

Can a caricature be caricatured?

The case of the witches' sabbath in the 18th century.

Observations on an anonymous painting

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ABSTRACT · Although the role of images in the construction and circulation of beliefs about witches has been widely studied, their function in the critique of magical phenomena, especially in relation to the decline of witchcraft, remains much more in the shadows. The ultimate aim of this essay is therefore to examine this phase from an iconographic point of view, in order to shed light on the period and the circumstances in which the Witches' Sabbath became the object of parody, not only literary but also figurative. A phenomenon that was neither obvious nor predictable, as still in mid 18th century it had to contend with the opposition of the secular and ecclesiastical authorities, who feared that to challenge the existence of the Sabbath was to question the existence of the devil, and thus of God himself.

KEYWORDS · Witchcraft, Enlightenment, Visual Parody, Venice.

1. THE MATTER

THE role of images in the construction and circulation of beliefs concerning magic has been the focus of a number of studies. These have shown that, far from always constituting a visual translation of textual descriptions or social convictions, representations of witches in the past were sometimes the product of original intellectual and artistic processing influenced by specific contexts and capable of redirecting the tensions permeating them.¹ As has been observed, “representations

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¹ The bibliography on depictions of witches has expanded considerably over the years: CHARLES ZIKA, *The Appearance of Witchcraft. Print and Visual Culture in Sixteenth-Century Europe*, London-New York, Routledge, 2007; IDEM, *Exorcising Our Demons. Magic, Witchcraft and Visual Culture in Early Modern Europe*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2003; LINDA C. HULTS, *The Witch as a Muse. Art, Gender and Power in Early Modern Europe*, Philadelphia, The University of Pennsylvania Press 2005; SIGRID SCHADE, *Witchcraft and Early Modern Art (1450-1550)*, in *The Routledge History of Witchcraft*, a cura di Johannes Dillinger, Abington, Routledge, 2020, pp. 351-360; LINDALL ROPER, *The Witch in the Western Imagination*, Charlottesville-London, University of Virginia Press, 2012; *Bibliotheca Lamiarum. Documenti e immagini della stregoneria dal Medioevo all'età Moderna*, Pisa, Pacini, 1994. For a distinctly his-