discernments; indeed, it has trouble doing so. Painting just gives you the

45. Fiorenza (see note 10), p. 259, makes this point.
46. Anna Coliva, "Dosso's Works in the Galleria Borghese: New Documentary, Iconographical, and Technical Information," in Humphrey and Lucco (see note 13), pp. 75–76, fig. 58; Coliva considers the hidden figure to be Astolfo.

49. Admittedly, as some have pointed out, Circe is not in every case accompanied by swine; see Zika, note 48, adding a 1518 edition of Ovid and Macioce (note 42), p. 30.
50. On “re-entry” as a structural feature of artworks, see Niklas Luhmann, Art as a Social System (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 143, 301, and passim. C. S. Lewis argued that the sixteenth-century Italian epics demystified and mocked the popular romances of the Middle Ages but at the same time practiced their own aesthetic countermagic. “Even when you laugh at it, the old incantation works. Willy-nilly the fairies allure, the monsters alarm, the labyrinthine adventures draw you in.” The Allegory of Love: A Study in Medieval Tradition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938), p. 299.
that matrix, painting begins to develop its own peculiar force of history. The aim of this paper is to bring into fulfilling poetry's expectation of it, namely that it enchantment, the theological-inquisitorial and the other and prior pictures. By identifying the prehistory of the phrase deceive with beauty. Painting in this period is starting to comparison of the past with the present, of painting at once recognizes and begins to undo the artistic-intertextual. Both traditions involved constant coordination two traditions of reflection on the problem of the gradient between past and present, the problem that Ariosto designated with the phrase arti al nostro tempo ignote.

Painting's intertextual recombination of its own prehistory is its local form of countermagic. In this way painting at once recognizes and begins to undo the force of history. The aim of this paper is to bring into coordination two traditions of reflection on enchantment, the theological-inquisitorial and the artistic-intertextual. Both traditions involved constant comparison of the past with the present, of once-powerful magic with its lesser modern forms, mere metaphors for magic.

II.

Vasari tells of the director of the hospital of Santa Maria Nuova who objected because the saints in a painting by Rosso Fiorentino resembled devils. Vasari's explanation for the patron's confusion is discouragingly literal: They looked like devils because "Rosso's custom in these oil sketches was to give certain faces an air of cruelty and despair, and then subsequently to soften their expressions and render them as they should be." Painting in these decades was often skirting the frontier between good and evil. The "charge" of the picture, positive or negative, was easily misread by the unaware. Ariosto signalled the dangerous proximity of positive and negative by making both his witches, malevolent and benevolent, beautiful and finely dressed. It is this ambiguity that Dosso's Rome painting "illustrates."

The stakes of the game that painting was playing were higher, however. The borders of poetry were well established by Ariosto's time; he could confuse the distinction between good and evil in all safety, whereas the secular painting, moving into a field traditionally occupied by altarpieces and devotional images, was fighting for its existence. The kind of picture about which the strongest truth claims were made, the non-fictional or referential picture, was very much still being made, indeed by the same artists who made the secular pictures. The implications of the painting's metamagical inquiry were only intensified by the institutional fact of the cabinet picture's recent disengagement from the cultic context.

This is a painting that is not a sacred image, but it resembles one. It defines itself in the first instance as "not a cult image." By simultaneously invoking and distancing itself from that prior image, such a painting, in effect, creates the cult image as a category; until then, the cult image was so ubiquitous as to be virtually invisible. It was an image imbedded within a ritually structured context. Such images often had other functions and were indeed often private and disconnected from formal ritual of any kind, but their primary identity derived from ritual context. The cult image claimed stable referential relations to the personages and events of sacred history or to eschatological doctrine. A non-cult image such as Dosso's is the sort of picture that does not have to specify what it refers to. It can just be "about" something; it can reflect from a detached standpoint, even on something potentially self-undermining such as the nature of deceptive appearances. A picture capable of commenting generally emerged in relief against a putative predecessor picture that could not do so. The cult image—not in reality, but from the point of view of Dosso's picture—had been naive about appearances. The cult image had offered the image of the Madonna, for example, as a reliable guide to her essence. The image of the maga also offered a beautiful surface, but signalled, through its self-differentiation from the cult image, that appearance itself was unreliable. The fictional cabinet picture defined itself in terms of the cult image on the basis of differing referential claims. The cabinet picture's commentary on its notion

51. Cesare Gnudi, "L'Ariosto e le arti figurative," in Signore cortese e umanissimo: Viaggio intorno a Ludovico Ariosto, ed. Jadranka Bentini (Venice: Marsilio, 1994), pp. 13-47, here 35-37, said that whereas Ariosto transforms the true into a dream and back again, Dosso only goes in one direction.


53. When imported by sailors to the New World, poetry like Ariosto's had to start all over and hold its own against referential texts; see Barbara Fuchs, Mimesis and Empire: The New World, Islam, and European Identities (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 13-34.
predecessor, the cult image, was part reverential and part skeptical.

Dosso deployed the Circe tradition, within an Ariostian framework, in order to re-stage an imagined predecessor state of art. He was testing the nature of his own mimetic powers by testing and monitoring versions of a prehistory of art, even a prehistory of Christian art. The enchantress’s art figures within the painting as painting’s own lost origin, a stronger form of mimetic figuration no longer available to painters. When the classical tradition describes witchcraft as a matter of cosmetic trickery, it is basically saying that the witch employs the same means as the artist. Dosso is testing this equation from the opposite direction. He wonders about whether some more powerful use of images might lie behind art. The painting tests art’s role as the potential successor to witchcraft as producer of apparitions.

The new fictional image hardly dared venture out of the elite household, unless it flew on a piece of paper, a print, or a drawing. Such a work was comparing itself to the powerful, efficacious talismans that ancient cultures disposed of. It was comparing itself to indexical images, perhaps, of the sort that a witch or maga might manipulate. The efficacious cult image, the notional archaic ground of the secular cabinet picture, is not literally visible in the painting. The painting offers instead a displaced and transformed cult image. The cult image reappears in the guise of the cryptogram on the enchantress’s tablet. The tablet is the artifact that matches up somehow with the order of the cosmos and she consults it for guidance. Conceptually it occupies the same space that the crucifix does in pictures of the devout St. Jerome in the wilderness. The cryptogram on the tablet in Dosso’s Rome picture combines elements of what appear to be geometric figures with formless doodles or flourishes. The diagram is glossed by various script-like but meaningless marks. The diagram and script on the tablet remember a primordial or cosmic writing, like the numbers and alphabet of kabbala, that precedes speech itself. Such writing preceded the hierarchization of cult image and mere artistic painting. The maga manipulates a non-representational, mimetic-magical language. The illegible words on the tablet and on the ground, in the rim of the enclosing magic circle, are material tokens that simply are their referents. They are not formed by convention or governed by codes, as our writing is. In fact, the maga does not write or paint at all, but instead wields a kind of wand, a wax torch, in her left hand, the non-writing hand. She performs the writing much as a priest activates the Eucharist with a combination of words and gestures. Her own performance is partially carried out as writing, in the sense that after igniting the torch—or so one might read her gesture—she will brandish it aloft, replicating the formless pattern inscribed on the tablet, so in effect writing with smoke, inscribing an inscription on air that disappears as soon as it is written but has its effect nonetheless. That ephemeral smoke-writing is not alienated from speech as normal writing and painting are.

The whole scene of art is present in this painting, art now as well as the lost prehistory of art that underwrites it. Dosso’s enchantress is the image of the cosmic manipulator who has control of language at a deeper, pre-coded, pre-conventional level. She is a serene and successful version of Albrecht Dürer’s Melencolia I (1514), an engraving which was obviously one of its models. Dürer’s Melancholy also sits among her instruments, including a brazier and an incense burner. There is also a dog. She is despondent, for unlike the busy child next to her scribbling on a tablet, she has somehow lost the key to creativity.

On the wall above and behind Dürer’s winged figure is a magic square, a tool for divination. Dosso’s witch, meanwhile, sits in a magic circle, a protected precinct where her spells will have their effect and where words will leave the realm of the merely symbolic and instead become actions in the world. In her circle she is invisible, just as are—notionally, it would seem—the nude nymphs in the Louvre Fête Champêtre by Giorgione or Titian. The three soldiers in fancy dress lounging in Dosso’s landscape, already stock figures of northern Italian painting, are unaware of what is happening behind them. The magic circle is an

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54. Kristina Herrmann-Fiore, director of the Galleria Borghese, kindly made it possible for me to study the painting at close range. Attempts to make alchemical or geometrical sense of the tablet have not met with lasting success. The book open at the feet of the Washington maga is potentially more intelligible.

55. Cf. Orlando Fùriso 6.38, “Alcina made the ready fish obey / By simple words and by mere magic lore” (con semplici parole, e puri incanti).

56. Cf. Orlando Fùriso 3.21–22, where Melissa summons demons but protects Bradamante by enclosing her within a magic circle. Pico della Mirandola discussed the significance of the magic circle in his treatise Sùris; see Burke (note 8), p. 37.

57. Felton Gibbons (see note 13, p. 200) argues that the maga must be Melissa if the soldiers are so relaxed.
architecture, a temple; the twisting vines on the tree suggest a sacred column; the circle permits her to be outdoors and indoors at once.

The magic circle around the witch is a figure for the picture frame. The frame was a virtual frontier differentiating a fictional from a real world, gathering all the strange forces and phenomena and collecting them inside the frame and leaving the rest of the world on the outside. By retreating inside a frame, art created the idea of its own opposite, a real practical world beyond the frame where things make sense. Art found a social function in the control and domestication of strangeness and unreason by differentiating constantly between fiction and reality. Art drew a distinction between real and fictional worlds and then copied that distinction back into itself as subject matter. That is exactly what happens here: The magic circle reproduces the picture frame inside the picture. In doing this, Dosso’s canvas is not exceptional, but rather is only making visible the basic structure of every artwork in this period. The new picture frame, even when it does provide support, can never be mistaken for a mere structural support. The frame around the enchantress is perfectly square and so puts itself in analogy to the circle on the ground. Dosso’s witch in her green laboratory is twice-framed.

The most important of the work’s own notional origin points is most carefully disguised, namely the Christian image. The sacred image is present only as a disfigured intertext. The true subject of the picture is the nature of that disguising through disfiguration. Witchcraft had become an occasion to reflect on latency, that is, on the doubled or layered structure of the artwork. It is through disguising and disfiguration that the artwork, the newly institutionalized cabinet picture, worked its countermagic against the cult image: not a disenchantment, but a counterenchantment.

Dosso’s picture transforms a basic template or pattern of Christian painting, the Madonna and Child in a Landscape. Dosso’s witch takes the pose of a seated Virgin Mary in a landscape, perhaps in a hortus conclusus. She resembles the Virgin but is not her, in the same way that the magical writing on the ground resembles real writing but is not. Even the effigies in the tree reinforce the Marian thematics of the painting, for their hands are pressed together as if praying to the interceding Virgin for release.

If Dosso’s witch is built on a Marian template, then by a principle of commutation the painting also allows the sorceress to flow back into the Virgin Mary and inhabit her. The painting excavates the witch-like layers latent within the Marian myth. The pagan thematics of the beautiful but deceptive surface were already negatively inscribed into the personage of the Virgin Mary, for Mary was the one woman whose beauty did not deceive. The picture works backwards and discloses the pagan and magical dimensions of the Christian figure.

The proposition is less outlandish if one considers the Madonna and Child in a Landscape by Dosso Dossi in Parma, commonly called the Zingarella or “Gypsy” on account of her orientalizing turban and the enchanted, fairy-tale atmosphere generated by the crumbling phosphorescent paint and the eerie isolation of the figures in the landscape (fig. 8). The Parma picture is the product of a transcoding; that is, an intersplicing of two unrelated codes: orthodox Marian and “romantic” or Giorgionesque.

But the excavation of the picture’s intertexts has only just begun, for the picture is governed not only by the myth of the Virgin Mary, but even more particularly by the image of the Holy Family in the Landscape, the so-called Rest on the Flight to Egypt. The Ariostian subject comes to look increasingly like a decoy. Dosso’s picture takes the Holy Family in the Landscape, disassembles it, breaks it down, and then reassembles it into a new picture. In doing this, Dosso extends the challenge thrown down by vernacular devotional literature to the Church’s discursive monopoly on the

58. The elite beholders of the painting and readers of Ariosto’s poem were not necessarily much worried about the epistemology and theology of witchcraft. They were naturally concerned about the Christian cult image, however, whose legitimacy was the most pressing possible public issue in these decades, not least in Ferrara, which was one of the centers of reformist or crypto-Protestant thought in Italy. That is to say, the sorts of discriminations that Dosso makes within his picture between one sort of magic and another may be functioning, just below the surface, as discriminations between one sort of religious image and another.


60. Cf. the concept, familiar to inquisitors, of the diabolical “countersacrament,” Walter Stephens (see note 31), p. 198.

61. Cf. Renate Lachmann on the aesthetic “fission” of the individual, with implications far wider than her local subject, in Memory and Literature: Intertextuality in Russian Modernism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1997), p. 298: “The history of literature . . . can be read as a history of how dual beings have been split apart and tamed.”

Christian myth. Vernacular retellings of the scriptural story expanded the spare narrative into a spatial dimension, giving the characters space to rest and unfold. Cultic painting followed by insinuating more and more subjects into the repertoire. The Rest on the Flight to Egypt was not an old subject but one that emerged only in the end of the fourteenth century and flourished almost exclusively in northern Europe. On the way to Egypt, traditionally, the little family rests like gypsies in a green spot; the Virgin Mary holds her child-god with Joseph in close attendance, or tending to

63. See the imaginative comments on this topic by Walter Seitter, Distant Siegfried-Paraphrasen (Berlin: Merve, 1993), p. 26 and passim.

household tasks. In the background, sometimes, a pagan idol topples from a column. Joseph, father to a child he has not fathered, is often a slightly ridiculous figure.65 He is an older man who protects his young bride and son but at the price of humiliation. The subject of the Holy Family discloses some of the paradoxes of Christianity, the religion where the abject and infantile is brought into such close proximity to the ideal and where ugliness and humiliation are so close to beauty. Dosso has simply taken the proleptic or foreshadowing structure of the traditional Christian image and pushed it further, literalized it, pulling apart the Holy Family and dispersing its components in a new picture. He has created an anagram of a Holy Family, just as if he had taken a word and recomposed its letters to form a new word. In this painting, faithful Joseph has become the dog, a mute, helpful, shaggy, grey presence who looks in wonder at the shining armor just as he had peered naively at the glittering gifts of the Magi who had travelled from the East to honor the birth of the Christ Child. Mary in this painting reasserts her original station outside of matrimony, the posture of permanent estrangement from the body of man that she had in fact maintained throughout her strange marriage to Joseph. In this she was witch-like, for fundamental to the folklore of the witch, and later the judicial description of the witch, was her alienation from marriage.66

In the thirteenth-century Austrian retelling of the story Das Kindheit Jesu, Joseph accuses Mary, when he is confronted with the fact of her pregnancy, of deception, trickery, and sexual mischief.67 Mary and her deceitful handmaidens, for doubting Joseph, are untrustworthy sorceresses, complicit with supernatural forces.68 In the painting, Mary has abandoned her docile role and donned gaudy clothes. She reasserts the literal meaning of costume as an option, a way, a mere custom. She literally travesties the Madonna, who like other holy personages was identifiable in paintings mainly on the basis of costume and other accoutrements. The Rome enchantress is apparently the inverse of the nude figures in Dosso's Washington picture or the German prints and drawings. But in this respect these images are in fact equivalent: nude or splendidly bedecked, either way it is not Mary anymore. This is made clear by Dosso's Venus and Cupid, a recent attribution.69 The picture is labelled by Cupid's wings and the obscure figure of Vulcan in the background, but in effect it is a nude Madonna and Child in a Landscape. The witch seduces through a treatment and ornamenting of her own body that runs directly against social convention, either through nudity—the inappropriate revelation of the body—or through fantastic costume and luxurious, superfluous materials. Her self-ornamentation turns the cosmos upside down, just as the soft woman masters the hard, armored soldier.70 The "social" person always stays in costume. The witch's power over her male victims is symbolized by her ability to disrobe and desocialize him. The embroidered cloth draped on her lap is in fact an article of clothing, with a sleeve and a collar, but it is not her own robe. It belongs to the unfortunate soldier; perhaps it is the robe of silk and gold that the witch Alcina wove for Ruggiero with her own hands (7,53).71 This maga is equally a mimic inversion of, and a rival to, the three eastern kings who travelled to acknowledge the birth of the new king, magicians who voluntarily subordinated their magic to religion.72

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65. The resemblance of the traveling Holy Family to a family of gypsies was brought out by Martin Schongauer's engraving of a nameless wandering family projected onto the subject of the Flight to Egypt (1470s); see Le Beau Martin: Gravures et dessins de Martin Schongauer (Colmar: Musée d'Unterlinden, 1991), no. C4, pp. 254-255. On Joseph's marginalization, see Albrecht Koschorke, Die Heilige Familie und ihre Folgen (Frankfurt: Fischer, 2000), pp. 30-37.
66. Walter Stephens (see note 31), ch. 11.
67. See note 63, pp. 26-256. Cf. Koschorke (see note 66, p. 20), pointing out that the name Gabriel means "my husband is God."
68. Koschorke (see note 65), p. 61. On the possible witch-like attributes of St. Anne in early sixteenth-century German culture, see Jean Wirth, "Ste Anne est une sorcière," Bibliothèque d'humanisme et Renaissance 40 (1978):449-480. Although Wirth proceeded from a reading of a woodcut by Hans Baldung that Leo Steinberg later contested (The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion [New York: Pantheon, 1983], pp. 6-8, 117), many of his suggestive theses hold up. Cf. Dosso's own Holy Family in the Royal Collection, with a weirdly horned and glowing Mary; Humfrey and Lucco (see note 13), no. 37, pp. 200-202.
70. The proximity of armor to naked flesh is explored in the Battle of Orlanda and Rodomonte at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, attributed by some to Dosso, by others to Battista Dossi; the only work by either brother unambiguously illustrating Aniosto. Humfrey and Lucco (see note 13), no. 30.
72. On the possibility of a "female Magus" and on the "femininity" of the Magi, see Richard Trexler, The Journey of the Magi: Meanings in
Dosso's Mary has recanted; the picture is her palinode. She desecrates the Christian chalice, vessel of the blood of Christ, by burning herbs in it. In her arms she holds not her child but a tablet. She has sent her child up to the tree, to join the others, completing the work of murder that the family had just escaped in Bethlehem and predicting the Crucifixion. Here Mary already sits below the Cross as she does in so many pictures of the Crucifixion or Lamentation. On her lap is not the body of her Son, but merely his seamless robe. Christ is the soldier she has disrobed and de-socialized. In a few moments the three soldiers in the background will gamble for it by throwing dice.

Cesare Gnudi wrote of the circle-based structure of this picture that brings it into alignment with the creations of Bramante and Raphael. But it has come to look more like a parody of a harmonious man-cosmos relationship; or worse, it suggests that only the witch can enjoy such a relationship with nature.

The painting is an anagrammatic dispersal of a Rest on the Flight. But the painting also reveals that the conventional Rest on the Flight to Egypt was itself only ever an anagram of a Lamentation beneath the Cross. An anagram is the rearrangement of the letters of a word to form a new word. To make an anagram is to extract a word from a context of meaning and instead consider it as pure signifier. The rearranged letters make a new signifier. This rearrangement creates a new context. In the framework of the anagrammatic play, both versions of the word, both combinations, are equal. The words' reference to reality, their signifying function, is momentarily—though not irremediably—suspended.

The commutativity between Christian subject matter and its exact opposite was increasingly a theme in these years. Vasari, in his anecdote about Rosso's diabolical angels (see above), attributed the switching to a beholder's philistinism. But such reversals were in fact cultivated by painting as it tried to keep pace with life and bring new domains of experience into the condition of representability. Pontormo's Carmignano Visitation (ca. 1528) adapted Dürer's Four Witches engraving (figs. 9, 10). Bronzino's uncanny Allegory with Venus and Cupid in the National Gallery in London parodically overturned Raphael's Holy Family of Francis I in the Louvre. Art kept trying combinations until magic met its match.

The proximity of holy and unholy was equally a theme of the discourse on witchcraft. The witch was the mocking mirror of the lay holy woman, the living saint who won adherents through spectacular self-denial, ecstasies, demonstrations of clairvoyance, or thaumaturgic powers. In the era of the witch, the female lay saint fell instantly under suspicion. Biographies struggled to draw distinctions and refute accusations. Remarkably, the inquisitors and witch-scholars themselves were often closely involved with the holy women. Pico della Mirandola wrote a biography of a lay saint, Catherine of Raccioni, and his Strix dealt explicitly with the homology between witch and saint. The Mantuan inquisitor Domenico di Gargnano was in contact with several living saints.

Dosso's refined anagrammatic play, a diabolical combinatory magic, relativized the powers of the witch whose very reality had never been decisively demonstrated. His painting took possession of the whole myth of witchcraft, the collective construction and the performance of the prosecutorial narrative, by reproducing that performance in a removed artistic sphere. Like the narrative put into the mouths of the victims, his picture disclosed the forces of disorder supposedly latent below a serene surface. In this way the picture brought out the fragility, conditionality, and performed quality of the Marian ideal of womanhood as it was retailed both by the traditional sacred image and the prosecutorial narrative. The painting equally relativized the magical efficacy of the Christian image, a power whose theological necessity and orthodoxy had never quite been established. It smoothed out the...
apparent gradient between the cult image and the fictional image. A modern, fictional painting such as Dosso’s proposed a myth of a prior, more effective sort of picture whose powers derived from its ability to capture the true image of the divinity. It then refuted the very myth it had just offered by working a countermagic, a better magic, on the prior picture. The painting makes mimetic magic available again as a second-order phenomenon, by offering intertextual combinatorics as a mimicry of mimesis itself. By mimicking the mimetic image, the artwork took possession of it. The painting does not really regret the loss of confidence in the efficacious cult image or the enchantress’s talisman. Rather, it embeds the cult image or talisman inside itself, sending the powerful message that the cult image is only ever available from a vantage point inside the fictional work of art. It shows how an image-magic might work if it had ever existed. That is not the usual account of the disenchantment process.

78. Cf. Taussig (see note 18), pp. 59–62.