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Esotericism and the art of Francisco Goya

Janis Tomlinson vergelijkt in dit artikel enkele schilderijen van de Spaanse schilder Francisco Goya (1746-1828) en constateert dat Goya door zijn ontwikkeling van verlicht naar romantisch schilder ook anders tegen esoterische onderwerpen als het occulte en de hekserij aan ging kijken.

'Esoteric: of philosophical doctrines, treatises, modes of speech, etc., designed for, or appropriate to, an inner circle of advanced or privileged disciples, communicated to, or intelligible to, the initiated exclusively. Hence of disciples: belonging to the inner circle, admitted to the esoteric teaching. Esotericism: (...) a tendency toward esoteric thought or language, obscurity. An example of such thought or language.'¹

In applying the term 'esotericism' to the Spain of the painter Francisco Goya (1746-1828), we ask: what thoughts or doctrines belonged to an 'inner' circle? My first inclination, on being invited to contribute to this issue on esotericism in Western thought, was to turn a discussion of Goya's images of witchcraft and the occult. But I soon realized that to do this was to define the esoteric in terms of the subject represented – a subject which in other times and places might be regarded as esoteric – rather than in terms of its audience. Witchcraft was hardly esoteric in late eighteenth century Spain; in fact, quite the opposite. It was a belief commonly held and admitted by Spain's rural population, as expressed by a denizen from the province of Cuenca encountered by Antonio Ponz, author of the eighteen volume *Viaje de España* (1772-1794):

'There are witches, there have been them, and there will continue to be them; and I don't speak because of the stories of others but because of what has happened to me.'²

1 Oxford English Dictionary.

2 Antonio Ponz, *Viaje de España; seguido de los dos tomos del viaje fuera de España* (1772-1794). Castro Maria del Riviero ed. (Madrid 1947) 301-302. Cited by Frank Heckes, *Supernatural themes in the art of Francisco de Goya* (Michigan 1985) 57.

The person quoted was, in fact, reacting against the writings of the Benedictine Padre Benito Jerónimo Feijoo (1676-1764) that criticized the superstitions and harmful traditions widespread among the populace or, to use Feijoo's term, the *vulgo*. In an essay 'Uso de la Mágica' in the second volume of his *Teatro crítico universal*, Feijoo offered five reasons for the persistence and perpetuation of fables relating to magic and witchcraft, which inspired vulgar belief. These were: the inclination of writers to recount and record prodigious events; the crediting of natural events to pacts with the devil; the misguided (*loca*) vanity of those who wish to present themselves as possessing magic powers; the false accusations of sects (such as heretics and schismatics) seeking to discredit their enemies; and finally, the belief by some individuals that they themselves are, in fact, witches, when they are not.³ Feijoo's discussion of witchcraft focuses on historical examples – there is little concern with these beliefs among educated readers in his own native Spain. This may well be because the audience for his works in all likelihood shared the disbelief expressed by Goya in a letter dated to the early 1790s: '...nor do I fear witches, goblins, phantasms, brave giants, rogues, scoundrels, etc. nor any other kind of bodies, I only fear [living] humans...' ⁴

Even in the eyes of the Inquisition, persecution of witchcraft had begun to subside after 1610, after a dissenting judge in the witch trials held in Logroño in that year asked for a revision of the case, only to show by juridical procedure that most of the evidence taken for fact was false.⁵ Witchcraft was perceived increasingly as a delusion, proof of which was almost impossible: the records of all Spanish tribunals from 1780 to 1820 record only four cases of witchcraft, two of which were never tried.⁶ And even though the witch-figure often appears in literature of the Spanish Golden Age, authors 'all refer to it with a touch of irony or skepticism as to the witches' powers.'⁷

3 Benito Jerónimo Feijoo, 'Uso de la magia' in: Idem, *Teatro crítico universal* II (Second edition; Madrid 1779) 119-168. The text is reproduced at: <http://www.filosofia.org/bjf/bjft205.htm>, 9-18.

4 Francisco de Goya, *Cartas a Martín Zapater*. Mercedes Agueda and Xavier de Salas ed. (Madrid 1984) 210.

5 Julio Caro Baroja, 'Witchcraft and catholic theology' in: Bengt Anklaröo and Gustav Henningsen ed., *Early modern European witchcraft. Centres and peripheries* (Oxford 1990) 19-44.

6 Henry Charles Lea, *History of the Inquisition of Spain* II, book 8, 241. Reproduced at: <http://libro.uca.edu/lea4/8lea9.htm>.

7 Caro Baroja, 'Witchcraft and catholic theology', 21.

It is in this same vein that it is best to understand Goya's earliest references to witchcraft in a series of paintings purchased by the Duke and Duchess of Osuna in 1798, in the drawings of the *Sueños* (1797-98) as well as the etchings based on them within the series of *Los Caprichos* (1799).

As tempting as it might be to contextualize Feijoo's voice of reason within a discourse of enlightenment that would continue in Spain until the Napoleonic invasion of 1808, it is a temptation to be avoided. In looking to Spain, we cannot identify specific philosophies, such as Pietism or Illuminism, to be identified with a group of disciples. The Spanish Enlightenment, identified with the reign of the enlightened despot Carlos III (reigned 1759-1788), was 'government sponsored' and 'government censored'. In a summary offered by the historian Raymond Carr:

'The Spanish Enlightenment, as an intellectual movement, was second-rate and derivative: hence the confusions consequent on combining borrowings from the earlier Spanish diagnosticians of national decadence...from Colbertism, the Physiocrats, and Adam Smith; hence its failure – if we except Goya, who shared the horror of superstition common to the supporters of *luces* – to fling up a European celebrity.'⁸

Hence, the difficulty of identifying the esoteric in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Perhaps better than any of his compatriots, Goya addressed the disparate themes of social criticism defined by the intelligentsia and political leaders of his day. Carr is correct in suggesting that Goya is the only figure of international stature to arise from the sparks of what can only very loosely be termed an era of enlightenment. And like those of his fellow countrymen, his ideas were selected from a wide variety of sources: readings of contemporary periodicals, contemporary theater, other literature, ideas gained from his acquaintances. Sometimes, those ideas are expressed in written words that accompany etched or drawn images; but equally important to understanding Goya's enlightenment are many of his paintings. Interpretation of these images, which are without written sources or parallels, and often without fully documented patronage or provenance, is a tricky matter; the method to be followed here will compare three images from the 1790s, 1810s and (possibly) the early 1820s to investigate continuities and transformations. Their enlightened perspective was esoteric, to be understood only by a very small circle of initiates, who like the artist had

8 Raymond Carr, *Spain 1808-1975* (Second edition; Oxford 1982) 71, 69.

witnessed the once perceptive glow of enlightenment fade.

Goya's concern with these themes begins in the mid-1790s, and might most obviously be identified with a drawing of a man sleeping at a desk, with fantastic creatures looming behind him, the first in a series of drawings that bear the title *Sueño* (Dream) which served as preliminaries for some of the etchings of *Los Caprichos*. Written in the upper margin is the title, *Sueño I* (First dream), and in the lower margin the words: 'El Autor soñando/ Su yntento solo es desterrar bulgaridades/ perjudicales, y perpetuar con esta obra de/ caprichos, el testimonio solido de la verdad' (The Author dreaming. His only intention is to banish harmful common beliefs and to perpetuate with this work of *caprichos* the sound testimony of the truth). Within the image, the front of the desk bears the words: 'Ydioma universal. Dibujado y grabado por Fco. de Goya año 1797' (Universal language. Drawn and etched by Francisco de Goya, 1797). This is the preliminary drawing for the well-known etching, *El sueño de la razón produce monstruos*, published in 1799 as plate 43 in the series of eighty aquatint etchings of *Los Caprichos*. However, the drawing shows that it was originally intended as a frontispiece for a series of etchings intended to exemplify a universal language or truth.

In projecting such a series, the artist clearly had an audience in mind: but who was included in that audience? The only documented patronage for the series is the purchase by the Duke and Duchess of Osuna of four sets of the series prior to its announcement for sale in February 1799. That *Los Caprichos* did not enjoy the commercial success for which the artist had probably hoped is clear from his own letter of 1803 to Miguel Cayetano Soler, Secretary of State and Finance, offering to the government the eighty etched plates for the series. In the letter, Goya states that only twenty-seven sets had been sold. The plates were accepted by the government (for which reason they can still be seen today in the Calcografía of Madrid) which in return provided Goya's son with a pension of 12,000 reales.⁹

It would seem that Goya himself intended *Los Caprichos* for a very limited audience, since in developing the series he apparently moved from a more straightforward series of satires depicting witches and customs to a far more complex collection of images that encompassed a greatly expanded array of interspersed scenes of contemporary customs, superstitions and the supernatural. The absence of any obviously intelligible order only enhances the enigmatic nature of the images. That contemporaries regarded these images as riddles to be solved is suggested by the manuscript

9 Francisco de Goya, *Diplomatario*. Angel Canellas López ed. (Saragossa 1981) 360.

captions added by early viewers – recorded in at least eleven first-edition sets.¹⁰ But few apparently were able or willing to spend 320 reales for this series of satire and fantasy.

Among those who were willing to invest were, as mentioned, the Duke and Duchess of Osuna, Goya's most important aristocratic patrons, and the only patrons who might be identified specifically with Goya's esoteric imagery. The first commissions given to the artist by the Osuna family were standard, if varied: a pair of portraits of the Duke and Duchess (1785); a series of scenes of rural life (1786-7); a portrait of the Osuna children (lost) and another of the family (1788), two scenes from the life of St. Francis Borja (1788), and a pair of portraits of the new king Carlos IV and queen María Luisa (1790). Several years would elapse before the Duke and Duchess either purchased (or, in my opinion, commissioned) another series of small paintings of scenes of witchcraft in 1798.¹¹

The change in subject matter is notable: why a series of witchcraft paintings? On the one hand, it seems highly plausible that Goya was gaining a reputation for painting the unconventional: in early January 1794, he had presented to his colleagues at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts a series of paintings that were, by the artist's own account, not commissioned and which therefore gave his fantasy more room for play.¹² By 1797, as we have seen, he was creating the series of drawings that bore the title *Sueños* (introduced by the first *sueño*, discussed above) with images of witches and satires of modern life. The 1823 inventory of the Osuna library records various accounts of *autos de fe* and studies of the Inquisition, as well as treatises on magic and witchcraft – including the classic *Malleus Maleficarum*. Moreover, one of the frequent visitors to the Duchess's *tertulias* (or conversational gatherings) was the writer Leandro Fernández de Moratín, who in 1811 would publish an annotated version of the report of the *auto de fe* held in the northern Spanish city of Logroño on the 6 and 7 of November, 1610.¹³ Given the apparent interest in the Osuna household in these themes, it is

10 Eleanor Sayre e.a., *Goya and the spirit of Enlightenment* (Boston 1989) ci-ciii.

11 Pierre Gassier and Juliet Wilson, *The life and complete work of Francisco Goya* (New York 1971) catalogue numbers: 219, 220, 240, 242, 248-254, 278, 659-664.

12 Juliet Wilson Bareau and Manuela B. Mena Marqués, *Goya. Truth and fantasy. The small paintings* (London and New Haven 1994) 189-209.

13 Heckes, *Supernatural themes*, 127-129; Leandro Fernández de Moratín, *Auto de fe celebrado en la ciudad de Logroño en los días 6 y 7 noviembre de 1610* (Madrid 1850) 617-627.



Figure 1 Francisco Goya, *The witches' Sabbath (El aquelarre)* (1797-1798) te Madrid, Museo Lázaro Galdiano.

reasonable to see this series as a commission.

Although Moratín's work has often been cited as an influence on Goya's paintings and etchings of the 1790s, its late date of publication, as well as references in the notes that can be dated to 1809-1811, lead us to question this assumption that has become commonplace.¹⁴ If a similarity is to be identified linking Moratín's text and Goya's etchings, it would be a common perspective in relating or depicting the events widely believed by the *vulgo*. Goya's brief and pithy captions may even have inspired Moratín's sarcastic glosses to the account of the *auto de fe*. For example, the account notes that a great number of clerics from monasteries throughout the city attended the *auto*: Moratín's note explains their eager participation by the fact that the event provided three weeks off as well as unlimited food and wine.¹⁵ In noting that two sermons were given, Moratín sardonically exclaims: 'What two pieces of eloquence have been lost to posterity'.¹⁶ References to instruments played at the devil's Sabbath lead to the observation that the devil follows the laws of the land, as instruments played at his Sabbaths are those of their respective regions; when mention is made to the ointments, powders and potions used by the devil, Moratín responds with a phrase that might well serve Goya as a caption: 'Gran boticario!' (Great apothecary!).¹⁷ As Moratín would explain in the prologue to the 1820 edition of the *Auto de fe*, his purpose in publishing the work was to ridicule the Inquisition, which for so long had, by its persecution of invented crimes, perpetuated superstition and hindered the progress of enlightenment.¹⁸ Both Goya's captions and Moratín's notes are directed to the enlightened. Thus, it is not the subject of witchcraft per se, but the enlightened perspective from which it is regarded, which defines the audience and the esotericism of these works.

How does Goya visually render this ironic perspective? The *Aquelarre*, or *Witches' Sabbath*, one of six paintings described as 'subjects of witches' (*asuntos de brujas*) that were purchased by the Duke and Duchess of Osuna in 1798 offers a case in point (fig. 1). The potentially horrific nature of

14 René Andioc, 'Sobre Goya y Moratín hijo', *Hispanic Review* 2 (1982) 119-132.

15 Nicolás Fernández de Moratín, 'Auto de fe celebrado en la ciudad de Logroño en los días 6 y 7 de noviembre de 1610' in: *Obras de Don Nicolás y D. Leandro Fernández de Moratín, Biblioteca de Autores españoles* (Madrid 1850) 617-631, note 4.

16 Moratín, 'Logroño', note 6.

17 Moratín, 'Logroño', note 32.

18 Heckes, *Supernatural themes*, 144.



Figure 2 Francisco Goya, *Inquisition scene* (c. 1816) te Madrid, Museo de la Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando.

this image is mitigated by the passivity of all its participants, as well as its proportions and context. The canvas measures 44 x 31 cm., and is painted with great delicacy of tone and stroke: this is a rococo Sabbath. Moreover, at least two of the paintings intended for this series (*The Bewitched* and *Don Juan and the Comendador*) can be identified with theatrical subjects and tentative identification of three other paintings with the subjects of contemporary theatre have been made.¹⁹ This context gives Goya's painting an air of play-acting or make-believe, as we look down upon this unthreatening devil, who assumes the form of a he-goat as he presides in a remote landscape setting over the nocturnal gathering of his worshippers. Even the bodies of the sacrificed children seem unreal, evanescent as minute brushstrokes on the surface of the canvas.

If witchcraft had been reduced to an object of derision for Goya's enlightened audience, the same cannot be said of the Inquisition – the actual object of Moratín's disdain in his *auto de fe* commentary. Direct references to the Inquisition in Goya's *Caprichos* are limited to two fairly straightforward depictions of victims of the Inquisition; it is only after 1810, when the possibility of abolishing the Inquisition was discussed by the provisional government in Cádiz, that Goya makes direct and clearly critical allusions to the institution in drawings belonging to the so-called Album 'C' and at

19 Ibidem, 124 -178.

least one painting (fig. 2). This painting, one of a series of four imagined scenes that combine and comment on Spanish customs past and present, was probably painted after and in reaction to the restoration of Fernando VII in 1814. In support of his repressive regime, Fernando resurrected the Inquisition to assist in ferreting out enemies of the government who professed in any way the libertine ideologies introduced in Spain during the reign of French king Joseph Bonaparte (1808-1813). Yet the Inquisition did not inspire the fear it once had: after 1814, its defendants were usually let off with a light sentence or reprimand. The gathering portrayed by Goya is an imagined meditation on the institution and its victims, whose irony could be understood only by viewers who shared the artist's apparent disdain.

How is that disdain visualized? Looking to the victims, we see four men wearing the yellow tunics (*sambenitos*) and conical hats (*corozas*) that identified and shamed those denounced (often anonymously) to the Inquisition. Their bodies bent to reflect their humiliation, these faceless and generic victims corroborate the power of the Inquisition – perhaps an allusion to those who supported its revival under Ferdinand's reign. The wigged constable seated on the left suggests in fact that this scene refers to a contemporary world. Yet, it takes place in a large hall (at odds with the outdoor setting usually used for *Autos de fe* or the smaller room where audiences with fewer participants took place), as a crowd of monks, identified by their robes as Dominicans, Carthusians and Franciscans, extends as far as we can see, disappearing into the penumbra under the vaguely Moorish arches. A Franciscan apparently pronounces either the crimes or the punishment from a podium in the mid-distance: his closed eyes show that he is acting by rote. Rather than a scene of an *auto de fe*, Goya's image is transformed into a metaphor of the all-pervasive oppression of the Catholic church, far more haunting than the charade of witchcraft portrayed almost two decades earlier.

As I've written elsewhere, Goya's scene of the Inquisition and the three paintings that accompany it (*The Procession*, *The Bullfight in a Village*, and *The Madhouse*) are ironic in tone, and intended for an audience that understands them not as reportage, but rather as commentary.²⁰ Can we identify the paintings with a specific patron or owner? In 1839, these works were willed to the Royal Academy of San Fernando, by Manuel García de

20 Janis A. Tomlinson, *Goya in the twilight of Enlightenment* (London and New Haven 1992) 161. For a discussion of this series of paintings, see 160-187.

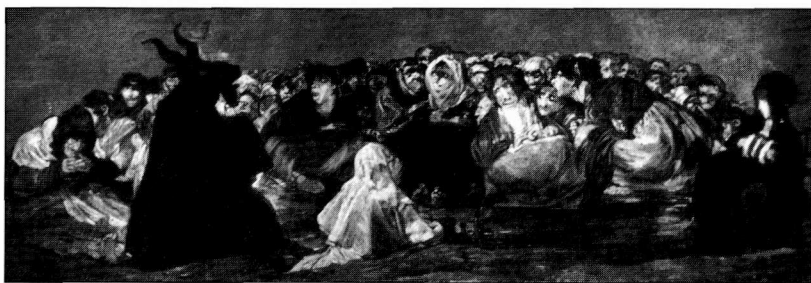


Figure 3 Francisco Goya, *Witches' Sabbath* (c. 1821-1823) te Madrid, Museo del Prado.

la Prada, a businessman who had also been a supporter of the regime of Joseph Bonaparte (or, as known in Spain, an *afrancesado*). Thus, he probably looked with skepticism upon the regime of the restored Fernando VII. In 1828, García de la Prada had served as an intermediary in delivering to the Academy Goya's portrait of Moratín following the death of the author (as well as of the artist, who died that same year). Was García de la Prada in fact the original owner of the four scenes by Goya? Or, were they too originally owned by Moratín, who certainly would have understood their charged meaning? Both men clearly belonged to the enlightened elite, who realized that it was not superstition of the masses but rather the power of the Inquisition and Church that perpetuated the oppression of their native country.

The audience for which Goya's work was intended becomes increasingly hard to define, particularly in addressing his most famous group of works, the so-called 'black' paintings, executed on the walls of a country house across the Manzanares river from Madrid that Goya purchased in February 1819. Painted in oil on the plaster walls, the paintings were transferred to canvas after the 1873 purchase of the house by Baron Frédéric Emile d'Erlanger. Exhibited at the Exposition Universelle in 1878, the paintings were returned in 1881 to the Spanish government and transferred to the Museo del Prado. The subject matter of these paintings includes religious processions, a scene of men fighting with clubs, mythological and biblical figures, and other groups of peasant or aged figures.

The scene of concern here (fig. 3) seems at first glance to repeat the theme of *The Witches' Sabbath* painted as part of the Osuna series over two decades earlier (fig. 1). The he-goat now sits silhouetted in the left foreground, against the crowd of onlookers who react with amazement and awe either to the he-goat or to something that is occurring to our left,

beyond the confines of the canvas. A young woman seated on the far right, in a black cloak and striped muff, who serenely watches the goings on is set apart from the other onlookers. Photographs of these works, taken before they were removed from the walls, show that the painting once extended to the right: restorers cut down the image by about 1 and ½ meters, removing what appears to be a void space that extended to the right of the young woman.²¹ Thus, her position would have balanced that of the he-goat, and like him formed a bracket enfaming the faces of his onlookers in the center of the painting. It is they who become the subjects of the painting, replacing the he-goat who dominated the *Osuna Aquelarre* (fig. 1).

The differences between these images far outweigh the similarities, and also represent Goya's own evolution from an idiom of the eighteenth century to one that can only be identified with Romanticism. It is, in part, a matter of perspective. That taken by the artist in painting the small witchcraft scene purchased by the Osunas is the perspective of someone who is oblivious to the power of witchcraft, and regards it, perhaps, as comic: his figures are like actors on a stage, his viewpoint distanced, his rendering controlled. In this, he seems to mimic the superior position assumed by the writer Moratín in his commentary on the Logroño witch trials.

In the black painting however, witchcraft becomes a secondary theme, now sidelined: the subject is the tyranny of belief. In this, the onlookers here recall the accused in the Inquisition scene, who perpetuate tyranny by their submission to it. Remembering the original focus placed on the faces of the onlookers, we see that the dark tones and broad strokes that dissolve individual forms underscore the expression of the painting, as the loss of reason becomes identified with the loss of the thinking individual.

For whom were the messages of the black paintings intended? We cannot know. Priscilla Muller has suggested that the painting may have been a backdrop for an entertainment inspired ultimately by the projected phantasmagoria of Etienne Gaspard Robertson, popularized in Paris in the 1790s, and imitated throughout Europe. Robertson appeared in the Principe theater in Madrid early in January 1821, but even before that time, imitators such as 'Mr. Martin' had presented phantasmagoria to the Madrid public as early as 1806. And a Señor Matilla produced a phantasmagoria in his home during the winter of 1819-1820. Scenes of witches were a common theme of these entertainments: and Muller reasonably asks if Goya's painting might

21 Nigel Glendinning, 'The strange translation of Goya's 'Black paintings'', *The Burlington Magazine* 868 (1975) 464-477.

not have served as a backdrop for some related kind of exhibition.²² This would presuppose an invited audience perhaps comprised of those who critically considered common beliefs and superstitions. But, by focusing on the believers as those who perpetuate superstitions, Goya undoes the magical, here shown to be only delusion.

22 Priscilla E. Mulder, *Goya's 'black' paintings. Truth and reason in light and liberty* (New York 1984). My discussion of the phantasmagoria and its possible relation to these paintings is fully dependant on chapter IV 'Why the 'black' paintings' 205-238.