

JOHANN HEINRICH FÜSSLI [HENRY FUSELI] R.A.

1741 Zurich - Putney Hill, near London 1825

Woman with a Fantastical Hair Style

Pencil on laid paper with watermark *Horn* and letters *IB*.

Inscribed in Greek in the upper right: *παιδολέτειρα* (*Paidoleteira*) and dated *June 4 21.* / *P.H.* [Putney Hill].

132 x 187 mm

PROVENANCE: Sir Eric Maclagan (1879-1951), Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum – Prof. Michael Maclagan, Oxford (1914-2003) – Thence by decent – On long term loan to the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, 2003-5

EXHIBITED: *Henry Fuseli 1741-1825*, Tate Gallery, London 1975, no. 197

LITERATURE: Gert Schiff, *Johann Heinrich Füssli*, Zurich, 1973, no. 1603, repr. – *Henry Fuseli 1741-1825*, exhib. cat., Tate Gallery, London 1975, no. 197, repr. p. 136

[For list of drawings and paintings here discussed that have to date been traced see end of comments.]

Fuseli was a history painter, i.e. a painter who derived his artistic subject matter from literary sources. As a student of Jacob Jakob Bodmer, the renowned Swiss literary critic, he received a first-class education in the Greek and Roman classics that also emphasised the role of the great European epics, and led to his gaining a near-verbatim knowledge of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the *Nibelungenlied* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Fuseli's training as an ordained Zwinglian minister left him with an intimate familiarity with the Bible; while his early love of the dramatic works of Shakespeare, particularly the tragedies, was reinforced by his first experiences of the plays as acted on the London stage and so enthralled him that his illustrations would earn him the title of "Shakespeare's Painter". The time he spent in Rome lying on his back drinking in the glories of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling was an equally synergistic experience: his reading of Dante's *Divina Commedia* convinced him of the profound influence the poet had exercised on the artist, thereby teaching him how to apply the lessons he learnt from Michelangelo to his illustrations of Dante.

Fuseli's extensive "official" oeuvre in which he drew from the above works and others is counterbalanced by the far smaller body of his "unofficial" work, constituting about ten percent of his overall production that was characterised by its wide range and reserved for the private viewing and delectation of his artist friends, and patrons, such as Lord Egremont who bought several of Fuseli's erotic productions on the versos of his history paintings to hang at Petworth House. E. C. Mason noted that, *there was scarcely any way of envisaging the erotic, [including] the most frankly obscene, that Fuseli did not whole-heartedly indulge in* (Eudo C. Mason, *The Mind of Henry Fuseli; Selections from his Writings with an Introductory Study*, London 1951, p. 142), one major focus being the battle of the sexes.

The present drawing (Schiff no. 1603, dated 1821) belongs to a small sub-category of Fuseli's erotic oeuvre, comprising about a dozen items on both paper and canvas of courtesans maiming or killing

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male infants or young boys. Notwithstanding the subject matter, it is Fuseli's rendering of the courtesan that makes this drawing arguably the most attractive one of this series. Although her fantastical coiffure with the fanlike creation atop her upswept hair reveals that she is a member of an infanticidal sisterhood, his treatment of her facial features suggest an intelligent woman, whose attractiveness is not impaired by the cast in her left eye and her louche expression. Indeed, her impeccable makeup, the hairpin between her lips, the beauty spot above her left eye and what may be a diamond in her ear, endow her with an unexpected romantic quality and confuse us about the discrepancy between the positive potential suggested by her appearance and the impassivity with which she pursues her dreadful calling. Schiff suggests that Fuseli's interest in this subject *undoubtedly* [my emphasis] represents his fear of castration as a result of his self abuse as he entered the age of puberty (Schiff, op. cit., vol. I/2, p. 228). There are other psychological theories regarding the possible cause of these disturbing images that haunted him.

The other images so far discovered of these women fall into two groups. The earlier ones prior to 1800 consistently show that involved courtesans sport the same fantastical hairstyle. The later drawings post 1800 show the courtesans wearing a much simpler swirling hairstyle, with one exception - Fuseli's last representation, dated 1821, where he returns to the pre-1800 fantastical hair style of Schiff no. 1603. Though the exact nature and significance of these activities are not always clear, the symbolism of these and similar compositions is consistent throughout the series.

But Fuseli's decision to illustrate Milton's *The Night-Hag Visiting Lapland Witches* (*Paradise Lost*, Bk. II, 662-666; MG 8) (ca. 1794-96) coincides very neatly with the themes he is already working on. His handling of the subject, e.g. "*the lurid diabolic garishness characteristic [of many] of Fuseli's illustrations of 'Paradise Lost' for the Milton Gallery*" (Lawrence Feingold, *Fuseli, Another Nightmare: The Night-Hag Visiting Lapland Witches*, in *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 17: 49-61. New York, N.Y., Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1984, p. 53); the artist's placement of the witch who will host the event in the lower left of the canvas, thereby allowing him to create a panorama extending to the almost limitless borders of Lapland and crowding the centre of the canvas with the hordes of the visitors approaching; the deliberate exhibition of the plump child that lures the Night-Hag "... *with the smell of infant blood, to dance | With Lapland Witches*"; the Night-Hag is not depicted by Fuseli "*with a naturalism that could convince us of her actual physical and material presence. She is rather an immaterial phantom, like a vision seen in a dream*" (Feingold, op. cit., 56): it is these elements stirred together and served up in a remarkably rich megilp of esoteric research (by both Milton and Fuseli) that raises this painting to high art.

Pope or Swift would have designated this illustration that depicts a typical Miltonic simile as a "*sublime Bagatelle*" with no derogatory intent: "*LAPLAND ORGIES, the Hell-hounds round SIN compared to those | that follow the night-hag, when call'd | In secret...*" (cited by Feingold, op. cit., 50).

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1) Schiff (Lost Work) no. 35. (ca. 1794-6). *The Night-Hag Visiting Lapland Witches*, Metropolitan Museum New York (Not in Schiff).

For an excellent introduction to "The Night Hag" see Lawrence Feingold, *Fuseli, Another Nightmare: The Night-Hag Visiting Lapland Witches*, in *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 17: 49-61. New York, N.Y., Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1984. Other illustrations are found in Gert Schiff, Paola Viotto, *L'opera completa di Johann Heinrich Füssli*, Mailand 1977, no. 127 (as the *Wild Huntress and Lapland Dogs*, dated as "1796"); *Art Journal*, Summer 1980, illus. 224.

2) Schiff no. 924 (1790-1800). Oil on canvas, *Five Courtesans* (verso of Schiff no. 1201; not illus. Location: Petworth House)



3) Schiff no. 925 (1799-1800), Oil on canvas. *Three courtesans* (verso of Schiff no. 926; also illustrated frontispice to Ruthven Todd, *The reputation and prejudices of Henry Fuseli*, London 1946 and New York 1947)

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4) Schiff no. 1030 (1796-1799). *Figure Study* (verso of Schiff no. 1030, *Scene from Milton's Comus* (recto)); not illus. by Schiff but reproduced in Christie's catalogue of 9 November 1993, Lot 11)



5) Schiff no. 1079 (ca. 1790-1795) *Witch at Work*, Source: Private Collection. Private communication with author (not illus. by Schiff; preliminary drawing of a seated female figure with fantastical hairstyle holding a child in her lap, whose pose and heavy breasts resemble the *Witch hosting the visit of the Night-Hag* who is wearing similar gloves)



6) Schiff no. 1078 (ca. 1790) *Two Courtesans* (finished study of Schiff no. 1079 completed by a second crouching witch at left; not illus. by Schiff; see Paul Ganz, *Die Zeichnungen Hans Heinrich Füßlis*, Bern 1947, text illus. p. 36)

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7) Schiff no. 1624 (1800-1810) *Courtesan performing mutilation*



8) Schiff 1626 (ca. 1815-1820) *Four Courtesans, two of whom appear to be stitching up body of young boy*

9) Schiff 1629 (ca. 1815-1820) *Two Courtesans* (names given as "Maria and Liz"; not illustrated)