
The Left-Hand Path: On the Dialectics of Witchery in *The Witch* and *Hagazussa: A Heathen's Curse*

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“I Conjure Thee to Speak to Me”: Introduction

As the recent success of television shows including *American Horror Story* (2011-present) and *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016) and the critical lauding of films ranging from *A Dark Song* (2016) and *The Love Witch* (2016) to *Hereditary* (2018) demonstrates, contemporary audiences still express a concerted interest in the ideologically, pragmatically, and theoretically complex figure of the witch - be it filtered through the lens of specifically occult predilections, revivalist aesthetic and narratological interests, or surreptitious social commentary presented as camp pastiche.^[1] Robert Eggers and Lukas Feigelfields' respective takes on Occidental folklore concerning witches and witchcraft, *The Witch* (2015) and *Hagazussa: A Heathen's Curse* (2017), engage with historical, cultural, and cinematic frames through which the figure of the witch has been presented, persecuted, and lauded. When placed in critical proximity with one another, the protagonists in each film - *The Witch's* Thomasin (Anya Taylor-Joy) and *Hagazussa's* Albrun (Aleksandra Cwen) - represent a gamut of witch-related issues and debates pertaining to the transition from girlhood to adulthood, the non-magical to magical subject positions of a witch. Such issues include the relationship between burgeoning and mature female sexuality. Here, the psycho-sexual trauma, abuse - within the context of its 15th-, 16th- and 17th-century phallogocentric suppression through Judeo-Christian morality - isolation, fear, and madness of a witch without a coven are also central. Relatedly, the magical necessity of personal sacrifice - both psychological and physical - in the process of becoming a witch and accruing magical power necessarily frames the issues and debates concerning the emancipatory and/or malign use of said power. Lastly, there is the relationship between the magical life (the Left-Hand Path - a term familiar in the modern occult, circumscribing various typically non-Abrahamic practices and beliefs), death, and *becoming*. By the term *becoming*, I refer to the psychological, emotional, and physical development of an adolescent into an adult and, also, into the figure of a witch.

This paper uses Friedrich Nietzsche's discussion of the *Apollonian* and the *Dionysian* to perform a dialogic close reading between Eggers' *The*

Witch and Feigelfeld's *Hagazussa*, critiquing the manner in which moral and magical forces are shown to affect the minds, hearts, and bodies of witches in each text. While also gesturing to occult literature, this primarily Nietzschean reading seeks to offer a critical reassessment of the figure of the witch as a paradoxical one - of both transformation and overcoming, as well as trauma and tragedy. Implicit in this bifurcated view of the figure of the witch is also a concern with how magic, sexuality, girlhood, and womanhood both aid and impede upon the psycho-emotional becoming and power of a witch as portrayed in contemporary horror-folk cinema.

This analysis opens with a brief excursus on the critical reception and persistent comparison of the two films and the implications of each director's interpretation and presentation of the figure of the witch. After a brief contextual presentation of the concepts of the Apollonian and the Dionysian, a Nietzschean reading of Thomasin's emancipation and transition into both adulthood and witchery is developed. It then analyses the relations between *excessive* Dionysian forces, overcoming, and sexuality in *The Witch* and how these relate to the image Eggers paints of the figure of the witch - through the symbol of the goat - as an emancipatory one. I then turn to Feigelfeld's depiction of the figure of the witch as one of *excrecent* illness and tragedy, and conclude my analysis with close readings of illness, trauma, sexuality, and toxicity in the film, again with a particular focus on the auteur's use of the symbol of the goat. Ultimately, the overarching goal of this paper is to explore how each text treats the underlying dichotomy of the witch in contemporary folk-horror cinema, as a figure of both excess *and* excrement.

“You Cannot Serve God and Mammon Both”: *The Witch* and *Hagazussa* as Two Sides of the Figure of the Witch

There are some overarching ideas permeating both of these films, the shared presence of which institutes a dialogue between their respective interpretations and presentations of contemporary Western cinema's figure of the witch. While I lay them out in full for the purpose of contextual orientation without much initial discussion, I will return to all the points raised in the following quotations and extracts in my subsequent analysis. Since the films' releases, there have been numerous and expected comparisons between Eggers and Feigelfelds' respective explorations of witches. Brad Miska describes *Hagazussa* as “Germany's answer to *The Witch* that has stunning atmosphere mixed with brooding terror from start to finish.”^[2] Marko Stojiljković echoes this sentiment, stating that:

A comparison with *The Witch* might seem superficial, but the two films share a deliberately slow pace, eerie atmosphere and undertones of

female empowerment created via the humanisation of the subjects. But while Eggers' film is all about the paradigm of time and place, which also plays a certain role in *Hagazussa* (the villagers firmly believe that witches exist and that Jews are the plague-bringers), the German-Austrian film focuses on the psychological side of things, dealing with delusions, sexual and other tensions and mental illness when faced with solitude.[\[3\]](#)

Similarly, Andy Crump notes the intermodulation between the (in)credulous and the hallucinogenic at the heart of the figure of the witch in *Hagazussa*, by asking:

Are Albrun's visions real, or figments of her imagination? Is witchery truly afoot, or is she just losing her marbles at the business end of ignorant mob persecution? The last of these is the only question with an emphatic 'yes' answer, though the idea that the real monster here is Woman is pedantic bordering on boorish. Movies like this function because the monster exists, not simply because people historically treat outsiders like stray dogs at best, vermin at worst.[\[4\]](#)

In an interview with Jul Marie, Feigelfeld comments on the common associative link between his and Eggers' respective films. When asked about these inevitable comparisons between the two texts, he responded somewhat critically by stating:

I am not sure that *The Witch* and *Hagazussa* aim in the same direction, when it comes to the depiction of a so-called witch. I also must add, that I had not seen Robert Eggers's film until after *Hagazussa* was finished. In *Hagazussa*, it was important that the balance between reality and magic was very blurred and that in the end it is the story of a woman struggling with a mental disorder. Eggers's film did the opposite, in portraying the 'emancipated woman' again as a mystical and magical creature, which is a very male point of view. So-called witches in those times were, of course, just human; women who did not fit into the moral codex of those times. It was the church that twisted the perception and found ways of hunting down and mass murdering them as 'enemies.' Nowadays, with a growing number of young women finding their empowerment within the witch metaphor, this can and should be used to emancipate yourself from these old values, ultimately from the prevailing patriarchy in the world.[\[5\]](#)

When asked about the tensions inherent in the idea of a male director behind a film about a woman's trauma, Feigelfeld states:

As I started to work on the subject of witches, it became quickly clear that it is the story of women, throughout the ages, being tormented by men, religion, and society. The prosecution of people, especially women,

who think or believe differently, is still even a very important topic in today's society. I worked a lot on finding a delicate understanding for this kind of suffering, working very closely with the main actress (Aleksandra Cwen) on creating a strong picture of what kind of woman Albrun was, as well as with the cinematographer (Mariel Baqueiro). Of course the fact that I am a male director is something that can never be forgotten in this process. It was a big aim for me to try to break away from the classic male (outlook) on the witch topic, like the 'evil woman,' but instead, to depict a woman, whom is struggling with her own place in society, but ultimately finding it with herself and nature.[\[6\]](#)

Marie notes not only the importance of both films' respective takes within broader, and indeed often still dichotomous, discourses concerning the redemption of the historically (unjustly) persecuted figure of the witch, but the power of this figure in contemporary issues and debates surrounding gender and sexuality. She notes that:

More often than ever before, modern women are taking control of the witch metaphor by removing its demonized implications and turning it into a symbol of empowerment - it just appears that both Feigelfeld and Eggers saw this phenomenon coming. Like *The Witch's* Thomasin, Albrun also takes back her power that was stripped from her as she turns to the dark arts, however, the horrific ways in which she chooses to do so leave more of a bleaker ending than Eggers's film, which will not only haunt you, but will also emote sadness and empathy, as it comes full circle from the film's beginning.[\[7\]](#)

While subtly and importantly different in their respective manifestations, Albrun and Thomasin are faced with similar repressions and constraints, in terms of the socio-political and cultural force exerted against their respective agencies. For Thomasin, the overbearing father - adherent to and promulgator of a patriarchal, phallogocentric Judeo-Christian morality - is the primary signifier and source of her repressive and subjugative trauma. For Albrun, it is the ill and potentially magical mother whose beliefs, practices, and misfortunes conspire to conform to an image of the *figure* of the witch - an image that precipitates the manufacture and allocation of a *label* and, with it, pervasive deprivations in the form of socio-cultural ostracisation and abjection.

Eggers' exploration of the figure of the witch is predicated on dichotomies where latent forces of chaos and overcoming threaten those of sober reserve and repressive piety with their *excess*. Similarly, Feigelfelds' exploration of the same figure is primarily concerned with the tension between magic and madness, between the Left-Hand Path - a path to the freedom of darkness or the *excrescences* of madness - and the fear of darkness and death. Critics have noted this central tension

between magic and madness, witchery-as-curse contra witchery-as-power. Dennis Harvey states: “drawing upon her presumably inherited ‘witching’ powers at last, Albrun is avenged, and then some. But as so often seems to be the case in such tales, deploying the ‘dark arts’ requires payment in return – as exacting a terrible toll from Albrun and her child.”^[8] This constant tension between the sane and the insane, the character’s traumatically addled worldview and the atmospheric tautness in which it occurs, is the product of a joint achievement: the expansive yet intimate eye of cinematographer Mariel Baqueiro and Greek dark ambient duo MMMD’s immersive score. It binds together the mutually differentiating forces in the film and is precisely the source of the *creativity* behind its interpretation of the figure of the witch.

In view of the above critical attitudes, it is not unreasonable to propose that the lives of Albrun and Thomasin can be read simultaneously as reflections and extensions of one another in terms of age and developmental trajectories. Thomasin’s narrative focusses on the important psycho-emotional, physical, and, in the case of a young witch, magical period marked by various symbols of transition. These include the following: emancipation from Christian ideology and embracing the Left-Hand Path – that is, relinquishing her identity as a parishioner and embracing her new subject position as a witch; a change of agency from passive receptacle of repressive phallogocentric patriarchal Judeo-Christian ethics to *wilfully* making a deal with the Devil in pursuit of her own pleasure, knowledge and power; the transition from church to coven; the transition from daughter to orphan; the transition from child to adolescent/young woman marked by her first menses; the transition from demurity and indirect sexuality to the full embracing of her burgeoning sexuality marked by not only her joining the witches at their mass and their orgasmic ascensions into the night at the conclusion of the film, but also disrobing, nudity, blood, fire and maenadic singing – all as inextricable elements of the Dionysian transition to the “delicious life” of the Left-Hand Path; and the transition from innocence to knowledge through the death of her entire family. In this sense, Thomasin’s transition from fey child to wilful witch is pithier and more immediate than Albrun’s transition, which is marked by very traumatic and incisive psycho-emotional transitions along a different trajectory but one ultimately book-ended by the similar antipodes of death and sexuality.

For Albrun, the coming-into-knowledge of her own power(lessness) and the power(lessness) of witchcraft are shown to have subtle manifestations that are all inescapably propelled and engendered by her experiencing abject trauma – from being sexually abused by her mother, to being indirectly raped by her assumed friend, protector, and fellow villager Swinda (Tanja Petrovsky), to being persecuted by the village youth as being both a witch and the daughter of one. In each instance, both films’

respective discussions of the *becoming* of a young witch make decidedly, albeit narratively different, pronouncements about this process. Subtending these differences is a shared understanding that witch-becoming is marked by specifically sexual or libidinal forces, traumatic forces expressed as violence and death, and that the experiential commingling of these forces is an inescapable price said individuals must necessarily pay as a type of ordeal or rite of initiation into broader occult mysteries, real or imagined. However, one difference between the two films is paramount and should be stressed here. Thomasin's journey toward the Left-Hand-Path, for all its trauma and death and paranoia and loss, is presented to the viewer as an emancipatory process through which she ultimately gains a type of radical independence. The opposite is true of Albrun's journey, which ends in isolation, trauma, persecution and ultimately death.

Ye Shall Not Suffer a Witch to Bloom: Nietzsche, Dionysus, and The Left-Hand Path

In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Nietzsche suggests that ancient Greek tragedy, and life by extension, was the direct result of a conflict or struggle between two fundamental forces or drives he refers to as the Apollonian and the Dionysian. Apollo "embodies the drive toward distinction, discreteness and individuality, toward the drawing and respecting of boundaries and limits; he teaches an ethic of moderation and self-control."^[9] Apollo, therefore, is symbolic of the "healing powers...of all the arts through which life is made possible and worth living."^[10] The redemptive power of the Apollonian cannot be attained without "freedom from wilder impulses" whereby Apollo is a symbol of "that wise calm of the image-making god."^[11] Opposing the Apollonian force is the Dionysian force. "The Dionysiac", Nietzsche states, "is the drive towards the transgression of limits, the dissolution of boundaries, the destruction of individuality, and excess."^[12] The Dionysiac emerges through the disruption of "all the rigid, hostile barriers, which necessity, caprice, or 'impudent fashion' have established between human beings, break asunder", resulting in a "blissful ecstasy which arises from the innermost ground of man...of nature itself."^[13] According to Nietzsche, the most intense and purest expression of this force in art can be found in the "quasi-orgiastic forms of music, especially of choral singing and dancing" in ancient Greece, similar, in its Maenadic, sparagmotic quality, to Thomasin's initiation into the Left-Hand Path at the end of *The Witch*.^[14]

What is important to note about the tension between the Apollonian and Dionysian forces is the *creativity* said tension produces. For Nietzsche, "the continuous evolution of art is bound up with the duality of the Apolline and the Dionysiac in much the same way as reproduction

depends on there being two sexes which co-exist in a state of perpetual conflict interrupted only occasionally by periods of reconciliation”.[\[15\]](#) Despite Nietzsche’s insistence on balance between the two fundamental forces, the Dionysian force is privileged throughout *The Birth of Tragedy*. This is because it is only through Dionysian music that the individual is shaken to his or her “very foundations”. Through the power of the:

Dionysiac dithyramb [,] man is stimulated to the highest intensification of his symbolic powers; something that he has never felt before urgently demands to be expressed: the destruction of the veil of maya, one-ness as the genius of humankind, indeed of nature itself. The essence of nature is bent on expressing itself; a new world of symbols is required, firstly the symbolism of the entire body, not just of the mouth, the face, the word, but the full gesture of dance with its rhythmical movement of every limb. Then there is a sudden, tempestuous growth in music’s other symbolic powers, in rhythm, dynamics, and harmony. To comprehend this complete unchaining of all symbolic powers, a man must already have reached that height of self-abandonment which seeks symbolic expression in those powers.[\[16\]](#)

When transposed to the context of Eggers’ film, Thomasin’s literal and figurative ascension through dark illumination is dependent on Black Phillip (Charlie, the goat), the melanistic buck goat that acts as the terrestrial embodiment of the Devil husbanded by Thomasin’s family, guiding her to the borne between the over-Apolline rigidity of her father and the image of his faith which he desperately clings on to in the face of the very real Dionysiacal forces around him, and the wild dithyrambic ecstasies of the coven. Crossing over this ontological borne, overleaping this existential splitting, from the chastity of liturgical veils into the bright dark of embodied passions, chants, dancing, and indeed flying, is the prerequisite for Thomasin not only to become a witch, but also to become herself. In this sense, despite the horrific deaths of her family, Thomasin, through Black Phillip’s guidance, finds “metaphysical comfort embodied in [her] tragedy and which is [later] incarnated in the satyric chorus [of] pure pleasure [performed by the coven] - pleasure in its indestructible power that, despite the changing character of phenomena, affirms life”.[\[17\]](#) It is through this ecstatic initiation that Thomasin reconciles her loss, to affirm it, to “[look] boldly into the terrible destructive forces of history and nature”, “[admit...] the universal suffering, accepts and assumes it, but transfigures it in the affirmation, in the Yes to life”.[\[18\]](#) It is this paradoxical view of tragedy, combined with witchcraft, that symbolically allows Black Philip to simultaneously console and seduce Thomasin to not only continue to live, but to live deliciously; that is, not only to advance, but advance down the Left-Hand Path.



Thomasin's initiation into the coven and the ways of The Left-Hand Path. From *The Witch* (Robert Eggers, 2015)

This Nietzschean Apollo/Dionysus tension manifests throughout the film in terms of fundamental divisions. While it may initially appear as if this splitting is inaugurated by the family's banishment as a result of William's (Ralph Ineson) refusal to "be judged by false contented Christians under an un-separated church, an English king's church", Thomasin's family is split long before any obvious trouble with Black Phillip emerges in the narrative.^[19] As Puritan Separatist Pilgrims, William and his family are split in several ways: 1) as Calvinists from the Holy Mother Church (Roman Catholic Church) and the English state church, 2) from England, its history, sociocultural, political and economic praxes, traditions, upheavals, and prosperities, 3) from the New England plantation, further separating them from all cultural, economic, and religious markers of organised Christendom and Englishness more broadly. This religious framework - both within the auspices of the church and without it, as adhered to by William and his family - is as unrelenting and ostensibly as rigid as the land to which they are banished to. It can be summed up in Thomasin's penitential prayer at the beginning of the film:

O most merciful father: I here confess I have lived in sin. I have been idle of my work, disobedient of mine parents, neglectful of my prayer. I have, in secret, played upon thy Sabbath and broken every one of thy commandments in thought...followed the desires of my own will, and not

the holy Spirit. I know I deserve all shame and misery in this life, and everlasting hell-fire. But I beg thee, for the sake of thy Son. Forgive me. Show me mercy. Show me thy light.[20]

William and his family are also split from the land of their banishment itself. On top of their fledgling farm, incomplete barn, and ramshackle cottage, the signs of failed harvest, rotted and emaciated cornstalks, and the odd scarcity of game indicate at the land itself has rejected them, refused them even its most basic resources. The most interesting and indeed Nietzschean divisions pertain to Thomasin, her coming-of-age, coming-into-knowledge, both numinous and imminent, concerning the world beyond the stricture and control of Apollonian beatific church doctrine. While the goal of the former is to maintain order, provide moral rearmament, and make life worth living, the latter, with its wild, explosive, and simultaneously creative and destructive potential, always-already threatens to expose the truth of onto-existential being: life is a confluence of temporary assemblages, bricolage, and interplays between *ekstatic* chaos and sobering order that simultaneously ensure and prevent the human experience of both internal and external bifurcation, in themselves and in the world at large.

After Caleb (Harvey Scrimshaw), Thomasin's younger brother, dies, Thomasin's split from the rest of the family is all but complete. William accuses Thomasin of witching Caleb as all evidence points to her: she found him "naked as sin, pale as death and witched", going as far as to suggest that at this point in the narrative, Thomasin has already bargained her soul away, and even urges her to confess that she is a witch.[21] This leads to an interesting effect of truth, one that leads to further sundering between father and daughter. Thomasin enumerates all the truths at the core of the family's misfortunes, revealing that said misfortunes are predicated on hypocrisy, not witchcraft:

You and Mother are planned to rid the farm of me. Aye. I heard you speak of it. Is that truth? You took of Mother's cup and let her rail at me. Is that truth? You took Caleb to The Wood and let me take the blame of that too. You confessed not till it was too late. Is that truth? You let Mother be as thy master! You cannot bring the crops to yield! You cannot hunt! Is that truth enough? Thou canst do nothing save cut wood![22]

This leads to William completely changing his views of his child, calling her a "bitch" and a "creature", and, eventually, her imprisonment in the goat enclosure along with the twins, Jonas (Lucas Dawson) and Mercy (Ellie Grainger), who also stand against her and accuse of her of witchcraft. Thomasin has no recourse but to accuse them in turn, stating:

The Adversary oft comes in the shape of a he-goat. And whispers. Aye,

whispers. He is Lucifer, you know it. The twins know it. Twas they and that goat what bewitched this whole farm. Was't a wolf stole Sam? I never saw no wolf. Mercy told me herself by the stream 'I be the witch of the wood!' Jonas and Mercy... they made covenant with The Devil in the shape of Black Phillip.[\[23\]](#)

In this sense, Puritanical Christianity is an Apollonian force opposed by the libidinous Dionysian force whose agent is Black Phillip, Thomasin's psychopomp and seducer to the excesses, luxuries, pleasures, violence, loss, and triumphs of life. Black Phillip, who, like a satyr in the retinue of the twice-born god, represents the triumph of the Dionysian over the ossifying rigidity and self-denial and self-deception of the Apollonian, can be described as a type of Gospel of Becoming or the Ethic of Living Deliciously.

Black Narcissus: The Goat as Chief Dionysian Symbol of Overcoming in Relation to Burgeoning Sexuality in *The Witch*

In the context of Eggers' film, sexuality - albeit latent and burgeoning - plays a key role in Thomasin's development both as a woman and a witch. It also factors into Thomasin's relationship with her brother Caleb, the latter of whom is shown to be sexually curious about his older sister, whose sexual maturation he observes and cannot escape; Thomasin is the only example of young womanhood available to him in his family's desolate and isolated existence. Here, these incestuous "unholy" relations evoke the scene involving the luring or seduction of Caleb by the young witch in a particularly noteworthy, dreamlike, and terrifying sequence in the woods, as well as the gyrations and *ekstasis* of the witch coven at Sabbath at the end of the film, which are equally laden with sexual undertones.

The connection between witches and sexuality reflects Thomasin's experience of a splitting that no other member of the family experiences, an onto-existential one involving the psycho-emotional and physical split between youth and young womanhood inaugurated by puberty. This process results in Thomasin's splitting from Caleb, which is predicated on her sexual development as Katherine (Kate Dickie) reveals to her husband that their daughter "hath begat the sign of her womanhood."[\[24\]](#) Along with Thomasin's first menstruation and the occult connections between the moon, menstrual blood, and magical potency, these themes manifest in the film's symbolism in the form of one of the family's white does lactating blood from its udders, along with Thomasin and the twins witnessing a witch suckling said blood when boarded up in the goat enclosure as a desperate punishment meted out by their increasingly unstable father. Her development into a woman causes Caleb to notice her in a sexual manner. He stares at her bare legs as she washes her

father's clothes on the banks of a small stream. She catches him watching her work, staring at the bare part of her chest at the top of her bodice. Here, in developing, she is splitting, moving away from a relationship predicated on platonic sibling interactions and love to one of a potentially sexual nature. At the end of the film, Katherine's confrontation with Thomasin reintroduces the theme of incestuous relations when the former states "you bewitched thy brother, proud slut! [...] Did you not think I saw thy sluttish looks to him, bewitching his eye as any whore? And thy father next!"[\[25\]](#) Here, sexuality is seen as an uncontrollable, potent, and dangerous force that cannot be sublimated by puritanical Christian doctrine or even so-called natural taboos. In this regard, Thomasin's development into a beautiful young woman, and the latently Dionysian energy that is an inextricable part thereof, threaten not only to the teachings of virtue, chastity, and demureness lauded in ecclesiastical views on female deportment, but also the *image* of the Apollonian integrity of the God-fearing family itself.

However, Eggers seems to have a more celebratory or at least sympathetic view regarding this force and its development. The liberating power of what remains an undefined psycho-sexual force is beautifully rendered in the film's final scene, in which Thomasin experiences a kind of *jouissance* that not only causes her to laugh and cry but also fly, as she both enters into it and it into her as a symbolic marker of her dark ascent, or indeed descent up/down the Left-Hand Path. This dichotomy belies the truth of Thomasin's condition as well, not only as an intelligent, spirited, and beautiful pubescent young woman who is enamoured of beauty, jollity, and gaiety, but as a daughter, scapegoat, failure, and problem-child within the untrue framework of confusion and suspicious paranoia of both her microcosmic family and her macrocosmic family in Christ/Christendom. In this sense, Black Phillip is to Thomasin what Virgil is to Dante: a guide, catalyst of emancipatory self-discovery and change, and symbol of overcoming and independence. He offers Thomasin a choice and a (sinister, that is left-hand) path to that truth, one he, in his mostly occluded anthropic "Devil form", describes as one of "butter" and "pretty dresses" and world-seeing, all of which are symbols for sensual experience, pleasure, growth, and knowledge.[\[26\]](#)

The only way Thomasin can be at peace and have any sense of harmony in herself as an individual is to acknowledge and accept her desires once so prohibited and gainsaid by the punitive, ascetic, anti-life mandates of both her earthly and heavenly fathers' houses. In order to attain the sort of truth associated with Nietzsche's figuration of Dionysus, Thomasin has to acknowledge and accept all opposites within herself and all alterity kept forbidden from her. She has to invert, disrupt, and/or destroy certain ideas and constraints in order to overleap them as Black Phillip would overleap a fence. She has to rebuke her merciless fathers and reclaim all

the myriad manifestations of life considered sin and, in her body and mind, reify, embody, and live them. She must relinquish work and tasks that turn her spirit idle in an ossified frame that delimits the possibilities of being, and neglect all in her young life that is not full of life, fertility, fecundity, growth, power, and pleasure. She must split from her parents' house and its laws and lies. In this sense, like the productive tension predicated on the paradoxical split integration of Apollonian and Dionysian forces, to split, as well as to (re)integrate forbidden forces, is, for Thomasin, also to grow. She must declare openly all the playfulness the Lord's Sabbath forced into secrecy, one that the Witches' Sabbath can draw out in the breaking of all covenants with Christ based on commandments and, instead make covenant with Older, or at the very least Other, Forces. She must embrace the paradox of the desire of her own will and sign away her soul to Black Phillip, paradoxically, for the purpose of following her own spirit openly, fully, and truly. In the last instance, *this* is what Black Phillip offers her: shameless imminent Joy in everlasting night with no need for divine substantiation of feeling, nor for penitence, mercy, or forgiveness, in its experience. Black Phillip offers to show her a darkness in which to be true, whole, and free. Latent in all her family's misfortune, from Thomasin's perspective, is the notion that all of the aforementioned can only be attained if she sheds all pretence and un- or half-truth of Apollonian superficiality. While the witches (in terms of killing her brothers, absconding with the youngest twins, and eviscerating the ewes to frame her as a witch) and Black Phillip's help in this (killing her father, William), she also has to get her hands dirty so to speak by killing her mother (albeit in self-defence) in order for her to be under no direct influence save her own nature, her will, and her desires. What Black Phillip offers her is a choice: to live a life of sensual pleasure and knowledge at the cost of not only the lives of her entire family, but ultimately, her own soul. Ultimately, this is what Eggers reveals Black Phillip's purpose to be, but also what it means to be a witch, and the harrowing and liberating psycho-emotional costs thereof.

Mad Magic: The Witch as Figure of Physical and Psycho-Sexual Illness in *Hagazussa*

While Thomasin is shown to tread a path that leads her to her eventual emancipation and what I have called her dark ascension, Albrun's turn down the Left-Hand Path leads her to death and madness. In short, *Hagazussa* offers a sobering take against the ecstatic image of the witch as a figure of emancipation, agency, knowledge, power, and sexual liberation. Feigelfeld shows that not all Left-Hand Paths lead to the same destination in as much as not every witch who treads them is the same. Feigelfeld's exploration of the figure of the witch interpolates some of the figure's associative links with folk-horror as a way into a more incisive and timely deconstruction of the *label* witch being deployed violently, as a

judicial, medical, and spiritual diagnostic against women of earlier centuries. *Hagazussa*, therefore, is less concerned with whether or not Albrun is a witch or not in a factual sense, but more so with the psycho-emotional consequences of both she and those around her believing that she is. In an interview, he confirms this logic, stating:

I had been thinking about this topic for a very long time. Part of my family comes from this particular place in the Austrian Alps, around Salzburg, where there are still quite alive traditions that are mostly rooted in Pagan folklore. The classic witch character, that we know from fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm for example, is something that formed around this area [...] I did a lot of research on this field and the story grew into something much bigger in the writing process, exceeding the classic horror witch character and dealing more with the perception of “different” women in those times and their struggle with society and sanity.[\[27\]](#)

The associative link between isolation and madness is heralded by the film’s narrative premise, and specifically its setting. The young Albrun is shown to live with her mother Martha (Claudia Martini) in a small log cabin, alone on the side of a scenic albeit isolated mountain. They are ostracised by the rest of the villagers of the valley below, being perceived as abject on account of being suspected witches. The persecution they undergo and endure is shown to be extremely traumatic. In a scene in the opening of the film, a few men of the village-folk are shown to carry torches while wearing horned fur masks as they threaten to burn down Martha’s cabin on account that she, and Albrun by association, are accused of being witches. This persecution and seclusion combines with the presence of illness and the burden of responsibility as forces acting against Albrun’s agency and well-being. This sense of oppressive psycho-emotional weight is further compounded by Albrun’s transition from childhood to adulthood. In one scene, the child Albrun is shown to change her bedding during which she discovers a spot of blood signalling her first menses. Ashamed and frightened, she hides the sheets beneath the floorboards of the cabin. This fearful transition is compounded by illness in another scene where the pubescent Albrun is shown to witness her mother collapse while out collecting firewood. Being shown to be terribly ill, Albrun nurses her, trying as she is able to reduce her rather excessive symptoms, which include vomiting, fever, and delirium. In this way, Albrun, under the imperative of dire and tragic circumstances, is shown to forcibly undergo a transition from the passivity of a child to the activity of a caregiver. She has to empty her mother’s sick bucket, tend to the house, prepare meals and medicines for her, all the while tending to their livestock (goats) as well as herself. Unlike Thomasin, Albrun has no other family, regardless of how close or estranged, no salve, no aid or help, and no succour to help ease this transition.

When a cadre of local nuns and priests visit Albrun's sick mother, they perform a thorough physical inspection during which they discover that she is marked by large boils and pustules under her left armpit. While their deliberations are, on account of the film's subtly effective sound design, kept undisclosed to the viewer, the suggestion is that they are deliberating as to whether her symptoms are signs of plague or witchery.[\[28\]](#) This scene does the work of clearly associating the figure of the witch with illness, thereby joining spiritual illness or abjection with physical (and later mental) decay. As Father Gore notes, the plague's appearance in *Hagazussa* is another element involving religious superstition. Many saw the Black Death as a punishment from God, meaning anybody who took ill must have strayed from God. Martha becomes sick with the plague and that acts as confirmation for the villagers she was, indeed, a practitioner of witchcraft. The illness drives her completely mad, so much so she appears witch-like to her own daughter, who, at a young age, was susceptible to superstition, and this goes on to convince Albrun she's also a witch. In a wider sense, superstitions involving the plague throughout Austria took on misogynistic forms via the folklore of the 'Pest Jungfrau' a.k.a Pest Maiden. People believed a female spirit flew across Germany, spreading the Black Death, taking the form of a deathly pale maiden when seeking its next victim— this made many people refuse to help young women who came knocking at their doors, leaving them to die outside for fear it was the Pest Maiden coming to infect them.[\[29\]](#)

In a later scene, Albrun experiences perhaps the formative transitional trauma in her development not only as a woman but as a witch. As Albrun sleeps, her mother, with a completely changed voice, one strong and healthy, calls out to her. Her mother's hair is changed from wispy, wiry grey and dry, to lush, straight, and jet black. Pale and spectral, she invites her daughter into her bed. While mother and daughter lay close together, Martha begins rutting herself against Albrun's head, hair, and face. Martha then reaches between Albrun's legs, and subsequently withdraws her hand, which is shown with the suggestive glistening darkness of the girl's menstrual blood. Martha brings her fingers to her nose and snorts and sniffs them maniacally, wiping her hand across Albrun's face while continuously and menacingly sniffing her. Albrun breaks free her mother's hold and flees while her mother rubs her hand across her open mouth in a state of *ekstatic* trance. While Albrun takes shelter, cowering in the goat pen, she can hear her mother begin howling and screaming in the cabin. Here, the differences/similarities of the role played by menses, particularly the reaction of each character's mother to it in *The Witch* and *Hagazussa* is ostensibly similar, but importantly different. In Thomasin's case, the onset of menses is met with both anger and later an incestuous Elektran jealousy on the part of her mother who sees her now sexually mature daughter as both rival and temptation for

her husband, Thomasin's father's, affections. While this is traumatic, particularly in engendering feelings of shame for Thomasin, her menses is not accompanied by molestation and abuse. Ostensibly, the same is true for Albrun. When inspecting her sheets alone, Albrun appears ashamed and frightened. However, once her mother senses, indeed 'smells' its arrival, she treats not only the menstrual blood itself but the body from which it is discharged, her own daughter's, as both appetitive and erotic. Ultimately, the entire experience of her molestation, which is in and of itself, in an occult context, can be read as a test, is, however read, portrayed as entirely traumatic. In this way, there are no Apollonian countermeasures to temper the increase of the malignant admixture of illness, paranoia, trauma, and burgeoning sexuality which, if taken as Dionysian in contrast, are certainly the darkest and/or excrescent manifestation of the excessive overcoming energy thereof. However, this energy is not enough to disrupt the chain of trauma produced and passed on by Martha to her daughter.

Milk and Horn: Sexuality and Trauma in *Hagazussa*

The bestial nature of Albrun's paraphilic sexuality as symbolised by the figure of the goat. From *Hagazussa: A Heathen's Curse* (Lukas Feigelfeld, 2017)

The adult Albrun's zoophilic inclinations manifest most starkly in a scene in which she milks one of her does, placing her face against its flank as she does. In an overtly sexual display, she sensually strokes its udders while spurting its milk over her hands and fingers. She begins masturbating while sensually taking her free milk-wet hand, rubbing her nose and lips, and placing it into her mouth. Both films approach the symbolic value of goats in relation to witches. Goats in *The Witch* are associated with secret knowledge and sinister mischief, but ultimately rebelliousness and violent aggression. In *Hagazussa*, this symbolism is reversed, and the goat, which is also feminized, is made symbolic of sensuality and sexuality. While goats are colloquially associated with licentiousness, Albrun's relation to her goats is marked by sensual richness, of milk and fur, and of the physical pleasures derived from these sensations, thus affirming the sensuality of the goat as a totem of onanistic, hermitic sexuality in the film. Moreover, Albrun treats the secretions of the goat - its milk being, in terms of sensual richness, equivalent to the pubescent Albrun's menstrual blood - in exactly the same way as her mother treated her blood. It is enjoyed primarily for its olfactory qualities, both blood and milk being brought to the nose and the mouth, not fully ingested but still sensually taken in. This scene is, in terms of pure, taboo-overcoming excess, perhaps the most Dionysian

moment in the life of Albrun shown. However, Albrun's sexuality manifests in ways that can be read as excrescent, as a pathological, psycho-emotional salve against oppressive supernatural forces that seemingly manifests all around her as a type of haunting. For example in one scene, Albrun is called into the forest by the sound of her mother's voice calling her. After investigating, she returns to her cabin, but, instead of sleeping indoors in her room, she sleeps in the goat pen where she lays on her stomach and masturbates as a means of escaping/assuaging her torment.

While Eggers presents Thomasin's burgeoning sexuality as inextricable from her burgeoning agency, independence and womanhood, Feigelfeld presents Albrun's sexuality as always-already traumatic. In *The Witch*, the libidinal forces of Dionysian excess that typically orbit the figure of the witch, magic, and sexuality in contemporary folk-horror cinema, while subtle, are indeed represented as such in Eggers' effort. For Feigelfeld, Albrun's complex and, when measured against even the most controversial examples of Dionysian sexuality and witches in mainstream Western cinema, excrescent sexuality is presented as an attempt to counteract the psycho-emotional and indeed sexual trauma inaugurated and passed down by her mother. In this way, Albrun's sexuality is divested of anything resembling the triumphant and Dionysiacally Nietzschean sense of overcoming and joy (*jouissance*) Thomasin gains access to. In contrast, Albrun's zoophilic sexuality cannot be disentangled from both trauma and illness. Commenting on the psycho-sexual aspects of Albrun's trauma and subsequent behaviour, Feigelfeld states that:

She pleasures herself as a means to cope with her repressed sexuality - in fact, like *The Witch*, goats are also prevalent in this film, but this time, *she* is using *them* as a means for temptation. A reoccurring snake also slithers its way through crucial scenes-another indication of temptation and sexuality - further implicating her so-called sins as a woman who craves physical pleasure.[\[30\]](#)

What is clear that both Albrun's goats and Thomasin's Black Phillip occupy the symbolic position of tempters or seducers-to-life. Each represents the potency of libidinal forces, repressed or otherwise, and their potential as fuel for overcoming psycho-emotional and indeed physical traumas through pleasure.

Witchwrath: Magic, Illness, Agency and Toxicity in the Witch Body

Following the scene of her rape at the hands of Swinda and a male villager, Albrun's revenge against the villagers is equally sensual - that is, her magic is not literary, nor is it predicated on the knowledge of signs and tinctures, or the reading of grimoires and the memorization and

recitation of spells, simple or complex. Her magic, for lack of a better term, can be described as pragmatic toxicity. For example, as part of her revenge, Albrun kills a rat in her cabin, takes its corpse and drops it upstream in the river supplying the village. She is also shown to squat over the dead rat and urinate on it and into the river, doubly poisoning the river with both her own effluvia and the rat corpse. As she performs this directly indirect act of vengeance, her nose begins bleeding. The implication of Feigelfeld's deployment of natural fluids - as be it milk, blood, and urine - is that, when issuing from the body of a witch, all all shown to have inextricably necrotic qualities. Not only are they associated with so-called "black" magic, wherein which, in certain traditions such as the Thelemaic tradition established by the infamous occultist Alistair Crowley, the use of bodily fluids, specifically human semen, vaginal secretions and menstrual blood, were necessary ingredients in workings of the most potent types of magic. In *Hagazusa*, Feigelfeld presents these fluids as hermeneutically bifurcated, simultaneously representing power and poison. This concept of the witch as the embodiment of toxicity is also reaffirmed in an earlier scene in which Albrun struggles to breastfeed her baby, Martha Jr., who refuses her nipple. Here, the enervating, life-giving, vocational, and pleasurable qualities of goat's milk are contrasted with the symbolically toxic qualities of witch's milk.

For both Thomasin and Albrun, the stability of their lives begins to unravel following the onset of their first periods. The implication here is that for both witches, but more so for Albrun, their respective witchery, power, sexuality, and the cycle of isolation and distrust each experience in their respective ways are inextricable from the cycle of menses, a cycle traditionally, especially for oestrocentric schools of witchcraft, associated with strength and lunar power and beauty. In *Hagazussa*, wherever there is blood, there is magic, and according to Elphias Levi, Moncure Daniel Conway, and Charles Upham, luminaries in occultic philology, practice, and hermeneutics, blood magic is typically considered the darkest kind.^[31] In this sense, while it is tempting to consider whatever agency Albrun is able to gesture to through the toxicity of her witch-body as Dionysian, it cannot be thought of as life-giving or engendering life. Its fundamentally necrotic character makes whatever magic is emanating from her witch-body, in Feigelfeld's presentation, inescapably anti-life.

The Left-Hand Path, Dark Ascensions, and Dead Ends: Conclusion

In the last instance, one has to question some of the seemingly emancipatory rhetoric with which Feigelfeld speaks about his portrayal of Albrun quoted above. *Hagazussa* expressly shows that Albrun's life is not delicious. Eggers presents Thomasin as eventually attaining a radical means of expressing an equally radical agency by *choosing* to make a

deal with Black Phillip (the Devil) to change the agential and experiential aptitude of her life from one as submissive and repressed by the oppressive Judeo-Christian ideologies of both her fathers, terrestrial and heavenly, to one of occult supernatural freedom, excess, pleasure and power. Feigelfeld presents Albrun's experiences as firmly delimited by isolation, trauma, madness, and unwanted responsibility. The contrast between the two auteur's respective presentation of the figure of the witch redounds to the witch as a symbol of the delicious life and/or the cursed life. In *Hagazusa*, the witch is not portrayed as a figure of emancipation but one of suffering and tragedy. This is not to say that Thomasin does not experience and overcome tragedy in *The Witch*. The resonant difference between the two young witches is the function of tragedy in their lives and on their respective trajectories down their respective Left-Hand Paths. For Thomasin, tragedy is part of the cost she pays for power, knowledge, and emancipation, and is a harrowing force that brings with it a dark enlightenment. For Albrun, tragedy is a seemingly inextricable part of the curse of being a witch that benights any and all expressions of agency she exhibits with an inescapable sense of the necrotic. A comparison of both films thus reveals that the Left-Hand Path is not ubiquitous, or, put slightly differently, the Left-Hand Path does not lead all who walk it to the same destination.

Notes

[1] That is, narratives whose aesthetics – from sets to performances – are deliberately presented as theatrically over-exaggerated. In so doing, as is the case in *The Love Witch* for example, contemporary witch narratives can pastiche, that is emulate, mimic, and mock, the depiction of the figure of the witch prevalent in California during the American “Summer of Love” in the 1960s.

[2] Brad Miska, “Blood Disgusting Presents ‘Hagazussa’, Germany’s Answer to ‘The Witch’,” Bloody Disgusting, last modified September 13, 2017, accessed October 12, 2019, <https://bloody-disgusting.com/movie/3527938/bloody-disgusting-presents-hagazussa-germanys-answer-witch/>.

[3] Marko Stojiljković, “*Hagazussa: A Heathen’s Curse*: The witch of the late medieval Alps,” Cineuropa, last modified October 20, 2017, accessed October 12, 2019, Cineuropa, <https://cineuropa.org/en/newsdetail/340057/>.

[4] Andy Crump, “*Hagazussa: A Heathen’s Curse*”, Pastemagazine, last modified April 17, 2019, accessed October 13, 2019, <https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2019/04/hagazussa-a-heathens->

[curse.html](#).

[5] Jul Marie, "Interview with 'Hagazussa' writer/director Lukas Feigelfeld," *Horrormonal*, last modified April 15, 2019, accessed October 13, 2019, <https://horrormonal.wordpress.com/2019/04/15/interview-with-hagazussa-writer-director-lukas-feigelfeld/>.

[6] Marie, "Interview."

[7] Jul Marie, "Hagazussa: A Heathen's Curse' is one of 2019's first horror masterworks," *Horrormonal*, last modified April 15, 2019, accessed October 13, 2019, <https://horrormonal.wordpress.com/2019/04/15/hagazussa-a-heathens-curse-is-one-of-2019s-first-horror-masterworks/>.

[8] Dennis Harvey, "Film Review: Hagazussa: A Heathen's Curse", *Variety*, last modified April 18, 2019, accessed October 13, 2019. <https://variety.com/2019/film/reviews/hagazussa-a-heathens-curse-review-1203192272/>.

[9] Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, ed., *Cambridge Texts In The History of Philosophy: Nietzsche - The Birth of Tragedy and other writings by Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), xi.

[10] *Ibid*, 16.

[11] *Ibid*, 16.

[12] *Ibid*, xi.

[13] *Ibid*, 17-18.

[14] *Ibid*, xi.

[15] *Ibid*, 18.

[16] *Ibid*, 21.

[17] Roderigo de Almeida Miranda, *Nietzsche and Paradox*. trans. Mark S. Roberts (Albany, NYC: University of New York Press, 2006), 5.

[18] *Ibid*, 5.

[19] Robert Eggers, *The Witch*. DVD. Directed by Robert Eggers. Los

Angeles, U.S.A: A24, 2015

[20] *Ibid*, 2015.

[21] *Ibid*, 2015.

[22] *Ibid*, 2015.

[23] *Ibid*, 2015.

[24] *Ibid*, 2015.

[25] *Ibid*, 2015.

[26] *Ibid*, 2015.

[27] Jul Marie, "Interview."

[28] This scene is reminiscent of processes of witch detection elaborated in the infamous *Malleus Maleficarum* (1497), a Latin witch-hunt manual. Translated as "The Hammer of Witches", the text was written by James Sprenger and Henry Kramer and functioned as a judicial case-book employed in the detection and persecution of witches for over three hundred years both in England and continental Europe.

[29] Father Gore, "Repressed Rural Women and The Horrifying Effects of Medieval Misogyny in HAGAZUSSA," *Fathersonholygore*, last modified April 23, 2019, accessed November 1, 2019, <https://fathersonholygore.com/2019/04/23/repressed-rural-women-and-the-horrifying-effects-of-medieval-misogyny-in-hagazussa/>.

[30] Marie, "Interview."

[31] See Éliphas Lévi, *Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie: Vol 1 & 2*. (Paris: G. Baillière, 1816); Moncure D. Conway, *Demonology and Devillore* (London: Henry Holt and Co., 1879); Aleister Crowley, "Magick: Liber ABA, Book Four, Parts I-IV," *Vsociety*, <http://files.vsociety.net/data/library/Section%201%20%28A.G.M.S.Z%29/Crowley%20Alester/Unknown%20Album/Book%20Four%20%28Liber%20ABA%29.pdf>; and Charles W. Upham, *Salem Witchcraft with an Account of Salem Village and a History of Opinions on Witchcraft and Kindred Subjects Vol. 1*. 4th ed. (London: Prederick Ungar Publishing Co. 1969 [1867]).

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