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DISEASE, MORBIDITY, AND THE DARK FEMININE

Sublime Representations of the Occult and Feminine Death in the Work of Gabriel von Max

By Tulasi Johnson

Gabriel von Max, an obscure artist from Munich, produced a canon of images that splendidly articulate how circulating fantasies regarding the occult, disease, and feminine death coalesced in visual art at the end of the nineteenth century. One can read Von Max as an emissary of an era when the feminization of disease was concomitant with the centralization of the feminine in the popular imaginary of the occult. These two social phenomena relied on the long-standing cultural understanding of the female body as inherently corrupt and dangerously uncontained, both corporeally and psychically. Although many practicing occult societies enabled women to occupy dominant roles in the creation of emergent, modern ritual practices, this role was circumscribed both by the hegemonic gender roles of Victorian society as well as deeply embedded fears of feminine contamination.

This circumscribed power structure, which delimited the role of the occult feminine, was abetted by the visual culture of the era, which remained entrenched in patriarchal imagery of the female nude— even by artists who were actively engaged in the non-normative culture of Occultism. While the work of Gabriel von Max can be seen as acceding to such patriarchal tropes, I argue that his oeuvre also contravenes traditional deployments of the female body in visual art. Von Max, by painting the female body in unmistakable stages of bodily decay, made formal choices which allowed the feminine corpse to occupy a liminal space of representation. Von Max's moribund, mystical females escape the inscription of the merely erotic gaze by transforming the *subject* into the *abject*, remaking the feminine into a complicatedly repellant

locus of desire and alienation—a transformation that allows the viewer to experience a sublime cathexis.

In this essay I propose a multi-disciplinary method for viewing the oeuvre of Gabriel von Max, one that deploys key twentieth-century feminist texts to address the absence of critical engagement with this artist in the art-historical canon. Couching von Max's artworks within dominant trends that populated the visual art of the time allows for a measured comparison with his contemporaries who worked with similar occult themes. I will also ground von Max's artworks within the socio-political context of the era in two ways: firstly, by reconstructing an overview of the legislative regulation of the sexualized female, and secondly, by investigating the rise of the occult in Western culture, both in practice and in the contemporary imaginary. When seen amidst this broader visual and social culture of late nineteenth century Europe, and evaluated using twentieth-century feminist theory, Gabriel von Max's singular representational program of feminine corporeality emerges.

I. An Intervention in Critical Engagement: Resurrecting von Max from Obscurity

Although Gabriel von Max achieved significant success during his lifetime, his popularity had waned by the time he died in 1915. His decline in popularity and a lack of perceived relevance of his artwork has led to a great dearth of English-language scholarship on this artist. Apart from contemporary accounts of the reception to his work in various exhibitions, very little work had been done on this artist until the 2010 publication of the catalogue that accompanied the Frye Art Museum's exhibition, *Gabriel von Max: Be-tailed Cousins and Phantasms of the Soul*. I depended on this monograph for biographical details and historical information about von Max's work, but I also noticed a remarkable absence of any critical, feminist reading of a large percentage of von Max's chosen subject matter—female bodies in stages of decay. Elisabeth Bronfen partially addresses this absence via her analysis of the 1869 painting *The Anatomist* [fig. 1] in her study from 1992, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic*, an extremely welcome find. My essay attempts to resurrect Gabriel von Max from obscurity by invoking the writings of Elisabeth Bronfen, Julia Kristeva and Lynda Nead in order to erect a critical armature to re-engage his artworks. I aim to contribute to this armature by urging a new method of viewing von Max's oeuvre—one that understands it as a prime site to link feminist theory to the sublime in visual art.

II. 20th Century Feminist Frameworks

The oeuvre of Gabriel von Max serves as the nodal point where *abjection* and *the sublime* intersect. Julia Kristeva's 1980 essay *Powers of Horror* serves as the cornerstone of my approach to von Max. Kristeva approaches the term *abjection* in a variety of ways, but the most useful definition arrives when she positions the corpse as the border between desire and repulsion. The corpse is a terrifying object with the power to estrange the viewer from themselves—in her words, "... like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by

[abjection] literally beside himself.”¹ Kristeva continues by positing the corpse as the penultimate borderland, a site of fear and uncanniness:

“...The corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything... The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us.”²

Edmund Burke, in his 1757 treatise *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, suggests that one can understand sublime terror in terms of that which excites one’s strongest emotions, especially the apprehension of pain and danger.³ I propose that the terror provoked by the corpse squarely situates Kristeva’s abjection theory within the realm of the sublime, which is useful when practically applying this theory to any analysis of visual art. I will return to this idea of the corpse representing the borderland between self and other, material and immaterial, as it becomes squarely situated in the female body throughout von Max’s oeuvre.

I find Lynda Nead’s work complimentary to Kristeva’s work on abjection and borders. Nead’s work makes these theories immediately applicable to the female nude in visual art. In her book *The Female Nude* from 1992, Nead posits that “one of the principal goals of the female nude has been the containment and regulation of the female sexual body... Art [has] worked metaphorically to shore up the female body—to seal orifices and to prevent marginal matter from transgressing the boundary dividing the inside of the body and the outside, the self from the space of the other...”⁴ Along with Kristeva’s sublime corpse, I will return to Nead’s idea of the border, especially as it relates to the corporeal condition of the diseased female body and the uncontained psychic space of the female mystic or Spirit Medium.

The third rhetorical framework I wish to invoke before delving into specific images is Elizabeth Bronfen’s work on the aesthetics of feminine death. She asks, “How can a verbal or artistic representation be both aesthetically pleasing and morbid, as the conjunction of beautiful woman and death seems to imply?” The answer, it seems, rests within the realm of the sublime. Edmund Burke foregrounds the apotropaic pleasure derived from representations of pain and death when he asserts that

“...poetry, painting, and other affecting arts... are often capable of grafting a delight on wretchedness, misery, and death itself. It is a common observation, that objects which in the reality would shock, are in tragical... representations, the source of a very high species of pleasure... The satisfaction has been commonly attributed, first, to the comfort we receive in considering that so melancholy a story is no more than a fiction; and, next, to the contemplation of our own freedom from the evils which we see represented.”⁵

1 Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1982), 1.

2 Ibid, 4-5.

3 See Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, first published 1757 (Reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 36 and 53.

4 Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity, and Sexuality* (London: Routledge Press, 1992), 6-7.

5 Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, 41.

Bronfen echoes this idea of the alterity of representational death when she argues that

“representations of death in art are so pleasing, it seems, because they occur in a realm clearly delineated as not life, or not real, even as they refer to the basic fact of life as we know but choose not to acknowledge too overtly. They delight because we are confronted with death, yet it is the death of another. We experience death by proxy...”⁶

In her sustained formal study of *The Anatomist* [fig. 1], Bronfen charts the intersections of orthogonal lines in order to uncover the relational axes of the two subjects' sightlines. By charting the triangulated set of gazes between the male anatomist and the female corpse, just as he is arrested in the moment of lifting the sheet from her breast prior to dissecting her, Bronfen argues that “femininity and death cause a disorder to stability, mark moments of ambivalence, disruption or duplicity and their eradication produces a recuperation of order, a return to stability. The threat that death and femininity pose is recuperated by representation...”⁷ She sees in this painted moment the articulation of her theory that the aesthetically presented dead female body allows the observer, signified by the male anatomist within the painting, to repress his own fears about mortality.⁸

Throughout my analysis I will return to key ideas from these writers as I position von Max's images in relationship to the texts. This paper explores how feminine death, illness and disease, and the occult (both as practiced and as perpetuated in the popular imaginary), reinforce each other and serve to construct a visual space for the imaging of the abject female in the late nineteenth century.

III. Biographical Background

Gabriel von Max [fig. 2] was born in Bohemia in 1840. After witnessing his father's death from cholera when he was fifteen, he seemingly had a rather turbulent youth, finally enrolling in the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Munich in his late teens. He found commercial success early in his twenties after his large-scale painting *The Christian Martyr* [fig. 3] was shown at the 1867 *Exposition Universelle* in Paris.⁹ I will return to this image later. He briefly held a teaching appointment at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Munich, but, as was his lifelong habit, he was repeatedly drawn away from his profession as an artist by his passions for collecting and the natural sciences, as well as his ever-increasing interest in the occult sciences. He maintained a well-known *kunstkabinet* of anthropological specimens and skeletal remains containing between 60,000 and 80,000 objects by 1915, where he hosted many leading scientists of the day.¹⁰ Von Max also organized Spiritualist séances, researched the lives of Christian saints, attended scientific

6 Elizabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death Femininity, and the Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 1992), x-xii.

7 Ibid, xii.

8 Bronfen goes on to posit that the anatomist's “contact with the dead body of another turns into a sign of his own inevitable disempowered submission to death... The feminine corpse inspires the surviving man to write, to deny or acknowledge death, while at the same the corpse is the site at which he can articulate his knowledge.” Ibid, 5-13.

9 Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker, “Betailled Cousins and Phantasms of the Soul,” in *Gabriel von Max*, ed. Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011), 6-14.

10 Karin Althaus, “Das Ubrige Lese Man In Darwin Nach: Die Wissenschaftliche Sammlung,” in *Gabriel von Max: Malerstar, Darwinist, Spiritist*, ed. Karin Althaus and Helmut Friedel (Munich: Stadtische Galerie, 2010), 247.

experiments regarding paranormal phenomena, and even founded parapsychological societies.¹¹



FIGURE 1. GABRIEL VON MAX, "THE ANATOMIST," 1869.

11 Susanne Böller, "Gabriel von Max and America," in *Gabriel von Max*, ed. Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011), 86.



FIGURE 2. GABRIEL VON MAX, UNDATED

Throughout his career, spanning from the 1860s until World War I, von Max focused on themes as diverse as mystical subjects, primatological studies, and evolution. He actively exhibited his paintings in exhibitions in Europe and the United States for many decades. His medical painting *The Anatomist* [fig. 1] from 1869 was exhibited alongside Thomas Eakins' controversial *Gross Clinic* at the 1876 *Centennial International Exhibition* in Philadelphia.¹² Unfortunately, due to some disorganized planning at this particular exposition, the art was not ready for exhibition at the time of the opening, and few critical reviews were published. However, von Max's work did not go unnoticed. While no comparisons were made between Eakins and von Max in the popular press, a singular letter appeared in an 1876 *Medical and Surgical Journal* whose author pantingly described *The Anatomist* as "a masterly delineation... of a woman, young and fair... [whose]

12 Birnie Danzker, "Betailed Cousins and Phantasms of the Soul," 20.

slight covering reveals the founded outlines of the treasure of limbs too delicious for death.”¹³ Von Max was also included in the first exhibition of the *Munich Secession*, held in



FIGURE 3. GABRIEL VON MAX, "THE CHRISTIAN MARTYR," 1867.

1893, but he would remain only loosely affiliated with this new movement of younger artists. He achieved particular popularity in the United States, where many of his works found their way into private collections, and his works were shown in the 1896 *St. Louis Annual Exposition*. Although his work was included in the seminal 1909 *Exhibition of Contemporary German Art* at the Metropolitan Art Museum in New York, by then von Max paintings had slipped out of

¹³ Ibid, 20.

popular fashion.¹⁴ In short, von Max's paintings were widely seen, on an international scale, for many years. This international appeal of his artwork proves significant when viewed alongside trans-national trends in venereal disease legislation and the emergence of occult practices, which I will closely examine shortly.

Von Max had a rather colorful personal life, flouting propriety by marrying his much younger second wife after a long-standing extra-marital affair.¹⁵ He ascended to the nobility on his 60th birthday in 1900,¹⁶ and died in 1915. The political attitude towards Germany after the two World Wars led to many museums and collectors selling their German holdings during the midcentury. As Jo-anne Danzker notes, "Among the most painful sales was that of *The Anatomist* in 1953 for the sum of only \$40,"¹⁷ a shockingly pitiful sum, even in mid-century dollars. Gabriel von Max, despite his secure stature among leading artists of his own era, had been dismissed as "kitsch" or simply overlooked in much of the art scholarship of the 20th century.¹⁸

Artistic Conventions and the Martyred Woman in the Nineteenth Century

Von Max's 1867 painting *The Christian Martyr* [fig. 3] was his first major success. This work fittingly serves as a useful point of entry for situating von Max within the larger artistic context of the nineteenth century subgenre of the female martyr. The subject choice of the martyr is in itself a loaded one, and I will return to the significance of feminine spirituality more explicitly when I examine images of the occult feminine later in this text. A few famed examples of this very popular theme include the relatively subtle, well received *St. Eulalia* [fig. 4] by J. M. Waterhouse from 1885; the far more sensational *In the Moonlight* [fig. 5] by von Max's associate Albert von Keller, from 1894; and the tacitly erotic *Study for the Temptation of Saint Anthony* [fig. 6], by the Belgian artist Felicien Rops. It is illuminating to look to the larger thematic trends in art in order to understand that von Max's subject matter acted in direct conversation with the hegemonic imaging practices of the day and was not just some obscure outlier. However, the main focus of my work in this thesis is to foreground the subversive space that he created *within* the dominant art culture. In this section I argue *not* that von Max was unique in painting the dead, abjected female, but that he was unique in painting the dead female as unmistakably beyond resuscitation and beyond the space of the erotic, or at least beyond the space of the safely discharged erotic.

To illustrate this subversion of the female martyr subgenre so popular at the time, I will return to *The Christian Martyr*. This painting was shown to an appreciative public at many exhibitions throughout the succeeding decades and reproduced widely in print form. Three copies are known to have been painted of this work, which eventually made their way to collections in the United States, St. Petersburg, and Prague, and it was widely reproduced and circulated in print-form. According to contemporary reports, the image captivated the art-viewing public.¹⁹ In the large-scale oil painting, a male supplicant crouches at the foot of the cross in the darker

14 Ibid, 7 and 48.

15 Jochen Meister, "Geliebte Madonna," in *Gabriel von Max: Malerstar, Darwinist, Spiritist*, ed. Karin Althaus and Helmut Friedel (Munich: Stadtische Galerie, 2010), 118-129.

16 Danzker, "Betailed Cousins and Phantasms of the Soul," 55.

17 Ibid, 56.

18 This dismissal of late Victorian, melodramatic art like von Max's is in no small part due to the influential mid-century art theorist Clement Greenberg's stand against "kitsch," which David Macey defines as "a pseudo-artistic activity which takes as its raw material the debased and academicized simulacra of genuine culture and exploits them to produce vicarious experience and faked sensations." David Macey, *Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory* (London: Penguin, 2001), 168.

19 Danzker, "Betailed Cousins and Phantasms of the Soul," 43-58.

bottom hemisphere of the picture plane, gazing up at the ecstatic face of the fully clothed female martyr. The low horizon line allows for a deep recession into space, yet the human subjects seem flattened in the foreground, privileging their bodily representation over their place in the overall landscape. The martyr's outflung arms and the lines of her body correspond to the right-angled lines of the cross. Her relaxed facial expression, slightly parted mouth, arched neck, and torpid limbs could suggest that she is in the throes of a pleasurable swoon. This painting presents a typical von Maxian conflation of death, erotic abandon, and beatification.

To refer back to Lynda Nead's definition of the female body as container, von Max infamously often painted his female subjects in various stages of putrefaction, and in this particular work the martyr's skin is noticeably green. In several of his works, he highlights this feminine morbidity with the inclusion of a secondary, male figure whose skin tones he renders in contrasting, sanguinary, animate pigments. In *The Christian Martyr*, this contrast is provided by the male supplicant. In fact, contemporary reviews of his work at exhibition frequently take care to note the unusual, even deathly treatment of the skin tones. Emphasizing Max's hue choices, one critic wrote in 1881 that the "petrification of his forms, and the ghastly pallor of his color, strike the spectator as with a Medusa spell." These circumstances, along with my own viewing of these works in person, provide evidence that his color-handling was an intentional aesthetic choice and not the result of fugitive pigments or the passage of time. While formally the pliability of the female's body is constrained by the rigidity of the cross, von Max employs a sort of slippage by painting the female in decay, positioning the figure as governed by biology, not governed by the purely aesthetic qualities of the female body, and more importantly, not locked into place by a strictly eroticizing gaze. In images like this one we can begin to see Kristeva's "vortex of summons and repulsion." In the contemplation of a von Max painting, the viewer's gaze is first engaged by the accessible aesthetic beauty of the female subjects. When the depiction of death transgresses the boundary of the safely aesthetic and passes into the realm of unmistakable decay, the apotropaic mechanism of the "othering" of death that Bronfen describes grows more difficult. As the subject becomes the abject, one can no longer, in Kristeva's terms, "thrust aside" the biological facts of decay.

A counterpoint to *Christian Martyr*, Albert Von Keller's 1894 painting *In the Moonlight* [fig. 5] was another such "martyred female" image, though he employs a distinctly more erotic treatment of his subject than von Max does. A crucified nude woman lays asymmetrically stretched across the entire field, with her knees, chastely together, torqueing towards the bottom right, while her upper body sags across the vertical axis to the upper left. The bloodied right arm of the subject introduces the sense of the downward pull of gravity on the body. As with the previous painting, the quality of hue in the flesh tones leaves us uncertain as to whether the subject is alive or dead, and whether we are in fact viewing an eroticized corpse. The rough ropes that bind the body to the cross and a complex network of the body's transversal angles keep the suspended body in tension. The contrast formed by the diagonals of the pliant, soft flesh and the right-angled, rigid wood could be read in two ways— as the female body resisting the punitive, rigid social order embodied by the phallic cross, or, conflictingly, as the success of the disciplinary body of the state coming to bear on the limp, passive, and possibly dead body of the female.

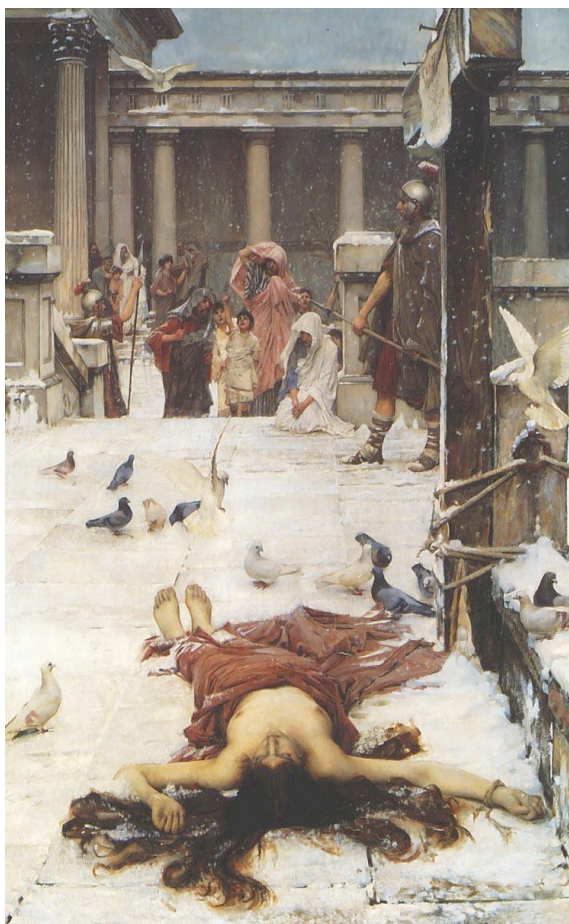


FIG. 4. JOHN WM. WATERHOUSE, "ST. EULALIA," CA. 1885

Though they employed different compositional techniques to paint crucified female martyrs, von Max, von Keller, and sundry other successful artists situated similar themes of spirituality, eroticism, and death on the female body. To refer once again to Nead, the ungoverned female body, batted down to the cross, was safely stabilized via formal "artistic regulation"²⁰ in this female martyr sub-genre of fin-de-siècle art. While this enabled some artists to discharge patriarchal fears of feminine power while solidifying archetypes of feminine containment, I have shown that von Max's formal pigment choices for *The Christian Martyr* disallow such a strictly punitive interpretation.

IV. "Cultural Blindness" to Feminine Death

Although the sight of crucified women and cadaverous invalids swathed in pale bedclothes might today seem rather odd subject matter, they were by no means unusual thematic devices during

20 Nead, *The Female Nude*, 20.



FIG. 5. ALBERT VON KELLER, "IN THE MOONLIGHT,"
1894

the nineteenth century. At the time, the constructions of femininity were a complex imbrication of physical debility and sexual anxiety, taking root amidst a context of high mortality and soaring epidemics of infectious diseases,²¹ resulting in a sort of "morbification of female sexuality."²² From the sheer volume of images of ill and dying women that proliferated in the latter half of the nineteenth century, it seems clear that the female body, and the female corpse in particular, was a highly charged site of hygienic and sexual anxieties. The drowned corpse of Ophelia was reworked time and time again by leading artists of the day such as George Frederick Watts, James Bertrand, and John Everett Millais [fig.7]. As Brahm Dijkstra wryly notes, "Inevitably a subject which could stir so much public enthusiasm was to remain a favorite with painters. Pale and dead [women] floated toward oblivion year after year at the Royal Academy..." [fig. 7].²³ Feminine

21 Alan Swedlund, *Shadows in the Valley: A Cultural History of Illness, Death, and Loss in New England, 1840-1916* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010), 2.

22 In her study of the corset, Leigh Summers remarks that "Victorian society coped with the frequency of mortality, and its emotional and psychic toll, by routinely 'othering' death and its management to the feminine. Understanding the Victorian obsession with illness and death, and women's socially situated positioning to it, is integral in identifying... the morbification of female sexuality..." Leigh Summers, *Bound to Please: A History of the Victorian Corset* (New York: Berg, 2001), 123.

23 Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siecle Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 41.

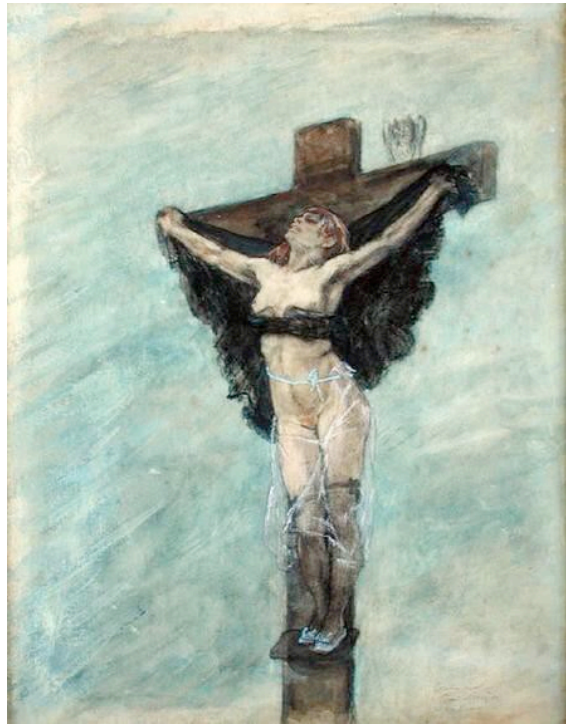


FIG. 6. FELICIEN ROPS, "STUDY FOR THE TEMPTATION OF ST. ANTHONY," N.D.

death, as represented in art, expiated the sexually profligate, diseased, or unbalanced woman. As Bronfen notes, the "threat" of uncontained femininity is "recuperated by representation..."²⁴ Bronfen, commenting on this nineteenth century superflux of dead ladies memorialized in paint, notes that "...representations of female death work on the principle of being so excessively obvious that they escape observation. Because they are so familiar, so evident, we are culturally blind to the ubiquity of representations of feminine death."²⁵ In the following sections, I aim to amend this "cultural blindness" by closely examining two dominant strains of feminine death as they relate to visual art: the passive figure of the tubercular female invalid, and the active figure of the syphilitic prostitute.

V. Passivity and Invalidism

Paintings abound of the wan, passive, consumptive invalid, romantically and slowly dying in her bed [fig. 8], leading to what has been identified as a veritable "Cult of Invalidism."²⁶ Leigh Summers, in her extensive social history of the corset, observes that the feminization of tuberculosis depended upon the understanding of the female body's unbounded, fluid borders. She comments that "consumption's othering to the feminine was... evidenced by the general belief that the disease was... identified as a disease of liquids and of disintegration, febrilization,

24 Ibid, xii.

25 Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body*, 4.

26 Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, 25-35.

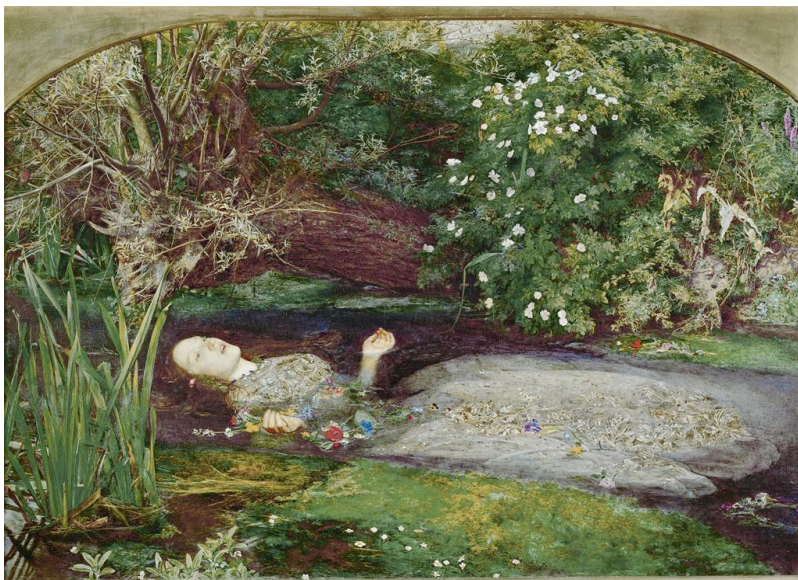


JAMES BERTRAND, "VIRGINIA," 1869

FIG. 7. THE "DROWNED WOMAN"
CRAZE.



GEORGE FREDERICK WATTS, "FOUND DROWNED"



SIR JOHN EVERETT MILAIS, "OPHELIA," 1851

and de-materialization of bodily fluids, specifically mucus and blood. Each of these traits and effusions can be, and was, perceived as a biological function of the female body.”²⁷

This conflation of symptom and gender echoes our guiding principle of feminine abjection, as the diseased female body defies containment. To reframe the feminization of consumption in Lynda Nead’s words, the “marginal matter” of mucus and blood literally “transgress[es] the boundary... If the female body is defined as lacking containment and issuing filth and pollution from its faltering outlines and broken surface, then the classical forms of art perform a kind of magical repairing of the orifices and tears.”²⁸ The artistic treatment of the invalid during this period acts as the mechanism for containment. This entanglement of the traits and symptoms of disease with the naturally functioning female body is a leitmotif that I will explore in the following examination of the feminization of syphilis.

VI. The Contagious Woman

The figure of the prostitute functioned as a doubly vulnerable figure, understood both as a sexually profligate woman and as the prime infecting agent of society’s most widespread and troubling incurable diseases. Richard Bernheimer cites the socio-sexual conditions of women in the nineteenth century, noting that the medical establishment pathologized female sexuality, seeing it as “the vehicle not only of hysteria but also of other hereditary diseases.” The rampant spread of syphilis, in turn, “strengthened the imagined link between active female sexuality—embodied in the prostitute, thought to be the primary source of contamination—and male destruction.”²⁹ Post-colonialist scholar Phillipa Levine echoes Bernheimer’s observation when she notes that “... attempts to control venereal contagion rested largely on the control of female prostitution as the assumed concomitant, and indeed origin, of venereal affliction.”³⁰

Though beyond the main scope of this study, this idea of the female body as inherently ill and disordered has an extremely long genesis in Western culture. Post-colonialist scholar Nandini Bhattachaya summarizes these abjecting impulses of the feminine when she observes that

“...the female body has always been perceived as dangerous and corruptive within certain western contexts. Beginning with the biblical narrative, a large body of spiritual, social, medical, political, and other forms of writing in the west have been concerned with the lore of women’s bodies, about their danger and their putridity, their sinfulness and their morally debilitating potential...”³¹

In the nineteenth century, the political and medical discourse that shaped the “lore of women’s bodies” largely focused on syphilis. The topic of the extensive body of state-administrated

27 Summers goes on to note that “TB was also considered by several leading doctors to be a result both of excessive passion and the repression of overwhelming desire, characteristics which—by the late 19th century—were identified with female sexuality.” Summers, *Bound to Please*, 138-139.

28 Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity, and Sexuality*, 6-7.

29 Richard Bernheimer, *Decadent Subjects* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 105.

30 Phillipa Levine, in “Venereal Disease, Prostitution, and the Politics of Empire: The Case of British India,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 4, No. 4, Apr., 1994), 580.

31 Nandini Bhattachaya. *Reading the Splendid Body*. (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1998), 15-16.



Leopoldo Romanach, "The Convalescent," ca. 1911



Frank Dicksee, "The Crisis," ca. 1891.



Giovanni Segantini, "Rose Leaf," 1891.



Carl Larsson, "The Invalid," 1899

FIG. 8 A COLLECTION OF CONSUMPTIVES.

regulations and systems of surveillance that attempted to control prostitutes (and by explicit extension, the spread of venereal disease) was extremely vast. However, an overview of the legislation implemented during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries throughout nearly every nation in Europe and the Colonies is extremely helpful to understand how deeply the idea of the impure, contagious, sexual female was embedded in Western culture. In France, state regulation of prostitution had been the norm since the late eighteenth century.³² Alexandre Parent-Duchatelet's influential 1836 study *Prostitution in the City of Paris: Public Hygiene, Morals, and Administration* explicitly linked syphilis to prostitution, and indeed suggested that the disease was an inseparable condition of prostitution (which was essentially true at the time).³³ In Prussia the state regulation of prostitution was well-established; after Germany unified, the 1871 Penal Code provided for prostitution as long as working women registered with the city vice squad.³⁴ In Britain, The Contagious Diseases Acts of 1866 and 1886, the so-called "containment acts," applied specifically to military towns and sought to control the extremely high rates of venereal disease amongst the soldiery. The international ubiquity of these regulations helps reconstruct the socio-historical context of female sexuality which von Max's images both reflected and participated in.

Though the laws in each city and nation varied, they tended to follow the same pattern of arrest, mandatory gynecological examinations, and compulsory containment of afflicted women in lock hospitals and sanitariums. Additionally, women suspected of being prostitutes who refused a medical examination were subject to penalty and imprisonment, with the Lock Hospitals functioning as an arm of the penal system.³⁵ It is important to note that registered prostitutes were not detained for being sex workers, but were imprisoned when found to have contagious venereal diseases—making the state of "being ill" in itself a punishable offense.³⁶ In the decades before sound medical treatments were available and before hospitals and prisons were properly designed with an eye to basic sanitation, such containment measures were often little better than death sentences for afflicted women.³⁷

Under these laws, the body of the prostitute was made to bear nearly all responsibility for the spread of infectious venereal diseases.³⁸ It is not unusual to encounter language such as this passage found in Parent-Duchatelet's aforementioned 1836 study: "Prostitutes... make

32 In fact, this regulationism continued in France until 1960. Andrew Aisenberg, "Syphilis and Prostitution: A Regulatory Couplet in 19th Century France," in *Sex, Sin, & Suffering: Venereal Disease & European Society Since 1870*, ed. Roger Davidson and Lesley A. Hall (London: Routledge, 1991), 15.

33 Ibid, 17.

34 Lutz D. H. Sauerteig, "The Fatherland is in Danger, Save the Fatherland!: Venereal Disease, Sexuality, and Gender in Imperial and Weimar Germany," in *Sex, Sin, and Suffering: Venereal Disease and European Society Since 1870*, ed. Roger Davidson and Lesley A. Hall, (London: Routledge, 1991), 76.

35 "Any woman subjected to examination and refusing to be examined, or quitting hospital before being discharged therefrom, or disobeying hospital regulations, is liable, on summary conviction, to imprisonment with or without hard labour." Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons. "Select Committee on the Contagious Diseases Acts," in *Report from the Select Committee on Contagious Diseases Acts, together with the proceedings of the committee, minutes of evidence, and appendix, 1882* (London: House of Commons, 1882), pp. v.

36 As a tangential aside, while it might seem outrageous and arcane to legally punish someone for having a disease, the fact is that there are still laws on the book as of 2015 in the USA that make being HIV positive a felony for sex workers.

37 Claude Quétel, *History of Syphilis* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 211-247.

38 Ramon Castejon-Bolea, in his study of venereal disease legislation in Spain, succinctly notes that "...the origins of regulationism must be sought within the Augustinian tradition, which established male fornication with women prostitutes as a lesser evil and a social necessity for the containment of potentially disruptive male lust." Ramon Castejon-Bolea, 62. Ramon Castejon-Bolea, "Doctors, Social Medicine and VD in Late 19th and Early 20th Century Spain," in *Sex, Sin, and Suffering: Venereal Disease and European Society Since 1870*, ed. Roger Davidson & Lesley A. Hall (London: Routledge, 1991), 62.

themselves unworthy of... freedom by debasing themselves to their unbridled passions and all the excesses of a dissolute life. Freedom in this case amounts to licentiousness, and licentiousness destroys society.”³⁹ The following pronouncement, found in a commissioned report from 1871 on the efficacy of the British legislation, reveals the deeply gendered bias such regulationism codified into law: “There is no comparison to be made between prostitutes and the men who consort with them. With the one sex [the woman] the offense is committed as a matter of gain; with the other [the man] it is an irregular indulgence of a natural impulse.”⁴⁰ These “containment acts” (an apt term when viewed with Nead’s aesthetic containment theories in mind) specifically provided for the regulation of the female sexual body and avoided the question of regulating the behavior of the sexually active male soldier, colonist, and civilian. While the existence of such state-controlled regulations would seem to imply a certain amount of social acceptance of sex work, public opinion on state-controlled prostitution was divided and regulationism eventually proved very controversial, leading to the rise of feminist-led prostitution-abolitionist movements in the early decades of the 20th century.

Long before the underlying pathogenic and bacteriological factors of venereal disease were discovered,⁴¹ medical writings “...tightened the equation between prostitute and pox by describing the whore’s body (syphilitic or not) as inherently diseased and abnormal... Women were sick by definition and therefore subject to medical surveillance.”⁴² Mary Douglas, in her seminal 1966 anthropological treatise *Purity and Danger*, notes that the margins of the body can function as a microcosm of the larger body of a culture. Matter and fluids that transgress these margins are particularly suspect polluting agents.⁴³ Douglas notes that within the procreative female body, the permeability of bodily margins is particularly fraught with patriarchal anxieties about the pollution of bloodlines, caste, and paternal genetic inheritance.

Moreover, the margins of the female sexual body, by nature permeable and penetrable, construct the female herself as a border. Under this model, femaleness itself can be extrapolated as a pollution danger.⁴⁴ Infectious agents were thought to always lie dormant within the bodily fluids of women, awaiting transmission to unsuspecting men via putrefied menstrual blood.⁴⁵ Another widely-held theory postulated that leftover semen collecting within the woman’s body

39 Alexandre Parent-Duchatelet, in *Prostitution in the City of Paris: Public Hygiene, Morals, and Administration*, (Paris: Chez Bailliere, 1836), chapter 5. As quoted in Quétel, *History of Syphilis*, 212.

40 Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons. “Royal Commission upon the Administration and Operation of the Contagious Disease Acts: Volume i: The Report C. 408,” (London, HMSO, 1871), §60. As quoted in Lesley A. Hall, “Venereal Diseases and Society in Britain, from the Contagious Diseases Acts to the National Health Service,” in *Sex, Sin, and Suffering: Venereal Disease and European Society Since 1870*, ed. Roger Davidson & Lesley A. Hall (London: Routledge, 1991), 121.

41 It was not until 1879 that the germ that causes Gonorrhoea was discovered, and not until 1905 that the bacterial agent that causes syphilis was isolated. Linda E. Merians, “Introduction,” in *The Secret Malady*, ed. Linda E. Merians, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 6.

42 Kathryn Norberg, “From Courtesan to Prostitute: Mercenary Sex and Venereal Disease, 1730-1802, in *The Secret Malady*, ed. Linda E. Merians (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 44.

43 “The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious... We cannot possibly interpret rituals concerning excreta, breast milk, saliva, and the rest unless we are prepared to see in the body a symbol of society, and to see the powers and dangers credited to social structure reproduced in small on the human body.” Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966), 115.

44 “...All margins are dangerous... Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins. We should expect the margins of the body to symbolize its especially vulnerable points.” Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 121.

45 “This idea that women were the source of venereal disease draws on a long tradition in Western thought in which women were seen as abnormal, deformed, or diseased.” Mary Spongberg, *Feminizing Venereal Disease* (New York: NYU Press, 1997), 2.

interacted with subsequent male sexual partners, “making the coitus impure and ultimately diseased.”⁴⁶ Not only did such theories position contaminating agents as permanently residing within the sexually active female body, they also explicitly marked the woman with more than one male sex partner as particularly infectious. The tell-tale symptoms of venereal disease such as sores and secretions tended to be more apparent on the male body. By virtue of feminine anatomy, these same symptoms were inherently *occulted*, hidden from view, and the female body, prostituted or not, was seen as perfidious and dangerous. This incursion into the regulation of venereal disease in the nineteenth century is essential to understanding the social and political stakes involved in the visual art of the time. As I will illustrate in the following sections, the hidden anxieties that undergirded constructions of pathologized female sexuality were at least partially revealed in images that employed the occult feminine as their subject.

VII. Punitive Images of Death versus the Evasive Female Corpse

All of this brings us back to the problematics of the sexualized, moribund female in the visual art and popular culture of the nineteenth century. The mythos of the willfully deceitful, infectious streetwalker was reflected repeatedly in popular novels⁴⁷ and print media, and was also activated by century-old inscriptions of the rapidly evolving industrial city as a hotbed of sin and corruption.⁴⁸ Claude Quétel, in his *History of Syphilis*, notes that the last decades of the 1800s saw the emergence of a new genre of popular fiction, “in which the pox and prostitution are associated on every page.”⁴⁹

Felicien Rops, the prolific Belgian contemporary of von Max who lived and worked in Paris, best exemplifies the sort of art produced under the ambivalent influence of the extreme anxiety and desire provoked by the sexualized female. His artistic output is beset by recurring themes of the demonic succubus and syphilitic prostitute, the “femme fatale” streetwalker, whose sole purpose in life seems to be to lead man to his venereal doom. In his 1878 etching *Parodie Humaine* [fig. 9], a well-dressed man follows a prostitute dressed in a threadbare shawl. Glancing back bewitchingly towards him, she holds a smiling mask in front of her real face, a death's-head. The man cannot see beyond her mask, and available sexuality, to the fate she holds in store for him. An allegorical reading of such an image as prostitute-as-contagious-agent is hardly a stretch.

An etching from 1888, *Diaboli Virtus in Lumbis* (which loosely translates as “The Devil’s Virtue is in the Loins”), is ripe for a similarly allegorical reading [fig. 10]. The dead center of the image is occupied by a woman’s ample derriere, her body turned away from the viewer. Above her tantalizing, partially unlaced corset, the flesh of her body erodes, her arms and head reduced to bare bones. An oblique view of her left breast reveals it as still somehow fully intact. A thin pair of wings sprouts from her skeletal shoulder blades as she gazes towards the decapitated head of a man that she holds aloft in her right hand. In her left hand, she holds an unstrung bow, a quiver of Eros’s arrows strapped below her hips. These classical emblems of love, held by the

46 Susan P. Conner, “The Pox in 18th Century France,” in *The Secret Malady*, ed. Linda E. Merians (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 19.

47 Claude Quétel goes on to quote a private letter from the novelist Charles-Louis Philippe, who had been doing “field research” for his novel: “Every prostitute has syphilis, and generally catches it soon after entering the profession. Then she walks the streets at night, laughing to attract men and give them her disease.” Quétel, *History of Syphilis*, 221.

48 “In 18th century thinking, the whore was a creature of the city who wallowed in luxury and displayed a sweet but deceitful face.” Norberg, “From Courtesan to Prostitute: Mercenary Sex and Venereal Disease, 1730-1802,” 40.

49 Quétel, *History of Syphilis*, 220.

skeletal woman, foreclose any other reading than that of venereal death. A dead, barren tree fills the background, while the bottom margin of the image features moth's wings straddling pelvic bones. Here, Rops cleverly appropriates the vanitas symbol of the skull and replaces it with the sexualized bones of the female pelvis. This image might as well represent the Angel of Syphilitic Death herself. These two images provide just two examples of Rops's prolific oeuvre—to trace every instance in which he implicates the female with death and disease would be an exhaustive endeavor indeed!

These popular and widely distributed etchings of Rops's are but a small sample of the kinds of images that circulated, and it is amongst this socio-historical context of venereal contagion that von Max's images of the dead female proliferate. The differences in representation between the two artists are vast. I contend that for von Max, in contrast to Felicien Rops, the female body in stages of death was not necessarily a site for the punishment of female sexuality, nor does it represent the fear of venereal contagion, but rather the moribund female functions as a transitional site between life and what comes after. It has been noted that for von Max, with his many inquiries into natural sciences, evolution, and the occult, his investigations into Spiritualism can be seen as "the final consequence of human evolution, [where] the corpse could serve as the nodal point for his studies both in natural history and in the invisible, parapsychic aspects of human existence."⁵⁰ I argue that von Max's painterly treatments of the female corpse work to destabilize the classical inscription of the dead female as site of sexual anxiety and punishment. Von Max's female corpses make for an evasive imaging practice that is not saturated with the misogynistic sexual anxieties of so many of his art-producing peers.

VIII. The Spiritualist Medium

Von Max was not unique in his converging interests in the occult and the natural sciences. An important point to note is that rational, scientific inquiry and a belief in the supernatural were not diametrically opposed in the nineteenth century, as we might assume today. Alex Owen, in her study of Victorian Spirit-mediums, notes that

"many believers argued that spiritualism provided scientific evidence for the spirit's survival after death, and did not perceive science to be inimical to spiritualist beliefs. Indeed, early adherents held out the fervent hope that science would prove their case, and sought to establish both the survival of the spirit and its materiality through strict adherence to empirical method."⁵¹

Contemporary sources confirm this intersection of the occult with rational scientific method. Arthur Lillie, biographer of the theosophist Madame Blavatsky, repeats an anonymous practitioner's explicit definition of Spiritualism, circa 1895:

"Spiritism is a *science*. That is its fundamental character. It distinguishes it one side from the current religions which are based on authority and on the other side from that science which leans on *prior* principles to deduce consequences more or less logical and all more

⁵⁰ Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body*, 4.

⁵¹ Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), pp v.

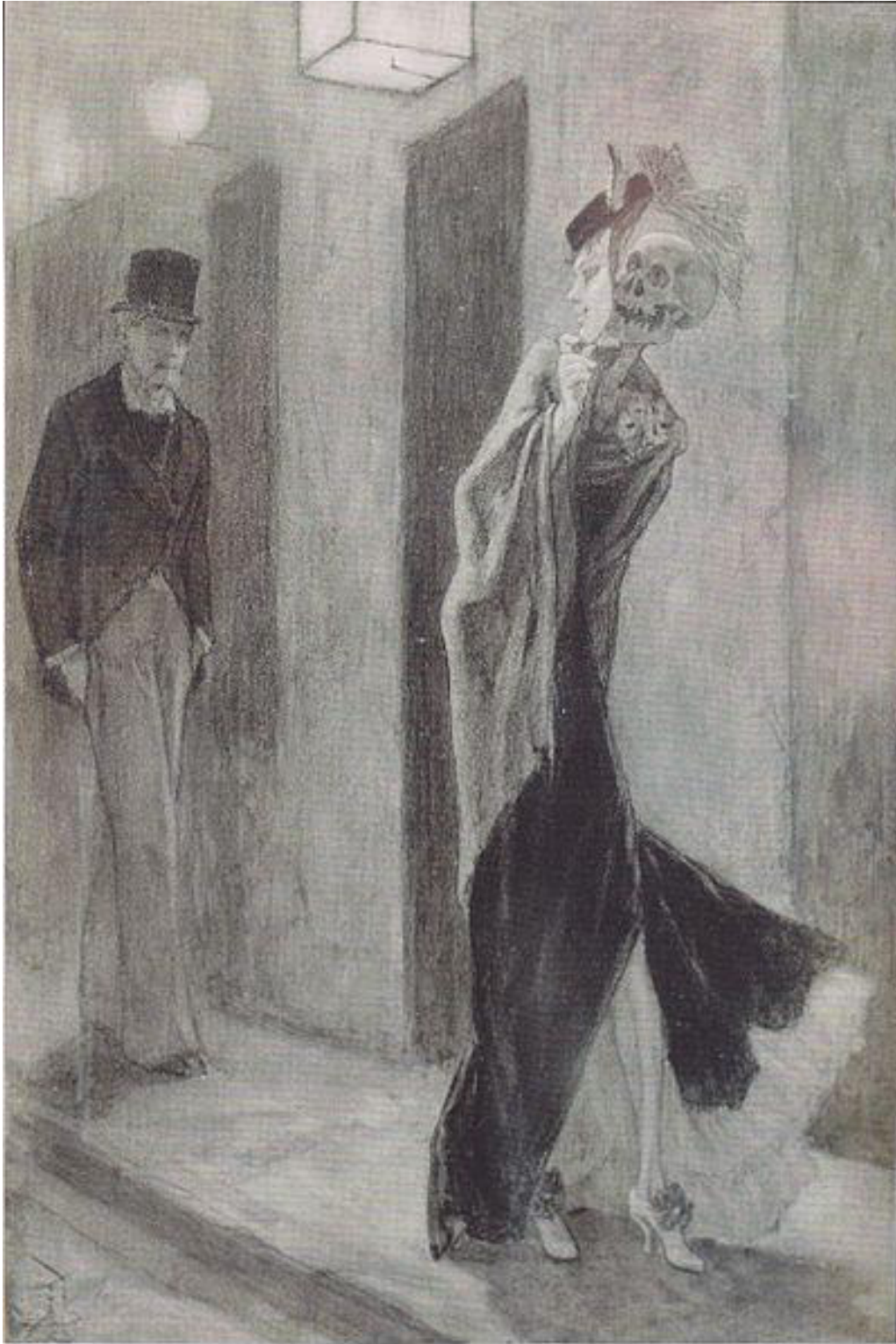


FIG. 9. FELICIEN ROPS, "PARODIE HUMAINE," 1878.

or less false... A flood of evidence has established that... 1. The agents which produce these phenomena are the spirits of the dead, 2. The soul survives the body, 3. If the soul survives the body, the conclusions of science that the soul is a resultant of the organism is disproved.”⁵²

Many such earnest debates proliferated at the time that couched Spiritualism between science and faith, trying to bridge the two. I will return to Victorian occultism in the next section.

Von Max’s rationalist, Spiritualist perspective on the function of the corpse as an intermediary corporeal state leads us to his imaging of mystics and mediums. In *The Ecstatic Virgin Anna Katherina Emmerick* [fig. 11] from 1885, von Max depicts a troubled clairvoyant who had died in 1824. The perspective provides a frontal point of access, with space receding into the dusky corner of the room. This oblique perspective pushes the female figure to the foreground, while the cropping of her lower body and the perpendicular sightline seem to perch the viewer on the corner of her bed, implicating the spectator in the scene. The subject sits upright under the bedclothes, eyes fixed on a crucifix on her lap, her stigmatic hands brought to her bandaged temples as though in pain. Her gaze seems impenetrable—focused on inward visions, her eyes turned away from the viewer and not even discernable beneath the shadow cast by her brow. A candle, placed on the bedstand by her right elbow, is the only source of warmth in the painting. Her body is swathed in white raiment and white bedclothes. In many of von Max’s paintings, this odd, bandage-like raiment serves as a signifier of feminine purity, a leit-motif that identifies the wearer as a body poised between the worlds of spirit and matter, life and death. The nearly monotonic palette of white wrappings and muted green walls serves to foreground her cadaverous skin. Von Max, in his formal technique of building up the skin with discernable traceries of veins and using grey, green, and yellow pigments, uses the skin of his female subjects to signify their status as liminal bodies—bodies hovering just this side of animation. This liminality foregrounds their status as almost privileged figures: if the states of animation and life foreclose the knowledge of the afterlife, it seems that von Max’s dying mystics are poised right on the threshold of possessing this hidden, occulted knowledge, which is by default denied to the living.

As with *The Christian Martyr*, this image can be couched within popular artistic themes of the day, the “Cult of Invalidism”⁵³ that informed countless images of the passively dying female body. By posing his subjects in bed in attitudes of suffering, it could be argued that Von Max subjugates the female body by means of the patriarchal artistic containment that Lynda Nead mentions. However, by way of his unusual formal choices and application of pigment, von Max subverts the passivity of the invalid subgenre by painting women in another sort of uncontained borderland— in the biologically delimited state of decay. I will return to this concept later in this thesis as I examine more examples of von Max’s treatment of the occult and moribund feminine.

IX. Victorian Occultism: An Overview

Before delving into a sustained analysis of von Max’s representations of the occult female, a basic understanding of the historical context regarding Victorian occultism will help in appreciating

52 Arthur Lillie, *Madame Blavatsky and her “Theosophy:” A Study* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1895), 201.

53 Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, 25-35.



FIG. 10. FELICIEN ROPS, "DIABOLI VIRTUS IN LUM-BIS," 1888.

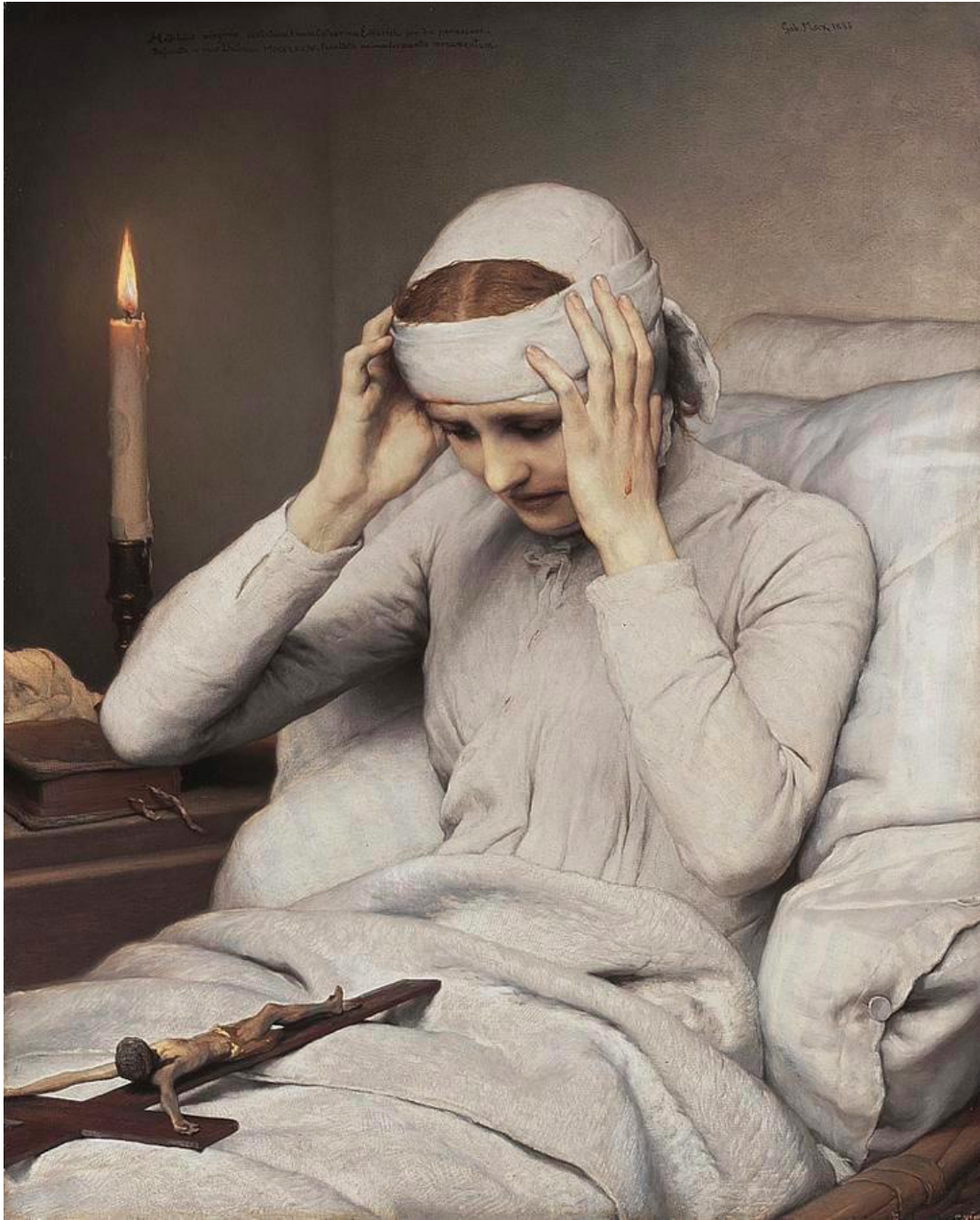


FIG. 11. GABRIEL VON MAX, "THE ECSTATIC VIRGIN ANNA KATHARINA EMMERICK," 1885.

the stakes involved in such images. Occultism flourished in Europe and America in the nineteenth century. The mass proliferation of various cults, societies, and sects that developed from the 1850s to the turn of the century makes generalizations difficult, as they differed from one another quite a bit. One point that *can* be argued is they all, to some extent, reimagined, and in some cases defied, normative patriarchal Judeo-Christian ritual practices.⁵⁴ The traditional structure of the Christian church had been undergoing “religious revivalism” and fragmentation since the earliest decades of the 1800s.⁵⁵ The timing of this proliferation of variant forms of spirituality in the nineteenth century has often been seen as a set of reactions against modernity, the rapid industrialization and alienation of urban life, and, not insignificantly, changing power structures within the gendered spheres of home and labor. It has been succinctly noted that “occultism flourishes... whenever disruptions of existing hegemonic structures become acute.”⁵⁶ Feminists, both male and female alike, tended to be attracted to occultism, as it offered the utopic opportunity to escape the Victorian model of docile, domestic Christianity and establish new modes of spirituality not girded by patriarchal gender disparities.⁵⁷ Alison Butler has noted that what she terms “plebeian spiritualism” and “middle-class spiritualism” allowed for class-appropriate activism.⁵⁸ Spiritualist societies that catered to the lower, working classes were more likely to align themselves with the disruptive tenets of socialism, atheism, and feminism, whereas middle-class or bourgeois spiritualism did not refute Christianity and agitated for social causes like prohibition. This sort of flexibility and a lack of rigorously defined tenets contributed to the diverse appeal of Spiritualism.

The performative aspects of modern occultism led to a mass market secularization of new forms of spirituality, with charismatic, publicity-seeking practitioners dating back to Anton Mesmer in eighteenth-century Europe. Leading figures such as Madame Blavatsky,⁵⁹ Annie Besant, Aleister Crowley, and countless lesser-known mesmerists and spirit mediums travelled between Europe, Asia, and the United States to proselytize and popularize their various societies and fraternal orders. Engagement with occult rituals like séances and “materializations”⁶⁰ were somehow not seen as a direct breach of propriety or gentility. However, this is not to say that they escaped criticism altogether. Some contemporary commentators, such as the German writer Max Nordeau, strongly associated Spiritualism with decadence and decline. In his lengthy tome

54 Ironically, Spiritualism, like many of the new Evangelical Christian sects that were developing in the US, depended on the Victorian patriarchal ideal of “True Womanhood”—an idea that women were purer, more innocent, and better suited to be vessels for the spirit (or “God’s word,” as the case may be). Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 12.

55 Alex Owen points out that, “officially born in mid-nineteenth century America in a region that had already witnessed decades of religious revivalism, sectarianism, and social experimentation, modern spiritualism developed amidst an atmosphere of optimism, radical ideas, and democratic principles.” Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 4.

56 Diana Basham, *The Trial of Woman: Feminism and the Occult Sciences in Victorian Literature and Society* (New York: NYU Press, 1992), 90.

57 “Partly due to its potential to speak to an emerging range of positions on sexual politics... Occultism was itself bound up with a spiritualized vision of social change that called upon those ideals of regeneration and self-fulfillment that were deeply attractive to feminists of the period, and offered a ‘new’ religiosity capable of outstripping the conventional Victorian association of femininity with a domesticated spirituality.” Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 87.

58 Alison Butler, *Victorian Occultism and the Making of Modern Magic* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 167.

59 Blavatsky founded the hugely influential Theosophical Society and was instrumental in bringing appropriated strains of Buddhist and Hindu spiritualism to the West. Both von Max and von Keller belonged to Theosophy societies.

60 Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker, “A Cachet of Strangeness,” in *Seance: Albert Von Keller and the Occult*, ed. Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker and Gian Caspar Bott (Seattle: Frye Art Museum, 2010), 22. (As a side note, materializations of “ectoplasm” were thought to be organic material from “the other side” that manifested from the body of the spirit-medium—an entire genre of photography was devoted to capturing—and debunking!— this phenomena! For further reading, see *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult*, by Clement Cheroux et. al.)

Degeneration, from 1893, Nordeau colorfully described the “mystic” as someone who

“troubles what is clear, and makes the transparent opaque... He... who sees the world through the eyes of a mystic, gazes into a black heaving mass, in which he can always find what he desires... because he actually perceives nothing at all... It comes that in most cases mysticism takes on a decidedly erotic colouring, and the mystic, if he interprets his inchoate liminal presentations, always tends to ascribe to them an erotic import.”⁶¹

Despite such gloomy criticism, Spiritualism and occult rituals remained extremely popular and were freely engaged in across all classes throughout America and Europe. Leading intellectuals such as Tennyson, Dickens, Thackeray, Yeats, and the Barrett-Brownings⁶² were known to engage in various occult activities, which only propounded their popular appeal.

Furthermore, massive epidemics of cholera, tuberculosis, and other infectious diseases ravaged communities on both sides of the Atlantic, and average lifespans did not extend much past 40 years of age—mostly due to extremely high rates of infant mortality.⁶³ It was amidst this societal context that people sought comfort in Spiritualism. The idea that one could contact dead loved ones through spirit mediums proved indeed a small consolation during a time when death was so abundant and mourning was a carefully codified cultural rite.⁶⁴

X. Ambivalent Gender Politics of Practical Occult Societies

Spiritualism, the belief that one could make contact with the spirits of the dead through the facilitation of a “Spirit-medium,” was but one of the many new occult practices taking root at this time. It was unique in its gender politics. The Spiritualist medium, nearly always a female,⁶⁵ inhabited an uncertain, liminal space in Victorian society. Diana Basham notes that “where the stereo-typical image of the male mesmerist and his passive female somnambule re-informed the gendered power-structures encoded in English law, Spiritualism reversed them,” with the female medium accorded “the active role of penetrating the minds of her audience.”⁶⁶ Conversely, the idea of the medium as a passive receptacle for transmissions from spirits and ghosts was deeply rooted in the ideals of Victorian womanhood.⁶⁷ A rare first-hand account, found in a

61 Max Nordeau, *Degeneration* (1893. Reprint, London: William Heinemann, 1920), 59-61.

62 Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 20.

63 Swedlund, *Shadows in the Valley*, 2.

64 “Grief sometimes led the bereaved to explore spiritualism. In the mid- to late 19th century, mesmerism and the consulting of spirit mediums came into fashion in the United States. Belief that one might contact a deceased family member through a spirit medium offered the prospect of consolation in learning the deceased’s fate in the afterlife and knowing that his or her soul was at peace.” *Ibid*, 99.

65 “The centrality of women to the Spiritualist movement is perhaps explicable by the fact that they too, like the spirits, existed within an uncertain medium whose dimensions were simultaneously literal and metaphoric. Without legal rights or representation, they had their own metaphoric power in the vague but pervasive concept of ‘female influence,’ an influence that the spirits themselves seemed eager to enhance and promote.” Basham, *The Trial of Woman*, 108.

66 Basham goes on to note, however, that, “the legacy of mesmerism, however, only permitted her to do so providing she herself exhibited the symptoms of the profoundest trance.” *Ibid*, 127.

67 “Victorian literary texts concerned with “Occult” phenomena... provided an important site for the discussion of gender concepts and gender roles... Precisely because the meaning of the term “occult” as something hidden, the

privately printed Theosophical pamphlet dating from 1897, highlights the extreme sensitivity and receptivity ascribed to the female Spirit-medium. Countess Constance Wachtmeister relates,

“I have passed through all the different stages of mediumship... [Spirit-mediums] are compelled to lead a life amongst all kinds of persons, a promiscuous environment where the magnetism is of a lower order and the vibrations inharmonious. These work upon the medium in a harmful way, [her] organization being so sensitive that she is like an instrument upon which play all the vibrations around [her], each one fluttering and setting her sensitive organism into commotion, swaying either for good or for evil, so that perfect harmony and peace are absolutely necessary for mediums.”⁶⁸

The female medium, in a state of somnambulistic trance, was symbolically deadened in order to commune with the spirits of the departed, and “the boundary between the here and the beyond blurred.”⁶⁹ As Alex Owen notes, “female passivity, the leit-motif of powerful mediumship, also positioned women as individuals without social power.”⁷⁰

However, even though passivity was central, the female medium as subject can also be seen as contravening social norms and beginning to articulate a “third space” for women— a space that depicts women as in possession of an interior life that does not conform to Victorian gender politics. Marlene Tromp asserts that, in practice, the séance circle was a rowdy space of hetero-social subversion, where, “when channeling ghosts, young woman mediums might radically violate social codes by drinking shots of liquor, punching annoying sitters, or flirting unabashedly with both married and single men in the room.”⁷¹ Additionally, the very nature of the Spiritualist trance allowed female mediums to cultivate a psychic space that was by definition ungovernable, “occult,” and interiorized. To refer to one of my guiding theories, that of containment, the female medium, entranced, can be seen as uncontained, slipping beyond the borders of social mores.

In sum, the socio-cultural phenomena of the female medium was not without complications: because it depended upon hegemonic ideas of female passivity and receptivity, Spiritualism allowed women to enact transgressive forms of behavior and assert their “feminine influences” as long as they were (supposedly) in a trance state and therefore not responsible for their actions.⁷² This ambivalent, uncontained space that the Spiritualist medium occupied in society became reenacted in the images that von Max produced.

XI. Fin-de-Siècle Fantasies: Satanism and the Black Mass

literature associated with occultism often provided a forum for discussions that are further-reaching, more profound and more challenging than those found elsewhere in the literature concerned with the “Woman Question.” Ibid, 74.

68 Countess Constance Wachtmeister, *Spiritualism in the Light of Theosophy* (San Francisco: Mercury Print, 1897), 1.

69 Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body*, 4.

70 Alex Owen also notes that “it was generally thought that women were disposed to certain traits, qualities, and abilities which in turn dictated their proper role and sphere in life.” Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 6-10.

71 Marlene Tromp, *Altered States: Sex, Nation, Drugs, and Self-Transformation in Victorian Spiritualism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006), 5.

72 “The ultimate irony of spirit mediumship, and the measure of its adherence to proscriptive norms, lay in the fact that it operated around a fundamental power/powerlessness duality. The medium’s power lay in her ability to absent herself in order to become the vessel for spirit possession, and this was a species of power that must remain, apparently by definition, contained.” Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 11.

A second strand of occultism that flourished in the late 1800s differs from Spiritualism in that it was largely an imagined construction: the Satanic “black mass.” As with Spiritualism and other practical occult societies, this construction relied explicitly on notions of women as permeable, liminal bodies. However, in the case of the black mass, women were positioned as morally impure and thus lending themselves easily to deviant sacrilegious sexual practices, unlike the inherent purity and docility that rendered women ideal mediums under the Spiritualist model. Hugh Urban, in his study of sex magic in modern occultism, notes that the conflation of debased female sexuality and magic dates back at least to the witchcraft persecutions of the fifteenth century,⁷³ and heretical Christian sects were accused of performing variations of sacrilegious sex magic and black masses as far back as the Middle Ages. As recently as the eighteenth century in France there were some Royal scandals that involved fabulous tales of black sex magic and ritual sacrifice, which of course were never quite proven.⁷⁴ In 1895 the Catholic Church in France even published a manual, *La Revue du Diable*, responding to the perceived spread of Satanism.⁷⁵

While little evidence exists to support that Satanism or black masses occurred with any great frequency at the time, a few scattered heretical “black magic” societies garnered a great deal of attention in the 1800s. Robert Ziegler, in his study of fin-de-siècle French Satanism, offers a fascinating account of Eugene Vintras’ *Ordre de la Misericorde*, or “Order of Mercy,” which had gained a modest following by 1850. Women were allowed to be priests within this order, but “their privileged role was to suffer in the body so that the body could be transcended.”⁷⁶ The trope that seems to define the celebration of the black mass is the substitution of the altar for the nude body of a woman.⁷⁷ While there may have been only a few actual practitioners of “black mass”-like rituals, their existence seems to have pervaded and captivated the literature of the late 1800s. This popular obsession reinforced longstanding notions of woman as abject and polluted, her body positioned as the ideal receptacle for suffering and the paramount vehicle of man’s moral and corporeal abandon. This mythos of the uncontrolled, uncontained psychic state of the female mirrors the socio-medical understanding of the female body as the inherent progenitor of venereal disease.

The most lurid account of the Satanic black mass can be found in J. K. Huysmans’s popular and controversial occult novel *La-Bas*, published in France in 1891. In a particularly memorable scene, Huysmans’ protagonist/alter-ego, Durtal, accompanies his mistress, Madame Chantelouve, to a fantastic Satanic orgy, which Huysmans insisted was based on his own eyewitness account of a black mass.⁷⁸ Durtal and Madame Chantelouve head to a hotel afterward, where “she took him treacherously and obliged him to desire her.” Huysmans proceeds to construct a rather histrionic scene of feminine sexual abjection, the woman leading her male lover to his sexual and spiritual doom: “She disrobed, threw her skirts on the floor, opened wide the abominable couch, and raising her chemise in the back she rubbed her spine up and down over the coarse grain of the sheets. A look of swooning ecstasy was in her eyes and a smile of joy on her lips. She seized him, and, with ghoulish fury, dragged him into obscenities of whose existence he had never dreamed.” Madame Chantelouve’s sexual and moral abandon is accompanied by spiritual

73 Hugh Urban, *Magia Sexualis: Sex, Magic, and Liberation in Modern Western Esoterism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 37.

74 Anne Somerset, *The Affair of the Poisons* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003), 194-195.

75 Robert Ziegler, *Satanism, Magic, and Mysticism in Fin-de-Siècle France* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 15.

76 Ibid, 125.

77 Somerset, *The Affair of the Poisons*, pp 247 and 261.

78 Urban, *Magia Sexualis: Sex, Magic, and Liberation in Modern Western Esoterism*, 197.

sacrilege. “Suddenly, when he was able to escape, he shuddered, for he perceived that the bed was strewn with fragments of hosts. ‘Oh, you fill me with horror! Dress, and let’s get out of here!’”⁷⁹ This key passage positions the abject female body as the prime agent not just of bodily corruption, but of spiritual contamination as well.

Not only was Huysmans a popular novelist, he was also an art critic who wrote about and appreciated Rops’ work.⁸⁰ He was no doubt influenced as much by Rops’ images (which predate his novel by a few years) as by his own research into Satanism. Indeed, Rops’ etchings such as *Calvary* and *The Sacrifice*, both from 1888 [fig. 12] might as well be illustrations of *La-Bas*. Both etchings feature graphic images of nude women wallowing in sexual congress with demons. *The Sacrifice* is explicitly an image of the black mass, with a nude woman stretched out across an altar bearing a bas-relief of one of Rops’s inventions, the half woman/half skeleton death-angel. Rops’s death-angel serves as the prime visual topos wherein fin-de-siècle fantasies of the Satanic black mass and the diseased, sexualized, moribund female converge.

While this cursory overview of Victorian occultism does not do justice to a subject so fascinatingly vast and multi-faceted,⁸¹ it does provide crucial context for the understanding of the visual culture of von Max’s era. The dual strands of the practical occult societies of Spiritualism, and the mostly-imagined strand of Satanism and the black mass are but two expressions of these emerging theologies,⁸² both of which illuminate the images produced by von Max and his contemporaries. I return to von Max’s constructions of the occult feminine in the next section.

XII. Ailing Mystics

Von Max, like Huysmans, also spent much of his time investigating the paranormal, and was especially fascinated by modern female Christian mystics. Von Max was particularly taken with the German clairvoyant Friederike Hauffe, who had died in 1829. He visited her relatives, made a pilgrimage to the significant sites of her life, and even bought relics like her sheet and headscarf.⁸³ In *The Seeress of Prevorst in High Sleep* [fig. 13], from 1892, the mystic is positioned in a rigid, almost cataleptic state of repose—eyes shut, her right hand extending towards the viewer. Her white headscarf covers her hair and cascades over her shoulders, her body chastely covered up to the neck by a white nightgown as she rests against massive, tousled white pillows. As I noted earlier in *The Ecstatic Virgin Anna Katherina Emmerick*, this preponderance of white raiment identifies the female subject as unsullied yet unbordered. A sheaf of paper and a pencil rest in her

79 J.K. Huysmans, *La-Bas* (1891. Reprint, New York: Dover, 1972), 250-251.

80 Huysmans devoted an entire essay to Rops. Robert Ziegler asserts that “Huysmans’ meditations on Rops’ art express Decadent insecurities about the obsolescence of the aristocracy, the discrediting of religion, the emasculation of men by the virago and the gynander.” Ziegler, *Satanism, Magic, and Mysticism in Fin-de-siècle France*, 24.

81 It is also beyond the scope of my study to assert whether or not Spiritualism had any legitimacy as a ritual practice—suffice it to say, that from the numerous accounts of debunkings and scientific experiments that were carried out, the search for “the beyond” was a prime concern for people for many decades in the late 19th century and was a cultural phenomenon in and of itself, regardless of whether the practitioners of the Occult were charlatans.

82 Arthur Lillie, biographer of Madame Blavatsky, provides a helpful if tangential account of a schism within the occult community in 1895: “In Paris, a fierce war is raging between the *spiritistes* and the *occultistes*. The *spiritistes* are *occultistes* in one sense of the word, for their study is the occult world. But the *occultistes* hold that the term applies to certain secrets of magic that they alone possess. Thus, occultism, with one party, means the secrets of the next world, and occultism with the other party means certain secrets existing within this world.” Lillie, *Madame Blavatsky and her “Theosophy:” A Study*, 200.

83 She was beatified in 2004 by Pope John Paul II. Danzker, “Betailed Cousins and Phantasms of the Soul,” 40.

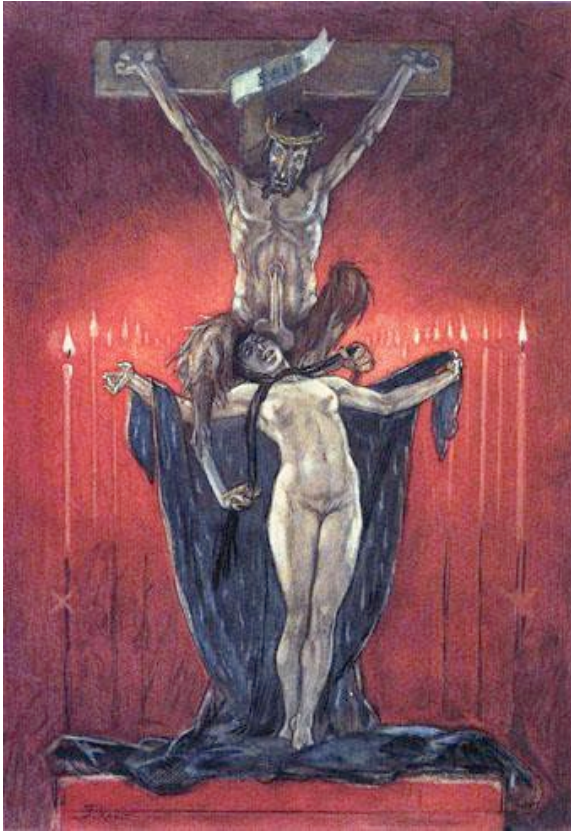
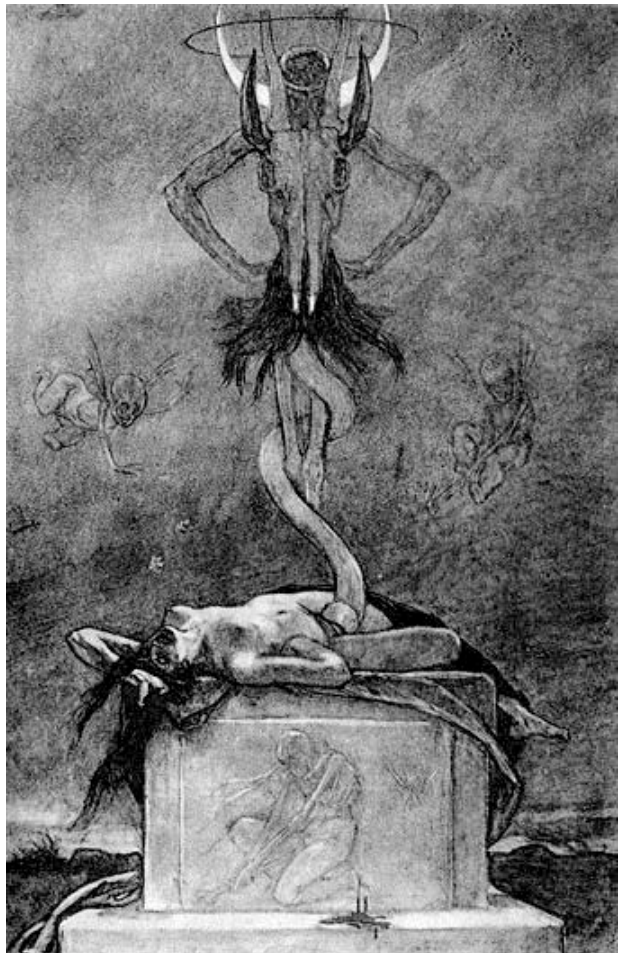


FIG. 12. FELICIEN ROPS, "CALVARY," (RIGHT), AND "THE SACRIFICE," (BELOW), BOTH 1882.



lap above the coverlet, ready to receive the transcription of her inner visions. Indeed, the topmost sheet of paper features the subtle, oblique pattern of an astrological wheel, marking the Seeress as a mystic. The pallor of her skin is built with layers of yellow and green pigment with a total absence of the feverish, erotic flush that characterizes the bulk of the invalid paintings by other artists of the time—typified by images like Giovanni Segantini's *Rose Leaf* from 1891 [see fig. 8]. The Seeress's position within the picture plane is elevated, and her supine body, cropped below the knees, is positioned above and along the central horizontal axis. This slightly perpendicular, low sightline positions the spectator as looking up at the figure, as almost kneeling beside her bed. Her pellucid, greenish skin indicates a liminal state of corporeality, and upon close inspection of her hands, the skin tones are even more mottled and grey. Were it not for the caption that indicates that she's in a trance/sleep state, the viewer would not necessarily be able to classify this female body as alive.



FIG. 13. GABRIEL VON MAX, "THE SEERESS OF PREVORST IN HIGH SLEEP," 1892

Gabriel von Max's contemporary Albert von Keller also painted many images of spiritualists, but was less interested in painting historical figures from the past. Von Keller tended to fix his gaze on living, contemporary female performers. One such painting is *Dream Dancer Madeleine* [fig. 14], from 1904. It depicts the Georgian dancer Madeleine Guipet, who von Keller saw perform in Munich and who "astonished audiences with her highly expressive, dancelike movements while in a somnambulant or hypnotic state" [fig. 15].⁸⁴ The extreme darkness of the background serves to foreground her contorted body, wrapped in the loose white robes that seem emblematic of the female medium. The cataleptic rigidity of her body, the upraised arm, and the opisthotonic arch⁸⁵ of her spine serve as additional bodily signifiers of her status as

84 Danzker, "A Cachet of Strangeness," 22.

85 A medical term for the arching of the spine and neck seen in cataleptic hysterics. Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, 101.

medium. Her darkened face, in shadow, twists into a grimace; the overall composition of this female body in the throes of Spiritualist trance does not conform to conventional eroticization of the female body in art. Her contorted body, far from passive or supine, seems to defy painterly containment and avoid the categorically sexualizing gaze. Von Keller's images of living, contemporary, non-allegorical Spiritualist women seem remarkably opposite to his treatment of the archetypal female martyr as seen in his painting *In the Moonlight*, wherein, as I mentioned earlier, the (possibly dead) female body is strapped down and invitingly exposed.

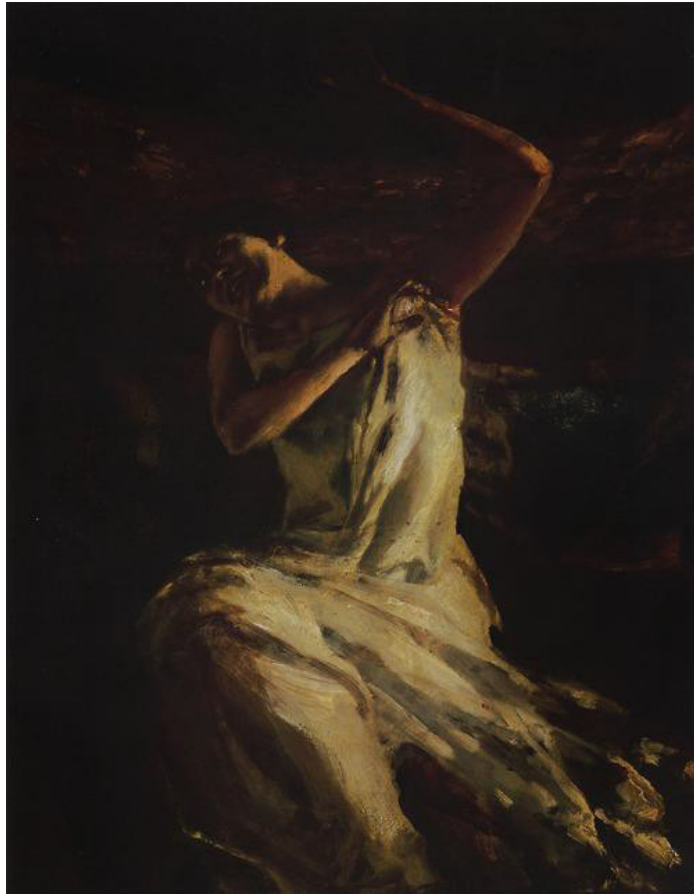


FIG. 14. ALBERT VON KELLER, "DREAM DANCER MADELEINE," 1904.

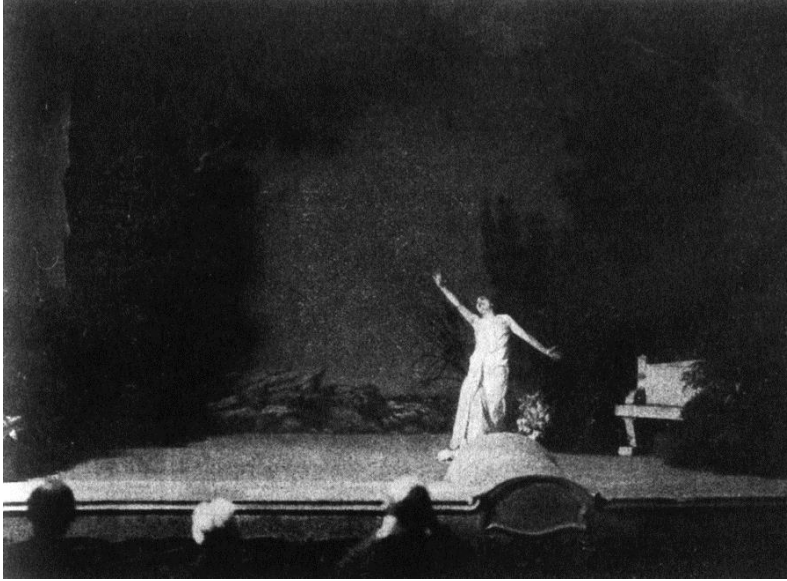


FIG. 15. UNCREDITED PHOTO, "THE DREAM DANCER MADELEINE IN MUNICH, 1904.

In *Spiritualist Telekinesis of a Bracelet* [fig. 16] from 1887, von Keller painted a practicing medium, Lina, in a hypnotized state, again with the signifier of the upraised, rigid, cataleptic arm. Von Keller often worked from photographs, and the original photograph this painting was based on has survived [fig. 17]. Gian Casper Bott is careful to point out that von Keller did not merely reproduce the photograph, but used it as a guide as he made specific compositional choices when building the painting.⁸⁶ In this work, the medium sits at a reflective table, her body, wrapped in white robes, fragmented and cut off at the abdomen. A murky, ruddy, flattened background pushes the body to the foreground. In contrast to the original photograph, her right hand is cropped by the top of the frame, while her left hand rests above the table, eerily translucent and malformed. Her eyes rill upwards and she focuses on a space somewhere beyond her hand—well beyond the limits of the frame. This gaze is both directed outward from the picture plane, yet also away from the viewer.

⁸⁶ Gian Casper Bott, "Albert von Keller: An Artist-Medium," in *Seance: Albert Von Keller and the Occult*, ed. Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker et. al (Seattle: Frye Art Museum, 2010), 32.

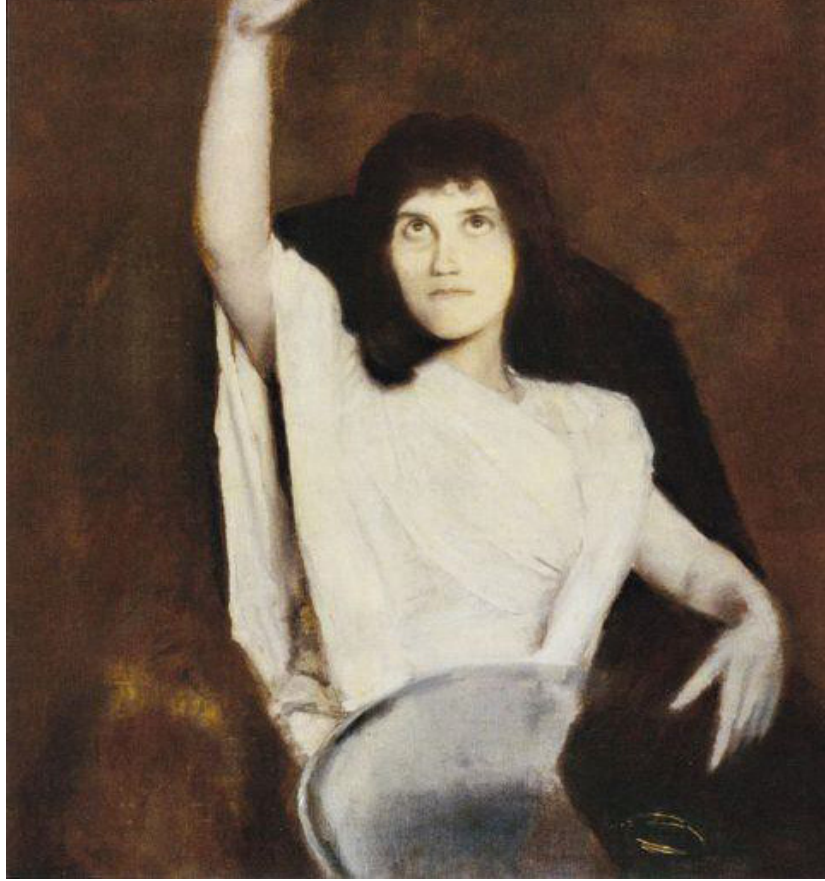


FIG. 16. ALBERT VON KELLER, "SPIRITUALIST TELEKINESIS OF A BRACELET," 1887.

It could be that von Keller and von Max, by choosing female practitioners of the Occult as their subjects, painted modern women whose inner lives not only extended beyond the margins of the frame, but beyond the margins of normative consciousness, to realms impenetrable to the masculine gaze. To refer once again to Mary Douglas's theories of pollution danger and the permeability of bodily borders, the female medium occupies an inherently sexualized border space—psychic penetrability mirroring the inherent permeability of the sexual female body. Relating these images of mediums back to one of our guiding ideas, that of visual art serving to "contain and regulate the female sexual body,"⁸⁷ the uncertain social space that Spiritualists occupied in the Victorian imaginary is reflected in these images—as a transgression beyond the frames of established gender roles and the confinements of reason and logic, as a trespassing beyond the separating borders between the dead and the living, between self and other.

87 Nead, *The Female Nude*, 6.

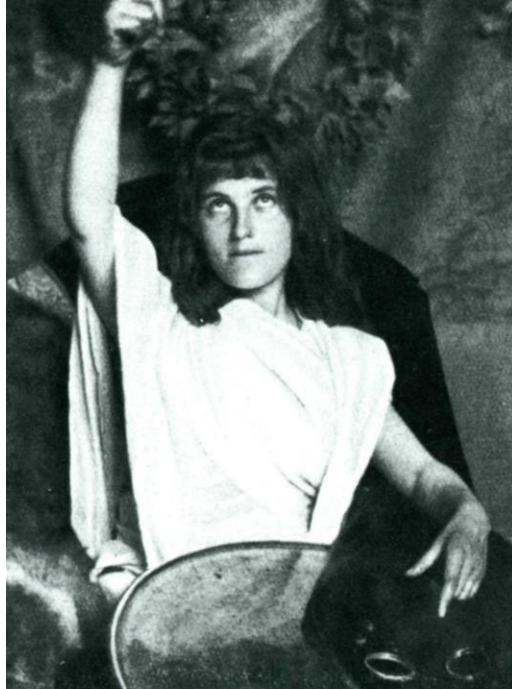


FIG. 17. MAXIMILIAN HORN, "LINA IN A POSE INDUCED BY SUGGESTION AFTER BEING PLACED IN A STATE OF HYPNOSIS (CATALEPSY) BY ALBERT VON SCHRENK-NOTZING," CA. 1887.

These occult images by von Keller and von Max could very well reinforce Victorian notions of the female as weak and debilitated, diseased and expiring, rarefied and pure—themes which do nothing to construct a modern or liberated space for women. One could even argue that, in von Max's images especially, art serves to rein in perceived lapses of appropriate feminine conduct by disempowering the feminine mystic and invalidating her with a weak and powerless body. However, in both von Keller's and von Max's works, the occult feminine hovers in a liminal, borderline state between life and death, consciousness and trance, uncontained by social codes. I contend that von Max, even while utilizing the conventional pose of the female invalid, subverts the theme by turning the subject's gaze totally away from the viewer, or even hiding her eyes altogether in shadow. While the averted feminine gaze in art can allow for a voyeuristic immediacy of access for the spectator, who does not have to encounter the challenging "look back" by the subject,⁸⁸ I argue for a reading of the averted gaze as representative of psychic interiority. This interiority is both signifier *of* and dependent *upon* the female subject's *identity* as Spiritualist, Seeress, or mystic. The averted gaze places von Max's female subject within her own interior space, her attention turned inward upon an impenetrable realm of the psyche and the occulted interior of her diseased body. Von Max's occult female remains ungoverned by the erotic gaze as she slips away from the corporeal state of a living being.

Signifiers of the Sublime: Decay as Resurrection in von Max's Religious Paintings

In addition to investigating the occult figures of Spiritualist mediums, clairvoyants, and mystics, Gabriel von Max painted many traditional religious themes throughout his working life. Though these biblical images may have dealt with more orthodox subject matter than the occult, von Max's representational choices were far from conventional. I will visit three singular images which, while couched within the conventions of biblical genre painting, imbricate divine

88 Typified by Manet's *Olympia* from 1897.

resurrection upon the moribund mortal body. By way of von Max's unique formal choices in pigmentation, spiritual resurrection becomes dependent upon bodily decomposition, the intersection of the divine with the corporeal elevating biological decay to a point beyond the material world.

A tension exists between the invitation of aesthetic appreciation and the uneasy awareness of decay provoked by von Max's color handling in *Mater Dolorosa* [fig. 18] from 1888. In this singularly dark image, the shadow of the vertical beam of the cross ascends the entire left-hand side of the painting. Mary's face in close-up, obliquely facing the viewer as she looks towards the left, is washed over with a deadened, grey-green skin hue. Her gaze is directed outside of the frame, towards, we can only assume, the invisible body of Christ—the vertical shadow of the cross running along the left edge of the painting provides the only signifier of his body. A band of bright crimson light, indicating either sunset or daybreak, marks the recessive space and bisects the dark picture plane into two halves, with the pale neck of Mary forming the central axis of the visual field. This crimson band of light suggests a deep, yet unseen, recessive space that pushes the body of Mary to the foreground, forcing the spectator to confront her grief-stricken face. Since the moribund body of Christ is absent from the frame, mortality and biological decay become situated in the face of Mary by way of the hues of her skin. In *Mater Dolorosa*, the death of Christ becomes feminized and “othered” within the body of Mary. This activates the aesthetic defense mechanism that Elizabeth Bronfen identifies in *The Anatomist*, the “death by proxy,” wherein visual art is able to discharge the viewer's own fears of death by safely situating it upon the body of the feminine other.

Von Max's painting *Mary Magdalene at the Foot of the Cross*, painted eleven years later in 1899, can be read as a pendant painting to *Mater Dolorosa*. The figure of Mary Magdalene, facing right, clutches the cross, her gaze similarly directed upward and beyond the frame, towards the invisible body of Christ. His body is signified by a trail of blood running down the wooden beam. An unseen source from the upper left illuminates the face of Mary Magdalene and the wooden beam of the cross, but the rest of the painting is swathed in dark tones. The abjection of the unseen corpse intersects with the sublime, as the terrified awareness of Christ's suspended body can be read in Mary Magdalene's expression of sorrow and shock. As with *Mater Dolorosa*, a crimson horizon line splits the picture plane in two, the red infernal light of the sunset or sunrise glancing off Mary Magdalene's hand that reaches upward on the cross. This horizon line links the paintings together visually, and the darkness that surrounds the bodies of both women is in itself an expression of the sublime, evocative of pain, terror, and void.⁸⁹

An image that explicitly revisits the invalid/corpse theme that I investigated earlier is the

89 Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry*, 132.



FIG. 18. GABRIEL VON MAX, "MATER DOLOROSA," 1888.

Raising of Jairus' Daughter [fig. 19] from 1878. Shown to great acclaim, this image pictures Christ sitting at the edge of a bed, like an anxious physician, his body mostly in shadow. His ruddy, enlivened hand enfolds the colorless hand of a dead young girl. The contrast between the two figures' skin tones serves as an unavoidable signifier of the life of the one and the death of the other, a formal choice I traced earlier in my examination of *The Christian Martyr*. The girl is in a somewhat horizontal posture, her propped up, rigid body swathed and bound by an abundance of disordered white bedclothes, her limp, damp hair spread over her pillow. The whiteness of the bed serves as a sort of throne to foreground the body of the female against the darkness that pervades the rest of the field. As seen in her jaundiced skin, unfocused, heavy-lidded gaze, and

rigor mortised limbs, von Max did not spare macabre details, even painting a fly settling on her arm. As with the paintings of mystics, the abundance of white cloth surrounding her body seems to further highlight her uncertain status—her inanimateness a temporary state before Christ pulls her from the borderland of death. This female body inhabits an uncontained space between life and death, seemingly right at the moment before divine resurrection.



FIG. 19. GABRIEL VON MAX, “STUDY FOR THE RAISING OF JAIRUS’ DAUGHTER,” 1888.

XIII. Closing Reflections

Although some of his artistic output can be couched within hegemonic artistic themes such as the “Cult of Invalidism,” von Max differs from such contemporaries as Felicien Rops and Albert von Keller, who tended to paint the nude female as a site of keen anxiety, necessitating discipline, regulation, and punishment. Many artists working in the latter half of the nineteenth century and beyond (Rops especially) depended on deeply embedded social constructions of the feminine as spiritually and physically corruptive, notions evidenced and confirmed in the documentary record by the extensive body of regulatory, punitive venereal disease legislation that bore down on the prostitute and the sexualized female.

In contrast, I argue that von Max, by framing the female form in conventionalized ways, employed formal techniques, especially in his color handling, that allowed the female body to slip beyond the contained borders of traditional erotic representation, and beyond the attendant inscription of the female body as inherently diseased and impure. Hovering in a liminal state between life and death, consciousness and trance, and even bodily materiality, their unmistakable corporeal decay places von Max’s painted women beyond the classic function of art to contain



FIG. 20. GABRIEL VON MAX, "THE WHITE WOMAN," 1900.

the female body's borders. These images disallow the simple eroticization of the female body, complicating our viewing of it by coupling the aesthetic beauty of the feminine subject with the uneasy awareness of the biological body's innate processes of decay.

To conclude my study of Gabriel von Max, I have to re-pose the question that unsettles me whenever I look at his paintings: How are these images of ailing and dead feminine bodies so alluring? It is as though I am drawn to them in spite of myself, and despite their content. They manage to be "both aesthetically pleasing and morbid," to borrow a phrase from Bronfen. I contend that these images' appeal rests in their ability to make the female subject *abject*. Von Max places the female in a realm beyond the confines of the erotic gaze—in a space beyond the borders of desire, beyond the borders of entrancement, and beyond the space of embodiment itself, leading to an alienating, yet sublimely pleasurable, visual experience. Von Max's depictions of women resonate with Julia Kristeva's abjection theory, where "death infects life," and we are then unable to look away and comfortably shed the ultimate bodily waste of the corpse that we "thrust aside in order to live."

I will conclude with von Max's ethereal image of *The White Woman* from 1900 [fig. 20], painted over thirty years after his first commercial success. For this image, Von Max returned to the mystic Friederike Hauffe, the "Seeress of Prevorst." A diaphanous veil floats about her body as she stands in the liminal space of a doorway, surrounded by a deep black interior beyond the frame of the door. Her body, filling the frame in a three-quarter close-up, is swathed in the telltale bandage-like white wrappings of the mystic, and a seemingly symbolic bundle of keys hangs heavily from a cord tied around her waist. Her right hand rests on the doorknob of the open door, the mechanism of the latch strangely detailed and foregrounded, in contrast to the shadowed obscurity of the background. Her slightly foreshortened right arm seems raised in a gesture of invitation. Her left arm hangs in repose at her side as she gathers aside her white skirts. Her dark eyes, set deeply in her pale, greyish face, peer outward from the doorway, not meeting the viewer's gaze but seeming to rest at a point beyond the viewer's left shoulder. The Seeress is poised in a literally liminal architectural space, her body signifying the margins between dichotomous states of being: inside and outside, materiality and immateriality, animation and death—the dark interior beyond her body occulted, hidden, and "beyond the veil" of comprehension. *The White Woman*, standing in her dark threshold, possesses the keys to that knowledge which is ultimately denied to the animate, living spectator— the knowledge of a world beyond this one.

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