Fausto Gozzi

Guercino among Witches, Wizards and Devils

There is one fact that is contested by no-one: Guercino remained an extraordinary draughtsman throughout his life, and the passage of time did not make his talent any less fresh. His natural ability to sketch complex compositions using but a few lines allowed him to design multi-figurative scenes, which – like a director looking for the best frame – he first intended to capture from different vantage points, sometimes producing over twenty preparatory drawings for his paintings.[1] This ease of drawing is also confirmed by entries in the inventory of goods belonging to Casa Gennari that was executed in 1715, following the death of Benedetto Gennari – Guercino's beloved nephew. Like his famous uncle, Benedetto never married; the only heirs to his enormous estate were sons of his brother, Cesare Gennari: Giovanni Francesco and Filippo Antonio.[2]

Taking stock of the Gennari family's estate ended on 31 October 1719 in Bologna, four years after Benedetto's death. It was preceded by a long period of estimating the value of furniture, paintings, drawings, prints, sculptures, real property and land by numerous experts. The first analyses of the inventory allowed me to establish that there were 2514 drawings by Guercino at the Casa Gennari in October 1719: 23 framed ones, hanging on the walls of the Bolognese home, 1689 pasted into eight large-format albums (with up to four drawings on one page), 690 loose anatomical studies and drawings of draperies kept in portfolios and 12 framed drawings that decorated the walls of the rural home in Belpoggio, a village near Bologna, situated on hills beyond Porta Santo Stefano. Apart from Guercino's drawings, the following works were also found in both homes: 304 sketches by Benedetto Gennari, 561 loose drawings kept in portfolios, executed by both Gennari brothers (Cesare too) and 685 sketches attributed to other painters active in Guercino's time and before him – a total of 5280 drawings.[3]

Given the large number of drawings and how they were kept (divided by subject matter), it is possible to state they both Guercino and his two nephews used them as preparatory studies and as the source of compositional solutions. Only after Benedetto's death did the arranged collection become dispersed – since none of Cesare's sons were involved in painting, they began to sell the works that now enrich the most important European collections.

The inventory is worthy of a separate analysis, yet here I would like to mention the set of 448 caricatures listed therein: 322 drawings by Guercino and 126 by Cesare and Benedetto

[1] This was the case of the Bolognese painting *Kneeling Saint William in Armour* – Denis Mahon, *Guercino. Disegni*, exh. cat., Museo Civico Archeologico, Bologna, 1991 (Bologna, 1992), pp. 47–53 and *Martyrdom of Saints Jacob and Josiah* from Reggio Emilia – Angelo Mazza, Nicholas Turner, *Guercino e Reggio Emilia. La genesi dell'invenzione* (Milan, 2011), pp. 92–105.

[2] Emilio Negro, Nicosetta Roio, *L'eredità di Guercino. L'inventario legale di Giovanni Francesco e Filippo Antonio Gennari*, Modena 2008.

[3] Fausto Gozzi, "Mantegna, Durer, Callot... Le incisioni di Casa Gennari nell'Inventario 1719," pp. 25–32, in id., *Guercino. Le stampe della Pinacoteca Civica*, exh. cat., Pinacoteca Civica, Cento, 1996–97 (Cento, 1996), pp. 25–32.

Gennari. It was included in *Settimo Libro di carte 195 reali, coperto di carta pecora bianca con cordella di bavella rossa e gialla per chiuderlo* [Volume Seven comprising 195 large-format folios in a cover made of white sheep parchment with a red and yellow bourette ribbon to close it].[4] Unlike other works, these were appraised in groups rather than individually – the estimate referred to all works on one page of the album (sometimes these were four small drawings, at other times two large ones or two small and one large one). It is clear from the appraisal that the expert Giuseppe Magnavacca did not consider caricatures as particularly valuable – they were estimated at a third of the price of drawings depicting more "noble" subjects.[5]

Carlo Cesare Malvasia, who knew Guercino, emphasizes the family atmosphere in the master's home and studio and recalls the barely twenty-year-old friends who would come to see him and gather at Casa Fabbri (this is where the artist opened Accademia del Nudo in 1616 – a class of drawing from the live model).[6] He recalls that the painter was absorbed in drawing at all times of day, including during meals. The caricatures were never used to create paintings, but their number proves that apart from the demand for sacral and secular images, something else began to be sought after in Cento: humour. However, many drawings represent not so much caricatures as insightful observations of reality: research has confirmed that certain facial deformations resulted from common 17th-century diseases.[7] Therefore, these works should be analysed from the perspective of the community where Guercino lived and of which he formed part. On market days, from dawn till dusk, the square in Cento turned into a scene frequented by strange and extraordinary personalities, so one may assume that this was where the artist observed both the most hilarious and the most wretched aspects of human existence. Drawings, executed when Guercino was not working on commissions, constituted his personal journal of sorts, where he recorded his observations and thoughts. Therefore, in parallel to the official artistic output of Guercino the painter, who embodied solemnity and respect for hierarchs and authorities, expressed in his representations of sublime secular and religious subjects, we may distinguish works of an entirely different nature – depicting the reality witnessed on the streets of his town. They introduce us to Guercino the jester, kind-heartedly mocking (perhaps in the company of his friends from Accademia del Nudo) the encountered characters (**figs 1–2**).

What stands out in the aforementioned group of sketches is the small, yet succinct set of works depicting characters or episodes related to practising magic. I was inspired to undertake specific research on this part of Guercino's oeuvre by a particularly interesting and at the same time disturbing drawing entitled *Semi-Naked Witch with a Cresset*, held at the Department of

[4] Inventario di Casa Gennari, Archivio Notarile, Bologna, Notaio Camillo Casanova, file 24, pages not numbered.

[5] Fausto Gozzi, "'Dai dai al mat.' Il Guercino e la caricature," in Massimo Pulini, *Nel segno di Guercino. Disegni dalle collezioni Mahon, Oxford e Cento*, exh. cat., Pinacoteca Civica, Cento, 2005 (Cento, 2005), pp. 38–47.

[6] Carlo Cesare Malvasia, *Felsina pittrice. Vite de pittori bolognesi. Alla maesta christianissima di Luigi XIIII re di Francia e di Navarra il sempre vittorioso*, vols 1–2 (Bologna, 1678) (2nd ed.: Bologna 1841; 3rd anastatical ed.: Bologna 1967), p. 258.

[7] Martin Ferguson (School of Medicine, Glasgow) noticed that some of Guercino's drawings, which had previously been regarded as caricatures, are in fact a documentation of real lesions occurring in the 17th century. See Fausto Gozzi, "Il Guercino e la caricature," in *Guercino. Racconti di paese. Il paesaggio e la scena popolare nei luoghi e nell'epoca di Giovanni Francesco Barbieri*, Massimo Pulini, ed., exh. cat., Pinacoteca Civica, Cento, Cento, 2001, (Milan, 2001), pp. 88–97.

Prints and Drawings of the National Museum in Warsaw, which was one of the works presented at NMW's exhibition *Guercino. The Triumph of the Baroque* in 2013.

In this sketch, there is none of the atmosphere of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, where three witches meet in thunder and lightning on an empty heath. Like other drawings by Guercino, this one too should rather be treated as a good-natured look at the local community. This is an example of how the master from Cento examines the superstitions of his countrymen with perceptible mirth. On the one hand, his distance to the subject of witches reflects his generally playful attitude towards his surroundings, yet on the other hand it is quite surprising. After all, the turn of the 17th century – i.e., the times of Guercino – witnessed the most intensive witch-hunts, perpetrated by Catholics and Protestants alike. Magic potions, witchcraft, covens during which (as was believed) sexual intercourse was had with the demon, children's death in inexplicable circumstances, destruction of crops and killing of farm animals – all that stirred the imagination of both the rural folk and superstitious city dwellers. And yet rejection and repulsion mixed with curiosity and fascination with the world of sorcerers and astrologists, chiromancers and self-proclaimed witches, philosophers and medicine men convinced of their power to heal, cast a curse of ill health or the spell of love. Such transgressions are described in the minutes of inquisitorial trials. In every city, there was one church focused on the activities of the Holy Inquisition – in Ferrara, which had jurisdiction over Cento, this was the Church of St Dominic, with the office of the general inquisitor and prisons. As is generally known, Dominicans played a key role in inquisitorial activities: they were mostly involved in combatting heresy, but also took part in hunting witches. This latter activity came to the fore towards the end of the 15th century, following the 1487 publication of the treaty *Malleus maleficarum* (*The Hammer of Witches*), written by two Dominican inquisitors, Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, in Germany. The book, which listed the most important spells and perverse practices of witches (as well as ordeals that were to be administered to accused women in order to elicit their testimony) was reprinted several dozen times: twenty editions appeared by 1520, with the following sixteen published between 1574 and 1669.[8]

Investigations were launched ex officio or following notifications filed by persons with a knowledge of the facts. The proceedings involved several sittings, during which the suspect and witnesses were questioned; the minutes were kept by a notary of the Holy Office and then signed (usually with a cross). Then, the truthfulness of the defendant's testimony was examined – if there were any doubts, an additional hearing was heard and he or she was subjected to torture. In all cases, the last instance that could confirm or annul the sentence was the Supreme Sacred Congregation of the Roman and Universal Inquisition, which served as the court of appeal and delivered the final judgement on the award and type of penalty.[9] Over time, one could be accused of heresy based on an ever broader catalogue of offences, such as owning forbidden books, practising witchcraft and wizardry, worshipping demons, performing Jewish and Muslim rituals, consuming meat, eggs and dairy products on fasting days, bigamy and maintaining any relations with Jews apart from commercial ones. Many

[8] Heinrich Kramer, Jacob Sprenger, *Malleus maleficarum* (Cologne, 1487). The first Polish edition was published in 1614: Heinrich Kramer, Jacob Sprenger, *Malleus maleficarum. Młot na czarownice. Postępek zwierzchowny w czarach, a także sposób uchronienia się ich, i lekarstwo na nie w dwóch częściach zamykający. Księga wiadomości ludzkiej nie tylko godna i potrzebna ale i z nauką Kościoła powszechnego zgadzająca się* (Krakow, 1614).

[9] Giuseppe Trenti, *I processi del Tribunale dell'Inquisizione di Modena* (Modena, 2003); Brian p. Levack, *La caccia alle streghe in Europa all'inizio dell'età moderna* (Bari, 2012).

witches sentenced by tribunals in Ferrara and Bologna were accused of divination, sorcery, casting spells and contacts with the forces of evil. These were women from the lowest social groups: widows, medicine women, midwives and herbalists who prepared potions from plants for the poor that had no access to medicine proper. It was generally believed that witches from Bologna gathered on the hills in the forests on Monte Paderno, where they took part in covens, danced around circles of burning candles and practiced arcane rituals. In the process, they put themselves into a trance using herbal lotions made from hemp seeds (the most important crop in the area), mandrake root, white poppy seeds and cabbage thistle, as well as belladonna flowers.[10]

In the times of Guercino, the word "witchcraft" could indicate two types of activity. On the one hand, it denoted black magic employed with evil intent: using supernatural powers to kill, cause illnesses, bring hail to croplands, kindle fires. On the other hand, it referred to manifestations of white magic, which was aimed at doing good – fostering fertile harvest, healing the diseased. Amorous magic was assessed as simultaneously good and bad, for one person's amorous conquest signified the loss of another's beloved. Even white magic was viewed with suspicion, since it also required the witch or wizard to worship the devil and conclude a pact with him.

When Guercino was seven (1598), the reign of the d'Este family over Cento (which lasted since 1502) came to a close and the city found itself within the borders of the Papal States. Cento was surrounded by a moat and formidable defensive embankments with drawbridges at each of the four gates, beyond which meandering streets led to the main square. The inhabitants of the city derived their wealth from growing hemp, the fibres of which were used to produce nautical ropes, linen and cloth. At that time, the main square still had medieval characteristics: it was permeated by the stench of animal excrement and waste flowing in the gutter, with foul-smelling crowds moving among cart-pulling horses and oxen. It was where one could see tattered shepherds and fishermen, and on market days also visitors from other towns, clad in unusual dress and haggling with carriers over the price of transporting hemp to Venice. Travelling barber surgeons belted out the wondrous properties of oils, ointments, talismans, syrups and herbs, while priests and nuns bowed over the poor, afflicted with hunger, lice and fleas.[11]

In the spirit of Counter-Reformation, the Inquisition in Guercino's time focused on superstitions and white magic; trials were instigated for amorous and healing magic as well as for telling the future. As the accusations of heresy became limited, the number of witch-trials in Italy increased, and it became clear that the Reformation, Counter-Reformation and severe religious conflict between Catholics and Protestants had contributed to the intensifying witch-hunt. It is worth realising that the percentage of women among those accused of witchcraft exceeded 75 per cent in all European countries, while in some – such as Poland, Hungary and England – it was over 90 per cent.[12] Owing to the stereotype of a witch, anyone who felt a victim of witchcraft tended to accuse women, since the female sex was thought to be more lustful and

[10] Carlo Ginzburg, *I benandanti. Stregoneria e culti agrari tra Cinquecento e Seicento* (Turin, 1972); Carlo Ginzburg, *Storia notturna. Una decifrazione del sabba* (Turin, 1989).

[11] The specific nature of fairs and markets is described by Massimo Pulini in the exhibition catalogue *Guercino. Racconti di paese. Il paesaggio e la scena popolare nei luoghi e nell'epoca di Giovanni Francesco Barbieri*, Massimo Pulini, ed., exh. cat., Pinacoteca Civica, Cento, 2001 (Milan, 2001), pp. 22–26.

[12] Levack, op. cit., p. 155.

prone to being tempted by the devil than the strong male sex. The majority of women accused of practising magic were over fifty – these were, among others, widows, menopausal women regarded as eccentric and antisocial, whose behaviour often irritated the neighbours, women that were mentally unstable or suffering from melancholy.

Research conducted by Antonio Samaritani[13] revealed a peculiar "heretic unrest" in 16th-century Cento. Protestant opposition became active in this Catholic city directly after the publication of Martin Luther's theses (1517), and respected inhabitants were soon accused of affiliation with Lutheranism: the famous grammarian Alberto Accarisio, Francesco Lamberti, cousin of the painter Orazio Lamberti, as well as prelate Giovanni Battista Rosati, rector of the San Biagio church. Lesser known citizens were also put on trial, for instance Antoni Bianchi, who dared to declare that the worship of paintings in churches constituted idolatry. There is also a known case of Raffaele Campioni from Cento, general of the Congregation of Canons Regular from the San Salvatore church in Bologna, who was brought to court in 1585 for "books on necromancy," eating "*tortelletti* stuffed with meat at a time prohibited by the Holy Church," "casting a spell on a blessed chalice" as well as the fact that "while he was walking in a procession, a mocking Demon was seen behind his back."[14] The latter offence leads us straight to Guercino's drawings, where the motif of being tormented by demons is depicted in a clearly satirical manner, full of scepticism and openly jeering at superstitions. Thereby, these sketches convey the ever more frequent attitude manifested by the educated members of 17th-century society (**figs 3–4**).

What deserves particular attention in this context is the 1620 letter of the painter Lionello Spada, where he refers to Guercino's famous assistant, Lorenzo Gennari, as a herbalist rather than a painter (**fig. 5**).[15] Apart from the text, the letter also featured Spada's drawing depicting a young man haunted by a witch. The addressee remains unknown, yet the sender asks him to obtain a magical concoction from Lorenzo Gennari to cure the nightmare that prevented Spada from sleeping peacefully at night. Malvasia recalls that Spada and Guercino were connected by ties of "close friendship"[16] – so the letter may have been addressed to none other than the master from Cento. The concoction referred to in the text could be theriac – a universal cure for all illnesses that was very popular in the 17th century. The same theriac, this time in a jar bearing the name of the medicament, may be seen in the 1637 painting *Herbalist's Shop* (Municipal Museum in Spoleto) executed by Guercino's brother – Paolo Antonio Barbieri.

The atmosphere of jeopardy and trials of witches and wizards on the one hand, contrasted with ever greater distance and irony towards the accusations on the other, provide the context for the group of works described in the present article. The first is the aforementioned *Semi-Naked Witch with a Cresset* (**fig. 6**) from the National Museum in Warsaw, bearing a mysterious inscription at the top: *Disopra, e sotto spiro morte e vita* (Above and below I breathe life and death).[17] The drawing comes from the rich collection of Giorgio Bonola (1657–1700),

[13] Antonio Samaritani, *Religione cittadina, autoriforma cattolica, malessere ereticale a Cento nel secolo XVI tra Estensi e Controriforma* (Ferrara, 1997).

[14] Ibid., pp. 97–127.

[15] Elio Monducci et al., *Lionello Spada (1576–1622)* (Reggio Emilia, 2002), p. 53.

[16] Malvasia, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 260.

[17] See Justyna Guze, "Guercino the Draughtsman," in *Guercino. The Triumph of the Baroque. Masterpieces from Cento, Rome and Polish Collections*, Justyna Guze, Joanna Kilian, Joanna Sikorska, academic eds, exh. cat., The National Museum in Warsaw, 2013–14 (Warsaw, 2013), pp. 45–49 and p. 151, cat. no. II.13.

a Lombardian painter, writer and collector, and is not the only work of the same provenance held at the National Museum in Warsaw. The witch is captured as she is putting out the flame of the cresset hanging on a nail. This is most definitely associated with the inscription quoted above, which should be interpreted as a puzzle alluding to the infernal powers obtained by witches when making a pact with the devil: *disopra* – above (in the world of the living), *e sotto* – and below (in the world of the dead), *spiro* – I breathe (therefore, I can administer) *morte e vita* – life and death. This disturbing credo of the witch from the NMW drawing testifies to the solemn tone of the work. In his youth, Guercino was fascinated with the singular characteristics of the human physiognomy and created hundreds of drawings focused on such particular features. There are two further works by the artist that depict the same monkey-faced woman, but seen from a different perspective. Therefore, we may assume that the Warsaw work is not a caricature, but rather a portrait of a witch from the rural surroundings of Cento, who is characterized by her monstrous, deformed mouth and nose.

The first of the aforementioned drawings is *A Witch, Two Bats, and a Demon in Flight* (**fig. 7**) from the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto.[18] There is an inscription at the back of the sketch, reading: *Vecchia streia donatra | brutta imperiosa* (Old witch donatra | ugly ruler),[19] which not only explains her occupation, i.e., "old witch" (instead of the word *strega* – 'witch,' Guercino employs the word *streia*, which is still present in the Cento dialect), but also provides her name: donatra | ugly ruler. The woman's gaze is directed downwards, while two bats and a winged demon with a trident are circling around her. Her head is covered with a mesh bonnet attached to the hair with an object resembling a spider web. We may recognize the witch from the Warsaw sketch – this time presented *en face* rather than in profile, with a clearly visible headdress. The sinister meaning of the spider web is unmistakable: this is where the witch hunts for her victims. The same deformed head and disfigured face may also be seen in the sketch *Ape-Like Witch Holding a Lighted Candle* from the Royal Collection in London (**fig. 8**).[20] This time she is accompanied by one demon hovering over the flame of the candle, which the witch holds in her left hand. Once again, what has been captured is the moment of a magical ritual: the woman's head is covered with a striped shawl, the burning candle she holds in her hand brings to mind a votive offering, and the witch's ill-omened gaze crosses ours as if she wanted to reveal to us the "sacred nature" of the spell that is about to come true. The drawing was purchased in 1763 in Casa Gennari by Richard Dalton, the librarian of King George III, together with a set of other works. It testifies to the insightfulness of Guercino as an observer. With his characteristic ease, he imparted lightness to the scene, diluting the sombre atmosphere by introducing a humorous detail: a funny, naked devil holding a trident and flying around the flame like a nocturnal insect lured to the light during a summer night. Each of the three drawings (**figs 6–8**) demonstrates the curiosity with which Guercino must have observed his extraordinary model. However, apart from astonishment, we also sense amusement here, like that associated with drawing comics – it is most visible in the figures of winged devils and bats that pester 'donatra.'

Apart from witches, Guercino's oeuvre also depicts wizards, including *Brumio the Wizard* from a drawing held at Biblioteca Reale in Turin, which features another mysterious inscription:

[18] Pen, brown ink and wash, 11.7 × 25.7 cm.

[19] David Stone, *Guercino, Master Draftsman: Works from North American Collections* (Harvard, 1991), no. 169, p. 237.

[20] Pen, brown ink and wash on paper, 19.4 × 19 cm. See Denis Mahon, Nicholas Turner, *The drawings of Guercino in the collection of Her Majesty the Queen at Windsor Castle* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 120, cat. no. 338.

Astati, il Mago Brumio (Armed with spears, Brumio the Wizard).[21] Taking into account that such works were devised by Guercino as puzzles, one may assume that they were meant to provide entertainment during pauses in work at the Accademia del Nudo. They could also be employed at home – in the evenings, before going to bed, Guercino could use them to amuse his family members, who after all were also his assistants in the studio. Here we are faced with yet another riddle. We know the identity and occupation of the bearded old man: the inscription informs us that this is Brumio the wizard. We may also guess that he is browsing through a book in search of a remedy for (physical, maybe amorous?) pain, suffered by the crying woman visible behind his back. Here too an important element of the composition is represented by two humorous, even downright funny devils: one captured in flight, the other as he is touching the wizard's right hand with a spear. The word *Astati* (from *asta* 'spear') should help us interpret this scene, yet in fact it renders it even more ambiguous – this term was used to refer to the youngest soldiers of the Roman legions, who stood in the first line during battle. Older, more experienced and better equipped soldiers, stood behind them. It is difficult to grasp the association between a Roman legion and the scene depicted in the drawing, yet it adds a humorous effect to the composition. It is worth noticing the employed wash, owing to which Guercino achieved pronounced light and shade effects – a patch of bright light falls on the open book.

Another drawing that makes a reference to magic and witchcraft is *A Witch* (**fig. 9**) from the Royal Collection in London (which I would like to refer to as the *Head of a Wizard or Witch in a Top Hat*).[22] This portrait depicts a bizarre character wearing a tall cylinder hat which shows a scene associated with sorcery. The person's face, looking downwards, communicates submission and resignation. There is a rope on his or her neck, while the hat brings to mind those that were used in the case of people sentenced to abjuration by inquisitorial courts. The same hat is worn by a sentenced man in another of Guercino's drawings, entitled *Canonico Ricasoli and Faustina* [Minardi] *When They Abjured in s. Croce* (Sotheby's London, 8 July 1998, lot no. 43). However, in the drawing from the Royal Collection, devilish tricks are depicted in much more detail: we see a devil armed with a trident, who approaches a nude kneeling in the water, with another winged figure behind them, attempting (it could seem) to stop him – however, it is difficult to ascertain whether it is an angel or in fact a second demon. Without doubt, the scene makes a reference to a pact with the devil – the so-called infernal baptism – which most likely formed the basis for accusing the defendant in the hat and the reason behind the act of abjuration. The figure depicted in the Royal Collection drawing – the deathlike face, gauntness and flat nose – bring to mind Rinaldo Corradino, "by nature a ridiculous man,"[23] who frequented fairs and markets and was friends with Agostino Carracci. He may seem familiar from a painting by Guercino in the Denis Mahon collection, currently held at the Pinacoteca in Cento: Corradino is portrayed while travelling on a mule, with an owl and the same rope on his neck as in the drawing at hand, which signifies either being sentenced to abjuration or an execution that eventually did not take place.[24] The charges brought against Rinaldo could result from his eccentric activity, which led to his trial before an inquisitorial court.

[21] Pen, brown ink and wash on paper, 15.3 × 21.4 cm. Stefano Bottari, *Guercino. Disegni* (Florence, 1966), fig. LVIII.

[22] Pen, brown ink and wash on paper, 19.5 × 17 cm; Mahon, *Guercino. Disegni*, op. cit., p. 310, cat. no. 204.

[23] Luigi Ficacci, Miroslav Gasparovic, Fausto Gozzi, *Guercino la luce del Barocco*, exh. cat., Zagabria, Museum of Arts and Crafts, Zagreb, 2014–2015 (Zagreb, 2014), p. 76.

[24] See *Guercino. The Triumph of the Baroque*... op. cit., p. 82, cat. no. 14.

A downright dramatic scene of witchcraft may be seen in Clemente Nicoli's print after a drawing by Guercino: *Wizard Performing a Magical Ritual over a Naked Man Tormented by Hallucinations*.[25] The depicted sorcerer wades through a stream, leading a naked man haunted by a small, winged devil and a bird. The magician points his wand towards an open book, tracing patterns inside a magical circle drawn on the ground. The ironic and humorous aspect of the composition is again expressed via the small devil and bird that torment the man, who attempts to support himself on the magician's shoulder, looking for respite from his hallucinations. The drawing *Medea Rejuvenating Aeson* from a private collection[26] follows the same subject matter. Mahon was first to catalogue the work under *Exorcisms and Witchcraft*,[27] while Emilio Negro and Nicosetta Roia provided a detailed description, correctly identifying the mythological scene. The foreshortened, naked body of Aeson is lying on the ground, with four candles placed on candelabra burning right next to him. The semi-nude Medea, with branches in hand, is about to stir the magic potion supposed to restore Aeson's youth – the dynamism of the scene is underlined by the masterful wash. The subject of eternal youth was frequently taken up by painters active in that period, as it was related to the motif of love, which was one of the most important 16th- and 17th-century themes (here, the context is Medea's love for Jason and Jason's love for his father, Aeson). There is no surviving information on any painting by Guercino on the same subject, and it is also difficult to specify who may have commissioned the drawing at hand.

The desire to remain forever young is also alluded to in the *Symbolic or Magical Subject* (**fig. 10**) from the Royal Collection in London,[28] which poses considerable interpretive difficulties. The drawing depicts two male figures sitting on the ground, with their backs to each other, so that we may observe them in profile: a young man is sat on the right, a mature man – on the left. The shape of the space between their heads resembles a funnel. When viewed together, these elements create an outline of a third person: an old man, whose eyes are formed by the ears of the two remaining figures, while their shoulders trace the contour of his white beard, and their hands turn into his own hands. Behind this bizarre trio we see two demons supported against a rock that resembles the basis of a fountain. The one on the right tilts a vase in order to pour a liquid found inside into the funnel created by the nose of the bearded old man. Water flows out from his nose into the vase in front of him. The demon on the left raises the chin of the man sitting next to him. This singular scene undoubtedly refers to representations of the three stages of human life; it also brings to mind the ancient three-faced Janus, who combined youth, maturity and old age, thus unifying the past, present and future. The same association was provided by Erwin Panofsky in his description of Titian's painting *Allegory of Prudence*.[29] The titular prudence was to be ensured by the memory of the old man, noting the lessons of past events, the intelligence of the mature man, reacting to the present day, and plans for the future dreamed up by the youth. The liquid flowing into the flask in Guercino's drawing would then symbolize wisdom combining what is best in each of the three stages of human life. This

[25] See Stone, op. cit., p. 88; Alberto Alberghini, *Guercino. La collezione di stampe* (Cento, 1991), p. 171, cat. no. 348.

[26] Pen, brown ink and wash on paper, 20 × 27.5 cm. See Emilio Negro, Nicosetta Roio, *Caravaggio e caravaggeschi in Emilia* (Modena, 2013), p. 208.

[27] Denis Mahon, *Disegni di carattere eterogeneo*, in *Il Guercino – Catalogo dei Disegni*, Denis Mahon, ed., exh. cat., Palazzo dell'Archiginnasio, Bologna, 1968 (Bologna, 1969), pp. 201–03.

[28] C. 1630, pen, brown ink and wash on paper, 17.6 × 18.8 cm. See Nicholas Turner, *Guercino: Drawings from Windsor Castle*, The National Gallery of Art, Washington (Washington, 1992), p. 90, cat. no. 35.

[29] 1565–70, The National Gallery, London.

subject is revisited by Guercino in yet another drawing from the Royal Collection (**fig. 11**), where instead of the two demons we see a young man pouring the liquid.[30]

The painter's extreme inventiveness is also proved by *Diablerie* from the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford (**fig. 12**).[31] This title was given to the drawing on account of the inscription *diavl è*, which in the dialect of the Emilia region corresponds to the adjective *diavle* – "possessed by the devil." However, it was most likely created as a preparatory study for a painting of Prometheus, who was usually depicted in precisely the same manner: chained to a rock and attacked by a vulture (or eagle in a different version of the myth), which preyed on his liver that would regrow overnight. Only later did the artist add a winged devil with a trident directed towards the man's body, imparting a comic character to the work: according to the inscription, we see a possessed man tormented by demonic visions. Interestingly, in 1616, when Guercino was painting a fresco showing an episode from the Titan's life above the mantelpiece at the Accademia del Nudo, instead of the terrifying scene with the eagle, he chose the moment when – with the help of the divine fire – he breathes life into a statue made of clay and tears.[32]

An Old Seamstress with a Small Child from the Courtauld Art Gallery in London (**fig. 13**)[33] is not that clear-cut, and therefore more difficult to interpret. The drawing shows an old woman with a spindle in her tangled hair (leaving no doubt as to her profession), carrying the tool of her trade wrapped in a shawl on her back, wearing an apron which she uses to hold balls of wool (though these may well be pieces of bread or fruit) and with a flask attached to her wrist. A naked child stands on the stone plinth next to her, leaning against her shoulder. The pose of the seamstress is contrasted with the playfulness of the child: the old woman is standing motionless, facing the toddler with an unsure, almost stern gaze. In the distance on the right, two additional figures are taking a walk. The spindle, a weaving tool carried on the back and yarn in the apron represent objects that are often associated with images of witches, rendering the composition ambiguous. It is also referred to as the *Allegory of Youth* – the aged woman's gaze directed towards her companion is to mean that she already knows the secret of the "thread of life," thus being able to read the future and establish how long the child would live.[34]

Certain interpretive difficulties are also posed by the expressive drawing entitled *The Enraged Housewife* from the Ashmolean Museum (**fig. 14**) (which I would like to refer to as *A Quarrel of Two Women in the Kitchen*).[35] The scene plays out next to the hearth, where a young woman engrossed in cooking is attacked by an older one, who holds her head and threatens her with a spindle directed towards her mouth. The attacked woman defends herself with

[30] Mahon, Turner, op. cit., p. 118, cat. no. 320.

[31] Pen, brown ink and wash on paper, 24 × 35.5 cm. See Sybille Ebert-Schifferer, *Giovanni Francesco Barbieri Il Guercino 1591–1666* (Frankfurt, 1991), p. 384.

[32] Fausto Gozzi, "The Collections in Graziano Campanini," in *Da Guercino a Bonzagni: Le collezioni d'arte della Fondazione e della Cassa di Risparmio di Cento*, Andrea Campanini, Graziano Emiliani, eds (Bologna, 2008), p. 58.

[33] C. 1623, pen and brown ink on paper, 23.1 × 16.8 cm. See Julian Brooks, *Guercino: Mind to Paper* (Los Angeles, 2006), p. 31.

[34] However, the most obvious interpretation is also possible: the drawing may well be an ordinary genre scene, and the old woman – the guardian of the child on her way to the field to bring food and a bottle of wine to workers.

[35] Pen, brown ink and wash on paper, 23.8 × 27.7 cm. See Nicholas Turner, Carol Plazzotta, *Drawings by Guercino from British collections* (London, 1991), p. 206, no. 184. A good-quality copy of the Oxford drawing is held at the Louvre (inv. no. 6951), while another one forms part of a private collection in Cento (the same collection features its mirror image in the form of a print executed in 1788 by André Gaspard Bizemont).

a poker held in her left hand, while pulling the older woman's hair with her right hand. I do not agree with the interpretation that the drawing depicts a household argument about a meal burnt by the younger woman.[36] The idea that the composition represents pulling a tooth using a threaded spindle seems equally unlikely, as this activity would require both participants to cooperate, whereas here their enmity is clearly visible. A print (**fig. 15**) attributed to Guercino and a sketch after which it was executed depict a similar fierce quarrel, taking place next to a hearth between an old witch in a turban and a young woman defending herself against the attacks using a poker. I believe that the scene visible in the Ashmolean Museum drawing is not so much an argument as witchcraft that is meant to harm the younger of the two women. The thread that the witch intends to insert into her mouth would then signify the 'thread of life,' required to cast a curse.

The last drawing found in the group related to witchcraft is *A Cat and a Dog in the Kitchen* from Teylers Museum in Haarlem (there under the title *A Cat on a Table and a Dog*) (**fig. 16**), which features another puzzling inscription: *BRUTTA, BRUTTA TIA LA PIU' MALA GATTA CHSIA AL MOND VE* (UGLY, UGLY AUNT THE WORST CAT IN THE WORLD).[37] The attention to detail, perfectly manifested, among others, by the cat's meticulously sketched collar, proves that this is a drawing from life, most likely depicting an everyday scene from Guercino's home. Again, we are referred to the theme of witchcraft by inscriptions concerning the painter's special pet: a cat called Mammone (Monkey). The animal is referred to by Passeri,[38] Calvi[39] and Malvasia;[40] the latter quotes an anecdote told to him by Guercino's nephew, Cesare Gennari: *mammoncino* (little monkey), which was a gift from a foreigner, "could do all the tricks performed by an equilibrist on a rope [...] the beast managed to win Mr Giovan Francesco's affection to the extent that he wanted to sleep with it," and in the morning, if the master tarried in bed, the animal "would open his eyelids with its paws and do everything to wake him up."[41] Guercino spent twelve years with the "little monkey," which died in 1664 (two years prior to the painter), killed by "a jaundiced old witch, who [...] cast a spell on it, which was discovered by the prior from Saint Cecilia's, a skilled exorcist."[42] Interestingly, in the folk tradition the word *Mammone* is clearly associated with the Biblical Mammon – a demon that tempted people with money. On the other hand, the Italian *Gatto Mammone* (literally: Mammon the Cat) is a magical figure of a terrifying, giant wild cat, which is feared by all animals grazing on the pastures. This mythical creature was also invoked in order to scare children.

From today's perspective, it is difficult to ascertain whether the link between Guercino's cat, the anecdote describing its unnatural death and name referring to a demon cat, ingrained

[36] Denis Mahon, David Ekserdjian, *Guercino Drawings from the Collection of Denis Mahon and the Ashmolean Museum*, exh. cat., The Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, 1986 (Oxford, 1986), p. 42, fig. XVI.

[37] C. 1620–30, pen, brown ink and wash on paper, 25.7 × 18.4 cm. See Mahon, *Guercino. Disegni*, op. cit., p. 306, no. 200.

[38] Giambattista Passeri, *Vite de' pittori, scultori ed architetti che hanno lavorato a Roma morti dal 1641 fino al 1673* (Rome, 1772), p. 380.

[39] Alessandro Calvi, *Notizie della vita, e delle opere del cavaliere Gioan Francesco Barbieri, detto Il Guercino da Cento* (Bologna, 1808), p. 45.

[40] Malvasia, op. cit.

[41] See Negro, Roio, *Caravaggio e caravaggeschi...*, op. cit., p. 210.

[42] Ibid.

in folk imagination, is merely a coincidence or deliberate work of the master from Cento. Irrespective of the interpretation, *A Cat and a Dog in the Kitchen* forms part of an interesting and hitherto overlooked aspect of the artist's oeuvre. A keen observer of the surrounding reality, Guercino also showed his distance and humour when commenting on wizards, witches and the sorcery they practised.

Translated by Aleksandra Szkudłapska