

“TO LIVE DELICIOUSLY”: THE IMAGINARY FATHER IN ROBERT EGGERS’ *THE WITCH*

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A strange father if there ever was one, since for Freud, because there is no awareness of sexual difference during that period (more accurately: within that disposition), such a “father” is the same as “both parents.”

Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*

The witch is defined as an abject figure in that she is represented within patriarchal discourses as an implacable enemy of the symbolic order. She is thought to be dangerous and wily, capable of drawing on her evil powers to wreak destruction on the community.

Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*

Robert Eggers’ 2015 horror film, *The Witch*, is simultaneously an exploration of the failings of fatherhood, the events grounded in the foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father, and an endorsement of paternity when it appropriately embraces its indelible, and originary debt to maternal love. The film chronicles the dissolution, and eventual destruction, of a family in 17th Century New England as they are expelled by religious elders from a Puritan Plymouth colony, their decline engendered, at least initially, by the abduction and subsequent death of their newborn son, Samuel (Axtun Henry Dube and Athan Conrad Dube) by a malevolent witch (Bathsheba Garnett).¹ Complementing the Witch’s curse, is the family’s patriarch, William’s (Ralph Ineson) ultimate failure to fulfill the paternal function, which results, amongst other things, in the main character, Thomasin (Anya Taylor-Joy), being locked in a life-or-death

¹ “Witch” will be capitalized throughout when referring to the film’s eponymous character. When not capitalized it is referring to the general archetype.

struggle with an abject maternal body that refuses to allow her to separate from a decidedly narcissistic mother/daughter dyad devoid of love. The film reaches its climax in parricide; William is gored by the family's goat, Black Phillip, an embodiment of the Devil, and Katherine (Kate Dickey), is killed by Thomasin herself in an act of self-defense after her mother's wild accusations that *she* is in fact the witch. Violently separating from her parents, her mother especially, allows Thomasin to conjure up the Devil, a seductive figure of masculinity in league with the witches, who helps her inscribe her name in his Book, before leading her into a primeval clearing to join the witches' coven. Here, the audience watches as Thomasin slowly begins to levitate alongside her new family, her face framed in a close-up shot that emphasizes her apparent ecstasy at being accepted into the erotic, supernumerary experience: each witch, Thomasin included, is completely nude and undulating sexually around a bonfire in a womb-like clearing reminiscent of the primal scene.²

The conclusion that Eggers' film suggests then is that Thomasin, having finally abjected a mother who threatened to subsume her, achieves an "*imaginary* reunion with the maternal body that takes the place of the real union with, dependence on, the maternal body" that is facilitated by, not only an act of matricide, but by the introduction of an ideal Third Party, namely the Witch.³ Eggers' re-imagining of the archetype of the witch as a figure that provides a transference from the primary archaic maternal body to the Symbolic, rather than embodying only a vision of patriarchal fears of *unchecked* feminine sexuality, brings the film's titular character into conversation with Julia Kristeva's chimeric, Imaginary Father theorized in *Tales of*

² The end scene, with its womb-like clearing, recalls a reunion with the archaic, non-differentiated maternal body and outlaw *jouissance*. Here, as indicated by Thomasin's outward facial expression, which borders on orgasmic delight, is the "supernumerary" experience of "imagined pleasure" associated with one's conception. See Oliver.

³ Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-bind* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 79.

Love. In contrast to the Freudian/Lacanian Oedipal Father, who offers only prohibition and the threat of castration, Kristeva's "nourishing-mother-and-ideal-father" is the embodiment of the mother's love in the paternal without sexual difference, an imaginary "coagulation of the mother and her desire"⁴ who "provides the support needed to lose the real identification with the mother's body and the move to an identification with her desire, which is a move into the Symbolic order."⁵ Encountering the apparent impossibility of disassociating from the primary dyad, the Imaginary Father allows for a "recovery" of the mother's love in the Symbolic by way of a fantasy creation *imagined* by the not-yet-subject during the pre-Oedipal period prior to advent of the Law of the Father. Viewed in this way, the Witch and the Devil, as they appear in Eggers' film, come together as a "father-mother conglomerate" that helps Thomasin transition from the melancholic dyad shared with her mother, affording her the opportunity to rediscover the lost maternal body in the primal scene at the conclusion of the film.⁶

Justyna Sempruch's work on the witch archetype in *Fantasies of Gender and the Witch in Feminist Theory and Literature* is crucial to this particular discussion as it establishes a connection between the historical trope as it appears in literature and the maternal body, specifically the pre-linguistic, archaic site, where the witch comes to figure, in Sempruch's analysis, as a "fantasmatic creature of the womb with no other place in the symbolic order but that of un/belonging."⁷ For Sempruch, the archaic mother, following Barbara Creed's analysis, is an ambiguous "fantasy of a castrating/castrated woman" signaled by the witch who serves as a

⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia, 1987), 41-222.

⁵ Oliver, 80.

⁶ Kristeva, *Tales*, 41.

⁷ Justyna Sempruch, *Fantasies of Gender and the Witch in Feminist Theory and Literature* (Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2008), 63.

“specific trace of the unencumbered woman,” a “ghost of the repressed uncanny absence of the archaic (rather than phallic) mother.”⁸ In this analysis, the witch is an imaginary projection, indicating the absence of the primordial site, as well as our debt to the originary sacrifice of the maternal body, existing in the Symbolic in the only way maternal *jouissance* can, as *otherwise* than belonging. Sempruch’s observation that the witch constitutes a trace of the maternal Thing and the primary loss of the maternal body, as well as her argument that the archetype figures as an “intricate passage (a type of umbilical cord) from passion to satisfaction, from the symbolically articulate and prohibited *jouissance* to a desire/pleasure, or what remains of it in the symbolic,” alludes to a shared function with Kristeva’s Imaginary Father.⁹ If both the witch and Kristeva’s ideal Third Party serve as representational constructs of the *irrepresentable* Real, what function might the former serve in the pre-Oedipal imaginary of the not-yet-subject? How might the witch, a figure so long interpreted as the antagonist of the Symbolic, as well as a decidedly *anti*-maternal figure¹⁰, come to serve as a figure emblematic of maternal love that in fact helps the child become a subject? And how is this subject, whose primary identification is with a figure of no sexual difference in the imaginary, emblematic of the maternal desire for the Phallus prior to identification with the Phallus, characterized?

With this in mind, the following will analyze Eggers’ film, *The Witch*, for the way it reconfigures the archetype of the witch as the “*archaic Third Party*,” Kristeva’s Imaginary Father, that helps the young protagonist, Thomasin, abject the mother and recoup the primary

⁸ Sempruch, 70.

⁹ Sempruch, 174.

¹⁰ This is specifically in reference to the witch being historically associated with abortions and infanticide, ostensibly establishing her at an opposite pole of the “ideal” maternal body. Her “curse,” as well, is typically viewed as a pestilence, causing the death of livestock and, in some cases, sterility.

maternal body in the fantasy of the primal scene.¹¹ Using Kristeva's work on the mediating function of the Imaginary Father in *Tales of Love*, as well as Kelly Oliver's interpretation of the maternal father as a "screen" for the mother's love that enacts a fantasy reunion with the maternal body at the originary site of copulation, I argue the witch, contrary to traditional scholarship, serves a developmental function in the evolution of the subject from the Imaginary to the Symbolic. The following will draw a correlation between Thomasin's specifically *feminine* rendering of Freud's *fort/da* game presented in the film and Kristeva's discussion of transference in the imaginary to illustrate how the witch is an imagined creation emblematic, not of destruction, but of maternal desire for the Phallus and the daughter's desire for the wholeness of the mother's body. In doing so, this reading of the witch not only problematizes the way the archetype has historically been interpreted, most specifically in challenging the apparent antagonism between the witch and phallogocentric Symbolic, but in emphasizing how the witch brings the maternal and paternal together in a way that effectively pluralizes phallic identification, offering the possibility, if not a non-phallogocentric identification, but a subjectivity defined by multiplicity.

1.1 The Imaginary Father

In *Tales of Love*, and later in *Black Sun*, Kristeva develops her theory of the Imaginary Father, a loving maternal-paternal fantasy that stands in direct opposition to the Freudian/Lacanian Oedipal Father, who is a "screen for the mother's love," the site of maternal desire that helps the child abject the maternal body through the promise of reunion with the mother.¹² In doing so, she

¹¹ Kristeva, *Tales*, 50.

problematizes Freud's observation that "primary narcissism is a developmental stage," taking issue with his theory of "objectless identification,"¹³ in order to argue that primary narcissism is "neither screen nor state, primary narcissism is already a structure, previous to the Oedipus complex," thereby undermining Lacan's Mirror Stage as the site of primary identification.¹⁴ For Kristeva, the Mirror Stage is merely a *reduplication* of an originary, archaic identification, which is the "mimesis in the mother-child dyad"¹⁵ where the child identifies with the mother's breast, not as object, but as a model, and "enigmatic apprehending of a *pattern* to be imitated."¹⁶ This "reduplication" takes place in an intrasymbolic space and is pre-objectal, yet this specifically *semiotic* identification "becomes the first in a series of reduplications. It prefigures and sets in motion the logic of object identifications in all object relations,"¹⁷ including "love, the sign, and repetition at the heart of the psyche."¹⁸

In this space of narcissistic reduplication, as Kelly Oliver makes clear, imagination is born, where the "narcissist cathects a preoedipal preobject rather than the paternal Phallus," a semiotic transference that precedes identification in the Mirror Stage that marks the transition from mother's body to Kristeva's Imaginary Father.¹⁹ As Oliver clarifies, the narcissistic structure, where the "child's having the mother's breast becomes the child's being the mother's

¹² Oliver, 70.

¹³ Oliver, 71.

¹⁴ Kristeva, *Tales*, 374.

¹⁵ Oliver, 72.

¹⁶ Kristeva, *Tales*, 25.

¹⁷ Oliver, 72.

¹⁸ Kristeva, *Tales*, 25.

¹⁹ Oliver, 74.

breast,” makes possible a “*metaphorical shifting*” where the child is transferred to the place of the Other that will eventually lead to “*metonymical shifting*” in the Symbolic so that all language and signification become a reduplication of the pattern of displacement originating in this pre-objectal stage.²⁰ In establishing this transference as a “unary feature,” Kristeva affectively positions primary identification as an objectless stage prior to, not only the Phallus, but to the Mirror Stage and the emergence of the Oedipal Father, thereby revealing an archaic maternal function “behind Lacan’s signifier and desire.”²¹ In “*La Vierge de Freud*,” Kristeva translates Freud’s prehistory into a maternal function, a space “somewhere between ‘the archaic and the symbolic,’ an imaginary mother” that comes to serve as the Imaginary Father, the “prehistoric father-mother conglomerate” that allows the child to transfer from the semiotic maternal body to “an ideal other who lack nothing.”²² For Kristeva, the Imaginary Father is a “coagulation of the mother and her desire,” where, following Lacan, the mother desires the Phallus, therefore the Imaginary Father “would thus be the indication that the mother is not complete but that she wants... Who?”²³ The Imaginary Father is the “supposed object of maternal love,”²⁴ that allows the child to transfer to the “gap” between the maternal body and the Symbolic Order, therefore the maternal-father is the encapsulation of the mother and her desire and “her implication in the paternal function.”²⁵

²⁰ Oliver, 74-5.

²¹ Oliver, 76.

²² Oliver, 78.

²³ Kristeva, *Tales*, 41.

²⁴ Juliana de Nooy, *Derrida, Kristeva, and the Dividing Line: An Articulation of Two Theories of Difference* (New York: Garland, 1998), 243.

²⁵ Oliver, 78-9.

Kelly Oliver interprets the Imaginary Father, the reflection of maternal desire, as a “metaphorical or *imaginary* reunion with the maternal body that takes the place of the real union with, dependence on, the maternal body,” whereby the child “rediscovers” the mother in the Symbolic by fantasizing its conception.²⁶ Furthermore, she reads the identification with the Imaginary Father as the child’s identification with its own conception, a “transference to the site of the *jouissance* of the primal scene;” the child identifies with the father “entering the mother” in a fantasy that allows them to travel back into the mother’s womb and *re-experience* the wholeness of the dyad.²⁷ Oliver extends Kristeva’s Imaginary Father as a metaphor for maternal Love to a fantasy of space, whereby the “child can rejoice in a (re)union with the mother...in the beginnings of its existence, and existence founded on (imagined) pleasure rather than lack.”²⁸ More importantly, as Oliver points out, Kristeva “maintains that adults seek love in the form of the couple in order to experience a sense of wholeness,”²⁹ arguing that:

The child, male or female, hallucinates its merging with a nourishing-mother-and-ideal-father, in short a conglomeration that already condenses two into one...One soon notices, however, in the last instance (that is, if the couple truly becomes one, if its lasts), that each of the protagonists, he and she, married, through the other, his or her mother.³⁰

The fantasy of the Imaginary Father then is the search for the phallic mother, the mother-in-the-father that exists in the Symbolic, a reunion in the primal scene that eroticizes the loss of the

²⁶ Oliver, 79.

²⁷ Oliver, 79.

²⁸ Oliver, 80.

²⁹ Oliver, 80.

³⁰ Kristeva, *Tales*, 222-3.

maternal body by allowing a recuperation of semiotic wholeness. The possibilities of Julia Kristeva's Imaginary Father schema is that maternal materiality and the reduplication of the mother's body in the imaginary constitutes the workings of metonymical identification prior to identification with the Phallus, thereby illustrating a multiplicity of father's, one of which that is comprised of maternal Love.

1.2 Infanticide and Transference

As I have argued elsewhere, Robert Eggers' *The Witch* begins with an inversion of a traditional birthing scene that draws the main character, Thomasin, from the Symbolic register of language to a decidedly intrasymbolic space between the resonance of the archaic maternal Thing and a father figure, William, who will eventually fail to satisfy the paternal function.³¹ Throughout the film, as the family is beset by the Witch's curse and their family unit quickly begins to dissolve as consequence, William desperately seeks to position himself as a symbolic substitute for God and the Word, the embodiment of Kristeva's loving father that will allow Thomasin to abject the mother and acquiesce to the symbolic network of language. However, William's status as substitute for the Law is exposed as fraudulent, it being revealed, through his numerous failures and inability to reflect maternal desire, that he is an inadequate "vehicle" for the Phallus, inadvertently forcing Thomasin to return to the abject maternal body in a state of melancholia and depression.³² With William unable to serve as the mediating Third Party to which the mother's love is directed, the narcissistic gap, the space of maternal desire is foreclosed and, as

³¹ Charles E. Hicks, "A 'Necessary' Matricide: Paternal Failure and Maternal Love in Robert Eggers' *The Witch*." Unpublished Manuscript, Peru State College.

³² Jacques Lacan, "The Signification of the Phallus," in *Ecrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), 582.

Kristeva makes clear in *Tales of Love*, there is only “narcissistic idealization.”³³ This narcissistic love, Kristeva argues, is distinguishable from the maternal desire the loving, Imaginary Father embodies and has “nothing to do with the protective wrapping over skin and sphincters that maternal care provides for the baby,”³⁴ but is a suffering, claustrophobic relationship with an abject mother who comes to figure as monstrous.³⁵ The failure of the paternal metaphor, of the initial absence of a fantasy that will allow Thomasin to experience maternal Love, situates Thomasin in an imaginary space where she is constantly searching for maternal Love, that primary transference to the site of maternal desire that will allow her to properly eroticize the maternal Thing, give it meaning, and reunite with the mother’s body.

Assuming that Thomasin is positioned in an intrasymbolic space that is want of maternal Love, the Witch can be understood within the context of the film as a fantasmatic creation specifically *imagined* by Thomasin through the creation of, what Luce Irigaray has termed, a “subjective space” of maternal affection, a repetitive reduplication of the experience of the archaic mother.³⁶ This ritualistic performance takes place early in the film, ironically immediately following Thomasin’s confession to God that indicates her desire for Love³⁷, and shows her playing a simple game of “peekaboo” with her infant brother, Samuel near the edge of

³³ Kristeva, *Tales*, 34.

³⁴ Kristeva, *Tales*, 34.

³⁵ Hicks, “‘Necessary’.”

³⁶ Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 97.

³⁷ The scene in question takes place immediately after the family has been expelled from the Puritan colony, which indicates Thomasin being “pulled” from the Symbolic back into a pre-objectal, intrasymbolic space. Here Thomasin asks repeatedly for forgiveness for her sins and “light,” which I read as a desire for God’s love, which is lacking and empty. This is supplemented by the framing of the scene itself; Thomasin is in the foreground praying on her knees, while her mother, Katherine, sits behind breastfeeding, her face grave and decidedly abject. See Hicks.

the forest, essentially recreating Freud's famous *fort/da* game. More importantly, this instance marks the first appearance of the Witch as Thomasin, uncovering her eyes for the final time, observes that Samuel, to her horror, has disappeared completely, the Witch spiriting him away to her cottage in the forest to be sacrificed. Here Thomasin is shown to be "playing mother" or, more appropriately, transferring herself to the site of maternal desire, indicated by the immediate shift to the primal scene that, although results in infanticide, is nevertheless associated with the *jouissance* of conception.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud recounts how his grandson, Ernst, who was "greatly attached to his mother,"³⁸ dramatized her absence in a child's game that permitted him to "master rather than mourn the loss of [his] mother."³⁹ As Freud observes:

The child had a wooden reel with a piece of string tied round it. It never occurred to him to pull it along the floor behind him, for instance, and play at its being a carriage. What he did was to hold the reel by the string and very skillfully throw it over the edge of his curtained cot, so that it disappeared into it, at the same time utter his expressive 'o-o-o-o'. He then pulled the reel out of the cot again by the string and hailed its reappearance with a joyful 'da' ['there'].⁴⁰

Through this dramatization, Ernst gains mastery over absence through the repeated disappearance/ reappearance of the wooden reel and, in doing so, gains "mastery over loss, specifically the primary loss of the maternal body."⁴¹ Lacan extends the metaphor in "The Function and Field of Speech and Language" to include the "child's acquisition of language with

³⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (New York: Liveright, 1961), 13.

³⁹ Dennis King Keenan, *The Question of Sacrifice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 95.

⁴⁰ Freud, *Beyond*, 14.

⁴¹ Keenan, 94-5.

which the symbolic order is identified,”⁴² observing that “should the child now address an imaginary or real partner, he will see that this partner too obeys the negativity of his discourse... Thus the symbol first manifests itself as the killing of the thing, and this death results in the endless perpetuation of the subject’s desire.”⁴³ In this reading, as Richard Allen notes, Lacan reads into the *fort/da* game the “relationship between the imaginary and symbolic,” where the performance of the game constitutes the moment where the subject “experience[s] itself as a unified ego like the image in the mirror.”⁴⁴ While Lacan, as Oliver notes, “sees a negativity in the Fort/Da that functions through metonymy that marks the beginnings of symbolization,” Kristeva and Irigaray will view the process as “primarily gestural and kinetic,” a bodily performance, indicating a maternal function *prior* to Symbolic iteration.⁴⁵

Though both Freud and Lacan claim the male son *masters*, rather than mourns the loss of the mother by objectifying her through the performance of the *fort/da* game, Irigaray argues in *Sexes and Genealogies* that a “girl does not do the same things when her mother is away... because her mother is of the same sex as she is and cannot have the object status of the reel.”⁴⁶ For Irigaray, much like Kristeva, the bodily identification with the mother makes separation even more difficult than with the son, therefore the *fort/da* game is transformed into an expression that produces an “energetic circular movement that protects her from abandonment, attack, depression, loss of self” which would essentially be a protection against

⁴² Richard Allen, *Projecting Illusion: Spectatorship and the Impression of Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 29.

⁴³ Jacques Lacan, “The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis,” in *Ecrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2006), 262.

⁴⁴ Allen, 29.

⁴⁵ Oliver, 44.

⁴⁶ Irigaray, 97.

self-abjection.⁴⁷ In both Irigaray and Kristeva's schema there is separation from the mother, yet the relational proximity between the pair is retained; for Irigaray the mother "remains too familiar and too close,"⁴⁸ while for Kristeva maternal regulation is already always prefigured in the body.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the daughter creates her own space in relation to the mother and, not unlike Kristeva's infant that "becomes" the mother's breast, thereby transferring to the site of maternal desire and the fantasy of the Imaginary Father. For Thomasin specifically, locked in a dyad void of maternal love, she *imagines* a maternal affection, not unlike Irigaray's daughter, who, "lavishing maternal affection on a quasi subject," in her case a doll, by performing the role of mother to her infant brother, Samuel.⁵⁰ In acting out a maternal love, Thomasin takes part in Kristeva's metaphorical shifting, whereby there is the "archaic transference from the mother's body to the mother's desire through the mother's love;" Thomasin negotiates her bodily identification with the mother by way of a transference to the "place of the mother, to the place of the breast."⁵¹ In the "peekaboo" scene, Thomasin performs a maternal role that emblematic of maternal love and, as Irigaray observes, this dance "forms a vital subjective space open to the cosmic maternal world, to the gods, to the present other," as well as, I would argue, the fantasmatic screen that is the Witch.⁵²

⁴⁷ Irigaray 98.

⁴⁸ Irigaray, 98.

⁴⁹ Oliver, 47.

⁵⁰ Irigaray, 97.

⁵¹ Oliver, 69-74.

⁵² Irigaray, 97-8.

In viewing Thomasin's personal *fort/da* game as a performance of love that transfers her to the site of maternal desire, it is fitting, however ironic, that the scene immediately following is Samuel's death at the hands of the Witch in what can only be described as a vision of the primal scene. The sequence following the disappearance of Samuel shows the Witch, dressed in a red cloak, returning to, what is presumably, her cottage in the haunted forest. Here, completely nude, she proceeds to kill the infant with a knife and ground him up, slathering his remains on her body and broomstick in order to facilitate her flight as indicated in the subsequent scene. The death of Samuel in, what I would argue is a primal setting *outside* of language, as exemplified by the lack of diegetic sound or dialogue, forms the inaugural loss that serves as the nexus of the entire film and grounds its structure, thereby the infant comes to figure as the phallus, the "signifier of that loss."⁵³ The phallic function will transfer to other objects throughout the course of the film, namely Katherine's prized silver cup as I have argued elsewhere, but Samuel's death serves the most crucial purpose of signifying the m(O)ther's desire and, above all, it's locatedness in the Other. As Lacan observes in "The Signification of the Phallus:"

If the mother's desire *is* for the phallus, the child wants to be the phallus in order to satisfy her desire. Thus the division immanent in desire already makes itself felt by virtue of being experienced in the Other's desire, in that this division already stands in the way of the subject being satisfied with presenting to the Other the real [organ] he may *have* that corresponds to the phallus...⁵⁴

If Samuel is assumed to be the phallus, then the scene in the Witch's cottage presumes her ownership of symbolic object, thereby illustrating that this is the site of maternal desire that follows the transference from maternal love. In the Lacanian schema the child, upon revelation

⁵³ Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), 102.

⁵⁴ Lacan, "Signification," 582.

that it is not the object of desire for the mother, that she desires elsewhere, attributes the Phallus to the father, therefore instituting a movement toward the Name-of-the-Father and the Symbolic. However, William, the family patriarch, through his numerous failures is revealed to be fraudulent as a symbolic substitute for the Law, thereby foreclosing the Name-of-the-Father; he does not satisfy the mother, therefore he does not allow for an “identification with the mother’s desire for the Phallus.”⁵⁵ That ideal other that is not lacking is revealed to be elsewhere, represented by the figure of the Witch who comes to serve as the maternal-paternal conglomerate, a phallic mother who Thomasin will eventually identify with in order to return to the site of conception and *jouissance*.

1.3 The Witch Conglomerate

To draw out in its entirety the archetype of the witch and its historical emergence in the collective unconscious is beyond the scope of this particular project, yet, it suffices to note that the witch, along with being associated, namely by Barbara Creed, with the abject and the “monstrous-feminine,”⁵⁶ is most notably defined as a chimeric figure and characterized, most importantly for this discussion, by her proximity to the maternal body.⁵⁷ Historically, as indicated in Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger’s infamous witch-hunting guide, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, the witch or “wise-woman” oftentimes referred to a midwife, a woman, according to the authors, who was potentially in league with the Devil and who, “if the mother herself is

⁵⁵ Oliver, 79.

⁵⁶ Creed, 73.

⁵⁷ In *Malevolent Nurture: Witch-Hunting and Maternal Power in Early Modern England*, Deborah Willis surmises that the witch was feared due to her magical powers and that this was typically viewed as a “magic acquired through her maternal power.”

not a witch, carries [the child] out of the room on the pretext of warming it up, and offers it to the Prince of Devils, Lucifer, and to all the devils.”⁵⁸ The fear of the midwife’s intimate knowledge of reproduction, disassociated, at least to a certain extent, from masculine control⁵⁹, coupled with their ability to perform abortions, led to the belief that witches “specifically attacked reproduction” and was emphasized to the point whereby infanticide, “kidnapping children, chopping them up, and boiling their body parts,” became an integral parts of witches’ lore.⁶⁰ Given this historical context, we can surmise that the witch terrifies because she has unencumbered access, not only to nature, but feminine reproduction, both of which indicate a proximity to an archaic, “outlaw” *jouissance* of the maternal body that are decidedly outside and, many times, at odd with the Symbolic Order.⁶¹

In *Fantasies of Gender and the Witch in Feminist Theory and Practice*, Justyna Sempruch analyzes contemporary representations of the witch, not only to outline feminism’s preoccupation with the archetype as a figure of resistance, but in order to “reformulate the ‘witch’ as a trace of cultural un/belonging, of bodily margins” and on that is “constantly present and absent” in its various cultural and historical depictions.⁶² To do so, Sempruch draws a distinction, in-line with Creed’s observations in *The Monstrous-Feminine*, between the “archetypes of the archaic mother of the semiotic and the phallic (fetishized) mother” in order to

⁵⁸ Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, *The Malleus Maleficarum*, trans. Montague Summers (New York: Cosimo, 2007), 141.

⁵⁹ Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2004), 89.

⁶⁰ Margaret Brannan Lewis, *Infanticide and Abortion in Early Modern Germany* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 92.

⁶¹ Creed, 77.

⁶² Sempruch, 19.

argue that, while the “phallic mother is a comforting fantasy of sexual difference,” the archaic semiotic maternal body “represents a terrifying fantasy of sexual difference.”⁶³ Unlike the Oedipal mother, who has been “domesticated” by the Symbolic, the archaic mother, oftentimes, is emblematic of the Lacanian Real, but nevertheless indicates a maternal body that “has not been marked by ‘symbolic castration’ but by ‘the real incision’ evoked by the cutting of the umbilical cord, deferred and perpetuated by the cultural presence of the scar, the navel.”⁶⁴ For Sempruch, the navel, following Elisabeth Bronfen, figures as “the enmeshment” that links the semiotic with the Symbolic, and the witch comes to serve as a “particularly resilient trace” of this convergence, thereby providing a link between the two orders.⁶⁵ The witch, therefore, figures an indication of the absence of the archaic mother, bridging the originary semiotic debt and the Symbolic and, most importantly, pointing to a “passionate desire” to return to the “abyss” of the semiotic.⁶⁶

In this way, the witch comes to serve as a trace of the primary loss of the union with the maternal body or, more appropriately for this conversation, a “*fantasy* of reunion with the mother’s body which takes the place of the real union that must be lost so that the child can enter language.”⁶⁷ The witch, in this interpretation, indicates the fantasy of the return to the primal archaism of the womb, imagery that is associated with Eggers’ *Witch* throughout the film, most especially in the scene immediately following Samuel’s abduction. As mentioned in the

⁶³ Sempruch, 67.

⁶⁴ Sempruch, 68.

⁶⁵ Sempruch, 68-70.

⁶⁶ Sempruch, 70-71.

⁶⁷ Oliver, 79.

previously, section, the sequence is comprised of an interior shot of the cottage, dimly lit, resembling the inside of a cave, recalling Sempruch's analysis of the Biblical abyss consistently used in depictions of monstrosity that indicates both a place of origin and punishment, as well, as more importantly, a place that signifies "both female pleasures (castration desires) and their annihilation" as it harkens back to Kristeva's *chora* and the archaic mother.⁶⁸ The scene's emphasis on non-diagetic sound and lack of dialogue, as well as the almost indiscernibility of objects and time, establish a correlation with Kristeva's *chora* in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, as a space that "precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality, and temporality."⁶⁹ Here, in the cottage, as with the *chora*, there is the "absence of social structures and language" and, as with the maternal womb, the audience sees the "accelerated rhythms of labor" as the Witch is viewed steadily grinding up Samuel's body.⁷⁰ Here we have a site of dual desires; the daughter, Thomasin, creates this imaginary space in order to reunite with the maternal body, the Witch, on the other hand, who *consumes* the infant in order to become whole and fly, points to the paternal function already working within the archaic maternal, the desire for the Phallus.

From the site of the archaic maternal body, seen through her association with the womb and the *chora*, the fantasy of the witch provides a "bridge" to the Symbolic in a way not dissimilar to that of Kristeva's maternal-father conglomerate, but not so that identification with her is solely an identification with the signifying network. As Oliver points out, Kristeva's discussion of the Phallus in relation to the Imaginary Father is varied, yet she does imply in *Tales of Love* "that there are advantages to a nonphallogentric explanation of primary identification,"

⁶⁸ Sempruch, 72.

⁶⁹ Kristeva, *Revolution*, 26,

⁷⁰ Alice E. Adams, *Reproducing the Womb: Images of Childbirth in Science, Feminist Theory, and Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1994), 22.

primarily that identification with the loving father, rather than the stern, Oedipal Father provides a “sense of completion and wholeness that combines the maternal gratifications and the paternal prohibitions.”⁷¹ As Kristeva observes in *Tales of Love*:

Maintaining against the winds and high tides of our modern civilization the requirement of a stern father who, through his Name, brings about separation, judgement, and identity, constitutes a necessity, a more or less pious wish. But we can only note that jarring such sternness, far from leaving us orphaned or inexorably psychotic, reveals multiple and varied destinies for paternity – notably archaic, imaginary paternity.⁷²

The Imaginary Father allows for multiple fathers to inhabit the paternal function, rather than the singular Name-of-the-Father, doubling the function and thereby provides, not unlike the witch, an umbilical cord that transitions the not-yet-subject of the pre-objectal to primary identification, not with the Phallus, but with what Elisabeth Bronfen refers to in *The Knotted Subject: Hysteria and Its Discontents* as the *omphalos*. Sempruch defines the witch, in her relationship to both the archaic mother and the Symbolic, as a “negotiator between phallic and *omphallic* spaces of culture,”⁷³ where *omphallic*, according to Bronfen, “points to the real, traumatic knowledge of the human existence grounded in mortality,” specifically the original debt to and loss of the maternal body.⁷⁴ The witch, like the Imaginary Father, pluralizes the phallic function, at the very least embodying both the phallic and maternal *omphallic*, thereby providing a primary

⁷¹ Oliver, 79-82.

⁷² Kristeva, *Tales*, 46.

⁷³ Sempruch, 70.

⁷⁴ Elisabeth Bronfen, *The Knotted Subject: Hysteria and Its Discontents* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), 20.

identification that is not merely characterized by phallic self-alienation, but “one that can also be playful and sublimational.”⁷⁵

Within the film itself, Eggers’ uses the traditional trope of the Witch’s broom as the key representation of Bronfen’s *omphalos*, an artifact that points, not only to both castration in the Symbolic, as well as maternal debt, but provides a literal “vessel” emblematic of the transition from the semiotic to the signifying network. In her discussion of the *omphalos* in *The Knotted Subject*, Bronfen counters the supremacy of the Phallus, setting up the *omphallic* as “democratic” and “indexical,” indicating “nongendered psychic moments of loss, severance, deprivation, and the persistent production of narratives commemorating the impact of traumatic vulnerability at the core of our psychic and aesthetic representations.”⁷⁶ The *omphalos* points to a shared loss, rather than sexual lack and Bronfen chooses the navel as an “anatomical sign to designate the other force field constituting the subject”⁷⁷ and, as Sempruch argues, in the witch the “semiotic and the navel converge in the maternal space of filth (placenta, umbilical cord), echoing the old practice of midwives predicting pregnancies by reading the knots on umbilical cords as prophetic signs.”⁷⁸ With this in mind, the Witch’s broom, which we see covered in Samuel’s blood following his death, provides an example of, not merely a phallic object, but a representation of the umbilical cord, the “signature of the lost maternal body, admonishing us of our debt to death.”⁷⁹ Here, blood, along with the images of the infant and the womb, all indications of our

⁷⁵ Kristeva, *Tales*, 46.

⁷⁶ Bronfen, 11-12.

⁷⁷ Bronfen, 11.

⁷⁸ Sempruch, 115.

⁷⁹ Bronfen, 19.

maternal debt converge on the phallic broom to pluralize the image, and while the knife clearly points to castration and the Symbolic, the broom and the Witch provide transition and identification *beyond* the Phallus. The Witch's possession of the decidedly *omphallic* broom that will eventually transport her from the semiotic of the cottage to the Symbolic outside the forest, solidifies her position as that ideal Other, who allows for identification, not only with the paternal function, but with maternal desire as well.

1.4 Conclusion

The Witch's final sequence forms an appropriate bookend when coupled with the opening act of infanticide, positioning Thomasin beyond the maternal dyad in order to identify with the figure of the Witch, an *omphallic* maternal-paternal conglomerate, thereby allowing for a specifically erotic reunion with the maternal body in a vision of the primal scene. Following Thomasin's act of matricide, the film's protagonist wakes in the middle of the night to the sound of chimes echoing from the forest, the nonrepresentation *chora* outside the Symbolic calling to her, as well as the family's goat, Black Phillip, waiting at the doorstep.⁸⁰ Approaching him, Thomasin makes a request for *presence*, for him to speak to her and deliver the Word, not dissimilar from the prayer she recites at the beginning of the film: "Black Phillip. I conjure thee to speak to me. Speak as thou doth speak to Jonas and Mercy. Dost thou understand my English tongue? Answer me."⁸¹ Thomasin, maligned with depression and melancholia due to a lack of maternal Love, a "radical, sullen atheist" in a signifying economy void of meaning, continues to seek for the

⁸⁰ Kristeva, *Revolution*, 80.

⁸¹ Eggers, *The Witch*.

wholeness of the maternal body that will organize the chaos of the Symbolic.⁸² When the Devil's "familiar" final responds, to Thomasin's delight, he does so through a series of questions: "What dost thou want? Wouldst thou like the taste of butter? A pretty dress? Wouldst thou like to live deliciously? Wouldst thou like to see the world?"⁸³ Enticed, Thomasin asks what is required of her in order to receive these gifts, whereby the Devil replies that she must sign his Book, but not before asking her to "remove thy shift."⁸⁴ As Thomasin disrobes, the Devil, now in the form of a well-dressed man, appears behind her and helps her to inscribe her new identity as a witch before following her into the forest where she eventually encounters the coven, dancing naked around a large bonfire, preparing to take flight.

The implication of Thomasin's identification and transformation into a witch, as evident by her ascension at the conclusion of the film, is that the Devil, as a paternal agent, becomes one of the twin poles of the Imaginary Father, along with the Witch as an emblem of maternal desire, together forming the fantasy of Kristeva's maternal-paternal conglomerate. The partnership between the Witch and the Devil echoes historical accusations of women being "in league with the Devil," as well as "implicating" her with a version of the Law, yet, more importantly, it is in the *desires* the Devil offers to fulfill that solidifies his role as a screen for maternal desire. Being that the Imaginary Father is the mother's desire for the Father's Phallus⁸⁵, it is fitting that, when the Devil asks Thomasin "wouldst thou like to live deliciously," it is an offer to be fulfilled, to provide the very satisfaction and wholeness that William could not provide in his role as father

⁸² Kristeva, *Black*, 5.

⁸³ Eggers, *The Witch*.

⁸⁴ Eggers, *The Witch*.

⁸⁵ Kristeva, *Tales*, 40.

or husband, and that which Thomasin has prayed for throughout the entire film.⁸⁶ The Devil's gifts are a promise of wholeness and they, as much as a promise of completion for Thomasin, of experiencing a loving father, answer the desperate pleas of her mother, Katherine who has spent the entirety of the film expressing her own desire for satisfaction, directing it primarily at William. The fact that the Devil's face is not seen and the audience is privy only to his silhouette and no discernible identity, solidifies his position as the ideal Other "who is not libidinally cathected as an object but remains an Ego ideal," but a loving fantasy that that offers to help Thomasin take up an identity in the Symbolic by writing her name in his Book.⁸⁷

Kelly Oliver argues that identification with the Imaginary Father, that subsequently allow for the emptiness of the narcissistic structure necessary for entry into the Symbolic, is a metaphorical transference to the site of the primal scene, a return to the original wholeness of the maternal body and the site of conception.⁸⁸ As Oliver observes, the "child's identification with the conglomerate mother-father can be read as an identification with its conception," whereby the "child is identifying with the imaginary father entering the mother" that allows the not-yet-subject to "re-place itself back inside its mother."⁸⁹ The fantasy of the child returning to the maternal womb replaces the need for the *real* mother's body, thereby allowing for an eroticization of the maternal Thing through a fantasy of copulation, ostensibly re-claiming the semiotic thing in the signifying economy.⁹⁰ The scene where Thomasin undresses in front of the Devil before walking nude to meet the other witches as they gyrate erotically around the bonfire

⁸⁶ Eggers, *The Witch*.

⁸⁷ Kristeva, *Tales*, 41.

⁸⁸ Oliver, 79.

⁸⁹ Oliver, 79.

⁹⁰ Oliver, 80.

is overtly sexualized and indicates Thomasin's identification with the fantasmatic father as they literally "enter" the forest clearing where there sits the fire of creation. Here, Thomasin has reached the primal scene, what Kristeva in *Desire in Language*, the "very space where father and mother meet... a space of fundamental unrepresentability toward which all glances nonetheless converge; a primal scene where genitality dissolves sexual identification beyond their given difference," a reunion with the mother that Kristeva likens to incest that "reach[es] the threshold of repression by means of the identification with motherhood."⁹¹

My claim in the aforementioned to a correlation between the Imaginary Father and the archetype of the witch as showcased in Robert Eggers' film is not an attempt to re-incorporate a figure that embodies a revolutionary, outlaw *jouissance* into a paternal fantasy of the Symbolic, but rather to illustrate that the witch can be read in such a way where she functions, not solely as an antagonist of the Law, but a loving, welcoming *supplement*. To refer to the archetype as such, in Derrida's definition as that which is a "surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude,"⁹² is not dissimilar to Semprich's labeling of the witch as a trace of the archaic wholeness of the semiotic and retains the importance of the play of absence/presence, but adds to it an emphasis on the specifically *infectious* nature of the figure.⁹³ Kristeva's theory of the Imaginary Father is revolutionary, in part, because it demonstrates an identification with the maternal desire for the Phallus *prior* to entry into the Symbolic which, as I have argued, effectively pluralizes the Phallus by, in turn, multiplying the paternal metaphors to which a subject identifies. The result of

⁹¹ Kristeva, *Desire*, 249.

⁹² Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 144-5.

⁹³ Nicholas Royle, *Jacques Derrida* (London: Routledge, 2003), 50.

this, as Eggers' film visualizes, is a viral subject, one that carries into the Symbolic the "outlaw love of the mother," that infects it with the drives that give language its meaning and, far from merely destabilizing it, positively reorients it.⁹⁴ The ending of the film, whereby Thomasin encounters the primal scene and joins the collective of witches is fitting; she has joined the multiplicity, the Deleuzian "war machine" that "reforms a smooth space" by reterritorializing it, reorganizing it as a maternal space.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Oliver, 82-90.

⁹⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 421.

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