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Article:

**Procreatio Interrupta: Reproductive Fear in the *Malleus Maleficarum* and the
Eruption of the Witch as Anti-Mother**

&

Proposal:

**Reproducing Knowledge: Tracing Epistemic Injustice from the Witch-Hunt to
Contemporary Obstetric Violence**

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Procreatio Interrupta: Reproductive Anxiety in the *Malleus Maleficarum* and the Eruption of the Witch as Anti-Mother

This article approaches the European witch-hunt through the lens of reproduction to uncover how fears surrounding fertility and procreation constructed a violent binary of the mother/anti-mother. Focusing on the Malleus Maleficarum as a key site, where theological anxieties and material fears around fertility, sexuality, and lineage converge, I argue that the witch is framed as the dark inversion of the ideal mother, a figure exemplified by the virgin Mary. This mother/anti-mother dichotomy, violently inscribed on the female body, exposes the contradictory expectations imposed on women: to be simultaneously a virgin and a vessel for reproduction. By analysing the Malleus's portrayal of witches as threats to reproduction – through infertility, infanticide, and the stealing of the male member – this article shows how reproduction becomes both the symbolic core and material site of persecution. This reproductive lens allows me to trace ideological frameworks surrounding motherhood in the construction of the figure of the witch and the translation of these frameworks into concrete violence, while also highlighting the broader historical continuity of the mother/anti-mother logic within contemporary reproductive narratives of control.

Key words: witch-hunt, reproduction, (anti-)maternal, Malleus Maleficarum, gendered violence

Introduction

According to Silvia Federici, reproductive anxiety plays a central role in the persecution of women during the witch-hunt. More specifically she writes about the control that was exercised on women's bodies by demonizing 'any form of birth-control and non-procreative sexuality, while charging women with sacrificing children to the devil.'¹ Particularly demonological works, which describe the nature of witches and witchcraft, formulate a narrative of fear around reproduction. Fertility interference, sexual transgression, and societal disruptions form key elements through which this figure is constructed in demonological texts. Witches would – amongst others - be responsible for the incapacity to ejaculate, the stealing of penises, the performing of (unwanted) abortions, and the stealing or killing of babies.² Particularly the accusations of the killing, cursing, or sacrificing of children form central themes in demonologies. The perversion of reproduction and the societal expectation

¹ Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (Autonomedia, 2004), 88.

² Christopher S. Mackay, *The Hammer of Witches: A Complete Translation of the Malleus Maleficarum* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 95, 185-187, 310, 424, 470-71; Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (Routledge, 2015), 161; Amy Walp, 'Toil And Trouble: Reproductive Health and Accusations of Witchcraft During The European Witch Craze', *Staking Their Claim: The Search for Equality and Justice in History*, 2011, 26.

of child-care played essential roles in the accusation, conviction, and justification of witches. The theoretical discourse of the witch hunts was, then, full of metaphors, ideas and suspicions concerning the obstruction or disruption of motherhood. To attain these disruptive powers, witches would have to form a pact with the devil, an act that was inherently sexual.³ In the context of early modern idealisation of virgin motherhood, the intertwining of the danger of transgressive sexuality with that fear of fertility interference contribute to the understanding of the figure of the witch as the anti-thesis to the 'ideal mother'. However, both the understanding of the ideal mother and her disruptive other are inscribed in the moralisation of the reproductive process. In this article, I argue that by focusing on the reproductive abilities of the womb, a violent and reductive binary can be traced through the narrative of the witch-hunt, namely: the binary of the mother/anti-mother.

To point at a vulnerability that might have contributed to the gender-specificity of the witch-hunt, feminist psychoanalytic thinkers have taken up this tension within the idea of motherhood to explore the motivation of the persecution of women. While these psychoanalytic perspectives have attempted to excavate underlying structures of motherhood, they often rely on vague – and sometimes gender-essentialist – assumptions about the subconscious. Rather than framing the violence of the witch-hunt within speculative psychological mechanisms, this study examines how demonological discourse actively constructed ideas of the (anti-) maternal. By shifting the focus from speculative psychological mechanisms to the explicit construction of motherhood in demonological discourse, a crucial question emerges: in what ways was the construction of the witch in demonologies embedded in a mother/anti-mother narrative?

To answer that question, I will investigate a specific demonological work, namely the *Malleus Maleficarum*. As one of the foundational texts for the theoretical framework of the witch-hunt, the *Malleus* provides a good starting point for the inquiry into the construction of the mother/anti-mother narrative. According to Hans Peter Broedel, in this demonological treatise, 'witchcraft, femininity, and sexual sin form a tight constellation of interrelated ideas: unbridled feminine sexuality led to witchcraft, which expressed itself most typically in sexual, reproductive, or marital dysfunction.'⁴ In the *Malleus* there is a clear contrast between the 'ideal woman' and its antithesis.⁵ The former defined by her virgin-motherhood, the latter by her sexual transgression and fertility interference. This tension between the idea of non-sexual proper procreation and hyper-sexual destruction of life creates an image of the witch as 'the

³ Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 142.

⁴ Hans Broedel, 'Witchcraft as an Expression of Female Sexuality', in *The 'Malleus Maleficarum' and the Construction of Witchcraft* (Manchester University Press, 2003), 178.

⁵ It is important to note the problematic intertwining of womb and woman within this idealization. Although this article is an attempt to trace precisely this problematic conflation of the notions of women, sexuality and reproduction through notions of ideal woman- and motherhood, I want to make clear that I do not deny the existence of women without wombs in the early modern period or claim that fertility forms a sign of womanhood. I merely aim to excavate the intricate patriarchal web of understanding concerning reproductive themes in relation to the witch-hunt.

dark other of the early modern woman', or: the anti-mother.⁶ In other words, through a misogynist logic embedded in the womb's abilities, the *Malleus* creates a schism between the ideal mother and the witch as the dark Other, or anti-mother.

To investigate this binary, I will use the reproductive lens as a thematical approach. With sexuality and procreation as central to the oppositional perception of women in the *Malleus*, reproduction not only forms a necessary site of investigation, but also forms a tool for critical engagement with genders-specific topics. Reproduction has namely never merely been a biological process; it remains a central site of political and ideological struggle. As Beauvoir argues, the maternal body is not merely biological but deeply political, shaped by cultural anxieties and regulatory forces.⁷ The move away from motherhood by second-wave feminists incited a counterreaction to the denial of value or agency in the reproductive process. In this reactionary move, radical feminist thinkers, like Federici, (re)consider the process of pregnancy as a 'power of women.'⁸ In this renewed understanding, thinkers ascribe a certain 'feminine power' to the procreative process again – with excesses in trans-exclusionary radical feminism – with the danger of swinging back to the previous reductive notion of women as mothers. These shifting ideals of motherhood reflect its historically ambivalent construction, both idealized as a site of purity and scrutiny, with the perpetual threat of reduction. This idea(l)s of motherhood are inherently intertwined with the reproductive capabilities inscribed on the bodies of women. The reproductive body is, however, a site of feasible tension within Christian ideology. On the one hand the capabilities of the womb have created a social expectation throughout history, but on the other hand, they form the foundation of fears and moral panic. The tension between the fears and expectations on the site of women's bodies hence extends to the socio-cultural expectations of motherhood. In a critical analysis *from* reproduction, I aim to uncover the intertwinement of the notions of womb, woman, witch, and mother in the *Malleus*.

Furthermore, reproduction as a site for political and ideological struggle is not merely a historical phenomenon. By tracing how the maternal body was constructed as a site of both necessity and danger, it is possible to shed light on enduring anxieties around birth, rationality, and autonomy. As the translation of theological anxieties concerning reproduction to societal dangers is coded in the maternal, the regulations hereof are likewise embedded in this logic. For example, Federici notes that states instigated rules on proper procreation, like bans on non-procreative sex, mandatory pregnancy registration, and harsh penalties for abortion and childbirth outside of wedlock.⁹ Furthermore the practice of midwifery became a site of control. This happened through the strict surveillance of midwives by (male) doctors,

⁶ Alison Rowlands, 'Witchcraft and Gender in Early Modern Europe', in *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, ed. Brian Levack (Oxford Academic, 2013), 463.

⁷ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (London: Lowe and Brydonel, 1956), 387.

⁸ Silvia Federici, 'Surrogate Motherhood: A Gift of Life or Maternity Denied?', in *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin* (Oakland: PM Press, 2019), 70.

⁹ Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 87, 192; Walp, 'Toil and Trouble,'32.

or the use of midwives as expert witnesses for sexual and reproductive crimes.¹⁰ These regulatory frameworks can be traced from the witch-hunt into contemporary obstetric practices. As Rodante van der Waal argues, the persistence of obstetric violence comes to the fore in the negation of maternal subjectivity.¹¹ Particularly the denial of agency during birth, highlights the enduring influence of the oppressive frameworks that can be traced through the witch hunts. Modern biopolitics, then, perpetuates a reproductive catch-22 that reinforces societal expectations of motherhood, while diminishing women's autonomy. By interrogating these dynamics in the narrative of the witch-hunt, this article not only addresses historical patterns but also demonstrates the possible relation to contemporary reproductive norms. More broadly, this inquiry underlines the significance of challenging and reimagining reproductive narratives. It thereby contributes to contemporary debates in feminist philosophy, particularly concerning epistemic injustice and reproductive ethics.

In four steps, I aim to excavate the binary logic of the *Malleus* by critically analysing the fears and expectations surrounding reproduction. With this I expose the witch as anti-mother. In the first section, I will foreground a philosophy of reproduction as a tool to rethink dominant frameworks. By tracing reproduction back to the Biblical notion of conception, the theoretical embeddedness of the inherent binary in reproduction comes to the fore. In the second section, I zoom in on the *Malleus* and analyse the construction of the ideal woman within this work. Through the sanctification of virgin-motherhood in the understanding of the resistance to witchcraft, a tension between the ideal woman and the embodied reality of reproduction come to the fore. This precariousness in the face of the perceived corruption of reproduction permeates the logic of the *Malleus*, exposing a contradictory logic of the maternal. In the third part, I trace how the tension in this logic of the maternal culminates in the figure of the witch as the anti-mother. This figure namely mirrors and perverts the ideal maternal role in her perceived power over the sexual act and reproduction. Positioned as the anti-thesis of virgin-motherhood, I argue that the witch comes to the fore as the anti-mother *par excellence*. In the last section, I examine how the mother/anti-mother narrative translates to real-world violence. The perception of material losses forms a key role in this translation, as I show that the (anti-)maternal transcends the personal and becomes political in the notion of male lineage. This movement from spirituality to materiality, allows secular courts to prosecute witches through violent (material) means. In reframing the witch-hunt through the lens of reproduction, I thus aim to lay bare the catch-22 of sexism that comes to the fore in the witch-hunt discourse in the impossibility to adhere to the logic of the anti-/maternal.

¹⁰ Blanca Espina-Jerez et al., 'Midwives in Health Sciences as a Sociocultural Phenomenon: Legislation, Training and Health (XV–XVIII Centuries)', *Medicina* 58, no. 9 (2022): 8; David Harley, 'Historians as Demonologists: The Myth of the Midwife-Witch', *Social History of Medicine* 3, no. 1 (1990): 4, 11.

¹¹ Rodante van der Waal, 'The 'Dead Baby Card' and the Early Modern Accusation of Infanticide: Situating Obstetric Violence in the Bio-and Necropolitics of Reproduction', *Feminist Theory*, 2024, 11.

The art of conception: reframing the witch-hunt through reproduction

According to Federici, reproductive anxiety forms a key motif of the witch-hunt persecutions.¹² She argues that this theme can be uncovered in both intellectual discourses, as well as practical instances of sexual and reproductive control. While her materialist approach offers crucial insights on the gender-specificity of the witch-hunt, her analysis on reproduction merely skims the surface of the 'ideological bricolage' that formed the foundation of the violent practices of the persecutions. The underlying idea(s) on procreation that induce this fear of demonic transgression, namely, only play a marginal role in her socio-economic analysis of the witch-hunt. The centrality of reproduction does, however, open up new possibilities for the investigation of the ideological frameworks of the witch-hunt; as treating reproduction – and its embodied reality of pregnancy – as a serious philosophical inquiry introduces tools for rethinking dominant discourses.¹³ In this first section, I therefore aim to show that it is necessary and fruitful to take reproduction seriously in the critical analysis of the 'ideological bricolage' of the witch-hunt.

By integrating pregnancy and birth in philosophy, it is possible to open up prevalent patriarchal discourses from the tension inscribed on the reproductive body. Both phenomena are – at least often – absent in hegemonic philosophical theories and analyses, even though an inquiry of the reproductive body can reveal questions about power, autonomy, and vulnerability.¹⁴ In this manner, reproduction forms a way into philosophical conceptual frameworks to expose previously hidden mechanisms. Federici's claim that reproduction forms one of the main sites of fear and violence during the witch-hunt, does then not only give rise to further questions about the framework of ideals behind the allegations on the site of reproduction, but also to the opportunity to take up reproduction as a new lens from which to investigate the witch-hunt and its contemporary discourse. In other words, Federici's analysis on the role of reproduction in the witch-hunt inspires a reading that explores the conceptual mechanisms that underlie the witch-hunt *from* reproduction.

Aligned with Federici's feminist interpretation of the witch-hunt, reproduction serves as a valuable marker of gender-specificity due to its embodied reality. However, Federici's analysis of the witch-hunt departs from a Marxist-feminist notion of body politics, wherein the female body forms the primary ground of exploitation in socio-economic transitions. Her analysis of the reproductive body as that 'what the factory has been for male workers,' is therefore heavily embedded in her socio-economic ideologies.¹⁵ Behind the centrality of reproduction, however, lies a more fundamental understanding of the intertwinement of the 'abilities of the womb' and expectations for women. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir

¹² Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 88.

¹³ Stella Villarmeia, 'A Philosophy of Birth: If You Want to Change the World, Change the Conversation', *Open Research Europe* 1 (10 June 2021): 4.

¹⁴ The investigation of the hegemonical understanding of origin *from* reproduction contributes to a new '*logos of genos*' that rethinks the epistemic value of embodied knowledge, and reproductive experience. See: Stella Villarmeia, 'A Philosophy of Birth', 6.

¹⁵ Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 15.

emphasizes the implications of the embodied reality of pregnancy, birth and motherhood on women's subjectivity by asserting that 'the processes unfolding in her [a woman's] biological body' relegates her to an immanent state of being.¹⁶ The analysis that women are defined by their biological abilities, highlights the importance of a reproductive lens for the inquiry into gender-specific topics. In departing from reproduction – as the site of reduction for women – it is, then, possible to shine a new light on gender-specific inquiries and disentangle the (historical) intertwining of womb and woman.

The significance of reproduction and – in extension – gender-specificity, comes to the fore in the fact that women were overrepresented in the number of victims.¹⁷ This discrepancy between female and male victims has given rise to feminist analysis of the witch-hunt as woman-hunt. Before delving deeper into the construction of the idea of the (anti-)mother in the *Malleus*, it is essential to address the common critique that the feminist analyses of the witch-hunt are 'polemical and historically inaccurate.'¹⁸ In reaction to the idea that women were deliberately targeted, many historians have namely refuted the possibility to find an 'objective' explanation for the overrepresentation of women, and dismissed complete theories on the basis of faulty numbers.¹⁹ To dismiss all of the particular insights in the analyses of these feminist thinkers is, according to Alison Rowlands, counterproductive.²⁰ The overrepresentation of women is after all a collective understanding of historians, as well as feminists.²¹ Given this clear overrepresentation of women, the gender-specificity of the witch-hunt in the context of a patriarchal society should take part within serious academic debate.

This gave rise to the notion that the patriarchy was foundational to the gender-specificity of the witch-hunt. This understanding can be traced through the accounts of feminist thinkers and activists. For example, already in the late nineteenth century suffragist writer Mathilda Joselyn Gage claimed that the persecution of witches must be seen as an attack on (the remnants of) a matriarchal societal order, putting an end to mother-rule.²² Even though this notion of the witch-hunt as eradication of matriarchate is historically inaccurate, Gage's exploration of the relation between the witch-hunt and aberrant stances of women towards family or society, provides fertile soil to investigate the gender-specificity of the witch-hunt. Her work laid the groundwork for exposing the intertwining of certain Christian ideals concerning women and the violence that occurred towards them. Instead of dismissing her ideas completely, it is therefore more fruitful to carefully investigate these feminist understandings of the idea(s) that underlie the persecution of (predominantly) women in the

¹⁶ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 477.

¹⁷ This concerns the overall overrepresentation of women. In some regions the gender-codification was reversed or didn't exist at all. See: Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 142.

¹⁸ Rowlands, 'Witchcraft and Gender in Early Modern Europe', 451.

¹⁹ Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 21; David Harley, 'Historians as Demonologists: The Myth of the Midwife-Witch', *Social History of Medicine* 3, no. 1 (1990): 1–26.

²⁰ Rowlands, 'Witchcraft and Gender in Early Modern Europe', 454.

²¹ Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 142.

²² Matilda Joselyn Gage, 'The Matriarchate', in *Woman, Church and State: A Historical Account of the Status of Woman Through the Christian Ages: With Reminiscences of Matriarchate* (CH Kerr, 1893), 13.

period of the witch-hunt. In this endeavour, I build on Christina Lerner's – more nuanced – assertion that 'the women who were accused were those who challenged the patriarchal view of the ideal woman.'²³ In other words, an analysis of the gender-specificity of the witch-hunt, thus, necessitates a critical examination of patriarchal ideals concerning women.

The reproductive lens serves an important role in this project. This lens namely enables scholars to navigate through topics that work at the junction of gendered embodiment and social expectations. There is, namely, not only an embodied reality to reproduction in personal experiences of sex and gender, but – through notions of womanhood and motherhood – the implications of reproduction extend beyond the personal into the political. As Beauvoir argues, the maternal body is not merely biological but deeply political, shaped by cultural anxieties and regulatory forces.²⁴ In departing *from* reproduction, it is hence not only possible to uncover the interaction between the material realities of pregnancy, birth, and violence, but also to investigate more abstract social expectations and ideals surrounding sexuality, womanhood and motherhood. The reproductive lens, thus, enables the recognition of gender-specific mechanisms within a given context.

Furthermore, the significance of reproduction in Western thought – despite it not being a site of departure for many thinkers – can be traced throughout history, particularly within Christian ideology. In *Confessions of the Flesh*, Foucault touches upon the Biblical interpretation of women as subservient to men. This notion gets intertwined with the perceived abilities of the womb and the concurrent understanding of this body as inferior. From this assemblage of ideas, then, an understanding of the purpose of this body erupts: procreation. Foucault encapsulates this reductionist move in asking: 'how does one avoid relating this theme of helper to that of the birth of a progeny that would derive from the difference of the sexes?'²⁵ This reading of the Christian interpretations of the body as a relegation of procreation as a women's responsibility, bears out the gender-specificity of reproduction.²⁶

Before I will return to the excavation of reproductive fears in the context of the witch-hunt, I aim to demonstrate the tension between the responsibility of procreation and the laboriousness ascribed to it. This tension, I argue, is embedded in (Christian) ideology and can be traced back to the notion of original sin, for:

Unto the woman he [God] said, "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow [in/]and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire *shall be* to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee."²⁷

²³ Christina Lerner, *Enemies of God: The Witch-hunt in Scotland* (Baltimore, 1981), 102.

²⁴ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 387.

²⁵ Michel Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, vol. 4, *The History of Sexuality* (Penguin Classics, 2021), 232.

²⁶ This is ironic, because the historical theological understanding of procreation has long been that the active contribution to conception was the male sperm, in contrast to the passive female role. See: Taylor G Petrey, 'Semen Stains: Seminal Procreation and the Patrilineal Genealogy of Salvation in Tertullian', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 22, no. 3 (2014): 343–72.

²⁷ *The Holy Bible*, King James Version, Gen. 3:16.

This Bible passage talks about the specific punishment for Eve's transgression, known as 'the curse of Eve.' Herein, both the subservience of women and their pains in labor are related to Eve's original sin, laying bare the conflict between the expectations of women (as vessels for procreation) and the reality ascribed to these expectations (in necessarily and justifiably being painful). Furthermore, in this notion, conception extends beyond the process of pregnancy itself and covers the initiation of gestation (sex) as well.²⁸ Within this Biblical framework, then, the complete process of procreation forms a site of struggle. The justified pain in both the sexual act and the reproductive process in this notion serve as a reminder for the punishment of (embodied) transgression. Instead of taking complications in conception seriously, this narrative hence signals at the necessity for purity and passivity in these processes. This exposes the reality for women to move within a framework that expects them to be pure, passive, and subservient, while working to conceive at the same time. The Biblical origin of origin, then, poses as an inherent impossibility for women. In later sections, I argue that in this tension – and the inevitability of transgression – the figure of the witch crystallizes.

The reproductive lens, which aids in uncovering implicit ideas on womanhood, can be extended in the excavation of the figure of the witch. The ideals of procreation that circulate the Christian bounds of purity namely inform the fears that are fundamental for the construction of the figure of the witch. In the words of Hans Broedel:

The witch in the *Malleus* was also not simply a female sorcerer; she was also the personification of deviant or "bad" female sexuality. [...] Witches instead were adulteresses, murderous midwives, and evil mothers, women defined by the authors as personifications of feminine sexuality.²⁹

This personification of deviant or 'bad' female sexuality of the witch combined with the analysis of purity and passiveness in the curse of Eve, allows for a reading of the witch as a specific (re-)embodiment of the curse of Eve. The notion of conception – interpreted in the broad sense of sexuality and gestation – is foundational in the understanding of the witch's transgressions.

To further explore the embeddedness of the figure of the witch in Christian idea(l)s of procreation, I turn to the *Malleus Maleficarum*, a foundational demonological text in the construction of the figure of the witch and her perceived transgressions. I will investigate how the understanding of ideal motherhood in this work informs the anxieties through which her anti-thesis erupts. An analysis of the *Malleus* namely reveals how contradictory expectations (and its curses) converge in an impossible, but concrete demand of motherhood. Within this demand, asexuality and disembodiment are upheld as ideals, while conception and procreation also remain necessary. This tension contributes to the precariousness of the position of women. The sexual act and the embodied labor that constitute Eve's curse form the

²⁸ Renate Marian Van Dijk-Coombes, 'Towards A New Understanding Of The Curse Of Eve: Female Sexual Pain In Genesis 3:16 And Other Ancient Texts', *Scriptura* 119, no. 1 (February 2020), 8.

²⁹ Broedel, 'Witchcraft as an Expression of Female Sexuality', 183.

material preconditions for the tension within this social ideal of motherhood, which is both idealized and constrained within these writings. The themes of conception, transgression, and destruction resonate in the figure of the witch; she appears as adulteress, murderous midwife, and evil mother, and is imagined bringing destruction to the community. Building on Broedel's analysis, I will argue that these accusations can be understood as disruptions of Christian procreative morality, framing the witch as the anti-mother *par excellence*. In other words, the deliberate disruption of reproduction forms the central danger in demonological texts like the *Malleus*, and it is through this theme that the witch is constructed as anti-mother: a perverse reflection of her blessed counterpart and a reiteration of her cursed predecessor.

Motherhood as site of scrutiny and idealization in the *Malleus*

The ideals on womanhood in the *Malleus* function around fertility, which, I argue, construct a narrative of the maternal. As one of the key texts that constructed the notion of witchcraft in the early modern period, the *Malleus* forms interesting ground to delve deeper into the intertwinement of Christian ideals inscribed on women and the gender-specificity of the witch-hunt. Furthermore, the authors of this work, Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, are notorious for their misogynist interpretation of witchcraft in their focus on the dangers of sexual transgressions, reproductive interference, and killing of human babies.³⁰ I argue that, in their misogyny, they construct the witch in negative terms, contrasted to the ideal women that is 'understood as a wife faithful to her husband and a mother caring for her human children.'³¹ This gender-specificity of the reproductive fears and threats can explain the disproportionate number of prosecuted women. Moreover, the departure *from* reproduction reveals a narrative of the mother/anti-mother. I expand on how logic is marked by contradiction in the opposing pairs of weakness and power, sexuality and purity, and creation and destruction. The embodied reality of reproduction, then, functions as a curse for women in an early modern context and the social expectation of motherhood embedded herein seals her fate. The perceived transgressions of the witch hence get entangled with the societal expectation of motherhood as well. In this second section, I show that the ideal of immaculate motherhood is engrained in the ethical framework of the *Malleus*. In setting out the ideal of motherhood I enable a reading of the witch as the anti-thesis hereof (central in the next section of this article). In other words, Kramer constructs the witch through all the things-a-woman-should-not-be; she is the 'Other' to the presupposed 'ideal mother'.

The authors of the *Malleus* construct this ideal mother in Marian terms. Between the lines of the explicit and extreme descriptions of the corruption of sorceresses, they namely

³⁰ In this text, I refer to the author(s) as 'Kramer', since Sprenger's actual contribution to the *Malleus Maleficarum* remains unclear. Several studies suggest that his name was primarily included to lend the work greater authority and credibility. See: Kramer and Sprenger, *The Hammer of Witches: A Complete Translation of the Malleus Maleficarum*, 2-6.

³¹ Josefine Thoren, 'The female rebel – the 15th century witch that never died A trans-historical comparative content analysis between the 15th century's *Malleus Maleficarum* and modern papal writings searching for the female ideal', in *Provocatio*, 41.

address the positive ideal of women in a more subtle – but not less consistent – way.³² As Hans Broedel states in his chapter ‘Witchcraft as an Expression of Female Sexuality’:

For all their misogyny, Institoris [Kramer] and Sprenger never accuse chaste virgins of witchcraft. Indeed, one of the most remarkably virtuous characters to be found in their text is a woman, a “poor little virgin and most devout,” who was able to cure bewitched persons by merely reciting the Lord’s Prayer with complete faith.³³

Broedel points to Kramer protecting women that demonstrate specific characteristics, signifying the existence of the ‘good woman.’ The ability of a ‘poor little virgin’ to cure inflictions of sorceresses or – in another instance – the rejection of an evil spirit by ‘a grown-up virgin who had a beautiful face and a refined character,’^{34,35} rely on these women’s innocence and purity. The idealisation of these characteristics, I argue, are embedded in a Marian ideal and specifically in her worth ‘as a product of theological assemblage [that] rests upon her desexualized body by virtue of her virginity-maternity.’³⁶ Kramer substantiates this claim in explicitly emphasizing that the ‘varieties of *goodness* and *perfection* that are susceptible of being shared [by God] were shared [...] [like] motherhood and virginity in Mary.’³⁷ In the interpretation of the perfection of the virginity-motherhood complex, expectations of innocence and purity merge in the notion of asexuality, while upholding the ideal of motherhood. It is necessary to investigate the specific markers that underlie the Marian ideal and the interaction thereof with the reality of the reproductive body.

The centrality of virginity and motherhood in the veneration of Mary in the *Malleus*, reflects a broader Christian ideal of women. The markers that define this ideal woman can be traced through Catholic texts – amongst which the *Malleus* – and pinpointed to her being a mother, wife, carer, and respectable, as well as her being passive, innocent and a virgin.³⁸ The ideal woman is, then, constructed through a complex set of expectations. For example, Kramer mentions that ‘respectable matrons’ are less given over to carnal vices, in which markers of motherhood, innocence or even virginity resounds.³⁹ In another anecdote he describes the different perpetrators in child sacrifice. He mentions that innocent children were ‘not offered

³² Kramer consistently use the terms sorceress and sorceresses throughout the *Malleus*. I incorporate this gendered term despite its non-inclusivity to stay close to the text, emphasizing the intertwinement of witch and women in this text.

³³ Broedel, ‘Witchcraft as an Expression of Female Sexuality’, 183.

³⁴ Kramer and Sprenger, *The Hammer of Witches: A Complete Translation of the Malleus Maleficarum*, 429.

³⁵ In this article I use Christopher Mackay’s translation of *Malleus*. However, instead of continuously referring to Mackay, from now on I will put Kramer as the author in the annotation. I do this to separate the thoughts of the author and translator (whom I also reference). New annotation: Heinrich Kramer, *Malleus Maleficarum*, [...].

³⁶ Joseph N. Goh, ‘Mary and the Mak Nyahs: Queer Theological Imaginings of Malaysian Male-to-Female Transsexuals’, *Theology & Sexuality* 18, no. 3 (January 2012): 226.

³⁷ Kramer, *The Hammer of Witches*, 219.

³⁸ Thoren, ‘The female rebel’, 39-40.

³⁹ Kramer, *The Hammer of Witches*, 277.

to the demons by *sorceress mother* but are secretly snatched away by midwives [...] from the embrace and womb of a *respectable mother* [emphasis added].⁴⁰ The aspect of respectability appears to be crucial for the author to ward off corruption. The anecdote namely demonstrates that a mother can succumb to the temptations of the devil, while the *respectable* mother remains innocent. The individual markers are hence not definitive in determining whether a woman demonstrates behaviour that fits the ideal; women must move between a variety of markers that are not only reductive but also form an unclear constellation of expectations. From the difficulties to adhere to these different markers within this constellation of expectations, particularly in the Marian virtue of virginity-maternity, the witch as anti-mother erupts.

The lens of reproduction reveals that these markers bring the negation of the reproductive body with them. The idealisation of virgin-motherhood namely clashes with the embodied reality of procreation (especially within an early modern context).⁴¹ This demonization of sexuality and its exclusion from idealised procreation can be traced through the Christian narrative on reproduction. For example, Foucault states that it was imperative for the Church Fathers that ‘the human seeds would have been sown without the slightest shameful passion,’ and quotes Saint Augustine’s statement that “‘the Creator [...] making blessed mothers conceive without libidinous pleasure and give birth without arduous labor.’”⁴² Moreover, while this tension between virginity and motherhood operates through both markers, it predominantly crystallizes as a struggle on the site of the maternal. Motherhood namely inherently presupposes sexual activity, whereas virginity remains (mostly) untethered from the patriarchal imperatives of reproduction and its accompanying maternal expectation. The denial of the embodied preconditions of (expected) procreation contributes to the impossibility to meet the expectations for the ideal woman. This is particularly ironic because ‘patriarchal control over the practice and definition of motherhood has alienated mothers from their bodies while simultaneously defining them by their bodies.’⁴³ The negation of embodiment in the virgin-motherhood complex is exemplary for the strained logic in reproductive expectations.⁴⁴

The tension in this logic, I argue, erupts in supernatural explanations of virgin-motherhood – and its perceived excesses. As the fixation on virginity requires the rethinking of the category of mother apart from sexuality, it denies the embodied history as the

⁴⁰ Kramer, *The Hammer of Witches*, 372.

⁴¹ It should be noted that I am not stating that sex necessarily forms the precondition for becoming a mother, especially in the contemporary context where surrogacy, adoption, IVF, and same-sex parenthood are possible. Without this, motherhood is more intimately intertwined with its commonly embodied initiation, namely: sexual intercourse.

⁴² Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 375 note 16.

⁴³ Brydie Kosmina, ‘Witches as Mothers’, in *Feminist Afterlives of the Witch: Popular Culture, Memory, Activism*, ed. Brydie Kosmina (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2023), 187.

⁴⁴ Even the translator of the *Malleus*, Christopher Mackay, acknowledges this strained logic and observes in a footnote ‘how strongly the author[s] wished to deny any possibility that innocent women could be defamed by demons.’ Christopher S. Mackay, *The Hammer of Witches: A Complete Translation of the Malleus Maleficarum*, p.358-9 note 298.

prerequisite of procreation. In this denial of the embodied reality of motherhood, the move to the supernatural is made. Kramer, following the Christian narrative, addresses the practical impossibility of virgin-motherhood by describing the virgin giving birth as a 'miracle surpassing nature.'⁴⁵ The irony of the shared roots in the supernatural of the virgin Mary – as the ideal women – and sorceresses – as her dark other – escapes the authors. Furthermore, the denial of the embodied reality of reproduction contributes to its mystification because it is not grounded in material reality. As a result of which it can be said that 'the maternal body and its ineffable ability to create life are positioned as magical processes akin to witchcraft.'⁴⁶ Besides the miracle of the Virgin Mary, this leaves room for the construction of the dark other to this ideal mother. With this, the *Malleus* exposes a 'logic' of the maternal that is characterized by tension. The witch erupts from this tension as a supernatural explanation for transgression, forming a multifunctional lighting rod for deviant behaviour that diverges from the patriarchal norm.

The tension between this transcendent ideal and the material reality of mundane motherhood is furthermore magnified in the carnality ascribed to women. As can be read in the *Malleus*, a woman is deemed 'more carnal than a man, as is clear in connection with many filthy carnal acts.'⁴⁷ Together with the ascribed weakness of the mind and body of women, this carnality enables the devil to ensnare women more easily. This reductionist view of women 'drew on long-standing and widespread ideas about women's weakness, credulity, and carnality, all of which made them more open to demonic seduction.'⁴⁸ What makes the *Malleus* unique, however, is the connection the author makes between misogynistic views and the danger of the witch. They explicitly state that heretical perversity 'is to be designated by the particular gender [women] over which he [the devil] is known to have power.'⁴⁹ Women are hence perceived as weak – as they give over to lust easily – but also dangerous – in their pact with the devil. This creates a tension through which women need to manoeuvre; they should rise above their weakness and carnality but avoid transgressing moral expectations. The negativity of the carnality ascribed to women however expedites the possibility for transgressions, especially within the inherently embodied and sexual context of procreative expectations.

The *Malleus* thus constructs the ideal woman within a 'logic' that is both rigid and contradictory, resulting in the impossibility of fully embodying 'goodness' as a woman. This comes most explicitly to the fore in the expectation of motherhood, as the sexual act as a gateway to corruption, clashes with the expectation of motherhood. The denial of the embodied reality within the idealisation of motherhood, furthermore, mystifies the process of reproduction. This precarious balance between asexuality and motherhood created fertile ground for demonization, as it is almost unavoidable that women fail to fulfil their moral and

⁴⁵ Kramer, *The Hammer of Witches*, 338.

⁴⁶ Kosmina, 'Witches as Mothers', 187.

⁴⁷ Kramer, *The Hammer of Witches*, 165.

⁴⁸ Rowlands, 'Witchcraft and Gender in Early Modern Europe,' 455.

⁴⁹ Kramer, *The Hammer of Witches*, 69.

social roles. Moreover, in framing women's perceived carnality as particularly susceptible for demonic interference, the reproductive body itself becomes a site of danger. The contradictions between expectations, perceptions, and embodied reality – coming together in the maternal – thus construct a framework characterized by impossibility. In other words, the centrality of reproduction and its societal expectations in the complex constellation of expectations in the *Malleus* create an impossible logic of the maternal.

The numerous possibilities for transgression within this logic create a persistent threat that materializes in the ultimate antithesis of the perfect mother: the sorceress. With this, the witch as a force of disruption comes to the fore as the subversion of Marian ideals in the *Malleus*. It is necessary to examine how the anti-thesis of this ideological framework manifests in the text's concrete examples, for example in the accusations of the interference with the sexual act, fertility, and proper child-care. From the destruction of male virility to the theft and corruption of infants, I argue that these accusations reveal how the witch is positioned as the antithesis of the ideal mother. In focussing on the dangers coded in the (anti-)maternal, the authors contribute to the gender-specificity of the witch-hunt. In the following section, I examine how this perceived corruption of proper procreation constructs the figure of the witch as the anti-mother in the *Malleus*.

The witch as anti-mother in the *Malleus*

The witch's transgression, subversion and depletion, form a direct reversal of the maternal ideal, extending the logic of the *Malleus* into the anti-maternal. The impossibility for women to adhere to the web of expectations surrounding reproduction erupts in a supernatural understanding. However, whereas Mary embodies the ultimate act of sacred procreation, the witch embodies its desecration. Kramer accuses the witch of weaponizing reproduction in accusing them of the stealing of penises or babies, thereby interfering with fertility. In these acts, the witch does not merely fail to nurture life, she actively works against it. Beside ascribing the deliberate intervention with conception to this figure, the authors claim that sexual transgression and interference with reproduction form her specific sites of power. This contradiction between libido and infertility, then, mirror the incompatibility between Marian ideals of asexuality and procreation. Through symbolism of depletion in the *Malleus* it becomes clear that the witch inverts the maternal ideal. In this section, I will trace the construction of the witch as the anti-mother in the *Malleus* and expose the logic of the anti-maternal herein.

According to Kramer, the precondition for the witch's power lies in sexual transgression. Central to this notion is the understanding of the pact between the witch and the devil. This pact is the act through which a sorceress attains her power. Besides the renunciation of faith, the witch's pact is characterized by its corporeal and sexual nature. Kramer emphasizes the intertwinement of sexual transgression and demonical power in stating that the devil has more power over the sexual act than any other act.⁵⁰ Within a framework where sexuality is both a vulnerability – through the carnality of women – and a

⁵⁰ Kramer, *The Hammer of Witches*, 172.

danger – as it lies at the root of her power – the pact becomes a unique site of transgression.⁵¹ The initial lapse of sexual transgression herein forms the mere initiation for the witch to attain her powers. Even though this act is already disruptive, the real danger lies in the application of the attained powers. Besides being a precondition for demonic power, the sexual act also functions as the precondition for reproduction. The continuity between the initial sexual transgression and the subsequent danger becomes clear in the notion of tainted progeny. The common belief namely was that demons could steal semen in the sexual act and impregnate other women, leading to illegitimate births that would undermine societal stability.⁵² Kramer for example states that the devil did not only accosts barren women for (their) pleasure, but that he also seduces women that are ‘disposed for impregnation [...] to taint the progeny.’⁵³ The sexual (p)act, then, initiates a continuum of disruption – sexual, reproductive, and societal – firmly embedding the sorceress in a logic that frames her body as a site of power and danger.

This continuum of disruption crystallizes in the notion that interference with reproduction forms a specific site of power. This inversion of the maternal forms a defining theme in the *Malleus*. The fear of reproductive disruption appears repeatedly in anecdotes, principles, and examples that frame witches as uniquely capable of undermining the processes of conception, childbirth, and child-rearing. Witchcraft in the *Malleus* is then ‘especially apt to disrupt the course of benign sexual relationships and fruitful reproduction.’⁵⁴ The perceived danger for reproductive interference herein functions as the opposite of proper procreation. The witch’s power is hence inscribed on the site that simultaneously determines the (social) value of women. Kramer explicitly underscores the inversion of ideal expectations, stating that ‘adulteresses, female fornicators and so on are more frequently sorceresses.’⁵⁵ Furthermore, the disruption of the maternal is demonstrated most clearly in the witch’s ability to ‘impede the act of the faculty to procreate.’⁵⁶ The figure of the witch hence takes shape in relation to the idealized mother – whom she both mirrors and negates – reflecting deeper patriarchal anxieties about women’s potential for both creation and destruction. The danger the witch represents is therefore not merely symbolic or moral but carries social implications with it. In other words, the witch is fully entangled in the strained logic of the (anti-)maternal.

The witch’s embodiment of the negation of the ideal mother comes to the fore in the different forms of interference with progeny mentioned in the *Malleus*. For example, one of the instances where the witch is constructed as embodiment of disruption lies in Kramer’s treatment of male impotence. He namely describes witches as obstructing the sexual act or

⁵¹ The specific nature of this ritual of power varies across periods and regions, but sexual transgression forms a common denominator. Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 142.

⁵² Sarah Dunn, ‘The Mark of the Devil: Medical Proof in the Witchcraft Trials’ (Kentucky, University of Louisville, 2017), 42-43.

⁵³ Kramer, *The Hammer of Witches*, 310.

⁵⁴ Broedel, ‘Witchcraft as an Expression of Female Sexuality’, 26.

⁵⁵ Kramer, *The Hammer of Witches*, 187.

⁵⁶ Kramer, *The Hammer of Witches*, 187.

corrupting male seed, he claims that 'there is a true removal of the [male] member from the point of view of the imagination of the person affected, though not from that of the thing itself.'

⁵⁷ It is striking that, despite occurring on the male body, this fear is overwhelmingly ascribed to sorceresses. As Moira Smith states, 'the historical record shows that it is men, not women, who collect phalluses [...] but in the *Malleus* male castration fears [...] are projected onto witches.'⁵⁸ However, instead of symbolic emasculation,⁵⁹ I argue that this shift of power is embedded in concrete reproductive fears. The extension of the witch's power beyond her own body, herein signifies the possibility of fertility interference of others. Kramer substantiates this claim in the agency he ascribes to witch's reproductive power. Witches can namely prevent conception and induce miscarriage, but these acts are rarely framed as the woman's own doing. Furthermore, in blaming external female figures—midwives, stepmothers, or jealous ex-girlfriends⁶⁰—he frames women as being passive and denies them autonomy. Later demonological works confirm this lack of agency of the witch. In the words of Hans Broedel, 'women did not work their spells through any power of their own, but only "through the help of demons whose pacts and sacraments they employ."⁶¹ What emerges is a contradictory understanding in which women are not granted agency, yet remain the default site of suspicion. Caught between the unattainable ideal of virtuous maternity and the demonic parody of it, women do not even have a choice; they can only passively undergo scrutiny. In the embodiment of the contradictory logic of monolithic motherhood, the witch serves as a multifunctional lightning for deviant behaviour that diverges the patriarchal norm.

This contradictory logic with regards to reproduction manifests itself in visual depictions of the witch in oppositional stereotypes, as the witch is portrayed as either the old crone or the seductive young woman. In this portrayal, the presentation of the body conveys reductive notions on fertility and its disruption. For example, the depiction of breast and belly is juxtaposed in the two stereotypes. These are firm and round in the young seductress – signifying fertility – but hanging and 'deformed' in the old crone - signifying depletion and death.⁶² Whereas the seductress embodies the aspect of power of the witch, the old crone embodies the danger of disruption of fertility. The opposition of hyper- and post-reproductive bodies in the portrayal of the witch emphasizes the contradictive logic inscribed on this figure.

⁵⁷ Kramer, *The Hammer of Witches*, 195.

⁵⁸ Moira Smith, 'The Flying Phallus and the Laughing Inquisitor: Penis Theft in the "Malleus Maleficarum"', *Journal of Folklore Research* 39, no. 1 (2002): 102.

⁵⁹ In psychoanalytic interpretations of the witch-hunt the metaphorical emasculating forms a common theme of study. Other theories claim that the act of stealing the male member by women can be seen as a symbol for a reversal of power. See: Marika Rose and Anthony Paul Smith, 'Hexing the Discipline: Against the Reproduction of Continental Philosophy of Religion,' *Palgrave Communications* 5, no. 1 (2019), 4-5; Andrea Sansone et al., 'Castration and Emasculation in the Middle Age. The Andrological Conundrum of Peter Abelard', *Andrology* 10, no. 5 (2022): 829; Broedel, 'Witchcraft as an Expression of Female Sexuality,' 181. Smith, 'The Flying Phallus and the Laughing Inquisitor,' 94.

⁶⁰ Kramer, *The Hammer of Witches*, 189, 424.

⁶¹ Broedel, 'Witchcraft as an Expression of Female Sexuality,' 173.

⁶² Ioan Pop-Curşeu and Rareş Stoica, 'The Witch's Body as a Narrative and Symbolic Tool', *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai-Dramatica* 68, no. 1 (2023): 20.

Moreover, the grotesque representation of the post-reproductive body signals at a logic of the (anti-)maternal. For these bodies are seen 'as dried up and potentially poisonous, rather than flowing with the life-giving fluids of the maternal body (menstrual blood and breast milk).'⁶³ The symbolic features of fertility, then, function both as a sign of sexuality and of the perversion of proper procreation. In this stereotyping, both the threat of transgression and depletion are inscribed on the witch's body.

In the *Malleus*, the theme of depletion takes the form of the anti-maternal due to the (symbolic) inversion of fruitfulness and the denial of sustenance. Herein the perversion of (breast)milk plays a central role. According to Sarah Dunn, food and nurturing form important physical symbols for demonic, as well as holy power.⁶⁴ This broader interpretation of fruitfulness and the interference with fertility, forms a common theme in the understanding of the witch's power. For example, Pope Innocent VIII issued a papal bull addressing the dangers of witchcraft in which he explicitly addresses these themes. Herein he accuses sorceresses of the killing and wiping out of 'the grapes of the vines and the fruits of the trees as well as men, women, work animals, cows, sheep and other animals of various kinds, and also the vines, orchards, fields, pastures, wheat, grain, and other crops.'⁶⁵ The use of food as a symbol for nourishment is quite concrete: the witch interferes with fertility of both the body, and the land. In the *Malleus* the theme of depletion predominantly comes to the fore in the deprivation of milk flow from a cow.⁶⁶ Besides the overall understanding of depletion as an inversion of fertility, milk specifically functions as a symbol for nourishment, fertility and motherhood.⁶⁷ The emphasis on the deprivation of milk reflects a direct reversal of these values by the witch. This reading gets substantiated by Kramer when he explicitly compares the milk flow of animals to the cycle of a woman.⁶⁸ In making the connection between milk flow and the cycle of a woman, the symbolic intertwinement of milk, nourishment and reproduction comes to the fore. The witch's depletion of milk hence signals at the rejection of nourishment and fertility, indicating a subversion of the maternal in these depletive acts and sustaining the mother/anti-mother narrative.

Furthermore, in the *Malleus* the themes of depletion and perversion of the maternal come to the fore in the swapping of babies. Besides the interference with progeny through sexual transgression, Kramer accuses witches of the killing, stealing, and swapping of babies. This last category – called changelings – concerns the substitution of babies and children by

⁶³ Rowlands, 'Witchcraft and Gender in Early Modern Europe,' 461.

⁶⁴ Sarah Dunn, 'The Mark of the Devil: Medical Proof in the Witchcraft Trials,' 74-75.

⁶⁵ Innocent VIII, 'Summis Desiderantes Affectibus [Encyclical Letter That Addressed the Rise of Witchcraft and Heresy in Various Parts of Europe]', in *The Witch-Persecutions*, by George Lincoln Butt, vol. 3, Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European History 4 (Philadelphia: Department of History of the University of Pennsylvania, n.d., original from:1484).

⁶⁶ Kramer, *The Hammer of Witches*, 276, 375-6, 400-401, 410, 464-65, 418.

⁶⁷ E. Ene Draghici-Vasilescu, 'The Nourishing Word: The Symbolism of Milk in Early Christianity and the Middle Ages', *Art and Articulation*, 2016, 1-12.

⁶⁸ Kramer, *The Hammer of Witches*, 375.

those of others, or by demons in the guise of small ones.⁶⁹ For these changelings 'the milk supply of four women would not suffice to suckle on.'⁷⁰ Herein the explicit intertwining of maternal fluids (milk), depletion and the interference with proper progeny is laid bare. Instead of the witch growing an extra nipple to feed her familiars,⁷¹ the nurturing mother is literally drained by these devil's changelings. Within the *Malleus*, then, the twisted relation between witches and demons on the one hand, and baby's and (respected) mothers on the other hand, plays an important role in the fear for interference with progeny. The extension of the threat from fertility interference to the stealing, swapping, and killing of infants exposes that the danger the witch poses does not only concern the physical ability of reproduction but also functions within the social realm. Through these disruptions of sexuality, reproduction and the family, the witch gets formulated as the anti-mother *par-excellence*.

The analysis above urges us to discuss how the logic of the (anti-)maternal that is inscribed on the witch erupts into violence. In the fourth section of this article, I investigate how the conceptual framework of the witch translates into a violent social reality for women. By analysing the equation of the stealing and killing, with the swapping of babies in the *Malleus*, I expose the importance of 'material losses'. Herein resounds the Federician analysis of the intertwining of patriarchal conceptions surrounding procreation and (proto-)capitalist notions of reproduction. Coming to the fore in the understanding of children as property of the father and the notion of lineage, the accusation of material losses gets substantiated in the social expectations of motherhood. The shift from personal religiosity to communal losses, I argue, allows for uncontrolled violence against subversive women. The involvement of the secular courts plays a big role in the extremity of this violence. Transcending mere discourse, the mother/anti-mother logic of the *Malleus* translates into real-world violence towards women.

The materialization of violence through anti-motherhood narratives

The anti-maternal does not merely function on an ideological plane but erupts in violence due to the ontological reality of embodied and social reproduction. Constructed as a moral imperative embedded in Christian ideals, the witch persecutions transcended personal religiosity through the collective punishment of perceived transgressions. Initially, the idealization of motherhood in the veneration of Mary is spiritual rather than material. The unattainability of the embodiment of this ideal gives rise to the construction of the witch as its antithesis in equally mythical terms, coming to life in stories that are equally terrifying and

⁶⁹ The categorization of changelings is somewhat odd, as later even impregnation with the wrong semen is included under this category. For the sake of clarity, I only refer to actual children that are replaced after birth.

⁷⁰ Kramer, *The Hammer of Witches*, 470.

⁷¹ The intertwining of fluids of the reproductive body and the witch most explicitly comes to the fore in the understanding of the witch's teat. Popular belief was namely that witches were able to grow an extra nipple to feed animals or demons. See: Sarah Dunn, 'The Mark of the Devil: Medical Proof in the Witchcraft Trials', 54.

implausible. These stories, however, become more concrete in the variety of calls to action towards a broader, non-intellectual, public. The last chapter of the *Malleus* for example functions as a manual for secular court, warning for the dangers of witchcraft and instructing the correct forms of interrogation and punishment.⁷² This explicit incitement of secular courts to properly prosecute witches points at the perception that their threat extends beyond the salvation of souls or even the integrity of the Christian community. Instead, it emphasizes the perceived material danger witches posed to society at large. In the last section of this article, I will set out the role of the logic of the (anti-)maternal, in the translation of this danger from the spiritual to the material – or the personal to the political.

The aspect of embeddedness of the witch in actual fears in society touches upon a complicated, yet important question concerning contemporary readings of demonologies like the *Malleus*; what was the actual impact of these theological texts on the practice of the witch persecution? And – vice versa – do these texts form an accurate representation of the reality of the popular beliefs regarding witches? Firstly, it is common understanding that these demonological texts should not be dismissed as a weird niche of theology. They namely formed an intricate intellectual framework that – through time – constructed a ‘cumulative theory’ of witchcraft and its practitioners.⁷³ The relationship between intellectual theories and popular beliefs, however, remains a contested topic within scholarly discourse.⁷⁴ The dismissal of this diachronic and diverse body of texts, varying from philosophical treatises to practical manuals, seems to be an academic fantasy. Moreover, the introduction of print technology facilitated the circulation of demonologies, with the *Malleus* marking a pivotal moment in the dissemination of these conceptions. According to Brian Levack, the *Malleus* was not only ‘the first witchcraft treatise that assumed a major role in making the cumulative concept of witchcraft available to a large audience’, but furthermore it essentially formed ‘a manual for inquisitors [...] and it incorporated many of the popular beliefs regarding witchcraft that were current in southern Germany at the time.’⁷⁵ Being a foundational text for many subsequent theories, the interaction of the *Malleus* with popular beliefs exposes the intertwinement of an intellectual and social reality. The interpretation of demonologies as purely intellectual projects detached from reality is, then, unconvincing. This becomes evident in the concrete dangers formulated on the site of reproduction (as mentioned in the last section). The accompanying instructions for the prosecution of witches go even further. In this concrete call to action, the logic of the (anti-)maternal translates to material consequences, revealing a cumulative logic where doctrine and practice blur.

This translation of ideological fears into material threats becomes most evident in the frequent allegations of witches stealing, swapping, or killing babies. As discussed earlier,

⁷² Kramer, *The Hammer of Witches*, 470-648.

⁷³ Mark A. Waddell, ‘Witchcraft and Demonology’, in *Magic, Science, and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 59.

⁷⁴ Sydney Anglo, ‘Evident Authority and Authoritative Evidence: The *Malleus Maleficarum*’, in *The Damned Art (RLE Witchcraft)* (Routledge, 2012), 1.

⁷⁵ Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe*, 54-5.

Kramer devotes more attention to these acts of infanticide and interference with progeny than to other forms of interference with procreation, at least those regarded to the bodies of women – such as infertility, abortion, or miscarriage. Infanticide – an anti-maternal act *par excellence* – forms a common theme in demonologies. The *Malleus* emphasizes this act as the ultimate transgression in various grotesque ways; witches do not only steal or kill babies, but offer them to demons, eat them, store their heads inside jars for spells, or create pastes or potions of their boiled remnants.⁷⁶ These disturbing accusations go hand in hand with the more abstract, yet still material, fear of illegitimate reproduction through demonic means. Whereas two centuries ago, Aquinas acknowledged the possibility of sexual relations between demons and humans, he denied that such unions could produce human offspring.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, the understanding of intercourse with the devil evolved to a new demonological perception defined by societal disruption. In this new logic, demons could disseminate seed outside of marriage and produce illegitimate children in having sexual relations with a variety of people.⁷⁸ The notion of lineage, then, becomes central to the fears surrounding fertility. By attributing interference with proper progeny to witches, demonologies embed this figure in a growing reality of reproductive anxiety that extends beyond religion, extending the theoretical narrative of the anti-maternal.

The witch, marked with these anti-maternal transgressions, emerges not only as a spiritual danger but as a secular threat more severe than heresy itself. This shift wherein witchcraft became more dangerous than heresy or apostasy is embedded in the societal disruption of its transgression. As Gerhild Scholz Williams notes, ‘witchcraft was considered more deadly than either crime, as the witch not only endangered her/his own soul, but... also threatened the well-being of the Christian community,’ and that this incited its punishment by both secular and canon law.⁷⁹ The translation of individual transgression into concrete threats for the community, I argue, can also be traced through the anti-maternal logic foundational for the construction of the witch. The material consequences namely flow from the (initially) spiritual concerns of interference with proper procreation. Central to these ontological consequences is the patriarchal notion of lineage, in which children are seen as ‘property of the father.’⁸⁰ Federici’s Marxist-feminist analysis of the witch-hunt clearly illustrates this translation of the personal to the political. She points at a body politics that conflates theological fears of reproduction with secular losses, resulting in the intervention of Church as well as state on the site of the reproductive body.⁸¹ Kramer substantiates the necessity for the involvement precisely through the ‘secular losses’ – like the property of the father.⁸² In

⁷⁶ Kramer, *The Hammer of Witches*, 283–85.

⁷⁷ Gerhild Scholz Williams, ‘Demonologies’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America* (Oxford Academic, 2013), 74.

⁷⁸ Hans Broedel, ‘The Inquisitors’ Devil’, in *The ‘Malleus Maleficarum’ and the Construction of Witchcraft* (Manchester University Press, 2003), 44.

⁷⁹ Williams, ‘Demonologies,’ 75.

⁸⁰ Kramer, *The Hammer of Witches*, 372–373.

⁸¹ Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 89, 192.

⁸² Kramer, *The Hammer of Witches*, 393.

these 'secular losses' the witch's transgression thus become a tangible threat to patriarchal notions of lineage, inheritance, and – in extension – social order, necessitating the involvement of secular courts.

Furthermore, the involvement of secular courts marked the onset of violence that, due to its embeddedness in the anti-maternal, was inherently gender-specific. In the justification of secular courts overseeing cases of suspected witchcraft, the possibility for violence emerges. Punishment of the secular courts is, however, not spiritual, but explicitly corporal in their use of torture and capital punishment. In the materialization of the secular losses of witchcraft, then, the materialization of violence also takes place. This violence, in its extremity, mirrors the severity of the accusations. As Christopher Mackay notes, unlike (other) heretics who could sometimes avoid punishment through repentance, the assignment of judgment to secular courts 'it is clearly foreseen that sorcery heretics should be promptly burned.'⁸³ The fact that the violence of the witch persecutions operates within the logic of the maternal becomes evident in the two foremost charges underlying the execution of women in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe: witchcraft and infanticide.⁸⁴ As these crimes 'centred on the killing of children and other violations of reproductive norms,'⁸⁵ they highlight the entanglement of judicial violence with a broader cultural logic of reproductive fear. Infanticide not being an inherently religious crime, signals at the extension of the fear of interference with progeny into the societal realm. In this way, the anti-maternal functions in a Christian symbolic framework, as well as a concrete judicial one that allows for gender-specific violence.

The increased codification of penalties for reproductive transgressions comes to the fore in concrete instances of control and punishment on the site of reproduction, particularly targeting midwives. Legal codes across Europe namely began to implement specific regulations concerning reproduction during the early modern period, reflecting a move towards the institutionalisation of reproductive processes.⁸⁶ This shift towards regulation of – or control over – the reproductive body took various forms. For example, states instigated bans on non-procreative sex, strict surveillance of midwives by (male) doctors, mandatory pregnancy registration, and harsh penalties for abortion and childbirth outside of wedlock.⁸⁷ Demonologies, like the *Malleus*, also explicitly emphasised the necessity of the regulations of birth practices, in the dangers ascribed to midwives, who 'caused greater losses than any other

⁸³ Mackay, *The Hammer of Witches*, p.616 note 449.

⁸⁴ Van der Waal, 'The 'Dead Baby Card' and the Early Modern Accusation of Infanticide,' 20.

⁸⁵ Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 187.

⁸⁶ The notion of control in relation to midwifery is an ambiguous one; in some regions, midwives were namely enlisted in the bodily examination of suspects. Whether this should be interpreted as a sign of appreciation for their expertise, or rather as a means of exerting control over this group, remains a subject of debate. See: Anne L. Barstow, *Witchcraze: A New History of the European Witch Hunts* (Pandora, 1994), 113; Harley, 'Historians as Demonologists: The Myth of the Midwife-Witch', 4, 11.

⁸⁷ Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 87, 192; Espina-Jerez et al., 'Midwives in Health Sciences as a Sociocultural Phenomenon: Legislation, Training and Health (XV–XVIII Centuries)', 8; Walp, 'Toil and Trouble,' 32.

sorceress.⁸⁸ This demonization of the midwife-witch coincided with the early modern medical movement to centralize birth practices under male authority.⁸⁹ The intensified regulation of midwifery and reproduction reveals that state interventions operated within an ideological framework in which the dangers of reproduction had become central. These fears mirror the mother/anti-mother binary constructed in demonological texts like the *Malleus*. In the contradiction between regulatory efforts to manage the process of reproduction (making-life) and the extreme punishment for the perceived transgressions (making-death), that the material reality of the reproductive catch-22 emerges. Even though the figure of the witch explicitly embodies the struggles on the site of the reproductive body, the logic of the (anti-)maternal extends beyond individual transgression and is traceable through regulations and control of reproductive knowledge and practices.

In the engagement with the material reality of the mother/anti-mother narrative inscribed on women's reproductive bodies, it becomes clear that the tension on the site of reproduction is not a historical relic but still a tangible reality for women. A quick glance of contemporary discourses and practices on reproduction, expose a prevailing logic of limitation, reduction, and violence. This limitation, for example, manifests itself in the fact that, despite the increased call of states to produce more babies, the lack of recognition for invisible labor is still an everyday problem. Also, the idealization of motherhood in the 'tradwife' trend – with explicit references to the Christian ideals of subservience and reproduction – reinforces biological essentialism, excluding trans women in this notion of womanhood. Furthermore, the dangers once attached to reproductive knowledge held by midwives and healers, as well as mothers and other women, still resonate today in the denial of rationality and autonomy in reproductive processes and persistence of obstetric violence (where women are subjected to dehumanizing treatment during pregnancy and childbirth). As van der Waal argues, the contradictions of the maternal logic in the witch-hunt narrative clearly comes to the fore in the fact that 'mothers were only recognised as subjects through the accusation of killing their children,' exposing the entanglement of women's subjecthood in the accusation of infanticide.⁹⁰ The ongoing fight for reproductive justice hence did not arrive in a void, but against the backdrop of age-old existing patriarchal configurations of reproductive ideals. The witch, as anti-mother, embodies these ideals and their materialisation into violence.

In this final section, I have traced the materialization of violence through the logic of the (anti-)maternal. By showing how the notion of 'secular losses' justified the involvement of secular courts, I addressed the emergence of corporeal punishment. In this shift, the struggle on the site of the reproductive body materializes into violence. By broadening the analysis to societal concerns such as lineage, I moved beyond the *Malleus* and pointed to broader mechanisms of control over the reproductive process. This, however, also raises further questions: what was the impact of the witch-hunt on historical obstetric practices? Was there

⁸⁸ Kramer, *The Hammer of Witches*, 212, 284, 643.

⁸⁹ The actual persecution of the midwife-witch is contested. See: Harley, 'Historians as Demonologists: The Myth of the Midwife-Witch'.

⁹⁰ Van der Waal, 'The 'Dead Baby Card' and the Early Modern Accusation of Infanticide', 11.

a loss of knowledge about the reproductive process as a result of the violence enacted upon reproductive bodies? And, how do the reproductive anxieties of the witch-hunt translate into contemporary gender-specific violence? The excavation of the mother/anti-mother narrative in the *Malleus* therefore merely forms a starting point in the investigation of the intertwinement of womb, woman, and witch. For now, in this initial attempt to understand the violence of the witch-hunt, the witch emerges as the anti-mother *par excellence*.

Conclusion

In this article, I have alluded to the violent reductive binary of the maternal/anti-maternal that comes the fore in the witch-hunt narrative, specifically the *Malleus Maleficarum*. Constructed as the dark other to the ideal mother, the witch mirrors and perverts the Marian ideal of virgin-motherhood in her hyper-sexuality and depletion. The intertwinement of womb, woman, and witch exposes a gender-specific understanding of witchcraft coded in the (anti-)maternal due to the societal expectations inscribed on the reproductive body. The impossibility to adhere to this logic exposes the catch-22 of sexism underlying the witch-hunt: the reduction of women to wombs, while this very womb is perceived as the main site of threat.

In departing *from* reproduction, I have traced how the figure of the witch erupts from – and simultaneously reinforces – the binary logic of the (anti-)maternal. In the excavation of this logic in the *Malleus* I have started to uncover the ideological bricolage underlying the gender-specific violence of the witch-hunt. The lens of reproduction provided a new way in for a critical analysis of this work. By returning to the Biblical origin of our origin, I exposed the (conceptual) tension of sexuality and procreation, its curse signalling the struggle on the site of the reproductive body. This reading gestures at a broader task: to reweave reproductive themes into our understanding of history, thought, and practices.

With the investigation of the maternal in the *Malleus*, this article attempts to foreground themes that have long been denied or rendered invisible—revealing that, instead of being a misogynist afterthought, the gender-specific violence is embedded in the impossible logic of the ideal maternal. The eruption of violence towards the antithesis of this ideal seems like a historical abnormality. However, the entanglement of reproduction—and the social expectations surrounding it – with violence still exists. For example, the tension in the (anti-)maternal logic of the *Malleus* included, among other things: the inherent oppositionality of virginity and motherhood, the contradictory framing of women's carnality as both a site of weakness and power, and the uneasy interplay between passivity and guilt. These topics remain central to debates in critical midwifery studies.

This investigation of the *Malleus* forms an initial step in taking reproductive themes seriously in historical analysis. Nonetheless, it is necessary to acknowledge the limitations of this article. Although the critical analysis is grounded in secondary (feminist) literature, it focussed on one specific demonological treatise. Given that the witch-hunt is not a monolithic phenomenon, further research is needed to assess the extent to which the logic of the (anti-)maternal shaped the witch persecutions. This future research might include comparative

readings of demonological texts, critical analysis of court records, or the recovery of firsthand testimonies of the accused.

In line with Stella Villarmeá's proposal for a new *logos of genos* – a new understanding of the origin of origin – it is essential to take reproductive themes seriously in (historical) discourses and practices. This forms a broader endeavour to reconsider the origin of human origin and contribute to a new feminist epistemology. The investigation of historical violence enacted on the reproductive body, I argue, is crucial to the rethinking of existing epistemological frameworks.

While this article focused on a single demonological work, it signals at a broader, often overlooked pattern: the entanglement of reproductive logic and violence. What initially began as a curious and critical investigation of the ideological foundations of Federici's claim of the centrality of reproduction in the witch persecutions, has exposed the firm embeddedness of a violent binary logic in one of the foundational works of the witch-hunt. This suggests that reproduction is not just a relevant theme, but a structuring one. In my research I was struck by the pervasiveness of (implicit) motifs surrounding reproduction. This forms fruitful ground for possible future investigations of reproductive themes and their epistemic legacy. For now, the uncovering of the figure of the witch as anti-mother in the *Malleus* provides an initial historical anchor point for potential future attempts to trace the influence of the harmful binary logic of reproduction on contemporary reproductive norms. Perhaps, in following this logic across time, we may even give birth to a new feminist epistemology of reproduction.

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Part II - PhD Proposal

Reproducing Knowledge: Tracing Epistemic Injustice from the Witch-Hunt to Contemporary Obstetric Violence

Summary of the theme and aim of the project

The Federician analysis that the reproductive body is a primary site of violence during the witch-hunt, has been pivotal for understanding its the gender-specificity. Recent scholarship, however, has brought attention to the possible connection between the violence against women during this period and patriarchal practices in contemporary reproductive contexts. Rodante van der Waal, for example, traces modern instances of the denial of maternal subjectivity through early modern infanticide accusation. This suggestion that Federici's analysis of the witch-hunt can be extended into actual medical practices, raises questions about the impact of early modern violence on the development of reproductive epistemologies. Therefore, I propose to examine how reproductive anxiety and violence during the early modern witch-hunt – embodied by the figure of the midwife-witch – translate into contemporary epistemic injustices. By taking the midwife-witch, embodied knowledge and reproductive experience seriously, this project seeks to reappropriating the reproductive process. Unique to this endeavour is that it does not treat reproductive themes merely as content within the historical sources, but that it positions reproduction itself as a mode of knowing. In adopting this reproductive lens, I aim to contribute to a feminist epistemology that centers reproductive experience as a foundational site of knowledge and agency.

Status Quaestionis

From the late 19th century onward, the witch-hunt emerged as a topic for feminist philosophical investigations. In extending roughly between 1450 and 1750 and covering a large area in Western Europe, this phenomenon forms a diffuse subject of study. However, despite regional differences in the prosecution of the witch, the number of women among the accused was on average very high, namely exceeding 75 percent.⁹¹ This overrepresentation has prompted an increase in feminist analyses of the phenomenon, including the works of Mathilda Joselyn Cage, Christina Lerner, and Silvia Federici. Although their approaches varied, the core of these analyses converged on the insight that — in the words of Lerner — 'the women who were accused were those who challenged the patriarchal view of the ideal woman,' in one way or another.⁹²

It is necessary to highlight that the gender-specificity of the witch-hunt traditionally has not played an important role in the analysis of these events by historians in

⁹¹ Brian P. Levack, *The Witch-Hunt in Early Modern Europe* (Routledge, 2015), 142.

⁹² Christina Lerner, *Enemies of God: The Witch-hunt in Scotland* (London, 1981; Oxford, 1983), 92, 102.

opposition to research on this topic within feminism.^{93,94} In some cases the aspects of gender and sexuality have even been blatantly put aside under the guise of a 'mere mass hysteria.'⁹⁵ The concern that a political analysis of events may compromise the 'objectivity' of historical research, however, often fails to consider the inherently disruptive effects of historical gendered power structures – expressed in violence towards women on a large scale – on the development of epistemological frameworks and (philosophical) practices, also within a contemporary context.

Recent literature on this subject has brought attention to the connection between the violence against women during the witch-hunt and the patriarchal practices that can be found in – amongst others – contemporary birth contexts. For example, Rodante van der Waal traces the negation of a birth person's subjectivity within contemporary obstetric practices through the events of the witch-hunt and states that 'more women were executed for infanticide in sixteenth-and seventeenth-century Europe than for any other crime, except for witchcraft, a charge that also centred on the killing of children and other violations of reproductive norms.'⁹⁶ In these claims they extend the earlier work on the intertwinement of reproduction and the witch-hunt of Federici into the realm of actual medical practices, raising questions on the epistemological development of the knowledge concerned with reproduction, specifically within the context of the witch-hunt.

The midwife formed a central figure in the investigation of the implications of the witch-hunt on historical as well as contemporary discourses of reproduction, as this figure forms a site on which embodied practices and knowledge of reproduction come together. Van der Waal's analysis can therefore be placed within a broader tradition of midwifery studies that traces current violent epistemological frameworks and practices through history. For example, Stella Villarmea argues that the contemporary denial of autonomy of birthing persons can be traced through the notion that the uterus transformed women in irrational or wild beings.⁹⁷ And, Rachelle Chadwick addresses the myth of the 'obstetric hardness' of black women that has roots in the historical dehumanisation of black people.⁹⁸ The focus of studies that specifically interrogate the intertwinement of the witch-hunt with midwifery varies. These studies, for instance, inquire into specific regulations of birth-care, like the emergence of the male 'midwife-surgeon' or analyse micro-narratives concerning the persecution of

⁹³ Alison Rowlands, 'Witchcraft and Gender in Early Modern Europe', in *The Oxford Handbook of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe and Colonial America*, ed. Brian Levack (Oxford Academic, 2013), 453.

⁹⁴ A. R. Topolski, 'What Do Women Have To Do With It? Race, Religion and the Witch Hunts', 2024, 57.

⁹⁵ Anne L. Barstow, *Witchcraze: A New History of the European Witch Hunts* (Pandora, 1994), 10.

⁹⁶ Rodante van der Waal, 'The 'Dead Baby Card' and the Early Modern Accusation of Infanticide: Situating Obstetric Violence in the Bio-and Necropolitics of Reproduction', *Feminist Theory*, 2024, 10.

⁹⁷ Stella Villarmea, 'A Philosophy of Birth: If You Want to Change the World, Change the Conversation', *Open Research Europe* 1 (10 June 2021): 8.

⁹⁸ Rachelle Chadwick, 'Breaking the Frame: Obstetric Violence and Epistemic Rupture', *Agenda* 35, no. 3 (3 July 2021): 107.

midwives.^{99,100} Research, however, also extends to more meta-theoretical discussions on the interpretation of the figure of the midwife-witch, as the embodiment of the gender-specificity of the witch-hunt or as a myth upheld by a too narrow oeuvre of feminist literature.^{101, 102}

This scattered research on the relation between the witch-hunt and midwifery calls for a more systematic investigation of the continuum of reproductive violence. The body of literature on the intertwinement of the witch-hunt and reproduction now namely consist of various smaller attempts across different academic fields. As a result of which the scholarship on this topic function on varies levels of analysis – from ‘purely’ historical investigations of primary texts to psychoanalytic meta-analyses of the symbolism of the stealing of penises. There is not a coherent investigation of the possible relation of the reproductive violence of the witch-hunt to the knowledge production concerning midwifery. This gap calls for a more substantial theorization of early modern reproductive anxieties and threats, coming together in the midwife-witch. That is why I propose to trace the possible embeddedness of contemporary forms of epistemic disciplining in birth practices through the mechanisms underlying the construction of the figure of the midwife-witch. In the investigation of the development of gender-specific conceptual frameworks of the witch-hunt, this project functions as a critical epistemological analysis at the intersection of history and feminism.

The inquiry into the role of reproduction within the epistemological frameworks of the witch-hunt and its possible relation to current epistemological frameworks, is grounded in the Federician notion that reproduction was one of the primary sites of fear and violence during this period.¹⁰³ Federici’s argument, however, necessitates a more fine-grained reading of the discursive conditions that allowed reproduction to become such a site of tension. Reproduction herein can serve as more than an explanation. It namely offers a new possibility for investigation, wherein reproduction serves as a methodological lens. This lens functions a critical starting point, which considers the gender-specificity of the witch-hunt and enables us to open up the epistemological framework that was foundational for the violence against women in that period, while addressing present forms of obstetric violence.

⁹⁹ Blanca Espina-Jerez et al., ‘Midwives in Health Sciences as a Sociocultural Phenomenon: Legislation, Training and Health (XV–XVIII Centuries)’, *Medicina* 58, no. 9 (2022): 8-9.

¹⁰⁰ Nicole Lam, ‘Healer or Hag? Female Medical Practitioners and Witch Accusations in 17th-Century New England’, *University of Western Ontario Medical Journal* 90, no. 1 (2021).

¹⁰¹ Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *Witches, Midwives, & Nurses: A History of Women Healers* (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 1973), 12-13.

¹⁰² David Harley, ‘Historians as Demonologists: The Myth of the Midwife-Witch’, *Social History of Medicine* 3, no. 1 (1990): 1-26.

¹⁰³ Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (Autonomedia, 2004), 88.

The reproductive lens as departure point contributes to the analysis of the epistemic injustices from the witch-hunt to now in a threefold way: (I) by revealing historical violence and reductive binaries that positioned reproductive bodies as both sacred and suspect; (II) by challenging dominant narratives that have misrepresented or overlooked women's lived experiences of birth and pregnancy; and (III) by harnessing its philosophical potential to reframe the conditions of epistemic exclusion and symbolic degradation around the reproductive body. Furthermore, the lens of reproduction enables us to investigate phenomena that happen on the site of the body – like the violence of the witch-hunt – and connect it with broader societal expectations for women or foundational notions within philosophy.¹⁰⁴ In this context, the figure of the midwife-witch, becomes legible as a site of epistemic collision: where embodied knowledge (acquired through touch, tradition, and experience) comes into conflict with institutionalized, male-dominated systems of control – whether juridical, theological, or medical.¹⁰⁵ The reproductive lens herein functions as a tool to analyse anxieties on the site of the body, while connecting it to broader epistemological injustices.

Research Aims and Questions

To investigate the influence of reproductive anxiety and concerns over bodily and epistemic control present and past, particularly in relation to the figure of the midwife-witch, this project will be divided in four main chapters. These chapters mirror the content of the investigation, following the phases of reproduction itself: conception, gestation, birth, and afterbirth. Each phase will correspond to a critical chapter that traces the development of reproductive logics across different discursive sites. Each chapter addresses a key question corresponding to its respective phase:

- **Conception – the understanding of historical reproductive epistemologies**

This chapter delves into the epistemic structures of demonological texts and examines how reproductive fears get anchored in the conceptual structures of the witch-hunt. It forms a necessary investigation of Federici's claim that reproduction functions as one of the main sites of fear during the witch-hunt.¹⁰⁶ In order to trace these themes surrounding reproduction, I zoom in on accusations of infertility, infanticide and improper child-rearing within demonological texts, with specific attention to the Dutch context and the work of Johannes Wier, who has written on the witch-hunt as

¹⁰⁴ Stella Villarmeia, 'A Philosophy of Birth: If You Want to Change the World, Change the Conversation', *Open Research Europe* 1 (10 June 2021): 1-15.

¹⁰⁵ Blanca Espina-Jerez et al., 'Midwives in Health Sciences as a Sociocultural Phenomenon: Legislation, Training and Health (XV–XVIII Centuries)', *Medicina* 58, no. 9 (2022): 8-9; Rosemary Ann Garratt, 'The Midwife as Healer', *Complementary Therapies in Nursing and Midwifery* 7, no. 4 (2001): 198; van der Waal, 'The 'Dead Baby Card,' 11-12.

¹⁰⁶ Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 88-89.

well as gynecology.¹⁰⁷ The role of reproductive transgressions in the construction of the figure of the witch, I argue, points at the centrality of reproduction within the epistemological framework of the witch-hunt.

- **Pregnancy – the gestation of the midwife witch**

This chapter focusses on the emergence of a specific figure within the conceptual framework of the witch-hunt, namely: the midwife-witch. Contrary to David Harley, who contests the existence of this figure by arguing that there is no historical evidence for the active hunting of this group,¹⁰⁸ I argue that midwives had to navigate their practices through witchcraft suspicions that were embedded in a conceptual framework surrounding reproduction. By analyzing the different roles of midwives in medical and theological texts of this period, I aim to demonstrate that in the figure of the midwife knowledge and practice of reproduction come together. For this analysis I will use treatises that specifically mention the evil of the midwife-witch, – amongst other – the *Malleus Maleficarum* and *An Examen of Witches*.¹⁰⁹ In other words, the midwife-witch emerges as a figure that transcends her literal profession and is a symbol for the power struggle on the site of the bodies of women within de epistemological frameworks of the witch-hunt.

- **Birth – the witch-hunt as epistemic rupture**

This chapter follows Rachele Chadwick's notion that contemporary obstetric violence is a form of epistemic rupture, as the 'vocabulary of obstetric violence to name and refuse reproductive oppression disrupts the normalizing edifices of medical, obstetric, legal, institutional, and commonsense knowledge systems.'¹¹⁰ I argue that the witch-hunt must be read as a historical instance of this type of epistemic rupture due to the extreme violence on the site of reproductive bodies.¹¹¹ By investigating medical texts, as well as judicial codes I aim to expose how the witch-hunt reinforced societal efforts to regulate reproduction. Herein the shift from embodied knowledge of midwives to a disembodied epistemology of reproduction in institutionalized medical authority can be discerned.

¹⁰⁷ Jacobus Scheltema, *Johannes Wier, Beschouwd Als Den Ijsbreker Tegen de Leer de Vooroordeelen Wegens Den Duivel, de Duivelskunsten, Tooverijen En Heksenprocessen*, (1825).

¹⁰⁸ David Harley, 'Historians as Demonologists: The Myth of the Midwife-Witch', 2.

¹⁰⁹ Henry Boguet, *An Examen of Witches: Drawn from Various Trials of Many of This Sect in the District of Saint Oyan de Joux, Commonly Known as Saint Claude, in the County of Burgundy, Including the Procedure Necessary to a Judge in Trials for Witchcraft* (J. Rodker, 1929); Christopher S. Mackay, *The Hammer of Witches: A Complete Translation of the Malleus Maleficarum* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹¹⁰ Rachele Chadwick, 'Breaking the Frame: Obstetric Violence and Epistemic Rupture', *Agenda* 35, no. 3 (3 July 2021): 110.

¹¹¹ See the chapter: Silvia Federici, 'The Great Caliban: The Struggle Against the Rebel Body', in *Caliban and the Witch* (Autonomedia, 2004).

- **Afterbirth – the remains of the ‘logos of genos’**

The final chapter adopts a broader analytical perspective and proposes a reclamation of reproductive knowledge. Inspired by Stella Villarmeas call to a new *logos of genos*, I argue that epistemic injustices concerning obstetrics can be challenged in treating pregnancy and birth not merely as a biological process but as a site of meaning-making, autonomy, and resistance.¹¹² A reclaimed *logos of genos* forms an alternative epistemology, grounded in the lived, unpredictable and transformative experiences of pregnancy and birth. In this philosophical refiguration of reproductive epistemologies, the midwife plays a central role as the site that enables embodied knowledge, interpersonal care and experience as a source of knowledge.¹¹³ Herein I aim to counter the legacy of the witch-hunt wherein reproduction forms a site of danger and disruption and reframe women’s reproductive capacities as sources of knowledge and autonomy.

Scientific and societal relevance

Taking the midwife-witch, embodied knowledge and reproductive experiences seriously contributes to reappropriating the reproductive process – contributing to a new *logos of genos*. The persistence of violence in contemporary obstetric practices, which negates reproductive autonomy and reduces birthing people to passive objects of control, highlights the enduring influence of oppressive epistemological frameworks that can be traced through the witch-hunt. The excavation of the mechanisms underlying reproductive anxieties of this period within this project, addresses not only historical instances of epistemological injustice and ontological violence, but raises questions about the ongoing impact on contemporary practices of obstetric healthcare and other societal norms surrounding reproduction. The reimagination of the value of reproduction in epistemologies enables us to challenge pervasive patriarchal conceptions of knowledge, both within specific practices – like obstetrics – and beyond.

The academic relevance is twofold. Firstly, this project is a continuation of the feminist project of excavating the gender-specific mechanisms that were foundational for the mass persecution of predominantly women in this period. Herein it forms a contribution to the understanding of this heavily gender-coded historical phenomenon. Furthermore, in tracing the development of the knowledge and practices of midwifery through historical notions of the midwife-witch, anxieties on the site of reproductive bodies, and the gender-specific violence of the witch persecutions, I aim to address the research gap in recent scholarship on the violent mechanisms in the historical knowledge production concerning midwifery. It thus also

¹¹² Villarmeas, ‘A Philosophy of Birth,’ 6.

¹¹³ Garratt, ‘The Midwife as Healer’, 198.

a contribution to critical feminist theory on contemporary topics and expands the understanding of ongoing reproductive epistemological injustices.

Methodology

To investigate the development of reproductive anxieties and the translation of these anxieties to epistemic injustice, I will adopt a discourse-analytical method grounded in Michel Foucault's concept of genealogy. In this project primary sources — demonological treatises, theological commentaries, legal codes, and medical texts — do, then, not merely function as conveyors of propositional content, but as discursive artefacts that perform symbolic work around reproduction. This endeavour is aligned with Stella Villarmeas proposal for a *logos of genos*: a feminist meta-genealogy that investigates the origin of our discourse on origin, devoid of patriarchal influence. As the examination of the science concerned with genos reveals 'serious questions about power, autonomy, and vulnerability,'¹¹⁴ this approach enables us to investigate the construction of the midwife-witch as a site on which these topics come together. In other words, a meta-genealogical approach allows for a historical excavation of the violent mechanisms underlying the development epistemic frameworks concerning reproduction.

Rather than treating reproductive themes merely as content within these historical sources, I aim to position reproduction itself as a mode of knowing. Aligned with feminist epistemologies that interrogate the exclusion of the bodies of women from the construction of knowledge, I aim to trace reproductive anxieties inscribed on reproductive bodies during the witch-hunt through the construction of the figure of the midwife-witch and uncover its relation to contemporary epistemic injustices concerning reproduction. In this way, the method establishes a *reproductive epistemology*: a mode of analysis that foregrounds reproduction both as an object of discourse and as an analytical key to understanding historical configurations of gendered knowledge and control.

The extensive timespan and scattered practices over the whole of Western Europe necessitates a clear demarcation for the research on this topic. That is why I will compare the feminist claims on reproductive violence to the development of specifically the conceptual framework of the witch-hunt in the Protestant Dutch regions. This is especially interesting due to the contemporary commonness of midwifery, which is unique to the practice of birth-care. Narrowing the examination to this region allows for the investigation of the development of epistemological frameworks over time within a unique context.

¹¹⁴ Villarmeas, 'A Philosophy of Birth,' 5-6.

Keywords

reproduction, midwife-witch, epistemological violence, witch-hunt, meta-genealogy

Timetable

Year	Action	Content	Output
1	Literature review	Demonological texts & feminist reproductive theory	Annotated bibliography; Methodology chapter outline
	Writing preparation	Chapter 1: main aims, structure, sources, planning.	Outline Chapter 1 and planning
	Research preparation	Archival investigation witch-hunt in the Netherlands	Research notes + public conversation or popular publication
	Writing	Chapter 1: "Conception – the understanding of historical reproductive epistemologies	Draft of Chapter 1
2	Teaching	Elective over Silvia Federici's Caliban and the Witch	Bachelor Course
	Writing preparation	Chapter 2: main aims, structure, sources, planning.	Outline Chapter 2 and planning
	Workshop organization	Workshop on historical obstetric violence experiences. Interdisciplinary investigation of this topic, with Trudy Dehue.	Workshop, interdisciplinary collaboration
	Writing	Chapter 2: "Pregnancy – Gestation of the Midwife-Witch"	Draft of Chapter 2
3	Teaching	Elective on Obstetric Violence; syllabus	Master course
	Writing preparation	Chapter 3: main aims, structure, sources, planning.	Outline Chapter 3 and planning
	Conference planning	Conference: aim(s), sessions/themes, methods, and organisation	Conference program; proceeding abstracts
	Writing	Chapter 3: "Birth – Witch-Hunt as Epistemic Rupture"	Draft of Chapter 3
4	Conference	Concerning 'The Im/Possibilities of Reproductive Epistemics'	Conference

Writing preparation	Chapter 4: main aims, structure, sources, planning.	Outline and planning chapter 4 and planning
Writing	Chapter 4: "Afterbirth – Logos of Genos"	Draft of Chapter 4; submitted articles
Revision	Editing the separate chapters	Full dissertation
Thesis completion	Full dissertation integration & defence preparation	Submitted thesis; successful defence

Summary for non specialists

Silvia Federici, in her comprehensive and systematic analysis of the witch-hunt, points to a central theme in the persecution that underlies this gender-specificity, namely: reproduction. She argues that witches were characterized by their sexually transgressive nature and the ability to interfere with procreation, which informed the violence against women's bodies. Besides forming fruitful grounds for both socio-economic and gender-specific analyses of the witch-hunt, the centrality of reproduction also raises new questions: in what ways did the conceptual frameworks during the witch-hunt contribute to the fear of reproductive transgression? How did this influence the knowledge about reproduction? And does the demonization of the reproductive body continue into contemporary instances of reproductive violence? In this project, I aim to address these questions and investigate how violence against the reproductive body in the period of the witch-hunt has informed the knowledge production concerning reproduction and its possible translation to contemporary epistemic injustices.

Central to this critical philosophical analysis is the figure of the midwife-witch. In historical texts, this figure was portrayed as dangerous, as she was perceived to have the power to disrupt fertility, perform abortions, and steal unbaptized babies. This figure was later taken up by feminist thinkers, for whom she was a symbol of lost 'female knowledge' and reproductive autonomy. Rather than treating this figure as purely mythical or symbolic, this project traces how the fear of reproductive interference translates to the demonization of reproductive knowledge, concretely in the practices of the midwife-witch. By disentangling the foundational notions for the construction of the midwife-witch, I aim to expose the historical epistemic injustice on the site of reproductive knowledge.

Furthermore, this investigation of reproduction as the main site of violence during the witch-hunt calls for an approach that takes reproduction not just as something to be feared or controlled, but as a source of knowledge. Reproduction therefore serves as more than an explanation in this project and becomes a methodological lens. In taking reproduction seriously, the midwife-witch becomes a site of knowledge acquired through touch, tradition, and experience, which enables the rethinking of institutionalized and possibly harmful forms of reproductive knowledge. To understand contemporary reproductive injustices and revalorize the more embodied forms of knowledge, this goes back to a pivotal moment in the history of the demonization of this knowledge.

To summarize, by means of conceptual analysis, I aim to trace contemporary reproductive injustices through historical violence on the site of the reproductive body. Taking up the

demonized figure of the midwife-witch, I show how this concrete violence impacts knowledge practices surrounding reproduction. In doing so, this project offers a contribution to a new understanding of the historical injustice of the witch-hunt, as well as to contemporary debates on rationality, subjectivity, and autonomy. By taking reproduction up as a methodological lens, it furthermore addresses the importance of taking reproductive themes seriously in historical as well as contemporary contexts. With this endeavor, I envision a new field within feminist epistemology, namely a 'reproductive epistemology.'

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Curriculum vitae

Personal information

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Education

Radboud University/Master of Arts Philosophy (research)
September 2022 - present, Nijmegen, The Netherlands
Specialisation: Metaphysics and Philosophical Anthropology [previously Metaphysics & Epistemology]
Thesis title: 'Procreatio Interrupta: Reproductive Fear in the Malleus Maleficarum and the Eruption of the Witch as Anti-Mother'
Supervisor: Dr. A.R. (Anya) Topolski

Erasmus University/Bachelor of Arts Philosophy
September 2018 – July 2022, Rotterdam, The Netherlands
Thesis title: 'Fenomenologie van de zwangerschap: hoe de ervaring van gespletenheid nieuwe inzichten verschaft over subjectiviteit.'
Supervisor: Dr. M. (Maren) Wehrle
Honours project: comparative project in Middle Eastern and Islamic philosophy

Stedelijk Gymnasium Arnhem/VWO

September 2012 – May 2018, Arnhem, The Netherlands
Nature & technology/ health & technology with philosophy
Extracurricular: course on the philosophy of science at the Radboud University, editor of the school newspaper, student representative on the participation council

Academic Experience

Member of Center for Contemporary European Philosophy (CCEP), Dutch Research School of Philosophy (OZSW), Society for Women in Philosophy Nederland en Vlaanderen (SWIP-NL) and Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (SPEP)

Radboud University/ Student Representative for the Appointment Committee of a Professorship in Metaphysics and Philosophical Anthropology
September 2023 – November 2023

Radboud University/ Reporter ('verslagschrijver') Radboud Reflects
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Erasmus University/ Secretary of the Board at Erasmus Verbindt, connecting academic networks to the city
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Erasmus University/ Student Representative for the Education Committee at the Erasmus School of Philosophy
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Erasmus University/ Editor for Erasmus Student Journal of Philosophy
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Erasmus University/ Student Representative for the Faculty Council at the Erasmus School of Philosophy
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Conferences and publications:

Accepted contribution/ the 63rd meeting of the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (SPEP)

October 17th-18th and 24th-25th, Online

Article: 'Birth as being-towards-the-future: Diotima's speech as an erotic reading of Beauvoir's conception of the future project'

Publication/ a special issue on the History of the Philosophy of Pregnancy

Forthcoming, Dayton University Ohio, United States

Article: 'A Critique of Nietzschean Reason: a Spivakian Analysis of the Foreclosure of the Pregnant Subject within *The Gay Science*'

Presented / Conference on 'The History of the Philosophy of Pregnancy'

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Article: 'A Critique of Nietzschean Reason: a Spivakian Analysis of the Foreclosure of the Pregnant Subject within *The Gay Science*'

Attended/ Conference 'Women and Their Body'

March 15th to 17th 2023, Paderborn University, Germany

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Attended/ Conference 'De lijfelijke van de Geest'

October 21st and 22nd 2021, Tilburg University, The Netherlands

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Other relevant experiences

Partij voor de Dieren/ Committee Member for the Municipality of Arnhem

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Partij voor de Dieren/ Policy advisor to the Nijmegen City Council party group
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Independent/ index creation of the book ‘Philosophy of Mannerism: from Aesthetics to Modal Metaphysics’ by dr. S (Sjoerd) van Tuinen
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